The Sirens Call

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A Dark Fiction & Horror eZine!

Short Stories, Flash Fiction, Poetry, and Artwork

Featured Poet: Marge Simon

Featured Collection: 'War: Dark Poems'

Featured Author: Lydia Prime

Featured Book: 'Itty Bitty Horror Bites'

Featured Artist: Allison Smith

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There are even worse things in the world than serial killers...

A FEAST OF SORROWS

THAXSON PATTERSON II

Available Exclusively on Amazon for Purchase or Borrow!
The cave gathered darkness the way that a corpse acquired maggots, over time, inevitably, until only pale bony structures remained. Faded yellow caution tape fluttered like the wings of a coal miner’s canary across the entrance, but Katrina’s twin paid it no mind. She bounded up the narrow trail, skirting fallen logs and ducking beneath the groping fingers of a low-hanging oak, her pack bouncing against the small of her back.

This was a very bad idea. Even as she watched her feet move forward, fear slowed her steps. Her shoes pushed up dark soil and slid across slimy fallen leaves.

“Come on,” her sister urged, pausing to look back. “You’ll be fine. Promise.”

Katrina followed still, hoisting herself up onto a moss-slicked stone and keeping her eyes on her feet, away from the cavern ahead. Its mouth yawned like a portal into the netherworld, and she tasted bile.

“Dr. Murdoch says this is the only way you’ll overcome your fear,” her sister said, but that didn’t seem right. Dr. Murdoch had always been so kind to her. When she began visiting him last year, he had calmly explained that the darkness could not harm her. She hadn’t believed him, of course, but the assertion had become a mantra in her mind when the last rays of sunlight shattered through the pines and fell below the horizon, when the night came and she was alone.

*It can’t hurt you. The darkness cannot hurt you.*

He had asked her to think back on her life to that singular moment where she had felt afraid for the first time, but she could recall nothing. She felt that this fear had been with her always; a spider with its fangs in her spine, paralyzing her and filling her with poison so that she would see monsters where there was only a bedpost or an innocuous pile of clothing.

Her parents believed that she would grow out of it as all children do, but with each year that passed, it seemed that Katrina’s mind came nearer and nearer to a truth that others refused to acknowledge. Children could feel it, under the bed or in the closet where the darkest dark lived, before they were told about imaginations or monsters or nightlights. They knew, and then they forgot.

Katrina had never forgotten.

“Maddie,” she breathed as the trail leveled off, the hiss of the waterfall long behind them. Drooping trees stretched their branches over the cave, protecting it from the light of the sun and whispering to each other. The leaves showed their undersides to the sky. “It’s going to storm. We should just go.”

“You can’t get out of this, Kat. It’s happening.”

Katrina’s fingernails drew blood from her palms. She focused on the pain as Maddie took her by the wrist and the mouth of the cave opened to swallow her. Deeper and deeper they went until the sunlight faded to a pinpoint in the universe. Katrina heard her sister fiddling with the flashlight, *tap tap tap* against her hip.

“Maddie,” she whimpered, tears stinging her eyes.

“Won’t work.”

A sob cracked out of her throat. She could hear the darkness in front of them, deeper in the cave, its leathery wings flapping against fetid air. Shadows climbed the slick walls, wedging themselves into cracks and slipping, eel-like, across the ground.

“I’m kidding.” Maddie clicked on the flashlight, washing the space in glorious white light. The darkness fell silent. Katrina wiped away the tears so her sister wouldn’t see. They stood in a cathedral of earth. Stalactites hung low from the ceiling and water dripped into luminous pools, stained red with iron, like bloodied pikes.

“Come on, silly,” her twin said. “This way.”

The darkness followed close behind them as Maddie moved within the orb of light. Katrina could feel it at her back. Katrina could feel its slippery tentacles reaching for her ankles. A creature hissed beside her foot. She cried out, and the shadows dragged her voice down the latticework of tunnels only to return it to her, diseased and strange.

“Maddie, this is good enough,” she pleaded. “We’ve gone far enough. Look, I’m not afraid anymore. We can go.”

But Maddie was up ahead, moving faster, her light growing farther and farther away. Katrina couldn’t catch up.

“Slow down,” she called after her, but Maddie laughed.
Katrina ran, her feet splashing through pools of stagnant water and startling a nest of bats. They fled in a great cloud, rushing past her, their clawed wings scratching her face, unholy voices filling her ears.

“Maddie, please!” she screamed, but her sister did not hear her. Panic tasted cold and metallic on her tongue as the darkness gained on her. It moved swiftly but gracelessly, its bulk scraping past stones and falling into crevices, and she thought she heard it clicking, like a crab.

“Over here!” Her sister’s voice echoed in the cavernous space, from the right, from the left, from above. Katrina ran, blind like the cave-dwellers, her hands outstretched before her, and then it grabbed hold of her leg—she lurched forward and fell, down, down, into black. She had the strangest sensation of déjà vu, as if she had crashed through this endless night before. Calm wonder dampened the panic as gravity had its way with her.

Thunder rumbled outside in the light of day, growling in the bowels of the earth like a great beast. The ground cracked against her hip and unconsciousness, somehow red against this backdrop of dark, splotched her vision before the blinding flashbulb of pain could awaken her. She could hear the creature slithering down into the hole, circling her as her heart throbbed blood into her ears. Her hair fluttered as it breathed upon her.

She felt frantically around the damp earth for something, anything that might save her. And then, her fingers closed around the flashlight! She fumbled with it, her other hand still searching, landing on fabric. Denim.

“Maddie?” Oh no, no. Had she fallen, too? Was she dead? The light clicked on at last. The jeans belonged to Maddie. She recognized the flowers embroidered on the hem. A lifetime ago, Katrina remembered watching their mother hand stitch the white daisies onto the fabric, and the memory was bright and drenched in sunshine. It seemed so far away now.

Maddie’s bracelet glinted in the beam of the flashlight, but the wrist that it encircled looked so thin. Impossibly thin. As her vision cleared, Katrina’s eyes focused on a desiccated corpse, cheeks hollow, lips stretched and dried into a grin. Braces held the teeth in place.

Maddie.

And then, in a rush of cold, stale air, the darkness restored her memory. She remembered the hiking trip last year, and the storm. The tree branches had crashed down all around them, debris whipping across their faces, caught in wind so powerful that they had struggled to breathe. She remembered seeking shelter in the cave. This cave.

And she remembered Maddie screaming in the dark, her voice sinking and sinking until it fell abruptly into the quiet.

Katrina saw that truth in the beam of the flashlight, bright and blinding and horrible.

“Why did you bring me back here?” she cried, clutching her twin’s shriveled hand, but she knew. The creature settled back into the recesses of the cave, and she did not feel afraid.

About the Author:
H.B. Diaz is an internationally published gothic horror writer who also manages accounts for Penguin Random House. She is the author of Nocturne: A Collection of Dark Tales, and her short stories have appeared in anthologies by Horror Tree, ID Press, Flame Tree Press, and others. She lives with her husband and son in a historic (and likely haunted) East Coast town.

Facebook: H.B. Diaz
Twitter: @HollyBDiaz
Step into the twisted warren of a lunatic mind, face the angered spirits of a haunted mansion, or escape a cursed forest's ancient monster... Whichever story you choose, be sure to keep the lights on.

H.B. Diaz

NOCTURNE

A Collection of Dark Tales

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON
Honeysuckle | T.S. Woolard

She stood there tasting the honeysuckle growing on the edge of the lawn, a marble statue of a Goddess, animated by a graceful touch of biology. Her tawny hair rippled on the same gentle breeze carrying the sweet strawberry scent of her shampoo.

Glistening in the summer morning sun promising to melt the slick dew from the tightly growing Bermuda grass, her lips worked with her tiny teeth to extract the sugary juice from the flower. The plump worms wriggled up and down the milky-yellow petals.

Her eyes—those amazing crystals allowing me to see her soul—rolled back in her head each time a particularly good supply of the sweet nectar released from her harvest. When they opened, a dainty ferocity burned in them—the kind that made you want to fight alongside her.

The creature God made for me never noticed I lurked in the graveyard. I couldn’t move, stricken by her beauty. I was more of a statue than her, but far from being as seraphic.

I hovered by the grave we knew as Nirvana's Tomb. A man named Curt Cobain was buried there in 1928. Sometime in the 90's, the name took on.

That was about fifteen years before I started on the grounds crew at the graveyard. Only about a year ago that divine woman began coming. I never saw her visit a single grave, I watched her eat pounds of honeysuckle, though. I don’t know why she did it, but it worked for her. Angels weren’t as perfect.

“Rollins,” my boss, Mr. Johnson, barked, “stop gawking over there, and get to work.”

I nodded. “Yes, sir.”

The bastard never let me be. I loved that woman. I was meant to spend eternity with her, but he wouldn’t leave me be.

Mr. Johnson had everything I ever wanted: a decent-looking, devoted wife, kids that bought him ties and World’s Greatest Dad coffee mugs, and a home to share all those memories in. He was a lucky asshole and didn’t have a clue. The man bitched to everyone about everything. He was never happy. Going on vacation, to his beach house in the summer, sounded like he was being water-boarded. I hated to hear him speak. His voice alone aggravated me now.

But, I went to work like he told me. Whether or not I liked it, he was my boss. For an ex-con, any boss was a boss to keep happy.

***

She was back, wearing a long, sweeping, teal dress. The day saw a cool front migrate through the town. With it, a heavy sustained wind came along. Brittle limbs and weak petals of flowers blew across the graveyard—a natural blend of streamers and confetti.

The dress hem rippled, like a flag, showing off toned legs. For a woman her size, her legs were first-class. Her calves budded from her ankles, like a Daylily waiting on the morning sun to rise before blossoming. Her thighs were smooth as silk robes and moisturized to perfection, sun glinting on the oh-so-desirable skin; it was lucky enough to touch.

Today, I would talk to her. I could feel it. Everything was slightly different this day than any other I lived through. I had only taken a year to muster the courage. It was time I learned if I would stand in awe forever, or if I would make her mine.

In some cases, knowing whether or not you could succeed is a good thing. Sometimes not knowing is a savior. I wish I never found out how drunk I could get before I would pass out behind the wheel. I wouldn’t have gone to prison. Maybe I wouldn’t have destroyed most of my life. And, maybe, I wouldn’t have killed Lynn Maryweather.

I never knew anything about her, but they said her name over and over again during my trial. I saw her parents and grandmother. Nice looking people, they were, even with the hate for me in their eyes.

Hell, I understood. I attempted suicide a few times, in the joint. I don’t mind being considered a lot of bad things. Most people keep off my back because of those bad-things-rumors. But, a killer, I find hard to live with. Unintentional though it may be, it didn’t make it any less true. I had to bear that cross; it was mine.

Don’t get me wrong, I deserve it. I killed that poor girl. I couldn’t be truly sorry if I didn’t hurt. It was reckless and careless, and I thought I was untouchable. Maybe I was, but Lynn wasn’t. I’m sorry she ever crossed my path.

This honeysuckle suckling woman made the pain and torture bearable. I detested waking up every day to be the same son-of-a-bitch I was the day before, dreaded every day I looked at my car—my murder weapon. I handled it, every last second of hell, for those few stolen moments pretending that woman in the graveyard was mine.

Something drew me to her in the teal dress. She wore it so well, and like she did just for me. Her hips flared out like a rose in perfect bloom. Her smooth breasts flowed over the top of the low-cut neckline. Her neck was long and thin,
begging to be kissed and nibbled. The dress accentuated my favorite parts of her.

My feet pulled me to her. I had no control. I felt like my entire life had been lived for this moment. Every spark, flame, firework—anything—existed within my body. I sweated without perspiration; I breathed without air; I knew without understanding.

But, for the first time ever, I lived.

She turned to face me, her incredible hazel eyes tugging my heart. I had to touch her, and she wanted me to. I could feel it in the electric space between us. She claimed more of my soul by the second.

Still, though, something scared me. My mind played me. Would she hit me? Would she hate me? Would she enjoy it as much as me? Would I disappoint her for being weak, or would she know it was her strength that won, instead?

All I wanted was for her to... Her, I just wanted her.

“What’s your name?” I asked, already out of breath.

I reached for her. The closer I came to contact, the more the world around her melted away. A rushing sound whistled by my ears, and the magnet in her body pulled the one it always needed.

She smiled and destroyed my world. I had met my destiny.

“Lynn.”

About the Author:
T.S. Woolard lives in North Carolina with his three Jack Russell Terriers. He has been published with many presses, and won several awards for his contributions to the horror world. Please look for more of his work, including his latest release, Be Free, at Amazon.

Instagram: @tswoolard
Twitter: @tswoolard

Return to Chaos | B. T. Petro

Chaos, my eternal love, your waiting is almost over. The fruit of our union ruled the Cosmos for eons, their exploits legend and as countless as the stars. Yet, with time, Uranus, the Titans, the Olympians, and even mighty Zeus himself, have faded into fable.

And now, at last, the Age of Man is ebbing. They breed unchecked like vermin. My forests and fields of greenery wither beneath their feet and turn to dust. A part of me dies with each loss of beauty. No longer can I replenish myself. Soon, very soon, my love, all will return to Chaos.

Deathwatch | B. T. Petro

Those who would succeed me as Arch-Mage crowd my chamber for the deathwatch. Their prayers are but empty words for they yearn for the death rattle like hounds at table. Soon, my comrades.

Those who would succeed me as Arch-Mage are mystified by my sudden decline. All have missed the signs of the dark arts from my final spell. With each heartbeat, the wild magics coursing through my body sap my strength to contain them.

Those who would succeed me as Arch-Mage will not succeed me. Rather, with this final breath they will join me on whatever journey awaits me.

About the Author:
B. T. Petro is retired and living in Ohio. His published story genres include sci-fi, fantasy, and horror. The stories generally have a bit of whimsy or a touch of the macabre. His best friend when he was growing up was an invisible robot, who still visits from time to time.
“Double venti half pump pumpkin spice soy latte no whip?” The barista smiled at Samantha as he guessed her order, his eyes like mocha flecks.

“You remembered!” Samantha hadn’t missed a day at the coffee shop since the start of seasonal drinks. “Let me get a pumpkin loaf too.”

“You got it,” he said. “Will that be all for you today?”

“Ooooh how about a gingerbread loaf for later?”

“Great. Anything else?”

Samantha shook her head and hummed along to It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year playing over the speakers. When he handed her the bag of pastries, she paused.

“There is one other thing…” Samantha began.

“No word yet,” the barista said. After checking to make sure there was no one behind Samantha, he leaned in conspiratorially. “But keep an eye on our social media. I hear they may be rolling out Holiday Cheer as soon as this week.”

Samantha squealed. The new mystery drink had been hyped since last year, and she had entered every online contest to be one of the early tasters to no avail. As she waited by the pick-up counter, she pulled up the company’s social streams. She had set up an automated alert for her phone whenever a new post went up but still liked to check. Nothing, except for an announcement that a limited-edition holiday tote would be given out when the drink became available.

Samantha was a connoisseur of holiday drinks from all of the major vendors. She knew whose eggnog latte had a touch more nutmeg, where to find the best balanced gingerbread spice drinks, and the place to get the most whipped cream topping for a peppermint mocha. But the new holiday drink promised to be something that would blow the others out of the water.

This week, she told herself as she took an approving sip of her latte, savoring the caffeine and sugar. It was silly to be so excited about a drink. She knew that; yet there was something unabashedly fun about getting caught up in holiday festivities. And if a drink could lift her spirits for a few bucks, it was worth it, she thought as she headed out of the coffee shop and back into the mall, crammed with shoppers and Christmas and Hanukkah décor.

A lot of people bemoaned the holiday crowds. Samantha reveled in it. Like a seasoned sailor on familiar waters, she maneuvered seamlessly between the currents of people, mouthing whatever Christmas song was blasting and shooting smiles at anyone wearing holiday accessories.

As luck would have it, her phone alerted her a few minutes later to a new post. Holiday Cheer would be available tomorrow at all locations, supplies limited. Finally.

The next morning, she was standing at the dark café door at 4 am, a full hour before opening. She once waited 18 hours in line at Comic Con to see the cast of her favorite show, so this was a piece of cake. First in line, Samantha thought in satisfaction and tweeted it a moment later before playing a promotional video for #HolidayCheer.

“What’s in this?” One of the taste testers, a brunette showing a little too much cleavage, raved. The video didn’t show the actual beverage, only the tasters’ reactions.

“We call the special ingredient Holiday Cheer, after the drink,” the company representative said with a wink. “Think of it as the new Coca Cola. You can’t place it, but something in it makes you feel better amidst the stress and chaos of the holidays. Holiday Cheer can get you where you need to be.”

Once the video ended, Samantha switched to her very detailed and very long Christmas task list. She did it all in a joyous frenzy: printing her own clever-but-sweet cards, correlating 100% recycled wrapping paper with matching bows and tags, organizing her work’s Secret Santa, and considering each present she would give with the solemnity of a saint. She baked dozens of cookies and presented them, cellophaned and topped with ribbons, to benefactors like the FedEx guy and the staff at her gym. And as for holiday parties, this year was a record—she had no less than nine to attend already.

“I’m like Mrs. Claus,” she’d joke with her friends.

All she was missing was a husband and house so she could take cheesy family photos and deck out a yard with enormous inflatable decorations and lights. Oh, the lights. She had outlined her studio apartment with blue icicles, bulbous glass balls and the smaller white blinkers, all in a feverish cornucopia of flashing colors. If she ever lived in a real
house, she would get so many lights that the surge in her electric bill would be a badge of pride, one people would shake their heads over in affectionate disbelief.

She even knew what she would tell her future kids about Santa. She wasn’t religious—religion was so serious!—but she would explain how Christmas tales reflected the spirit of the holidays, tapping the very best and most generous side people had to offer. It was like a veil settling over everyday life. For about two months everything was different. Special.

At last the doors opened, and a cheer rose up behind Samantha from the line that spanned out to the parking lot. She felt like the head of a proud snake as she led the other customers toward the counter. Baristas worked with machine-like precision, placing down one cup after another topped with signature red-and-white swirls in anticipation of the orders.

The employee who rang her up smiled through his piercings. “Ready for some holiday cheer?”

“I am brimming with holiday cheer,” Samantha said. “I’ve been waiting for this since last year.” He looked appropriately impressed and handed her the exclusive tote—a mini canvas bag printed with red bells and a splash of silver glitter.

“I love it!” Samantha shrieked then lowered her voice. “Thanks.” Nothing matched the utter satisfaction of a free, high-quality item. That, coupled with being one of the first customers to try the coveted drink, was a double whammy of reward signals for her brain.

At last the warm cup was in her hand. It was more beautiful than she had expected: flakes of crushed candy cane rested atop the striped swirl of whipped cream, along with brighter crimson specs she couldn’t place. A miniature gingerbread man rose artfully in the mountain of fluff capping the caramel-colored beverage.

Samantha pressed through the crowd into the mall, walking rapidly toward her favorite holiday display with her free hand guarding the drink. In the mall’s west wing, a giant snow family surrounded a dining table piled high with gifts. There, in front of a heap of sparkling fake snow, Samantha posted a quick selfie with the tote and drink before taking her first sip.

Heavenly. She swirled the blend of holiday spices on her tongue, trying to place the delightful combination. Nutmeg, certainly, and the barest hint of cinnamon. Was that molasses? She took another sip and a warm glow spread through her chest. Placebo? No, she definitely felt good, like after a few sips of spiked eggnog.

“Holiday cheer,” she murmured, nibbling at the gingerbread man. Her head buzzed at the temples, but not in a drunk way. Rather, everything seemed especially clear, sharp as ice. Silver Bells blared over the speakers and she could almost feel each note chime and hover in the air like something liquid and humming. The song sounded so striking she actually turned to check if there were real bells behind her.

Samantha smiled. All of the people passing her looked utterly divine, like characters in a movie, bundled and busy as life-sized ants scurrying through the tunnels of the mall. Parents toting two girls in animal-themed pushcarts grinned at Samantha simultaneously.

Holidays really are the best, Samantha thought, downing the rest of her drink. One of the girls dropped something out of the back of her pushcart and Samantha darted forward.

“Hold on! You lost—”

It was one of those little elf-on-the-shelf dolls, a skinny, green-clad Santa’s helper. As Samantha’s hands closed around its soft cloth body, its head turned to look at her.

The elf laughed. Battery-operated, Samantha thought. But its laugh was mean, a shriek that seemed to laugh at her.

“Oh you are in for a treat,” the elf said, its eyes rotating in its sockets.

“My toy,” one of the girls hollered. She was standing outside of her pushcart and her pupils were as red as Santa’s suit.

“Here.” Samantha thrust it at her and rubbed her own eyes. The girl must have a medical condition. Or maybe it was Samantha. A dark red hue seemed to hover at the corners of her vision, even after she blinked.

Over the speakers, Silver Bells ramped up, faster and faster in a demented version of itself.

Am I having a stroke? Samantha dropped the cup of Holiday Cheer. It rolled past her furred boots, dripping a little leftover whipped cream. Something scurried out of the cup before it disappeared into the display.

Samantha jumped as the music screeched louder. “Silver hell… silver hell… It’s Christmas time… if you’re shitty.”

“That’s not right,” Samantha said, her voice sounding far too panicked to her own ears. “It’s silver bells.”

Something caught her eye, distracting her from the erroneous song lyrics. The snowman family was moving. The mall had hired actors to stand in instead of mannequins, Samantha realized.
“Fun,” she told herself after a shaky breath. She’d watch the show while she got her bearings.

The snow family—a male, female, and three child-sized figures, all with coal-like eyes and carrot noses—gyrated as if they were on motors and locked their eyes with Samantha’s. The snowman tipped his bowler hat and grabbed the ball that made up his lower torso with twig-like hands. He tossed the torso ball up in the air as the rest of him floated and reformed. The snowwoman ripped off her apron and likewise detached a piece from her body, lobbing the white globe to a smaller snow child who caught it and threw it back. Soon the entire snow family was exchanging and flinging snowballs, all while keeping their gazes fixed on Samantha.

Samantha clapped uncertainly. Something about the way they threw their snowballs seemed inexplicably vulgar. She shrieked as an icy clump of snow smashed into her face.

“What the hell?” She tried to sound angry but her voice trembled as she shook out pieces of ice from her collar.

She looked behind her and nearly screamed. Shoppers passed by in a blur, as if they were in a sped-up video. Their heads turned to snarl at Samantha, their mouths crammed with pointed mistletoe.

Samantha’s fingers wound around the canvas handle of her limited edition tote as she tried to ground herself. But it was too late. The world seemed to peel back a fine veneer, as if a sheet had been ripped away to show the rot beneath. Berried ivy raced around the storefronts, growing thick and filling the air with the smell of must and decay.

The snow family was gone, but in its stead swarmed small figures, streaming over the hard snow that had taken over the display. Ants?

No, they were gingerbread men. Three dozen at least, led by the one that had adorned her cup of Holiday Cheer. As they neared they smiled, their teeth glinting silver spikes. The leader bled black where Samantha had tasted its arm. Several of the humanoid cookies donned candy canes sharpened to long points in place of limbs, like a profane experiment in cross-candy fusion.

She didn’t actually scream until they started climbing her boots and jeans, nipping with their teeth. One lifted its pointy candy cane arm and stabbed her in the wrist.

Samantha flung them off and ran. She tried to go to the parking lot or even the coffee shop to get help. Instead, she found herself at the center of the mall, the exact spot she didn’t want to be. She skidded to a stop at the giant fir tree swaying under the weight of super-sized silver and gold ornaments.

Santa’s workshop, a blinking sign exclaimed next to the tree. A half-man, half-reindeer behind the sign snarled and paced, eyeing her as if it wanted to charge.

I am glimpsing another realm, she thought. One of Dante’s circles of hell. A Silver Bell Hell.

The children in line glared in unison, eyes as red as brake lights. They looked angry or hungry, she couldn’t tell which. But none of them moved, too afraid of losing their spot in line. Samantha prepared to run again when she spotted Santa, his back to her.

The looming red-and-white figure turned. Samantha was terrified at what monstrosity she would see above the Santa suit. What was there was far worse than she could have guessed: a blank slate, completely white, as if his face was a blizzard onto itself. That terrible void sucked all of the strength out of her and she fell to the tiled floor, crying.

“Why doesn’t he have a face?” she sobbed to herself. Despite lacking features, his head was cocked toward her. Listening. Or waiting.

The faceless Santa took a step toward Samantha and spread his arms, too long to be human, as if he was welcoming her to his lair. The world shifted, spinning like it was in a blender, with him at the epicenter. He threw his head back in a silent laugh.

Samantha turned away from the maelstrom as a burning sensation made its way up her throat. A great glob of peppermint foam flaked with crushed candy cane, tinted yellow from her bile, forced itself out.

She threw it all up, right into her exclusive special edition holiday canvas tote bag.

***

Samantha woke up the next morning in her apartment with a blurred memory and headache. At first she figured it was a hangover, but as she waited for her mind to clear, hardly any memories of the previous day came to her. Did someone roofie me? She wondered, rubbing at a sharp ache at her wrist. She remembered the mall and Holiday Cheer and feeling sick—Nightmares. She had had nightmares but couldn’t recall the details. Samantha tried to blink away the feeling of dread that had settled into her chest.

By the end of the day, she had convinced herself it was a 24-hour bug or, quite possibly, an allergic reaction to Holiday Cheer. She kept to her apartment for a few days to be safe.
While she stayed in bed googling articles on allergies and food, Samantha stumbled across someone’s personal blog ranting that synthetic flavors could, in a small subset of users, evoke inexplicable psychotic episodes, similar to a trip. One of the links on the blog led to an ode to psychedelic drugs, raving about how they let users see the world as it truly is, the layers of dimensions beneath everyday reality. Samantha shuddered and closed the website, quickly turning back to her many Christmas to-do’s.

A week later, Samantha was back into the spirit of things, whatever sickness she had had gone. Except—the next few times she glimpsed a holiday-themed coffee cup, the music started to warp into a demented version of itself. She would quickly will it away, sweating beneath her festive sweater, until it passed.

She gave up coffee shortly after.

About the Author:
KC Grifant writes internationally published horror, fantasy, science fiction and weird western stories. Her fiction stories have found homes in collectible card games, podcasts, anthologies (including the Stoker-nominated Fright Mare: Women Write Horror) and magazines, such as Andromeda Spaceways Magazine, Unnerving Magazine and the Lovecraft eZine. In addition, she is co-founder of the Horror Writers Association (HWA) San Diego chapter.

Author Website: KC Grifant
Twitter: @KCGrifant

Getting Ahead | Kevin Gooden

Laying in the street with the stench of petroleum, pollution, and piss burning my nose, I see oily asphalt and weathered road paint in my near vision, but that impossibly close view of the road is not what’s scaring the hell out of me—it’s what I see on the road, next to the sidewalk. Sirens are approaching. I know they’re for me, and I know they’ll be too late. I’ll be dead in a minute, two at the most.

 Weirdly, my life isn’t flashing before my eyes. My financial analyst’s brain is whirring, figuring out what the hell happened.

Taking a break from work, I came out on the sunny street to grab a smoky, rich coffee from that new Caribbean food truck, hear today’s joke from Ajay, schmooze existing and potential clients from the other towers, work the angles, get the tips, keep getting ahead. So busy, so much bustle, people everywhere. My morning buzz at the curb.

Maybe the sun did it. A mother pushing a jogging stroller was crossing the street at the intersection just down from me, and the truck turning left didn’t see her till too late, couldn’t stop, swerved out to the right, challenging the laws of physics, and losing. The truck flipped, landed on the sidewalk, crashed through newspaper boxes, and skidded to a halt when it smashed into a lamppost, shearing it off.

People screamed and scattered in a split second of terror. I didn’t move in time.

The truck was one of those funny-looking glass delivery types, with the angled mounting brackets on both sides, used for hauling large glass panes. I guess the driver didn’t tighten the straps enough. When the truck stopped, a sheet of glass on the left side didn’t, came right at me like a heat-seeking missile. Found its target.

I’m looking at my decapitated body, blood still spurting from the stub of remaining neck, head sheared off clean. Brain death is... coming... someone is yelling “cover it up”. Good plan... wouldn’t want... anyone else... to be scared....

About the Author:
Kevin Gooden resides in British Columbia, Canada. He’s had stories and poems of various genres published at numerous online and print venues, but always keeps a soft, squishy part reserved for the macabre.

Facebook: @KevinGoodenWriter
Twitter: @KevinGooden
Soup for Mother | Sharon Hajj

The daughter poured teeth into the soup and hummed her favorite tune. Steam rose up in small white clouds holding their secrets close. She leaned and took a deep breath. “It’s almost done,” she said. “It just needs a little more pepper.”

She tapped the wooden spoon on the edge letting tangled dental floss drop back into the soup. She then placed it on the counter that was still covered with drops of blood. The pepper shaker sat next to a jar of pickled fingers and toes. Their bright red nail polish looked like Christmas lights flashing in pond water. Eliza, finally of the age when she could make her own decisions about her future, had cut off her pinky and added it to the jar yesterday. She was content to be a part of her mom’s nourishment. She grabbed the pepper and shook it a few times over the simmering soup.

The clouds thickened and drifted off into the corners of the room. Their pungent odor of rotten flesh escaped Eliza’s notice. She only smelled the rosewater and bone broth she had purchased at the corner store attached by a walkway to the convent.

“Bone broth helps your blood and immune system,” Sister Rosaline had said. Time had not been kind to the nun. Her skin sagged below her jaw line. "Please be careful. I've known your mother a long time and her selfishness never ceases to amaze me. I've seen her use ... dark powers before. Use these things to help her, but don't give too much of yourself."

"I'll give her whatever she needs. She has more to offer than me. Plus, she'd never hurt me, would she?" Eliza pushed out the words through ragged breaths. She moved her scraggly hair behind her ears and scratched at dry patches on her arm.

"Don't put yourself down like that, dear. I can't say for certain what she'd be willing to do. That's why I want you to be cautious."

Eliza shrugged. "She made me promise to always heal her. I have to go. Thank you for the bone broth."

Sister Rosaline showed her a toothless grin. "Take care of yourself."

The gaping holes in her mouth had inspired Eliza. A few dental additions to the soup would build mother’s immunity even more. As soon as she left the store, she returned to her cottage to pillage the pantry. She pushed past the dried frog skins and strips of poison ivy vines. She moved the pile of birds’ nests and knocked over the bundles of wheat stalks. It took her a moment before she recognized the contents in the jar. The teeth had fused together, or at least the jaw that held them couldn’t be seen. The mouth grinned at her. The large teeth with sharp incisors laughed through the glass when she picked it up. By the time she reached the pot of soup, the sound of rapturous guffawing had filled her ears.

The last two soups she had made hadn’t helped her mother recover from the sickness which left her feverish and limp. Even with the added blood from the richest woman in town and the clippings of hair she had added after the mayor’s last haircut, her mother hung on by a thin thread. Eliza could almost see the faint reflection on the line connecting their hearts. This time, the soup would work.

She stirred until the water rose to a boil. “There now, just an hour or so to go."

After she hung up her apron, she sank into the sofa across from her mother. Eliza had always dreaded naps, but seeing her mother sleeping made her want to savor the quiet. The grey skin on her chest rose and fell in a rhythm that hypnotized Eliza. She slipped into a deep slumber.

Clouds rose from the soup with single teeth tucked away in their centers. They lingered close to the pot before scuttling away to join the other escapees up in the corners.

Eliza woke to the sound of clacking. She looked at the clock and threw herself from the couch. “My soup! I hope it’s not burnt!"

When she stood, she faced teeth hovering in front of her. Their polish gleamed and withered at the same time. One by one they sank into her neck, like darts being thrown. She screamed and dropped to the floor. Blood spurted from her neck. “Mother, help me!” With her hands pressed against her skin, blood poured down her body. Her eyes widened when her mother stirred. “Help me!”

Her mother sat up and looked at her with hollow eyes. “Your soup is perfect this time, the perfect combination.”

Eliza gasped as the blood rose from the floor and drifted across the room. It flowed into her mother’s fingertips. Her skin flushed. “You’ve done well, my darling.”

Eliza reached out her blood-coated hands. The last thing she saw before blackness swept away all of her sight, was her mother’s tongue lapping at her fingers.

About the Author:
Sharon Hajj lives and writes in Douglassville, PA and has been known to turn down a margarita so she can read a book. She is currently working on a middle grade fantasy while she explores other genres for her short stories. She previously published, THE CLOCK TOWER, through a local publisher.

Author Website: Sharon Hajj
Twitter: @sharonhajj
A Dying Moment | Gavin Gardiner

The moment froze as the woman from above hit the concrete in front of him.

The wind continued to blast, making his eyes water and face contort in its command. This gale was the only thing untouched by fate’s freezing influence, with the woman before him stuck in her exact second of impact, suspended midway through her collision with the pavement. But why was he being forced to witness the obliteration of this stranger? Why had every twisted detail been paused for his consideration? He wished only to caress the knotted twine around his ring finger, the mark of his and Sophia’s love, but time had paralysed him completely.

Unable to move, imprisoned in an instant, he gazed into this woman’s dying moment.

He found he hated her. This plummeting thing entering such an ungodly state of ruin was nothing more than a rude interruption. The falling form was completing a journey from, presumably, one of the overlooking windows of the hotel above. But this sight wasn’t deserving of his attention; there was only one worthy of his thoughts.

Sophia.

It had been in her father’s barn one cool summer’s dusk when those poetry-loving lips had whispered how it was going to be. They’d lay in one another’s arms upon a mixed heap of her abandoned Coleridges, Miltons, and Whitmans, with his Foundations of Behavioural Neuroscience and Neuroscience: 6th Edition somewhere in the mix. With no colleges or universities nearby they’d taken the studying of their passions into their own hands, but these shared study sessions were never very productive. Anyway, that was when she’d described the bonds of marriage as ‘immaterial’ to what they had, and explained that they needed no pomp or ceremony to seal their love. Hypnotised as always by Sophia’s carefully selected words, he felt his insides settle into a kind of tingling static of excitement as she tied the earthy twine around his ring finger. She then motioned for him to do the same for her. He did, and from that moment on he knew their families’ attempts to interfere were, also, immaterial. With the ragged strings picked from the bale of hay, they’d knotted their resolve to abandon the countryside that had defined their lives up until this point, and flee for the city. They would work, study, and build a future together. But what had this wilderness of towering concrete brought them?

His terminal diagnosis, that’s what.

He stared with rage into this stuck second, bitter that the fallen woman’s death would no doubt stay with him for the rest of what little time he had left. Furious at the thought, yet unable to look away, he glared down at this random woman’s final act of rebellion or depression or last desperate attempt to take control of her life. She was blurry, like the moving subject of an improperly taken photograph. He could barely make her out, such was her distortion, until suddenly he discerned something: her frozen, final conscious motion. In her moment of impact, she was reaching one hand up.

For him.

He squinted through the explosive gale and saw that, sure enough, her eyes were locked on his. He was surprised she’d have time to register someone so fully. Could she really be reaching? The synaptic connections of her brain were probably lighting up at incalculable speeds, like an orgy of strobe lights, so it could be possible. There were survivor stories of these things, you see. Those who had made suicidal leaps and lived to tell the tale gave all sorts of reports as to what they experienced, both aligning and conflicting with the opinions of the ‘experts’: the explosion of adrenaline could make you hyperaware, or send you into shock, or cardiac arrest, or cause you to black out, or even make you forget what the hell it was you were in the middle of doing anyway. In the end it was still a mystery. What goes through the mind of someone in the crosshairs of concrete, whose self-inflicted mode of annihilation is so utterly bereft of hope or chance or luck, is still a sacred secret.

He should know. He’d researched it enough.

He’d been told the cancer would take him soon, but he’d made up his mind before he’d even left that cold, cruel doctor’s office that he was going out on his own terms, whether Sophia liked it or not. But he was afraid. Yes, of leaving Sophia. Yes, of all their grand plans for the future fizzling out. Yes, of never revolutionising the field of neurophysiological biochemistry. But it was the thought of that final moment that caused the cold sweat to break out across his back. He was going to end it himself, this he’d set in stone, but the dreaded instant before his return to the darkness of nonexistence was...well, troubling. And so, to prepare, he did what he did best. He studied and researched and learnt.

Did dying moments stretch out like elastic, the final split second of your life protracting for longer than anyone could ever know? He’d learnt that male mosquitos live for an average of ten days, yet their perception of time may allow for this short lifespan to feel to them like what we know as months. The smaller the animal, the faster its metabolic rate; the faster its metabolic rate, the slower the passage of time appears to them. Try to swat a fly and you’ll have your proof. He’d even skinned some papers hypothesising a possible solution of mankind’s distant descendants to the eventual end of the universe: manipulation of their metabolisms to experience the final centuries of the cosmos as countless millennia.

Speculative cosmology and bug study have nothing to do with you ending it, he’d told himself. But wasn’t there the chance that our biochemical metabolic processes, or at least the neurological signallers governing the outputs of these operations, could go haywire in the event of such a cataclysmic rush of adrenaline? Couldn’t that burst render our perception
of time as skewed as the mosquito’s? His readings had validated time and again the popular opinion that stressful situations slowed time down for the individual, or at least sped up their senses. Many sleepless nights of research had sealed his belief that there had to be a connection between the overflow of epinephrine, noradrenaline, cortisol, and dozens more stress hormones in a moment of such intensity as that of one’s premature death – and your metabolic perception of time.

As that physicist with the funny hair had once said, it’s all relative.

He’d come to believe that however he did it would result in this final, stretched second. The pull of a trigger would warp into hours, the leap in front of a train would become a Hollywood slow-mo sequence, and the moment of the concrete’s ferocious arrival – as this woman was experiencing – would stick like a broken record. But he knew too much about the effects on the brain of failed overdoses, had seen too many images of blundered self-inflicted gunshot wounds or blunt force traumas. No, it was going to have to be a jump. That was the surest way. He would just have to suck up the goddamned final moment, just like this woman before him.

He was going to be the master of his own demise, no matter what Sophia said. Except hadn’t she agreed that it would be for the best? Hadn’t he felt her bony pianist finger on his lips before he could protest at her not only wanting to be there by his side, but actually doing it with him?

He left these troubling thoughts, such unbearable thoughts of any harm coming to Sophia, and turned his attention back to the jumper. Blurred breakages and anatomical detonations were becoming evident throughout the woman’s horizontal body as it slowly sunk into the curbside. Was he inventing things that were not there in this hand seemingly reaching up for him from the pavement? Was her frozen motion nothing more than the desperate flailing of someone meeting their end?

And still the moment did not resolve. Still the wind pummelled his paralysed being, causing tears to stream from his eyes. Still the woman was driven at a snail’s pace into the concrete. His hatred began to dissolve. Whatever she’d gone through, they were the same, really. This was what he was to become. Before long, his synaptic connections would be the ones blinking like a demonically possessed tangle of Christmas tree lights. That explosion of adrenaline making you hyperaware, or sending you into shock, or cardiac arrest, or causing you to black out, or making you forget what the hell it was you were in the middle of doing anyway would soon be his.

Come to think of it, what had he been in the middle of doing?

Of course, he’d come from his temp office job, that grey, washed out excuse for a—

Actually, it had been from the university campus, that beehive of academia, a buzzing furnace of innovation and discovery coiled like a spring ready to—

Or had it been their apartment, so dingy and damp as it was, yet emanating a warmth produced only from two souls intertwined in a love so—

Sophia. From wherever he’d come, he’d come with Sophia.

And as the maddening gale snatched the tears from his eyes to carry them upwards, the image of the woman before him finally resolved into clarity. At long last he spotted the twine wrapped around the ring finger of the woman’s reaching hand, and abruptly realised his own hand had also been outstretched the entire time. Those manic synaptic connections suddenly brought it all back.

He’d come from above.

Also horizontal, also reaching, he felt himself floating above the woman in her final instant. Untethered, he stared down into eyes that were wide with all the knowledge of those who witness their own end. He begged this treacherous moment to allow those poetry-loving lips just one last breath. But this world, having given him more than he was ever meant to be given, could now only take – and take it would.

In his dying moment, he reached back.

About the Author:
An upcoming horror writer from Scotland, Gavin Gardiner believes there are no greater terrors than that which reside within our own minds. For this reason, he specialises in the psychological, and pushes the themes and subjects of his work into areas seldom explored in the genre.

Author Website: Gavin Gardiner Horror
Twitter: GGardinerHorror
As we existed here, frolicking only for a human millennia or so, creating great symphonies of which only he and I could know. Sam had taken leave to cast forth a wave of final shrouds, my darkness, the worlds angel of death. He took energy encased in dying flesh, scattering it as magic set free to the ether.

Before Sam departed, it seemed that his goodbye had left an inescapable piece of itself. Inescapable to me at least, Sam was long gone, he had other daemons and angels in which to freely play. That fateful goodbye now fatal, leaving me tethered down in heavy chains without a key, while he flew weightless well beyond here.

It had been growing for months, and shouldn’t have been there. I had been made infertile by God — my price for not being obedient to a foolish man. Even in this brief guise of human form, that punishments promise should have stood. Procreation should have been a physical impossibility. My body and entire energy were for the nurture and realisation of lust, hedonistic angel fallen from the heavens, not new life. Yet here I was with this thing embedded inside my flesh. It should’ve come away, but this parasite was relentless with the desire to live. I tried to poison it out, but it only burrowed in deeper; embedding its core into mine, a most unwelcome fusion.

It was Sam’s of course, as inconceivable as this was. Sam and I were to one another beyond any notion of life and the illusion of time. Opposite sides of the same golden coin, we were equals—Angel to Daemon just the same, perfect synchronicity. When we collided, smashed into one another we made new worlds, our pleasure in one another and of others, created and destroyed stars. There was so much more than the one big bang that created the tiny solar system to which a few billion lifeforms clung to so desperately. As they simultaneously destroyed the planets very source, dousing out the essential spark and poisoning wonderful winds. Choosing wilful ignorance and damaging lacklustre traditions over that which is plain, that which could be real ‘peace.’ We were bigger, Sam and I. We were infinite. We came to find ourselves on this tiny rock of Earth, for a blink; to play before the rock and its inhabitants became fragments, just forgotten scattered dust. We came to play on this skimming stone amongst our exploding stars. It was forbidden, but that only made it more appealing, especially with this particular planets pending self-destruction.

This thing inside this fleshy form was slowly but surely draining this life. Maybe more energy than I was even able to part with on this plane. The critter was sucking my life-energy into its own being, my little internal black hole. My son, my erupting star was sinking me into the shadows. This life was feeding and growing, leaching from this blood supply, leaching from my inner flesh while I grew paler by the day; my devil’s child, bastard son of a snake.

Alone for the first time in eternities, trying to breathe through the scratching suffocating smog of his dust with this bundle of multiplying cells, this thing, this ‘baby’ embedded inside. I was stuck and jealous of his ability to escape this menial human cycle of events. This shouldn’t have happened. Not even human, my form was just a costume, a disguise, a touch of theatre.

As far as this frame of time went, it had been 4824 hours since I had seen Sam, my sweet delicious venom. In that time, I had desperately avoided acknowledging this cancerous growth. Repeated failings to expel this little devil, though the ignoring it was now impossible. I could feel it tumbling and stretching inside, filling me up, squashing my organs making room for its own. I was infested, invaded. It was, now, much more than the seed of the snake, this thing was flesh, blood and bone and I could feel every flex of it within my tight, rigid belly — barely recognisable as my own. This skin was very different to when I poured myself into it, like a neat pair of drainpipe jeans not too long ago; now it was stretched out, taut, threatening to burst.

For the first time, another new notion from this planet, I was dying. Having never laboured before, I was still certain that this was not the ‘normal’ course of it. Surely my insides shouldn’t feel like they were giving up, liquefying and toxifying. I shouldn’t feel as though I was rotting from the inside out or none of these animals would ever do it. Shivering and chattering through the cold, sticky sweats. Going around in circles for long, unrelenting hours, with rolling pains and violent vomiting that had me buckled down on all fours with desperate fat stupid tears rolling down my raw cheeks. Gagging and choking as this acidic brown-black hot liquid burned up through my oesophagus. I was deadly drained and my vision a blur as my eyes bulged heavily from their sockets. Laying huddled in a ball on the cold tiled floor; I thought it was surely over. That if I didn’t move and the contractions and nausea took leave of me for just a little while I would rest enough to simply slip away from this life. With thoughts of my own last breath, I passed out and there was sweet nothingness...

Violently vomiting myself out of this temporary coma, this fools death, my head pounded. This entire body was in agony through to the brittle bones from this affliction of being an accidental breeder. My body began pushing as the tension built up to a crescendo, with every molecule of my flesh focused on getting it out. With an intense, most unnatural feeling of an internal ‘pop’ and an almighty gush of amniotic fluid. There was pause for a few moments then.
Just enough for me to notice that this fluid felt unexpectedly oily against my skin and the odour to me was oddly spermy, considering the substances apparent exclusively feminine origins. Another rolling cramp came marching angrily around my back. Followed by the involuntary pushing, I felt this costume vagina stretch open as though I was going to be split in two. I was releasing something new into this world. My impossible parasite was tearing from this body as if I were a chrysalis or egg shell to be discarded once it was done. Opening up, I felt the hard-round head push out. Shaky breaths as everything seemed to subside for just a moment apart from the torturous stretch that remained. Only seconds and my body began to tense and push once more. Its body slipped from mine to the ground in which I sat, smoothly with that final push. The release was a physical relief until reality kicked in. Which it did, as I heard the thing cry out, such a strange noise to me, that of a crying baby. Gargling between cries, it then quickly got into the rhythm of sounding its voice — a human voice. I leaned down and picked this wriggling little thing up with my eyes squeezed shut. A reflex reaction it seemed to reach out for it. Its body slick and slimy from being inside of mine was light, maybe only about 3 pounds or so, but solid. Through the cooling blood and birth gunk, shaking as the adrenaline coursed through my veins, I looked down at this warm lump of flesh in my unsteady hands. This thing, this baby, was human in appearance, my baby?

Gasping at the horror of my impossible creation, a wave of nausea rippled through my stomach as burning hot acid came rising up my raw gullet, involuntarily pouring from my dry mouth and splashing to the floor. Another contraction wracked through my body; I barely managed to reach ahead and place the spawn on a bundled towel, haphazardly wrapping him — the cord still bound us together. I moved him away, though the cord pulling nauseatingly at my body, making me wretch over my shoulder — black sludge burned through this shipwrecked vessel. Throwing myself forward, eyes clenched shut with hands on blood-soaked thighs, my body instinctively pushed. Something squirmed against my upper leg, opening my eyes; I blinked furiously — the fat arrowhead of a grassy-green, blood-tinged serpent hung out from my body. The ghastly head was fierce and certainly not of this plain.

Then I felt the long muscular body wriggle and pull painfully inside of me; it waved its body hanging out of mine. Vomiting again, when I looked back down at that face, the sturdy head of the serpent looked straight up at me, unwavering and certain of its place. The serpents skin radiated danger, scales around its fat spear head looked like tiny delicate blades of grass, each one standing a little away from the body, tipped in black. There was nothing soft about the appearance, even with the colouring, these blades were each sharp. Turning its head up further a little and to the side, the beasts forked silver tongue licked the air and a hiss echoed around the room. With that hiss the crying, I had forgotten about, instantly stopped. Crimson bullet eyes pulled me in. They were marbles of burning molten lava, holding every colour of uncomfortable unsurvivable heat in them. Those petrifying orbs moved and rippled as if it could pour and burn through the world any second. My skin began to scorched — a looming eruption. My body contracted again, and I felt the serpent pull back up into me a little before being pushed out completely. The entire length of this beast tensed, slithered and rippled through and then out of me. I thought that it may pull some of my innards out with it, as the tail stretched and lashed. As it was forcibly spat from my gaping, raw, bleeding cunt, the tail lashed and whipped my thighs, leaving angry red burns.

The serpent swiftly coiled around itself then began to uncoil in one smooth motion, snaking its way towards the baby. It slithered around the bundled towel, licking the air furiously with its silver forked tongue. Then rearing its arrowhead high over the mound of baby sloppily wrapped; it appeared so much bigger than it had only seconds before, truly monstrous. A proud parent or fierce calculated predator — it looked down over the newborn boy, the son of the snake and maybe it truly was. Slinking down gently over this tiny bairn, it tasted the air around the boy’s face, delicately, flaring wicked nostrils wide. The baby made gentle cooing sounds, before falling silent as the serpents eyes of volcanic fire met his of steel blue. Without breaking eye contact, the serpents terrifyingly yet gracefully long muscled body, slowly slithered under the towel around the child.

Slumped back, paralysed by exhaustion of this unwanted birth, the blood loss and every other loss that sloshed about this terrain, I could only watch from dazed spent eyes. The great green serpent reared back its head; the neck expanded stretching open its otherworldly jaws. Jaws that were clearly designed with flexibility and unwavering brute force through muscle, tendons, and ligaments. It was designed in nature for peaceful assured deadly destruction. The entire spectacle unfolded before my weary eyes in slow motion. The baby seemed hypnotised by the beast; it appeared shrouded in peace. The serpents massive muscled mouth continued to stretch itself open; an all-consuming maw dazzled with deadly razor fangs as it casually stretched its jaw. Head turned down now towards the child, slipping its bottom jaw over the hypnotised barnirs face, simultaneously wrapping its body tighter around this tiny body and using the upper jaw to feed the baby into its throat. An all-encompassing first and final embrace. Paralysed, all I could do was watch; unable to blink my dry eyes as it expertly swallowed that new flesh whole. The ghastly shape of the entire tiny
body completely encased beneath the beasts green-scaled skin. The beast took pause. Coiling around itself, as the consumed body beneath its taut skin slowly reduced; absorbing into the creatures flesh.

Licking the air, the serpent turned those wicked volcanic eyes towards me, slowly slithering through the blood, through the vomit. It began rising itself up before me until we were face to face. The Snake held all the power here; I was trapped somewhere between life and death, stuck and powerless. Hissing around my face menacingly it said, “End of flesh, end of all dayssssss. My dear ssssssweet Lilith...”

Its voice was raspy, petrifying to human ears, even if these were a mere disguise, they were real enough for now. It caught my eye, reared its fat arrowhead that little bit just above mine and I realised then that it was me. My serpent, my freedom. As the realisation hit, the serpent dove down and I felt the entire beast pummel itself into this broken body, shredding this prison of flesh. The revulsion and agony as razor-sharp-skin lacerated, slashed and burned through my innards. As the last of this blood poured free and the air left these shredded lungs, I was free again.

About the Author:
Natasha Sinclair is from Scotland, UK. Her first published piece was released in 2018. This was followed by the release of short story fiction and poetry. Her writing spans genres including; speculative, fantasy, horror, psychological and erotica. Out with her own publications she is a contributor to several anthologies. When not writing she's teaching, raising and adventuring with her daughters and looking after their adopted animals.

Author Blog: Clan Witch
Instagram: @clan_witch

The Cold Death | Nicole Henning

The storm hit before anyone could prepare. One minute it was a typically cool winter day with a dusting of snow, the next a blizzard dumped feet of ice and snow. The world seemed to stop moving at that moment. Some people got stuck outside, I can see a small lump across the street. The neighbor’s kid that was always so smiley to everyone, she had been outside enjoying the fluffy stuff on the ground when the first wave of ice came down. It hit her hard, now hours later she’s buried. No one even tried to go outside to save her. I didn’t try to go out to save her either. I’m shivering in my living room with the windows all closed out with plastic sheeting, garbage bags, paper bags, anything to keep the cold out. But I kept a small square open so I could look outside and see. I wanted to make sure, you have to understand...before the televisions went out. Before the electricity flashed and then never came back on. The news was reporting something was happening to the people who were stuck outside when it happened. They were starting to move. As the temperature plummeted to 150 degrees below zero, in the less windy spots, the frozen bodies were pulling away from their resting places and roaming the streets. A couple hours ago I saw the drift of snow covering the girl start to move...she would have to work through the layers of ice and snow but she would do it eventually, she had all the time in the world. So I was going to wait. Shivering under every piece of clothing I could fit in layers, my outside gear and all the blankets I have. I wait and listen to the howling wind.

About the Author:
Nicole Henning is a book-a-holic who lives in a big-little town in Wisconsin. She surrounds herself with all things scary and bizarre and enjoys creating unique art. When she isn’t writing she enjoys playing video games and spends a lot of time snuggling with her dog Allie aka Princess Prissy Pants. Reading, writing and horror are her biggest passions in life.
Step through the gates for the graveyard has many nightmarish tales to tell...

GRAVEYARD SMASH
WOMEN OF HORROR ANTHOLOGY VOL.2

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AVAILABLE ON AMAZON
Millard sipped his drink and looked over at the flowering shrub. He had purchased the Scottsdale estate some six months ago. The couple had residences all over the world, but his dying wife wished to spend her final days back home in Arizona. She had fallen in love with the property – especially the landscaping.

The estate lay nestled in the foothills of the McDowell Mountains, not far from the Mayo Clinic where she could embark on a new experimental treatment for her condition. But his attorneys had advised him that the asking price topped the range of comps. The seller had priced the property with regard to its ambience of greenery, and in particular, the rare bramble bush that now held Millard’s full attention.

During the negotiations, the seller’s agent, a young woman in her mid-twenties, had explained to Millard that the owner – a Madame Romani – frequently traveled to the Middle East. “Twenty years ago, she had obtained a cutting from what the Monks of St. Catherine’s Monastery claimed to be the original bramble and planted it here, in her back garden,” the agent said.

“The original bramble?” Millard asked.

“Yes”, the young woman said, “the burning bush of Moses.” She had taken Millard over to the shrub and reminded him of the bramble’s significance in the Jewish Torah, the story in Exodus regarding Moses’ confrontation with Yahweh on Mount Sinai. “God appeared to the young shepherd out of a burning bush, a bramble not consumed by the fire, and appointed Moses to lead His people out of Egypt, back to Canaan, to the land of milk and honey. Some ancient Biblical scholars believed that Mount St. Catherine’s is the Biblical Mount Sinai and a monastery was built at its base with the bramble replanted on its grounds,” she said. “The owner believes this,” the agent pointing to the shrub, "to be a propagation of the original burning bush from which God appeared to Moses.”

Millard remembered smiling, all the while pissed off at what a ridiculous superstition was costing him - time and money.

“Madame Romani claims God has nourished the garden with good vibrations, ever since,” the young agent had said.

Millard stared at the plant. Madame f-ing Romani. He wasn’t smiling now. All that religious bullshit - and a goddamn gypsy, to boot. Millard took another sip of his drink. It had forced him to dicker around with the seller’s representatives such that by the time he’d gotten the price down to where he saw it as a deal, his wife’s condition had worsened. Two days after they moved in, she died.

Millard grabbed his drink and began a slow walk around the patio. He’d had enough of the trappings of religious fervor growing up in the home of Evangelical parents. And though he had left all that mysticism behind a long time ago, Millard did know a bit of the Bible - the part that suited him. That part came from Genesis and it went something like ‘let man have dominion over all the earth - over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth’. Millard had taken that to heart.

Retired now, - a second by-pass surgery had left no choice - the vast majority of his wealth still lay in the holdings of the conglomerate he had founded some forty years ago. Millard hated those whimpering Greenies that constantly threatened that vast enterprise. They hung on his corporation’s back regarding every business it engaged in from strip mining in Appalachia to fracking in North Dakota, from lumber harvesting in the rain forests of South America to their water and air polluting factories in India.

Where do those Greenies think meat and eggs come from if not the extensive stockyards and meat processing plants my corporation runs in Texas and Oklahoma and the vast chicken farms in the Midwest. Millard sipped the whisky.

Man has domesticated animals to serve - literally to serve. Christ, and just when the Exxon Valdese has slipped from the minds of the gas guzzling American public, BP goes and screws up. Now, according to the bean counters, the new issues with drilling in the Arctic might cost my conglomerate hundreds of millions – maybe a billion - in lobbying payouts.

Another sip. Why can’t all these environmentalists get with the program? Prosperity theology they call it - the health and wealth gospel. The Bible says man has dominion over the earth; it is his job to subdue Mother Nature and bend her to man’s will. Millard could let the whole God thing slide but he liked their mantra: ‘economic prosperity is a blessing from God’.
Millard raised his glass in salute. *We have been given power over creation because we are made in his image.*

His glass empty, Millard again took a seat, plucking more ice from the bucket. He looked over again at the bush and thought of the last meeting with the real estate agent, at the final walk through. She wanted to pass along a last recommendation from the departing owner. The agent had pulled out the slip of paper and read: “The back gardens will remain as beautiful and peaceful as they are today if you simply leave the *Rubus sanctus* alone.” Then she handed him the paper and left.

Millard was not a botanist. His dead wife might have recognized the name ... she loved to tinker in the gardens of their many homes. The only thing Millard liked to grow? A new business and his bank account. *That's the kind of green thumb I like to claim,* and he sipped his fresh drink.

He’d looked up the name afterwards: *Rubus sanctus,* the genus-species of the damn bramble bush. Millard reached into his pocket and pulled out the slip with the message. He had kept it because it had really pissed him off. He remembered the look on the agent’s face, the heightened timbre of her voice and her speedy departure. It wasn’t so much of a recommendation as an instruction – leave the *Rubus sanctus* alone. He had never liked being told what to do ... by anyone, especially a woman ... especially a gypsy.

Though Millard held no sway with the ramblings of an old gypsy woman, or the superstitions of Judaism (or any other religion, for that matter), in the three months of his occupancy, he had not even considered doing anything with the bramble bush until this afternoon.

His wife gone and his business career over, the days seemed filled with nothing, growing longer and longer. Despite his doctor’s orders, Millard had started drinking more and more. He missed his wife, and some degree of guilt had crept in about his haggling over the property and how the negotiations had cost her the last few months of serenity she so desired. *It's that goddamn plant and all the bull shit that those idiots associated with it that really bare's the blame, not my rational business sense but their irrational mysticism.*

His poor dead wife couldn’t do it, but in her stead - in her honor, he would putter in the garden for a while. The skies had turned partly cloudy in the late afternoon and Millard had decided to trim the pyracantha hedges a bit - he would just give the tops a little haircut. But first he walked over to the bramble bush. It had grown a fair amount since they first moved in and now seemed a tad untidy. *It'll look a lot better if I shaped it just a bit.* The note lay folded and forgotten in his pocket.

The shears grasped one of the low-lying branches. Millard hesitated for a moment as the bush seemed to vibrate slightly - then the blades sliced through the flesh of the plant.

In the distance a clap of thunder - then another and another, coming closer.

He snipped off a second branch and then a third.

Now the tumult loomed directly overhead, and he stopped. He looked up at the clouds that had gathered. It would rain within the hour, he figured. The bush looked a little better though a thick sap dripped from the cut branches. Despite his moderate inebriation, with the sight of the damage, Millard remembered the damn note. *Well, maybe the old gypsy woman had been right,* he thought. *Better wait till tomorrow and see if I've had done some serious damage.* If not, then he’d finish the trimming. Right now, he needed to work on the hedges before the rain moved in.

But first - he sat down at the table - it was time for another drink. As Millard sipped the whisky he stared out at the job before him. The pyracanthas were in full bloom, but now the wind had picked up somewhat, and Millard could see the white petals of the flowers falling to the ground. *How strange,* he thought - *way too early for that.* Millard refilled his glass. He had only intended to reshape the tops but now- He might as well trim the entire hedge.

The trimmer roared to life.

For the next ten minutes Millard attacked the bushes. With every pass the dull blades of the old tool ripped through the vegetation, sending branch after branch flying. Then he stopped. Millard looked down at his bare legs. The alcohol dulled the pain, but he could see the blood oozing from the numerous lacerations where the thorns had cut him. He would have to rest soon. He hadn’t realized how much the hedge had grown since the gardener’s last visit and now, with each successive pass, the boughs seemed to be longer with more and more of them finding their way onto his body. He pushed on but within minutes, in his stupor, he sliced through the extension cord bringing everything to a halt.
Damn! He wasn't finished but darkness had set in, and Millard knew he was in no condition to repair the damage. Besides, his arms ached, and his neck felt stiff. He'd wait till tomorrow to rake up the debris; then he would finish the job. Now, as a slight rain began, *is no time to be messing with electrical things*, he thought, *but it is time for a drink.*

The old man sat out on the patio, his back to the kitchen door, sipping yet another whisky. Heavy clouds of the monsoon almost completely dominated the southern sky - except for one break through which an intense beam of sunlight emerged. Millard looked over. The light bathed the bramble bush as if lighting it on fire. The sap from the cut branches continued to bleed out, now reddish in the burning light.

“What the-” Suddenly, Millard jerked forward in his chair, startled for a moment. Things were scurrying past him in the deepening darkness.

A strong breeze had come up, and Millard realized they weren’t living things running past him in the twilight, but dead things - pyracantha leaves and petals carried on the gusts from the piles of debris that lay ten yards in front of him. And branches - branches with two-inch thorns - like giant walking sticks - that skittered past him, accumulating in the cul de sac of walls behind him. The wind had really picked up now and debris was flying everywhere.

The burning bush continued to glow in the deepening darkness. *Kind of pretty,* Millard thought. Then he noticed the three cut bramble branches. They were glowing as well - and moving. Projecting from their cut ends, the exuding red sap was coagulating into long cylinders. Each crimson tube seemed to throw itself out on to the patio bricks, flatten into an adherent mass and then contract, pulling its trailing branch forward - forward toward him.

“Uhhhh!” Suddenly, a foot-long bough of pyracantha struck him in the face, its razor-sharp thorns piercing his cheek.

A second hit his hand, the whisky glass shattering on the concrete as the thorns sliced across his fingers. Then another and another.

Millard could still see the bramble branches; the red tubes now forked at their ends, tongue-like as they probed out toward him, pulling the now pliable wiggling branches behind them.

“Oh my god.” He tried to get up, but a swirling mass of debris engulfed him from behind, pulling him backward into the chair. He looked down. Chased by the wind, white petals covered his bare legs. The once delicate blossoms were now shard-like, cutting into his flesh, their pungent odor in life now even more foul in their decay. Sounding like crinkling paper, the hardened petals sliced through his clothing.

The third bramble branch had reached his legs, wrapping itself around his ankles. “Get off me ... godddd ... someone ... get it offffff.” The first two were already on his body - somewhere - crawling upward - upward. Looking down at the thorns protruding from the palms of his hands, he tried to scream, but leaves and branch bits had found his mouth - filling it and now forcing their way down his throat.

Something else was on his face. *Get it off me .... get it offfffffffff.* Millard’s mind still raged. His bloodied fingers had found the pulsating threads that slithered in his wet grasp. They slipped downward as he tried to pull them from him. One sucked itself to the nape of his neck. Then another slapped onto the front of his throat, pulling at his sagging skin. They were spreading across his flesh, reaching out for each other as they wrapped themselves around Millard's neck.

Then - the tightening began.

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### About the Author:
O. D. Hegre is a former Professor, involved in biomedical research at the University of Minnesota and in the biotech industry. Despite now residing in the sunny Sonoran Desert, his journey with the written word often takes him to the dark side. Orie’s Speculative Fiction has appeared in numerous print anthologies and online venues; his first novel and book of short stories are available at Amazon.

Facebook: [Orion Hegre](https://www.facebook.com/octet/Hegre)

Twitter: [@drWoden](https://twitter.com/drWoden)
Sharon watches her mother drag herself around the kitchen, her swollen ankles shuffling in big furry slippers, a terry cloth robe barely covering her swollen belly. Her mother holds the base of her spine with the flat of her hand, stretching backwards.

“Ohhhh, when will this be over?” her mother groans, straightening and opening the refrigerator door. She leans forward and brings out a packet of bacon. “I wish this bacon would cook itself.” She slaps a metal pan onto the reddening burner on the electric stove and pours yellow oil from a big plastic bottle. Soon there is sizzling. She stabs the bacon with a metal fork and tosses strips into the hot pan. Her eyes are half shut, long upper lashes brushing lower and lower, until her head droops and the fork clatters to the floor.

“Mama!” shouts Sharon. Her eyes fly open and Sharon jumps up from the breakfast table to grab the utensil off the floor.

“Oh, thank you, honey,” she murmurs. “I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Again?” asks Sharon, shifting her feet. The bacon smells like heaven. She busies herself setting Mr. Pinkerton Bear’s place at the table. Her mother rinses off the dirty fork and flips the bacon strips.

“Mama, can we go to the park after breakfast?” Sharon doesn’t know why she is asking. She already knows the answer.

“Sorry, Sharon, I know it’s Saturday. But, the doctor really wants me to rest. Your sister will be here in a few days,” she says patting her belly. Sharon watches her mother flip the bacon onto a paper towel. Circles of grease gather under the shriveled, wavy strips.

“I wish that baby would just go away,” whispers Sharon to Mr. Pinkerton Bear.

“What’s that honey?” Her mother yawns, putting the plate of bacon next to a bowl of Rice Krispies on the table, and pouring herself a cup of decaf. “Oh, I can’t wait to have real coffee.” Sharon pours some milk into the bowl, picks it up and puts it under one of Mr. Pinkerton Bear’s brown, fuzzy ears.

“Snap, crackle...pop!” said Sharon, turning to stare at her mother’s stomach. Her mother is slouched in a chair, her eyes shut, her breathing slow and even.

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“Will you read me a story after dinner?” asks Sharon, eating the last of her roasted chicken.

“Only if you break the wishbone with me,” replies Sharon’s father, presenting the forked bone as a challenge.

“You’re on.” Sharon giggles, grabs one ends and pulls. Her father screws up his eyes and pretends to be struggling mightily. Sharon snaps the bone and gets the bigger piece.

“What did you wish for, my sweet?” he asks.

Sharon watches her mother doing the dishes and smiles. “You’ll see,” she says coyly.

After dinner, Sharon snuggles into her father’s neck, wrapped up in her pink flannel nightgown. She is sitting on his lap in the living room easy chair and he is reading Little House on the Prairie. He gets to Sharon’s favorite part. Jack, the family dog, has rejoined the family after being separated and lost. “Can I get a puppy?” asks Sharon.

Her father hugs her. “Some day, sweetie. A puppy is a big responsibility. With the baby coming, let’s wait a year or two.”

“That’s a long time,” frowns Sharon. She slides off of her father’s lap. “This baby is a problem,” pouts Sharon, crossing her arms. Sharon’s father laughs, puts the book down and takes off his black framed glasses.

He wipes the lenses with a handkerchief. “Oh, you’ll see. You’re going to have so much fun being Mommy’s little helper. And having a little sister will be so grand.”

Sharon takes Mr. Pinkerton Bear, stalks to her room and shuts the door. She tucks the bear into the lower bunk bed, carefully tucking the sheet around his fuzzy chin. “That baby is going to just disappear,” whispers Sharon. She moves her bear’s head up and down. “I’m glad you agree,” she says, and climbs up to the top bunk.

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That night, Sharon wakes to hear her parents talking in the hallway. Sharon climbs down the bunk bed ladder and grabs Mr. Pinkerton Bear. She opens her door and sees her mother standing doubled over, her nightgown covered in a dark, wet stain. The doorbell rang and Sharon’s father went to the door, letting in their neighbor, Nettie. Sharon liked Nettie because she baked Snickerdoodle cookies and she lets her braid her long gray hair. Nettie is carrying a small overnight bag.

***
The next evening, Sharon’s mother and father come home, looking very tired and sad. They hand Nettie some money, and Nettie leaves, saying, “I’m so sorry,” and slips out the front door.
“Something went wrong,” says her father.
_Sharon thinks his eyes look reddish and he is talking slowly, like there is something wrong with his tongue._ “The doctor couldn’t fix it?” asks Sharon, hugging Mr. Pinkerton Bear very tightly.

‘No, she couldn’t,’ he says. He looks sadder than Sharon has ever seen him. He looks at his phone. “It’s past your bedtime.”

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“Don’t worry, Mr. Pinkerton Bear. Tomorrow they’ll see this is a good thing. It’s actually a real-life miracle.” Mr. Pinkerton Bear’s plastic eyes reflect the pink of the Hello Kitty Night Light in the corner. “And you get to keep your own bed!” Sharon scrambles up to the top bunk and leans over. “Good night, Mr. Pinkerton Bear! Sweet dreams!”

Sharon wakes to an irritating, high-pitched sound. Moonlight is shining through the curtains. She sees a baby wrapped in a pink blanket in the middle of the floor. The baby dissolves into a pool of dark liquid and disappears. Sharon flies down the ladder and yanks open her bedroom door.

“Mama, there’s a baby crying in my room!”

Sharon’s father comes running down the hallway, slipping a little in his leather slippers. “Shhh, your mother is resting. You had a nightmare. Go back to bed.”

“It was real!” insists Sharon. She stops cold. “Mr. Pinkerton!” She rushes back into her bedroom and grabs the bear, its plaid bowtie askew. The door slams shut behind her, the push-button door locking on its own. A little girl wearing a blood soaked white night shift is slowly walking toward Sharon, diagonally across the bedroom.

Sharon’s father knocks on the door. “Sharon, are you ok?”

Sharon backs away from the advancing apparition.

“You wished me away. But...I’m....not....going....anywhere!” says the little girl through clenched teeth. Her eyes are black holes of coal. Sharon scrambles to the top of the bunk bed. The girl appears on the bed next to her. Blood flows all over the bed, soaking the pillowcase and blanket.

Sharon’s father pounds harder on the door. “Sharon, open the door!”

The blood-covered girl smiles, blood gushing through her teeth, and puts her hands in prayer position.

“We all have wishes. You know what I wish? I wish you OUT OF MY BED!” she roars and throws Sharon off of the bunk bed head first. Sharon flies through the air and hits the hardwood floor with a thud. As a pool of blood gathers under Sharon, the girl finds Mr. Pinkerton Bear under the pillow and whispers:

_Star light, star bright,_
_The first star I see tonight;_
_I wish I may, I wish I might,_
_Have the wish I wish tonight._

Sharon’s father kicks the door and breaks the lock. He and Sharon’s mother rush to Sharon’s side. Sharon’s mother screams at the sight of her body on the floor. Her father turns her over. Sharon’s eyes and mouth are wide open and her body is convulsing. Sharon grabs her throat and then goes limp. Her father reaches inside of her gaping mouth.

Sharon’s mother grabs her husband’s arm. “She’s choking!” He removes a bone from Sharon’s throat. It is a large, intact wishbone. Sharon’s mother screams. Her father stands and turns on the overhead light. There is a child’s writing on the walls, in blood. _Be careful what you wish for._

The little girl in the top bunk looks satisfied and disappears, her reflection remaining forever in the plastic eyes of Mr. Pinkerton Bear.

About the Author:
Eileen Taylor is a landlady and a writer living in Los Angeles. Her husband is on the frontlines of the pandemic and her son is in quarantine. She loves watching horror movies with her 91-year-old father.
The world was an imperfect place. No news flash there. He had always felt that in fact, perfection was unattainable, something to strive for, sure, but the reality was all you could do was your level best to try to be the version of yourself that mattered, that did good works, that made the world just a slightly better place if only for those people who mattered to you most in the world. To try as hard as you can at what you want in this life because no one was going to give it to you, the work must be done, the effort made in earnest. Still, did everything have to be so goddamn difficult?

A harvest moon reflected red off the water as he walked along the paved path beside it. They had pulled a body from the canal just two nights ago; good a place as any, he thought as he continued past, hands deep inside his coat pockets, as if forcing them down would keep him grounded, would stop him from just floating away as well. He tucked his chin down inside the lining of his overcoat as a strong wind drew a chill up from the surface of the water below, slinking up the concrete embankments like tentacles from the deep. Just a few more blocks.

He had spent the last six weeks tiptoeing around the house as Sharon slept during the day, her twelve hour shifts at the hospital taking a toll on her, both physically and mentally. She was exhausted, and rightfully so. She worked hard, too hard. He had never envisioned a life where she had to worry so, and work until she dropped, picking up extra shifts just to help with the bills; all because he couldn’t find a job. How big of a loser was he? How much of a coward he felt, hiding from his life; terrified by the success waiting just around the corner. He would make things right.

His steps echoed on the pavement. There were only a spattering of people out at this hour. Drunks leaving the bars, the homeless milling around beside trash cans set a blaze, rubbing calloused, dirty hands together for warmth. He could see them beneath the overpass as he crossed Token Avenue, their ratty clothes glowed a soft orange as the flames reflected off the concrete above them.

Hope Plaza was still under construction. Its skeletal frame growing larger and clearer with every step. It was a colossal structure; twenty stories high and enveloping the entire block just south of Noble Street. Scaffolding wrapped around the outside of the building facing Carter Boulevard, the main entrance to the future home of the city’s elite.

The site boasted it would be a one stop shopping and living experience...for those who could afford it. Sharon had marveled at all the amenities the building was going to house once completed and told Allen her wish to live there some day; to be able to look out across the water while enjoying her morning coffee, to go shopping, hit the gym, and home again all without ever having to go outside. They differed on that part of their life. Allen loved the outdoors, not so much the people populating it, but still, he had always felt close to nature, it soothed him; something that was getting more difficult to do with each passing day. Yet, he did enjoy his moonlit walks along the canal; sneaking out after Sharon had collapsed into bed, for fear his restlessness would wake her.

Tonight, he could hear the city groan beneath the weight of itself; the world tearing itself apart. He was going to do what he could to make things right again.

Allen squeezed through a gap in the security fence. It had seen better days, all dinged up, bent at the wrong places, lacking any real characteristics to provide any sort of security at all, save psychological, as the fence had been overused, beat up, and neglected. Allen smiled. Haven’t we all been, he thought as he ducked beneath a strand of yellow caution tape cording off the main doorway, now nothing more than a large empty frame tucked in between steel and concrete, its abysmal mouth both haunting and inviting. Allen stepped through and headed for the stairwell. He wasn’t going to fuck up this time, he thought as he climbed the stairs. This was something he could do for everyone he loved. He wasn’t a completely selfish prick, after all.

The ninth floor was designed to be a grocery store though it now sat empty, save for the few dollies and pallet jacks peppered haplessly about, machines built for service, now waiting for purpose. Allen knew how they must feel. With no outer shell wrapping the building, only plastic sheathing, torn and flapping mercilessly in the stiff autumn wind, he made his way beneath the dangling light panels to the edge of the floor, looking out and down on a city he once loved.

Allen used to think of love in terms of centuries, lasting, enduring, and evolving. But part of evolution entails the discarding of what no longer works in lieu of what does. And right now, he was the defective organism. He was lacking, broken, irrelevant. Not everything growing is meant to favor the species; some are indicators of
what is no longer needed, what is hindering the rest from being what they could be, what they were meant to be, not to be regulated by the weak, the faulty, the ones never destined to make it. He felt like those plants, like those creatures he always read about; the ones that went extinct so the others could flourish without detriment, without something else starving them of the very nutrients they needed. Sometimes you had to cull the herd so that it may thrive.

Sharon would forgive him over time, he thought as he perched precariously on the edge of the ninth floor, looking down at the canal and the lights beyond it. She would move on, move past his selfishness, realizing, one day, that it was for the good of the others that he go away, that he couldn’t bare the heartache and heartbreak that he was causing her; the looks she gave him when she was trying to see the man she loved in the face staring back at her as they talked. This was for the best. He took off his coat; a thick, fur lined jacket that hung down to his knees. He loved that coat. It was the only thing that made him feel like a man anymore, a good, work-ridden coat. He looked down on the concrete slab it now lay on, screwing up the courage to jump.

“You done with that, then?” A slurred, disembodied voice belched out behind him from the darkness.

“What the hell?” He whirled around, teetering on the edge. At first, Allen thought it might be site security, though he had never seen any on his walks. Then, as the figure emerged out of the shadows, preceded by the overpowering stench of cheap, sweet liquor like toilet wine, he saw the old man, sitting on a stack of empty pallets about three feet off the ground, his feet brushing up the dust on the floor as he swung them slightly, slowly, back and forth as if he hadn’t a care in the world.

“The coat,” the old hobo said, pointing to Allen’s jacket lying on the floor.

“Oh, yeah. I don’t need it anymore. You take it. Here.” Allen bent down and picked up the garment, extending it out to the man.

The old man walked casually over, swaying slightly, his breath lingering in a cloud before him as he walked. Allen could smell it. Elderberries?

“Long way down,” the man said sliding his arms inside the coat, cinching it around him. “Nice coat. Warm.”

“Yeah. Used to love that thing. Don’t need it anymore.”

“No, I suppose you don’t. Not if you’re thinking about going down that way.” Again the old man lifted his arm, this time his short round fingers pointing at the edge and the world below the building. “What’s your name, mister?”

Allen was taken back by the man’s cool demeanor. Five minutes ago he was climbing the stairs ready to make amends, to fix all that he had broken; and now, here he was giving a homeless man his coat and telling him his name. “Allen,” he said sheepishly, stepping away from the ledge ever so slightly.

The old man took notice. “Wanna have a seat? A drink? It aint the best stuff in the world, but it’ll keep you warm.” He held up a jug held hostage in a crumpled brown paper sack. Allen smiled. For some reason, the old man’s gesture warmed him more than he thought the cheap hooch ever could, yet he walked over and sat on the pallets with the man, sharing the man’s booze with a healthy, indulgent swig. Allen choked it down, spitting, coughing.

“Jesus Christ, that’s antifreeze.” Allen choked and coughed as the corrosive mixture burned its way down to his belly, where it hit hard and landed heavy.

“Told ya it’d keep you warm.” The old hobo took the bottle and sat it beside him on the makeshift pallet chair.

“Yeah, and also kill me.” Allen shook his head like a wet dog trying to clear away the vapors spewing out of his mouth. He thought he could almost touch them and waved his hand in front of his face for effect. The hobo laughed and then said, his tone more somber now, “Didn’t look like you needed any help with that one.”

“Yeah...about that.” Allen said, embarrassed.

“No need for that,” the old man cut him off, “aint none of my business what’s brought you up here. I guess, my only concern is, whether or not you’re staying or going?”

“Oh...I suppose I could stay a bit. Maybe have another drink.”

“Good lad,” the old man said, passing the bottle back to Allen. They sat there, the two men, talking about families, jobs or the lack of them, of opportunities missed and those taken. They spoke of heartbreak and hope, about love and duty; they even talked a little about the meaning
of life and what they were truly meant for in this world; was it to suffer or to be of use? To live to work or work to live; they laughed and drank bad booze until dawn broke across the water below them, tiny fragments of light sending the darkness into retreat.

“I really should get back. Sharon will be worried.” Allen stood slowly on wobbly legs.

“About that.”

“What do you mean?” He could no longer focus on the particulars. His vision blurred and his stomach lurched within him.

“Sun will be up in a few minutes. It’s time to eat.”

“Thanks, but I really do have to go. Next time, perhaps.” He steadied himself on the stack of wood.

“Yes I did, mister. Didn’t want to have to haul you back up here.”

“The old man sat the bottle down beside him on the pallet and got to his feet. His boots heavy and rotten, his new coat wrapped around his frame, ribs poking through both fabric and flesh.

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“Thanks, but I really do have to go. Next time, perhaps.” He steadied himself on the stack of wood.

“You don’t seem to grasp the gravity of the situation. Won’t be no next time. Not for you I’m afraid. Shame too, you seem like a good guy.”

Backing away- “Really, you’ve been kind to share your drink with me, and for the conversation, God knows I almost did a right stupid thing. You talked me down. And for that, I thank you. But I really have to go now.”

Shapes emerged form the growing shadows of the derelict ninth floor suite. Silhouettes became clearer, standing just beyond the light. Some swayed in giddy anticipation; some stomped their feet in place, the sound reverberating throughout the floor, bouncing off the steel beams and scaffolding strewn about the worksite. Allen could see them now, as he swirled around, his head on a swivel, his feet planted like a tree, stuck in place as he twisted this way and that, trying to discern just how many people were in the room.

“I’m afraid we really must insist, mister.”

Allen’s head began to swoon. Too many sagging edges and squiggly lines replaced the supports and girders holding up the room. The floor swam beneath his feet, the world tilting at all the wrong angles. “But,” Allen spat, drool pooling at the corners of his mouth, turning his words into an incoherent liquid drabble, “you talked me down.” Allen went to his knees, unable to balance himself any longer.

“Why,” he gasped as the sedative coursed through his blood stream.

“Everyone has to eat, mister. And we’re starving.”

Allen no longer felt anything. No pain, no confusion. It was as if he were in the dentist chair, the doctor yanking and tugging on a bad tooth, his head being held with one hand, instruments shoved deep down his gullet by another. He knew exactly what was being done to him as a myriad of hands tore at his clothing, finger nails digging into the soft parts of his belly, ripping intestines from his flesh. As he lay there, being clawed at and pulled by the ravenous crowd, Allen’s thoughts drifted to Sharon. *Would she think him missing? Dead? Would she think he had abandoned her, leaving her to move on without him? Isn’t that what he wanted? Wasn’t that exactly what he had planned to do? To take the cowards way out, leaving her with all the burdens he himself could no longer bear?* In his mind he felt himself smiling. He didn’t leave her. He didn’t go through with it. A stranger helped him turn it around, convinced him life was worth living. As he succumbed to the blood loss, Allen drifted away knowing he hadn’t quit on her. He made it through the darkness. He was helping others survive. It was nice to feel useful again.

**About the Author:**

Matt Scott is the author of *Darkness Calling* and *Voices in My Head* as well as more than three dozen short stories appearing in anthologies across the country. He recently moved from the Midwest to the beautiful mountains of Colorado, where he lives with his wife, Heather, and their ever-growing gaggle of furry friends.

**Facebook:** [Matt Scott Writer]
**Twitter:** [@mattscott1975]
The Reverend Barnaby Hoover woke up in the middle of the night. It was too dark, too silent. Muffled. The air was stagnant. He turned to go back to sleep but bumped his head on something and collapsed back on his pillow. Slowly, he stretched his arms up to investigate. His hands touched the smooth cool surface of what felt like a wooden board. He ran his fingers across the board as far as he could reach but could find no edge, nothing to hint of its purpose. He stopped and listened. The only noise he could hear was his own breathing, which was getting faster and faster. Was he running out of air? A wave of panic engulfed him, and he started pounding on the board. It wouldn’t budge. Exhausted and now his skin scraped and bleeding, he called for help, but stopped, even more alarmed, as his screams sounded unusually loud and resonating. Panting and covered in sweat, he was coming to the unavoidable conclusion that he was in some kind of a small, enclosed space.

A moment later, he felt the cord attached to his wrist, and his worst fears were confirmed. He was in a coffin. He had been buried alive.

The Reverend frantically tugged the cord and heard the sound of a distant bell ringing. Unsure that this wasn’t just a figment of his troubled imagination, he kept on tugging. The low but persistent ring was still there. This gave him hope, and he started to calm down.

Everything should be all right. His doctor, William Kelley, must have thought he had died from his illness, and they had buried him.

He had never liked and trusted William Kelley, or any other doctor, and now it was clear he was right. William Kelley was a pompous know-it-all, whose main accomplishment was to confuse and trick parishioners into thinking that illnesses just happened. They didn’t. Everyone knew diseases were caused by demonic powers, black magic, or foul air. He couldn’t figure out why doctors were so well respected. There was little proof that they had ever helped anybody. On the contrary. Once his doctor started bloodletting him daily, his health had sharply declined.

The one thing Doctor Kelley did right, however, was to suggest the idea of a safety coffin. “Reverend Barnaby,” he had said, “it may not be years from now, but it is always good to be prepared. And nothing will put your mind at ease more than arranging for a safety coffin for when the time comes.”

Then, he had explained that a string, attached to the Reverend’s wrist, would also be connected to a bell so that he could ring it, should he ever find himself buried alive. The Reverend thought this was very far-fetched but conceded that it was a good idea, mainly to end the conversation more quickly. The Doctor had said that he would be happy to take care of it, for, of course, a small commission. The Reverend had agreed promptly to this too, just to shut the man up.

The Reverend shook the cord again for a few minutes. He hoped that the two nightwatchmen who usually guarded the cemetery were close enough to hear it and get him out to safety. Then, he would insist to be brought straight home.

Thud...thud...thud.

The Reverend’s heart leapt with excitement.

Finally, he would be saved. His rescuers were breaking through the layers of soil and rocks above his coffin.

About time, too! He was dizzy from the lack of air.

A few minutes later someone broke the coffin lid, and two pairs of strong hands pulled him out of the coffin. He collapsed to the cold ground, panting. After a while, he caught his breath and arose unsteadily, disheveled, covered in dirt, and with tears of relief streaming down his face.

The full moon cast its soft pale light over the trio.

“Stap my vitals! Father!” exclaimed one of them. “It’s a miracle! When we first heard the bell, we thought the Devil himself was playing with us, but Jacob said we should start digging right away and fast, didn’t you, Jacob? Come, Father, we should bring you to the doctor!”

The Reverend took a few steps and stumbled, but the two men caught him just in time.

“What took you so long? Didn’t you hear the bell? And don’t bring me to the doctor. I don’t want to see him. Take me home!” cried the Reverend.

“If you would let me carry you, Father, we will get there quicker. You are still weak and shaky,” said the second man. “Doctor Kelley warned us you wouldn’t want to see him, but you absolutely must. He instructed us, Father. Please don’t make this more difficult on yourself than it has to be.”

Why would Doctor Kelley tell these watchmen that I wouldn’t want to see him, the Reverend thought. But before he could protest, the two watchmen half-dragged, half-carried the Reverend to the doctor’s house.
If William Kelley was surprised to see him, he didn’t show it. The doctor nodded to the nightguards, who pushed the Reverend into one of the two empty beds.

“Father,” said the doctor in calming voice, “I understand you are upset. Who wouldn’t be! But you are a very sick man. I can’t let you go home tonight. Don’t worry, I will send for your servant tomorrow. But now, I shall start the bloodletting immediately. Otherwise you might not live through the night.”

“You had me buried alive!” the Reverend yelled, shaking with anger, “I would have died in that coffin!”

But the doctor, a great proponent of the depletion theory, was looking at the chart where he had tracked the Reverend’s bloodletting sessions. The last was twenty-four ounces. Enough to lose consciousness, not enough for death. Excellent. He would try twenty-five ounces next.

“Jacob, Elijah, hold Father Barnaby down,” said the doctor, “I wouldn’t want to hurt him. He’s been through a lot today.”

About the Author:
Milkana N. Mingels was born in Bulgaria and currently lives in Massachusetts. She is the author of the Tales from the Mountain of Perun duology. Her short fiction has appeared in Sirens Call Publications and Every Day Fiction e-zines. She would love to hear from you on her Facebook page

Facebook: Milkana N. Mingels

Until Death Do Us Part | Candace Meredith

She used stitches to mend his body; later she added tape and Velcro. When she was near completion she fabricated new clothes. His hair faded to white to match his complexion; she sat him up at the dining room chair and fed him from a rice bowl. She knew his organs would fail to work again but something else preserved him, made him alive again. She did not intend to kill him with the knife; he was too brave.

She sliced him down the eye first when he fell into her then he became violent. She loved him but they argued. His twisted corpse spun around and fell to the floor with a thud against the tile. Her white cabinets were stained in crimson; the scene looked like something from an American horror movie; she had the starring role. This way, he could not speak—she enjoyed him better. She played music to watch him come alive; his spirit was in there and it liked to dance. He smelled good in death like carnage to a fruit fly. The insects would find him there and use his vegetation to be whole. Filled. Complete. She used him too long so as the rot did not scare the dog; Charlie just barked, then growled when he licked his fingers—figuring he was an imposter and not his daddy. She cleaned the knife that severed his neck when the head fell into the sink; she had to use shoe laces for thread. After he was mended she knew she could have him forever and she shared his corpse with the friends he made being dead—he didn’t have many when alive—and as a corpse he provided a warm body, again, because his spirit was alive in there.

Faking his being alive preserved what soul he—probably a soul like a child, still playing little league in the mind of a corpse. When the neighbor came to visit she sat him on the patio and lit a cigarette. June was a good woman and she made a lemon cake—later Helen would feed him frosting with a spoon. Her husband was wound with fishing line later, to keep the skin from sloughing off—when he turned blue then dark purple she nicknamed him the dead man, funny to her, because when his eyes would open she figured his screams would startle the neighbors so the duct tape was useful, eventually, because then he would not speak.

About the Author:
Candace Meredith earned her Bachelor of Science degree in English Creative Writing from Frostburg State University in 2008. Her works of poetry, photography and fiction have appeared in various small presses. She also earned her Master of Science degree in Integrated Marketing and Communications (IMC) from West Virginia University. She currently lives in the Shenandoah Valley with her fiancé, son, daughter, six cats and three dogs.

Facebook: Candace Meredith
Driven underground by those of the light... Now known as The Dark Dwellers...

TAKERS OF LIGHT

Daniel Loubier

Available Exclusively on Amazon for Purchase or Borrow!
A Grand Estate | Zack Kullis

Tendrils of smoke drifted from the cigar, rising in winding curls in the dimly lit room. Thade put the cigar out on his silver ashtray.

"Are the preparations done? I need to be sure the estates are prepared with all the adjustments I requested. Remember, each of them had a sub-estate plan that needed to be accounted for."

"Yes, Mr. Whitby. It’s done...."

Thade's long-time attorney and accountant paused awkwardly.

"Marten, what’s bothering you?"

"The family's attorneys were a little confused about the stipulations, but once they were notified your estate transfer and various life insurance policies would remain in place in the event of your untimely death, even if by suicide, they quickly agreed. Should I be worried about you?"

"Don’t fret. I know you’ve worried about my money-hungry family, but I am alright. In fact, I have recently found a hint of peace that I’ve been looking for."

He ended the call and admired what was left of his cigar. Thade always smoked them down to the cigar's band, which he never took off. It reminded him of the joy it brought him, and at the very end, the cigar always reminded him of a finger of a corpse. To some, the end was a negative thing. Thad knew there could be beauty in the end.

They started showing up at 10:45 in the evening. The event wasn’t scheduled until 11:30, but he expected his ravenous kin to arrive early. Thade made them wait at the entry way until he was ready to let them in. He opened the door, something his butler normally did, but he had given his staff the day off.

Thomas, the most aggressive of his relatives, barged in first. "Uncle, how wonderful to see you. I hope you are well."

"You don’t need to bother with politeness," replied Thade as the rest of the group came in. "We all know why we are here. None of you have been shy about wishing for my death. Let's not pretend this isn’t about money."

"That’s easy enough," Thomas replied smugly.

Thade was expecting the only 14 relatives that had any claim on his estate. There was only thirteen. A sliver of anxiety began to wedge its way into his brain. He wanted all of them there for this—needed to have them all here.

For decades his massive estate was the only reason relatives had contact with him. It was an absurd dance of propriety and narcissism that he detested. Year after year he continued to outlive his closer kin, and year after year the remaining family became increasingly open about their distaste for his longevity.

It didn’t take long for him to realize how it impacted his ability to enjoy himself and his wealth. It did, however, take him years to come to the realization that there was only one way to be free of this mess. He lost his will to tolerate these wolves nipping at his fortune. Then one day Thomas joked about Thade having to kill himself since he wouldn’t die naturally. That was all he needed to hear.

"Hello Mr. Whitby," came the sing-song voice of the last attendee as she arrived. "I hope I’m not late."

"For an event like this, Janis, I'm surprised anyone came at all. Who would have thought my family was so full of morally bankrupt souls."

Thade’s comment caught the group off guard and left them all in silence.

"Come on now," he said. "Let's at least laugh while we can. My health is superb for a man of my age. I've lived a lifetime with a massive fortune. You are what is left of my kin, and nobody can take wealth into the next life. We haven't always had the kindest relationships. I can be gruff and blunt. On the other hand, every single one of you here has asked me what you could do to become the sole heir to the estate and leave the others out."

He watched as their eyes darted back and forth at each other with a bizarre mix of guilt and anger, each finding ways to justify their argument while silently condemning the others.

"I let you all vote on whether or not I proceed with my plan, and each of you agreed that I should. No man should have to experience the kind of fighting and bickering between their kin that I have. All I want now is peace, so I agreed. I have prepared my estate plan and will. Each of your attorneys shared this with you, and each of you will receive something that will change your lives. However, there is one member of this morbid group that will receive what I believe to be exactly what they are looking for. Shall we proceed?"

Each of them looked eager. Thade had prepared a special room in his mansion for the event and told them to prepare alibis so they would not be suspected of anything. They jumped at the suggestion of taking his private yacht for a transoceanic family trip, which he would miss because he was sick with the flu. While away, he would take his life, and nobody would suspect anything.
Thade opened the door to the final room and they all walked inside. The room was large, square, and had nothing on the walls. There was a strange platform about 20 feet off the ground that stuck out of the wall like a diving board above a hardwood floor. A rope ladder extended from the floor to the platform, and just above the platform was another rope with a hangman's noose on the end.

"Well Uncle, I'm impressed. This is quite the setup. I didn't think you were going to go through with it. But this..." Thomas motioned around the room and then pointed at the noose. "Since the documents are all signed, what I say now won't change anything. I have wanted you to die for years, and every time I thought you might kick the bucket, your miserable old ass just kept going. All I can say is it's about time."

Nobody gasped. There was no dismay. Thade could see the silent agreement in their faces. This is exactly what he couldn't wait to be free of.

"Shut the fuck up," Janis said as she absentlyminedly fussed with her hair. "Why are you dragging this out Thomas? Just let him do it."

"Great idea," Thade said as he made his way further into the room. "I'm tired of this ugly pettiness."

Thade climbed the rope ladder slowly, and when he reached the top he looked down at the group. They all took places in various parts of the room to be assured of the best show. He pulled up the rope ladder, fixed it to the platform, and then picked up a jacket he had placed up there earlier and carefully put it on.

"Get going with it," Thomas yelled. "I want to raid your scotch cabinet."

"I won't do this without my jacket and a cigar," Thade yelled back. "Just hang on..."

Thade started to laugh as he put the noose around his neck. The more he thought about his little joke, the more he laughed. Even the angel of death had a sense of humor, he supposed.

"Someone push the button on the wall over there," Thade said to the group.

"Why," asked Janis. "Can't you just jump like a normal person?"

"I wanted this to be special. Why do you think it took so long for me to get this finalized? I had mechanisms installed in the walls that would retract the support and take care of business. I wanted it to be a bit of a show. Since you're so anxious to get things going, my sweetest Janis, why don't you do it?"

Janis walked over to the button and slapped it. She turned quickly, with a sick grin of expectation on her face, ready to see the drop. A loud rumble shook the walls and all their eyes focused on him. Thade looked over just as a solid sheet of metal slid from within the wall and blocked the door. Thomas was closest to the door and was the only one who noticed.

"What in the hell is going on here," Thomas he started pounding on the metal sheet that blocked the only door. Thade removed the noose and then casually sat down on the edge of the platform, with his feet and legs dangling high above the floor. Janis screamed as the rumble continued and a thin line formed in the middle of the floor. Thade pulled a fresh cigar out of his jacket and carefully lit it. It took a few seconds for the group below to understand what was going on. The floor started to retract into the basement of the house, leaving a slowly widening crevice in the middle.

Eric, usually the quietest of the group, ran over to the gap in the floor and peaked down. The little weasel let out a scream that didn't match his mousy size and pointed up at him. "You son of a bitch, are you trying to kill us?"

Screams and shouts rose from the floor as many of the group carefully went over to the gap, which was about two feet wide now, and saw hundreds of metal spikes and triangular chunks of serrated steel. By this point Thade's cigar was fully lit and he centered his attention again to the group below.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't paying attention. What did you say Eric?"

"If this is a joke," cried Janis, "it isn't funny."

Thade savored his smoke before he replied. "That depends upon the point of view."

Thomas turned from pounding on the door, his face red with fury and fear, and pointed up at Thade. "You were supposed to hang yourself. You are the one that was going to die!"

The gap in the floor had grown to about six feet wide and had taken up about a quarter of the floor. Thade rolled the smoke around in his mouth before letting it out as he spoke.

"The plan was never for me to die, Thomas. I just wanted to be free from all this greedy family ugliness. Your greed was easy to manipulate."

"I will do anything," Janis cried, tears streaming down her horrified face. "I don't even want the money anymore. Just let me go."

Eric tried to jump to the other side but was only able to grab the edge. The rest of them hurried over to watch. Eric's grip failed and he fell onto a pair of spikes in the subbasement. One spike tore through the back of his knee and..."
pushed the kneecap off to the side as Eric's weight pushed him downward. A second spike punctured his lower back and about a foot of bloody metal pushed through his sternum.

He looks like a cockroach on a pin, Thade thought as he watched the bloodied man squirm. The horrified crowd scurried from the edge and hugged the wall perpendicular from the growing chasm, hoping against hope for some measure of safety.

"Uncle Thade," came Thomas' quivering voice. "Please, show mercy."

"Mercy," Thade asked disgustedly. "For decades you have hoped for my death and squandered your own money while expecting to simply inherit mine. Why should I show you mercy?"

"What about the estate? If we all die, who gets the estate?"

"Who says we're all going to die," Thade asked incredulously. "Are you really that naive? My estate is still mine. Your minor fortunes will also belong to me, or didn't your attorneys explain the whole thing? I get freedom from you buzzards flitting around my wealth, wishing for my death. I might be much older than you, but I'm also wiser and much more savage."

Janis screamed as she bent down, pulled off a shoe, and threw it at Thade. She lost her balance and fell headfirst into the pit. Her scream was cut off in a wet gurgle as a large spike scraped her face and then plunged between her neck and collarbone. Her body came to a stop as the end of the spike slowly poked out at her waist.

The rest of the group became crazed with fear and fought with each other for the last few feet of safety. It started as struggles to be closer to the wall, but it became apparent that there wasn’t enough room for all of them. Family ties broke down as the survival instinct took over.

Thomas was the first to push someone over the edge. The screams only amplified after the older male fell onto one of the triangular pieces of metal. Thade watched as the man grabbed his now severed leg by the ankle and was dragging it with him as he tried to find an exit that didn’t exist. His arterial squirt left a dark splatter behind him in an almost pretty pattern.

There was now about a foot of floor left to stand on. First two, and then three more people were pushed into the pit and impaled on spikes. Thade watched as one that rolled just as a spike pushed into his abdomen. The third cousin landed hard but stood up triumphantly, thinking he made it. He ran around the subbasement floor, dodging spikes and the jagged pieces of metal, unaware his intestines were impaled on the spike he hit. A grotesque display of wet entrails wound around the spikes, a bloody testament to fruitless efforts.

Thade turned as a howl of victory grabbed his attention. The floor was completely retracted and left a small gap. Thomas was hanging by his fingertips, spitting out an eerie mixture of crying and laughing as he glared at Thade.

"Now what, huh? Are you going to come down and throw me in?"

He waited for the mad cackle to die down before he responded.

"I’ll climb down once the floor goes back into place. I will be better than I’ve been in years. You, on the other hand, won’t make it."

The rumbling within the walls grew louder and the floor began to move back. Thomas quickly lost his precarious hold and fell into the carnage below. The floor blocked Thade’s view of Thomas, but the screams of the mortally wounded were somehow fitting. Visceral cries, once clear, soon picked up an echo, and the volume reached a terrible climax just before the floor shut with a slam.

Thade put the rope ladder down, went down, and sat on the floor while he finished his cigar. The groans, screams, and weakening cries accompanied his smoke, dying out completely as his cigar burned down to the band.

He put it out and admired the end that this cigar represented. Death is beautiful. Where one thing ends, another begins, and often with peace.

About the Author:
Jack Kullis worked for the FBI for 15 years, has lived in multiple foreign countries, and currently works at a hospital where he regularly transports bodies. His paranormal experiences include Candomble and Macumba Preta in Brazil, Santeria, and Brujeria in Mexico. Take a seat and let Zack’s dark mind take you for a ride.

Instagram: @ckullz
Twitter: @ZKullis
When the house sold to her father, the estate agent called her room the fourth bedroom. The previous owners had fit a large window that gave weight to the charade, but it was no more than a glorified storage cupboard.

She had started off in the big room with her older brothers, but when she came home crying one day because a boy in math’s class had laughed whilst learning about the shape of tetrahedrons and pointed to her chest and said, “Like those?”, her father took her from the big room and placed her in the tiny convert on the top floor. One brother asked if she would be afraid all the way up there on her own, but she had found the constant quiet soothing, liking that it gave her the power to create chaos if she wanted it and then return to stillness. The room had been painted pink in her honour, despite her favourite colour being green.

No one had specifically told her she shouldn’t open the window and crawl out onto the ledge and walk along it in stocking feet peering four stories down at the garden path below and no one had told her she should.

That was the first time he had appeared to her. The concept of somebody sitting cross-legged on top of her house, when she was going about her day inside of it, had never occurred to her but nonetheless, there he was.

“You sure you should be doing that?” He said with a cocked eyebrow. He held a damp cigarette with strangely long fingers and claw-like nails. The air felt dank and heavy as if the rain were somewhere far off and thinking about returning.

“Oh, I’m pretty sure I shouldn’t be doing this.” She quipped. “But I love the cold air.”

He grinned at that and called her a rascal, then reached forward with his clawed hand as if to pull her up onto the roof. Instead, he too a swipe at her arm, leaving a three-pronged scar she would wear into adulthood. The girl gasped and pulled her arm away and plunged back into the warmth inside the house. He looked out across the rooftops and took a drag of his cigarette, as if what had just happened had not. If anyone had ever asked, she might have said that she had fallen against the wall and scratched her arm down the course brickwork, but nobody ever did.

As time went on, she became a little more sure-footed on the windowsill. She would pull herself up onto the roof and smoke the cigarettes she stole out of her father’s pockets, but he never showed.

***

She saw him now and then as she got older. One night at university, she opened the window to escape the dense, earthy smoke of the room to see him standing watching her across the street. The old scar had prickled as she looked out at him, even though there were fresher tracks that could call for attention alongside it now.

“Hey,” she whooped and puzzled at the sense of relief she felt to see him. He smoked and said nothing, and in the end, she shut the window and returned to the darkness inside.

Once on a late-night drive she swerved to avoid a flash of fur and paws that scampered into the road and hit him instead. The empty green bottles on the car floor, clinked and smacked against each other. He had raised an eyebrow at her then, the type of disapproving look a father might give a child when they’ve demanded too much of his time then limped into the black forest, ignoring her shrill protests.

***

On this occasion, ten years later, he turned up to speak to her again. She bartered then, a little less sure of herself, a little more in need.

“A bit chilly isn’t it?” He smirked.

And she looked around her at the white Nepalese mountain, as if seeing her surroundings for the first moment. “I may have bitten off more than I could chew this time”, she croaked and offered a watery smile.

Laying down next to her, he cuddled in close and pushed his fingers inside her snowsuit, finding the pudgy, damp skin underneath. He slipped one of her shoulders out of the suit and the cold air against her bare arm slapped her like a hand of fire. She snuggled into him and tried to syphon his warmth. When she coughed against his throat he laughed at the clatter in her chest and called her a little rattle snake.

“So, you’re ready?” He’d asked eventually.

She’d shivered and looked up at him, almost embarrassed,

“No... not yet.”

He had half smiled and sighed, then ran his lips down the scar on her arm, snatched her wrist tight and ripped three fingers clean off with his teeth.

“Insurance,” he’d grinned, blood wet mouth gleaming.

When they found her they said she was frantic and raging, ‘begging for his mercy’ and that she was lucky it was only those small parts of her that had died on the mountain that night.
Most thought that would be enough for her. That this would be the pivotal moment when the world birthed her quieter years, that maybe she’d try her hand at some more normal things; Get a stable job, keep a boyfriend for more then three months, save for a mortgage. Instead she spent the next few years calling out to him; Cave diving in Bali, bungee jumping in Mexico, tombstoning in England.

“If I go down, I’ll be having the time of my life.” She slurred into a neck one night in Cuba, spilling spiced rum down a back.

When the time came a few years later, the reality turned out to be quite different.

“My, you get around.” She muttered when he turned up that night.

“Speak for yourself.” He grinned with that raised eyebrow, as he stubbed a cigarette out on the doorway floor and slunk into the tent. The heavy air buzzed to the sound of mosquitoes. She was wet with sweat and couldn’t raise her head from the cot she’d been placed on. Around her people spoke in low voices and she caught small scratchings of sentences like ‘fever’ and ‘bite’, but no one would confirm to her what she already knew.

“How does it feel?” He asked and seemed genuinely interested.

“Like I am an ancient volcano, running thick with magma.”

He smiled again and gave her a fond look that she took to say, “You were always my favourite.”

“What I’d give to be back on that mountain now.” She said and managed a side smile.

“You always did love the cold.” He replied and scuffed a clawed finger across her cheek. They sat in silence and he allowed the time to pass, with the flutter of distant bats and the gentle rasping, moans, and mumblings from her mouth.

“So...ready now?”

“You know I’m not.”

And this time he had the decency to look a little stricken.

“I’d say I’d make it quick, but it smells like you’ve been here a while already.”

She laughed despite herself and was quiet for a long time and then,

“At the funeral they’re gonna say something like, ‘She lived life to the fullest, doing her best to escape the death that chased us all’ but you and I both know it was I who chased you.”

He proffered her a clipped smile. She didn’t speak again after that, but he sat with her on the edge of the bed and watched as her fingers and feet cramped up into gnarled, grey tinged expressions of themselves, and she clawed at her own throat and skin as if searching for release.

He picked up her wrist. On the edge of her hand were two holes where the poison had seeped in. The arm was heavy despite the three fingers missing and he dropped it and watched as the three-pronged scar he’d given her years before came into view. The arm hung limp off the cot like a dead snake. He smiled at the memory of what was his and pressed two clawed fingers to her quieting wrist.

At last he placed his cold hand against her chest and for a beat, she swore she felt the frost of the Nepalese mountain air or the cold chill of wind from opening her bedroom window wide. When she groaned, he pushed again. Harder. The clawed limb broke through the now paper like barrier of her skin, collapsed the ribs with a squeak and crack of splintered bone and found the dull thing left in her chest. It seemed almost ready to slump into pulp, as if years of precariousness had pummelled it into soft offal.

He took the mushy thing from her chest. Sometimes he would keep the rubberier ones, but this one he smooshed in his hand, then ran his bloodied fingers up her throat and sipped the last breath out of her mouth. The gnarled body became still. He looked up from her as if noticing the tent for the first time, it was tiny except for the huge plastic window on one side. For a moment he lingered, to look out at the forest beyond.

“It was I who chased you.”

He mimicked her voice as he said it and laughed at the concept. Then walked out into the warm night air and the darkness.

About the Author:
Siren Knight is a UK writer who specialises in illuminating the borderlands between fantasy and reality. Her short stories have been published in various publications and she now actively seeks representation for her YA crossover fantasy fiction manuscript.

Twitter: @SirenKn1ght
Some will probably ask, “What did your twin brother, J. R. Hightower, do to deserve what happened to him?”
I’ll tell you. He should’ve begged more before his finale, and the curtains closed.

One night, as I was searching for one of my favorite blankets in a hall closet, I reached up to the top shelf. Without knowing it, I pressed a button, and a secret door opened up.

A steep, metal stairway introduced itself to me, as a cold draft slapped me in the face and ran her icy fingers through my natural, braided hair. She crawled into my ear and whispered, “Come, and you’ll understand.”

I pulled the Cobra Kai cover from the shelf and wrapped it around my quivering body. Pausing for twenty-one seconds, I grabbed the pulsating rail and descended below, one step at a time.

My breath drew icy, deformed figures in the air. As I reached up to touch them, each shattered and melted away.

Tiny murky, yellow torchlights scantily dressed the cobwebbed walls. Upon climbing down the last three steps, I saw him and all what he had done.

A pile of bones, almost touching the ceiling, attempted to conceal its creator. I sniffed a faint, salty and charcoal-like odor in the air. Glancing down at the blood-stained concrete floor where I spied a shredded purple collar. The faded name printed on it was still readable—Darla,—my cat, whom I rescued from an animal shelter three years ago.

Several stainless-steel, sharp tools hung on one wall where an examination table rested.

“J.R., what have you done?” I yelled pointing at his collection and holding Darla’s collar in my trembling hand.

“Where’s Darla?” Tears flooded my eyes. Jerking his body around and wiping his gloved hands onto his black apron, he glided towards me. He peeled his plastic face-shield backwards, resting it on the top of his head.

“Little sis, you shouldn’t be here,” he said, pulling one glove off and chunking it to the floor. A thousand scratches tattooed his outer hand and half-way up his arm. “You weren’t supposed to find out this way!”

I stepped backwards and fell into the mountain of bones. He knelt over me, slurring a few of his words, and said, “Now, listen up, I had to stop them.”


Rocking back and forth on his knees he said, “The dreams... they always come to me and gather around the foot of my bed and cry. They won’t stop coming and they cry and cry... The perpetual scratches against the back of my headboard are the worse, almost every night, all night until 6:00AM.”

“Who’s crying and scratching?” I asked with a deep frown.

“The kittens... the kittens I placed in a burlap bag, alive. I threw them in the lake, when I was thirteen-years old. One of them clawed me so bad that I had to constantly hide my right hand or wear a glove.”

J.R. narrowed his eyes at me, then tore them away.

“Those voices in my head told me to do it,” he said as sweat skated down his face and drops plopped down onto my cheeks.

“Told you to do what?” My heart starting racing.

“To hunt them down, skin them, and harvest their bones... the kittens. Then, they would leave my dreams, but the voices lied, because the kittens’ cries aren’t gone. They’ve been with me now for over five years.”

“J.R., did you kill my baby, Darla?” My eyes enlarged and heart started beating faster.

He didn’t say anything.

“Did you kill her?” I looked into his still eyes.

Licking his lips with his forked tongue—followed with a wide grin—, he said, “Yes... her raw heart tasted the sweetest out of all of them. She was my last one, but now the voices are telling me that I have to finish you. They know you’ll tell on all of us. We can’t have that. The pain will only last for a little while, I promise.” He stroked my hair with his weighted hand that reeked of decayed anchovies.

Reaching from his back pocket, he pulled out a long blade.

I fumbled, grabbing two jagged bones on the side of me. Before he could drive the blade down, I stabbed him on both sides of his jugular.

Blood gushed out like wild fireworks all over me. He gurgled and spouted, “Thanks, sis... I-won’t-hear-the-cries-anymore.”

“Yes, you will. I’ll make sure of it for all eternity.” I rolled over and stood up.
His eyes widened, and he fell on his side to the ground.

I tore a long strip of the blanket and wrapped his wounds tight, just long enough to finish what I needed to do. I ran up the stairs to gather supplies. I placed a candle on the ground and lit it with a match.

Slicing his abdomen down the middle with his blade, I pulled his flesh back. He screamed out so loud that a few of his tools slid down the walls. I entombed Darla’s collar and several bones under his liver and saucy intestines. I sewed him up with a large fishhook-like needle and cloth string. I poured hot candle wax down his fresh incision.

Dabbing my finger in his seeping blood, I wrote a message on a sheet of paper: ‘Darla and friends, haunt J.R.’s rotting flesh and dead bones, forevermore!’

Then, I balled it up and stuffed into his mouth. I pinned his lips together with large sewing pins and painted his lips with fire ash.

Unwrapping the bandage from his neck, I finished watching him bleed out. Before he took his final breath, my nails on my right hand retracted, and curvy, crimson claws with snow-white tips extended from my fingers. I carved out his frozen heart, bit a chunk out, spat it in his face, and threw it onto the ground. I slammed my shoe down hard, until I saw all of his bloody remains squish out. My oval pupils transformed into onyx, vertical glowing slits.

I waved my hands over the bones and J.R.’s body. They all floated up in the air in a speedy, circular motion for a minute. Clapping my hands together, they disintegrated and flew down inside the open glass jar. I screwed the lid on firmly and tied a white ribbon, drenched in his blood, around it.

Traveling in darkness, under the candlelight of the oxblood moon, towards the lake, I found the perfect place to bury the jar. As I walked away, I turned around and purred in the howling winds, “J.R., I always heard those cries and scratches... I just didn’t know you were a monster, too.”

About the Author:
Miracle Austin works in the social work arena by day and in the writer’s world at night. She’s a YA/NA cross-genre, hybrid author. She’s a Marvel/DC/Horror/Stanger Things FanGirl and loves attending cons and teen book events. Miracle lives in Texas with her family, and she looks forward to hearing from her awesome readers, who already know her, and new ones, too.

Instagram: @MiracleAustin7
Twitter: @MiracleAustin7

I Remember You | Judson Michael Agla

I remember you long ago on the balcony, in your see through sun dress; balancing light and shadows from your lean figure as you walked passed me, fuck! You could make a man cum from a simple glance. I could see how you carefully displayed a slight reflection from your cleaver shining from your purse in the early dusk of the orange sunset. What went so wrong? It wasn’t all the killings, we both enjoyed that, maybe we just grew up too fast? Genocide takes its toll; it rips at your heart and turns it into the darkness. It was easier when we were younger, when blood and shovels weren’t such a nuisance, all the burning, the explosions and strangling’s, close contact murder and arbitrary demolitions, digging six foot holes in the moon light, with a bottle of the best. No wonder we grew apart, death was a dirty game, and we were covered in it. You look the same as you did, beautiful and vicious as a viper; you let me see the cleaver, you never make mistakes like that, the only question is who’ll be doing the swinging. I was obviously your mark, but were you just giving me an edge up, a fair fight to the death, or were you just falling on the sword, tired and worn, ready to meet the boatman. I know you’ve already forgiven me, and we both know; only one of us would be seeing the sunrise.

About the Author:
Judson Michael Agla is an artist working in a multiplicity of mediums; such as drawing, painting, wood and soapstone carving, and writing flash fiction, short stories and poetry. The majority of his work surrounds the idea of the human condition; be it metaphorical or literal.
Humans. Werewolves. Ritualistic Murder...

Centuries of Sin

Sara Yardley

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON
“This isn’t the way…” Tears streaked my face and I couldn’t finish my words. *This isn’t the way I want to say goodbye to my brother!* If only I could scream it aloud.

It was three-thirty a.m. and we *had* to be quiet. Our lives depended on it.

We were crossing the alleyway behind Goldilocks bakery, with Danilo’s butchered corpse in four heavy trash bags.

***

Earlier that night, we had finally caught him. We, being my sister Teresa, and my cousins, Manuel and Joma.

Someone, *something*, had killed three children in our neighborhood; the poor little kids were found ripped apart and mauled, their remains laying in pools of blood in the open streets.

Neighbors had seen *it* on many nights, dashing away from the headlights of the traffic and into the shadows of the parks and deserted buildings. Everyone feared this evil that had arrived in San Pablo.

At first, we hadn’t connected Danilo’s running away with the child murders—he’d been gone a full week before the first one—but then, Joma swore that he had seen a rabid Danilo near a dumpster one night. And Joma’s hair, I kid you not, had turned completely white; evidence of true shock, whether real or imagined.

Maybe he had seen an *aswang*, in human form, out hunting. But Danilo? No, I prayed he was just off partying in Manila with his seedy friends as he’d done before.

My mother certainly believed Joma though and feared for the family.

The day we told her was cool and rainy. Perfect she said, for preparing a protection spell. This spell begins with picking a fresh coconut at midnight and boiling the guts for its oil. Mother spent hours preparing the coconut just right: draining the oil, reciting the protective prayers, and finally, discarding the leftover coconut flesh and shell in a river, far from our home. She then hung the blessed coconut oil in a pouch by the front door. All just as folklore insisted that she do. If an *aswang* came by, the oil would boil by itself and warn us of the approaching danger, she insisted.

I didn’t believe it, none of us did, but the next night Danilo returned, and the coconut oil boiled over, like lava erupting from Mount Mayon.

He stood in the front yard; a man’s form in Danilo’s ragged clothes, but he was *not* my brother. The eyes of a devil, this creature had. Sharp, gold swirls that cut right through you. How Danilo came to be that way we’ll never know, but we knew that night he was *our* responsibility. *Our* blood.

Joma attacked the *aswang* with my dad’s old machete. The stabs and slices subdued it enough that we could pour the boiling oil over its body and then hack off its limbs and head.

Mother prepared the trash bags.

***

So, there we were in the early hours of the morning, in the alley, taking poor Danilo’s remains to the vet’s office where Manuel’s wife worked. They had an incinerator there for cremations—perfect for our task. We were all trying to be strong, but I wasn’t the only one with shaky legs and wet cheeks.

No one said a word until we reached the small playground close by the clinic.

“The girl was found there,” Teresa whispered.

“Shut up!” Joma urged. “We have to get off the streets before the morning traffic starts.”

We were lucky to be in a quiet, mostly abandoned neighborhood. We’d seen only a few cars drive by.

Manuel, at the front of our procession, suddenly froze.

“What’s wrong?” Teresa asked.

I hurried to catch up and see what had spooked Manuel.

“Oh God!”

Another one! A woman, with the same fire-burning glare and snarl that Danilo had had. Joma still had his machete and rushed to protect our group.

A rough fight broke out; the three of us dropped the trash bags and grabbed the nearest weapons we could find.

For Teresa, a discarded hub cap; Manuel a rotting fence post from the park; and me—I hit the jackpot with a steel rod. It was rusted and bent but had one sharp edge. I would stick it straight through her eye.

The *aswang* hissed and snarled, snapped and scratched. We all got bruised, punched and scraped, but thankfully none of us received a deadly bite. We took that bitch down and stepped back to assess the damage.

“We’re getting good at this,” Teresa joked.

No one laughed.
I wiped the warm blood from my face with the hem of my t-shirt and re-gripped my rod. “Someone help me cut her into pieces,” I ordered. I wanted to get the hell out of there. Joma looked around. “Where can we get more trash bags this time of morning?”

About the Author:
Kelly Matsuura is the Creator of The Insignia Series’ anthologies (Asian fantasy themed) and has had stories published with Ink & Locket Press, A Murder of Storytellers, Black Hare Press, Paper Djinn Press, Sirens Call Publications, and many more.

Author Website: Black Wings and White Paper

Dirty Phoenix Rising | Phil Slattery

On a cold, dreary December day, Sam Liston walked the shore of Puget Sound, picking up pretty seashells and debating with himself that if he swam toward the horizon, would he freeze to death before he could drown peacefully? Sam kicked something he thought was a coconut brought by the currents, but as it rolled away he could see that it was a severed head, partially de-fleshed by fish and crabs, with a full beard and long, chestnut brown hair.

“I knew I should have wrapped chains around the head as well as the body,” he muttered. He gazed into the empty sockets that once held the gray eyes of his business partner.

“Maybe I do have something to live for,” he thought.

He smiled and felt a great weight lifted off his shoulders.

Murder had been a thrill. He had been wracked with terror, fear, and paranoia at first, but after he had pushed Steve off his boat and saw him vanish beneath the waves, he felt a great relief, like the peace he felt after the sex he had not had in months. His first murder had been a challenge in covering all the details, hiding all the facts, and leaving misleading clues to give him plausible deniability. Surprisingly, he had actually enjoyed the challenge. Now, he had something he could master, something in which he could take a personal pride. This was a high he had never imagined.

He would start with the homeless and hookers and then move up to more difficult game like housewives, businessmen, and public figures.

He picked up the head by its hair, kissed its forehead and cheeks, and buried it in the tall grass off the beach. He piled driftwood over it to prevent pets from digging it up while their masters walked them. As he brushed sand off his palms, he gazed at the wood and said quietly, “Thank you, Steve. Truly, thank you.”

Looking out to sea, he watched the waves disappear as night descended. For once he was actually looking forward to tomorrow. Dawn would be the beginning of a new life steeped in beautiful promises.

About the Author:
Phil Slattery has a B.A. in German and Russian. He has been writing fiction sporadically since the late 1990's. His poetry and stories are in several collections available on Amazon. He is currently working on finishing a sci-fi/horror novel entitled Shadows and Stars. He hopes to follow that with three more novels over the next few years. He can be found on several social media sites.

Author Blog: Phil Slattery
Twitter: @philslattery201
I promise you, my friends, you’re not likely to hear a story stranger than this one, so let me charge your glasses and then I’ll tell my tale. This all happened when I was still a young man. Despite being a callow youth at the time, I called myself an old soldier, having served in 1/42nd since I was a mere lad of twelve. Drummer at first, then I joined the line. Proud to wear the redcoat I was, proud to carry my Brown Bess. Served under Colonel Macara. I saw him killed at Quatre Bras in ’15. Terrible shame it was, terrible. I remember it all; the line, the square, the cannon and the shot. Terrible times.

But my tale isn’t about my service. No, my tale comes from ’16, after I was discharged. After old Boney was defeated they didn’t need so many of us lads to fight, so I was sent home. I didn’t mind, I was going back to a good job on a farm.

My tale concerns a part of my journey home. It happened in Norfolk, it did. I had no money, so I was walking, as many of us old soldiers were forced to do. The folk who stayed behind weren’t welcoming to us who fought, they didn’t like the redcoats. John Tar they loved, but not us, not us Lobsters.

It was November and it was cold. I had been walking all day and was dog tired. I was used to long marches, but it’s easier when you’re marching as part of a regiment; harder to do when you’re by yourself. It was getting towards dusk. I was on a country lane, with trees on both sides. I hadn’t passed a road marker for a while, so I knew I wasn’t likely to find an inn or tavern where I could bed for the night. If I was honest, I didn’t want to spend the money neither, not unless I had to. A barn or an abandoned house would do me, I had some bread and dried meat in my pack. I kept walking, but kept my eye on the side of the roads, looking for suitable accommodation. I was too tired to walk all night and I didn’t want to bed down in a hedgerow. I spotted something after about a mile.

The house was set back from the road, a ramshackle cottage, clearly derelict. The roof was sound, so I knew it would be dry. It would suffice for me; beggars can’t be choosers. The front door was hanging off the hinges, so I simply pushed it open. The cottage wasn’t a big place, one large room with a fireplace, a kitchen with a pantry and a small room at the back that was clearly a bedroom. There was no furniture, but I didn’t mind, it was dry and I was used to bedding down on floorboards. I decided to sleep in the large room, so I set a small fire in the fireplace and ate my meagre rations before unrolling my bed and settling for the night. The fire kept me company, the flames flickering and dancing across the walls. I drifted off to sleep.

Something woke me, my soldier’s instinct making me reach for a musket I no longer carried. I wasn’t afraid, since the final cavalry attack at Quatre Bras I had not felt that emotion, but I needed to discover what had disturbed my slumber. I was trespassing and I didn’t want trouble, no sir. I entered the bedroom at the back of the house and saw a dark figure standing next to the window. I could see him clearly in the moonlight illuminating the room. Now, I don’t want you to think I’m more sensitive than the next man, but I have seen a lot of dead men in my time. The man standing in front of me was dead, I swear I knew this as soon as I clapped eyes on him. It was the eyes, they were empty. But yet he was still standing. His eyes met mine and he spoke.

“You are a stranger.”
“To these parts, yes.”
“Then I have no business with you.”

He turned away from me and stared out the broken window. I couldn’t leave it like that. Disturbed as I was at the sight of a dead man standing in front of me, I felt I had to discover the story behind his existence.

“Who do you have business with, my friend, standing there in your funeral clothes?”
“I know how I’m dressed, lad. I know what I am.”
“Of that I have no doubt. I’m curious to know what brings a man back from the dead.”
“What brought me back I can’t say, but I can tell you why. For revenge.”
“Must have been a powerful wrong to have brought you back from the grave, that’s all I can say.”
“It was and now I am away to discharge the burden I must rid myself of. It is redemption I seek.”
“Will you tell me your burden?”

His dead eyes flashed over me.

“I’ll not tell you lad, but you can accompany me and observe first-hand what my duty is. You may be of assistance to me, my legs are not as they once were and I may need to take your arm if I stumble.”
“I will, although some would say I was mad to agree.”
“Aye, well some would no doubt say that, but I’ll be right glad of your arm this night.”
And with that, we headed out into the cold night air, all thoughts of fireside and sleep gone from my mind. I tried not to think about my task.

“Where are we headed?”
“A small village named Middleton Bishop.”
“When did you die?”
“Three months ago.”

He was remarkably well preserved for being three months in the ground. Having seen and smelt some of corpses on the battlefields of the Low Countries I was grateful.

“I couldn’t rest, I had to reawaken to complete the task in death I couldn’t complete in life.”
“And will you tell me your task before we get to Middleton Bishop?”
“No, but you will see when we get there.”

We lapsed into silence as we walked along the stony, frost covered road. He stumbled as if drunk, his legs wobbling beneath him. I occasionally took his arm, my hands reluctant to hold the cold, hard flesh of the recently dead. I couldn’t but wonder what I was getting myself into.

After about thirty minutes of walking we reached the village. It was a pretty little place, stone buildings with thatched roofs. It was not unlike my own home and I felt a pang of homesickness. It was a cold night so there were only a few folks in the streets. Those that glanced at us looked shocked and they soon roused the whole place. Within seconds we were surrounded by about fifty villagers. I could hear snippets of conversation.

“It’s old Dan Collins, as I live and breathe.”
“But he’s been dead these last few months.”
“The reverend himself came from Norwich to bury ‘im. Saw it myself.”
“Who’s that with ‘im? Never seen ‘im before.”

Nobody spoke directly to myself or my companion, whose name I now knew. The villagers stood round us, clearly uncertain about what to do. No doubt I would have done the same, being confronted with a dead man. Suddenly there was a bustling from the edge of the crowd and the villagers parted to let a prosperous looking individual through. He looked shocked at what he saw, but when he spoke his voice was calm.

“So, Dan, you’ve come back to us. I’ll be reckoning to get my money back from the physician we paid to declare you dead.”

“Let him keep his money, Mayor Bartholomew, he did his job right and proper. I am dead.”

The Mayor snorted.

“In this world, the dead stay dead, Dan. If you are what you claim, why are you back on this side of the ground, bothering the good folk of Middleton Bishop?”

“I’m not here to bother these folk, I’m here to claim my vengeance against those who wronged me, those who sent Duggan to kill my daughter and me to get my land.”

“No one sent him, he was a robber, that’s all.”

“No, he was sent by another.”

“Well, you may have lain in the dirt for all these months, but you seem to be able to hear the village gossip. Some misguided folk in the village say such things, but there is no substance to such a claim; Duggan gave testimony at his own trial to say as much.”

“The gossips had it right, not that I heard it from them. Duggan was paid well for his deed and his family provided for after his execution. This has been made clear to me during my time underground.”

The Mayor looked amused, not an emotion I expected to see while talking to a dead man.

“The spirits told you, did they? And tell me, dead man, what was this truth these spirits told you?”

“That it was you who paid Duggan, that it was you who told him to lie at his own trial to save your skin.”

“No man would do that; such testimony could have saved his neck.”

“Bartholomew, I told you I learnt the truth. When you commissioned him to carry out this dread act, Duggan was already dying of cholera and he knew it. The money you offered him was enough to support his wife and children. All he had to do was kill some innocents and his family would be provided for. Without the money, they would be in the poorhouse within a week of his death. He went to his grave knowing however badly they thought of him, at least they would have full bellies and a future.”

At this revelation, the Mayor for the first time looked worried. The villagers gaped. I stood silently.

“My daughter died because you wanted the land to sell to the train company. Them that needed the land to build the new Newcastle to London line. You made a pretty penny out of the deal. Some folk here suspected, but never
had proof. They weren’t to know you bought the land in secret from my estate and once it was sold to the train
company, you took the money down to London and secreted it away in an account there, away from prying eyes.”

Now the Mayor was looking nervous, not as confident as he had before. The villagers were starting to move
away from him, perhaps knowing what was likely about to happen. Dan shambled towards the Mayor who started to
turn, clearly with a view to outrun this vengeful phantom. But a carefully placed foot by an unseen villager sent him
sprawling into the mud. That was enough, Dan caught up with the man who had wronged his family.

Now, I can see you are all gentlefolk so there’s no need for me to describe the scene that followed. I found
myself unable to tear my eyes away and that was the same for most of the villagers too. They stood in silence watching
the demise of their Mayor. Then, one by one they left in silence, leaving me alone with the dead. Dan stood up from his
grisly task and then, his duty done, his corpse slumped to the ground beside the dead Mayor. He could finally go to his
final rest, his absolution finally received.

And that’s my tale, my friends. I left the village of Middleton Bishop that very night and have never returned, but
I will always remember the night I spent in the company of a dead man.

About the Author:
RJ Meldrum has been published by Culture Cult Press, Trembling with Fear, Black Hare Press, Smoking Pen Press, Tell
Tale Press, and James Ward Kirk. He’s had stories in Sirens Call Publications eZine, the Horror Zine and Drabblez
Magazine. His novella The Plague was published by Demain Press.

Facebook: Richard Meldrum
Twitter: @RichardJMeldru1

The Essay | B.E. Seidl

“The Name of the Rose,” Miss Carlton muttered, “I’d not have expected him to choose such a complex book!”
The literature teacher roamed her problem student’s paper. Liam was the cliché high school football star: handsome,
talented, and indifferent towards education. Fellow teachers had tried to convince her that he would easily make his
way without reading books but Miss Carlton would not give up that easily. Every other week she had him do some extra
work. “This is really good!” Incredulous, she put a big slice of apple in her mouth. She flipped the pages, absorbed in
Liam’s argumentation. It only briefly crossed her mind how strange it was for a student like Liam to write by hand, even
more so with ink. “Did he really write this all by himself?” She was almost through with the essay. Usually she was good
at knowing whether one of her students had cheated. With this paper, she was not so sure. Slowly, she chewed on
another piece of apple. There was an unexpected taste on her tongue. Surprised, she tried to figure out what it was. Her
tongue examined the apple, first the flesh then the skin. There! The skin tasted bitter. Looking at her hands, she noticed
that her fingers where covered with ink. I better wash them, she thought, but when she tried to get up, a heavy weight
tacked her to the chair. Her head was spinning. With shaking hands, she reached for the glass of water in front of her,
just to knock it over. The ink! She wanted to cry out for help but her tongue had swollen up like a balloon, blocking the
air out. In panic, she swept the paper from her desk as if this gesture alone could undo everything. With the last of her
strength, Miss Carlton heaved a heavy book from her desk, An Introduction to Literature, and tossed it against the door
of her office. With a thud, she landed next to Liam’s paper, her head hitting on a fountain pen. “It’s all about the last
laugh!” The final sentence made her smile. Under great effort she reached for the pen and wrote ‘F’ underneath it.

About the Author:
B.E. Seidl is a bilingual writer and literary researcher. Her work has appeared both in print and in online magazines and
anthologies such as 101fiction, Horror Without Borders and in several issues of Sirens Call Publications. In her writing
she seeks to collect kafkaesque everyday moments and transform them into mysterious tales. She lives in Vienna,
Austria.

Author Website: B.E Seidl
Twitter: @BESeidl
Heather brought the car to an abrupt stop and then leaned back in the driver’s seat, irritated, as the fox sat in the path of the headlights. It stared back at her, its eyes glittering like coins.

“Move, Reynard.” Heather shouted and sounded her horn. The fox’s breath made tiny clouds on the night air but it wasn’t budging. The country lane at the top of the valley was deserted and Heather’s journey up from the Manor House had been surreal. Neon Santas, giant grinning snowmen, blinking Merry Christmas signs, they had all loomed out of the darkness as the village had apparently gone to bed mid-evening, exhausted from Christmas Day. Reindeer had flashed their way across roof tops as several Father Christmases had been caught red-handed hanging off ladders, apparently pretending to be burglars.

Heather pressed the horn again. The fox continued to stare back. Her husband, Christopher, would have just driven over it, damn the consequences, and bragged about it later at dinner.

‘Yum, lovely roadkill! Heather, would you like a slice from what’s left of the leg?’ he’d grin while the rest of his family sniggered behind their hands. With a theatrical flourish, he would pull the domed cover from the large silver serving dish to reveal the usual uninspiring roast from Cook. Heather would steel herself to show no emotion as he did so; she knew only too well how they loved their party tricks.

*My last ever Christmas here, Heather thought, and smiled to herself. I’ve left them a present they won’t forget. Shame I’m not there to see it.*

She pulled open the glove compartment and reached into it. Underneath the petrol station receipts, discarded lipsticks and crumpled tissues she found a wizened apple. ‘Your glove compartment is like the doorway to another dimension!’ Christopher had often said as he’d delved in looking for something. ‘I could put my hand in there and fall in, never to be seen again!’ The mousetrap had stopped him and now the glove compartment was hers alone. But it had been the perfect hiding place for the new passport with her photo but another name. A pile of US dollars and a new iPhone rested safely underneath them.

Heather’s stomach growled as she bit into the apple. There would be proper food at the airport hotel. She opened the car door and walked over to the verge to look down at the valley.

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“There’s the Manor House, the old ancestral pile, lit up like a Christmas tree as usual. I can hear them snoring after their annual feast from here.” She shuddered as she remembered the overcooked turkey surrounded by partially incinerated roast potatoes and greasy pigs in blankets. The dishes of pale, apologetic looking sprouts and carrots with gravy boats full of a solid looking brown liquid, the tarnished silver and dusty Fortnums crackers.

‘And now the party games!’ Christopher had announced to a room full of slightly inebriated family members wearing askew party hats, who were already becoming sleepy.

‘Hooray!’“ said everyone.

‘Let’s make sure that Heather joins in this year!’ said Magnus, considered a child genius, although Heather had never seen much evidence of it.

‘Sorry, Magnus, I didn’t mean to drop the cranberry sauce when I passed it. Seems very watery this year.’ Heather had said apologetically while Magnus glared at her.

‘This is how we like Christmas!’ Christopher had said, ‘with all the family here!’ ‘The Aged Bat and her Batman’, he indicated his grandparents, ‘Ma and Pa’, waving to his parents and continuing round the table until he concluded with Maisie his younger sister and Heathcliff his brother.

Heather had expected Byronic good looks when she had first heard the name but Heathcliff’s protruding teeth and thinning hair soon indicated the opposite. ‘At least one of them had a sense of humour.’

“No more Charades or bloody Sardines,” she shuddered, as she remembered so many fumbling fingers accompanied by heavy breathing in the camphor-smelling sarcophagus-like wardrobe. The first year, she had seized one particularly persistent hand and held it aloft while announcing loudly ‘And who does this belong to?’ as Granny had unlocked the door and let the light in. She’d always noticed a gleam in the grandfather’s eye whenever she was under the desiccated mistletoe strung up over the doorway, which disturbed her.

‘Heather, we don’t do that in this family,’ she had been told very firmly, so after that she always wore very high heels and merrily stamped on any feet she thought might belong to the groping hands, whilst apologising. However last year a male voice had whispered, ‘Mmm, do it again,’ and she knew she could face it no longer.

“They never saw me leave.” She tossed what was left of the apple into the long grass. “And no one will ever know I was there.” A rustling of the undergrowth made her turn. The fox had padded off. She took her current iPhone out of her pocket and dropped it onto the tarmac before treading on it and cracking the screen. Then she bent down, picked it up and threw it into the bushes. *That’ll give the police something to think about,* she thought. She turned and walked back to the car.

As she sat in the driver’s seat and slammed the door shut she heard the central locking operate clunkily. “Thank God I won’t be driving this old heap for much longer.” There was a new car waiting for her in her new name in a lock-up garage in the next village.

There was steam on the windows and she switched on the heating to dispel it. The inside of the car felt stuffy and she could smell sweat. And something else.
Christopher’s horrible aftershave? she thought, sniffing as the pungency increased, Old Badger or some such olde worlde nonsense. He must have left something in the car. Come on, come on, let’s get going.

She reached for the ignition keys but they weren’t there. She rifled through her pockets looking for them but instead found only an old lipstick. The car suddenly felt cramped and she could also smell lavender. The steam on the windows obscured her view and Heather gasped when the driver’s seat suddenly shot forward pressing her against the steering wheel. A familiar voice said, close to her ear, “Do it again, do it again.”

“No!” gasped Heather, “I’m dreaming!” Glancing up at the rear view window she screamed in horror.

There they all were, sitting on the back seat waving at her and smiling, all squashed together. Christopher, the Aged Bat and Batman, Granny, Magnus, Wombat, Maisie, others that she couldn’t make out . . . it was most of the family.

“We really enjoyed that Christmas pie you left for us in the fridge. Mmm, mmm.” Christopher said to her.

“I kept finding bits with red spots on.” said Granny, “Tasted a bit bitter but my sense of taste isn’t what it was.”

“I told you all that they were bits of poisonous toadstool. No one ever listens to me,” Magnus hissed, “And you all said it was delicious and made me eat it.” Smirking, he waved the car keys at Heather and then pushed them down the back of the seat.

“It was for later – supper!” hissed Heather tersely. “You weren’t supposed to eat it yet.” She’d gathered the fly agarics especially, kept them for Christmas and had enjoyed stirring them into the large traditional Christmas Day evening pie.

“Sorry darling, couldn’t resist! And now here we all are again, together at Christmas!” Christopher smiled. “Now who’s for a game of Sardines?”

More and more of the family began to appear on the back seat, pushing and displacing each other out as they squeezed into the seats. Heather could feel the driver’s seat moving forward again as she tried to push back. The passenger seat seemed to have at least three porcine children fighting for space on it and she recognised Christopher’s nieces and nephew Tansy, Pansy and Pippin. Heather tried to open the car door but someone was trying to climb over her. Now her face was squashed against the driver’s side window as she tried to bang on it and yell for help.

“You’re all ghosts. How can you all be so solid?” she whimpered.

“We’ve always been a pretty solid family. Geddit! Geddit!” roared Pippin, digging his elbow into her side as he tried to settle on the passenger seat.

“Get in the party spirit Heather, for once,” said Lydia, Wombat’s glamorous older sister.

“It’s a good thing we’re such a big family, otherwise it wouldn’t be so much fun,” Christopher said from behind her as the driver’s seat moved forward for the last time and Heather’s head connected with the car horn. It beeped continuously until Christopher reached over and pulled Heather’s head back. “Don’t want someone stopping to found out what the matter is and spoiling things! What a party we’re all going to have!” The deafening noise of party poppers filled the car and there was a strong aroma of underwashed bodies too close to each other.

“This could be a new world record for Sardines – there’s bags of room in here!”, Magnus squealed excitedly. The car was rocking as others appeared and joined in. Roaring laughter filled Heather’s ears and she found it increasingly difficult to breathe as her eyes rolled up into her head and she began to fall into darkness.

As she did so she realised that Hell wasn’t other people but playing festive party games with them forever and ever.

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“So the car doors were all locked from the inside and the driver died from asphyxiation. Every bone crushed and not just from the driver’s seat being pushed virtually onto the dashboard, which broke her neck. No marks on the body, though. A lady with two names. Heather Marshall and, according to the passport in the glove compartment, Janie Clark.” The pathologist handed it to the detective sergeant.

“Strange it happening on the same day as the mass poisoning up at the Manor House – all the family gone in one go.” he mused.

The noise of fifty party poppers let off in unison made them jump as Heather’s crumpled body half fell out of the driver’s seat, bringing with it a strong waft of mince pies and sherry.

They turned round. “Merry bloody Christmas.” said the DS.

About the Author:
Carole Tyrrell is currently living in Rochester, Kent, UK which is reputed to be one of the most haunted places in Britain. So far she has been unable to prove this. Carole enjoys likes poking about in churchyards as she loves memento mori. She has been published in The Silent Companion, Ghosts & Scholars and several anthologies.

Facebook: Carole Tyrrell
Twitter: @cattyrrrell
"The hole to Hell. Isn't that hilarious, Jack? Hell wasn't only a story to these people. It was real! And it's through that hole." Barbara patted the yellow stone wall, keeping her hand well clear of its dark, chest-high aperture. "It's just a hole, Honeybear, as plain as my auntie's face, in a frigging basement!"

Jack flinched inwardly at Barbara's screeching cackle as it echoed through the bone-dry air of the crypt. Thank Christ there was no one else around. The other members of their party were still exploring the ruins of the temple above.

Barbara's doll-like eyes were riveted by the circular opening. It was the plainest thing, Jack had to agree, and looked about as threatening as a laundry chute. The culture that had created it was famed for its relief carvings, some of which could be pretty scary – all teeth and eyes – but there was none of that kind of ornamentation on the rough-hewn masonry surrounding this foot-wide perforation.

"What's the idea Honey?" wondered Barbara. "Can we climb in? It's too small, surely. What's behind there do you think? I mean really behind there?"

The light from the wall-candles was dim and faltering. Like an archaeologist deciphering an ancient hieroglyphic, Jack squinted through his spectacles at the faint and tiny type of his guidebook.

"It doesn't say anything here about climbing inside Cupcake. It says you're welcome to put your hand in or, if you're feeling brave, your head. According to their traditions, you have nothing to fear if your heart is pure. If not, you may get dragged in."

"Ooh!" Barbara clasped her fleshy hands together and hunched her shoulders in an orgasm of mock terror. "Doesn't that give you a chill just thinking about it? DRAGGED... IN..." Again, that cackle.

He should leave her. He would leave her, as soon as they were back home. It would be too awkward to break up in mid-vacation. Somehow he'd struggle on through these final days, smiling through her inanities, her gaucheness, and that squawking witch-laugh that made his entire body wince. What did he ever see in those doll-like eyes, the vapid round face framed with blonde ringlets? Was it because his mother used to wear her hair that way? Was he that much of a Freudian cliché?

Barbara moved her face an inch or two closer to the hole. "I don't see how it's possible anyhow," she stated. "There's no frigging way a body could get dragged in there without getting seriously mangled in the process."

"I don't suppose it's a literal thing," said Jack, who was now thinking about how much he'd enjoy seeing her get dragged in there, hearing her shoulder and rib bones crack, her mouth no longer cackling but screaming, her hips and butt plugging it for a second or two until the demons pulled even harder. Oh, now that would be hilarious!

She took out her phone, snapped a picture. For a second, everything became bright silver. Except for the hole. Her cherubic lips parted as she studied the photo she'd just taken. "OMG! It's so black in there. Even my flash didn't illuminate it."

Jack didn't own a phone himself. He favoured the traditional toolkit of the traveller – the kind of things that didn't require recharging, like a map, compass and guidebook. It had annoyed him when they arrived at their so-called ‘traditional’ lodgings four days ago to discover not only plug sockets, but wi-fi. For fucks sake! Were there no remaining analogue outposts on Earth?

He unclipped the flashlight from his belt, stepped in front of Barbara and shone it into the cavity. Nothing. No interior. The light from the wall-candles was dim and faltering. Like an archaeologist deciphering an ancient hieroglyphic, Jack read his entire body wince. What did he ever see in those doll-like eyes, the vapid round face? It didn't own a phone himself. He favoured the traditional toolkit of the traveller – the kind of things that didn't require recharging, like a map, compass and guidebook. It had annoyed him when they arrived at their so-called ‘traditional’ lodgings four days ago to discover not only plug sockets, but wi-fi. For fucks sake! Were there no remaining analogue outposts on Earth?

He unclipped the flashlight from his belt, stepped in front of Barbara and shone it into the cavity. Nothing. No interior. The beam, bright at first, quickly faded, as if devoured by the darkness.

"Looks like a tunnel," he said.

"A tunnel to Hell?" Barbara's fat face became all puckered. Her eyes shrunk and she hugged herself, squeezing her shoulders. This time the fear seemed genuine.

Jack smiled at her. "Of course not Sweet Cheeks." And he thought: My God you really are that stupid. How can you exist? How have you not died by now, setting fire to your hair or trying to take a clifftop selfie?

She smiled back at him, reassured. She

"You're right Honeybear," she said. "I'm just being silly. There's no such place as Hell. So where do you suppose the hole leads? It can't be for humans because it's too small. Hey, maybe it's a hole for cats." She emitted a squawk of pleasure at this thought. "That's it. A hole for cats. It's where cats go when they die, only instead of Hell, it's Heaven. What do you suppose cat Heaven would be like Hun?"

He couldn't do this anymore – couldn't keep up this smile, not for the rest of this holiday, not even for the rest of this minute. He had to tell her they were finished and he had to do it now. She'd make a scene. There'd be an awkward few nights. He'd sleep on the floor. But it would be worth it. Boy would it be worth it...

"Cushions," she said, "and lots of little mice scurrying about. And milk. And so much stroking. There'd be angels whose only job was to stroke all those dear dead kitties."
"Barb..."
She blinked her eyes dreamily at him. "What is it Big Bear?"

Jack did a quick sweep of the crypt – they were still alone. A bubble of wicked delight rose in his chest. Maybe he wouldn't break up with her just yet. First he'd have a little fun.

"Why don't you try putting your hand in the hole Sugarplum? Maybe you'll feel some... cat fur?"
He watched her face turn pale – actually, literally, turn pale. He'd never seen a face do that before, and he could barely stifle his laughter.

"That's not funny Jack!" She was clenching her right hand in her left as if frightened it might reach in there of its own accord. "I would never do that. Never never never! Not if you paid me a million billion dollars."
Yet he could see she was tempted.

"Why not Buttercup? Don't you want to stroke a dead kitty cat?"
She looked at him, her cheeks hot and her eyes small, the way they always went when she was angry. He'd gone too far – not that he cared.

"Now you're just being mean!"
"I'm sorry Muffin." He put on his cutest baby voice, the one that always made her forgive him. "Honeybear wasn't trying to be mean. I was just messing around. There's nothing in the hole really. Not really. We both know that."
Her mouth wavered, not yet ready for a smile. "Do we though? I mean do we?"
"Of course!" And then he frowned, feigning a sudden onset of doubt. "At least I think so. I suppose one can never be entirely sure unless one were to..." His mouth slowly expanded into a smile. "Maybe you should try it Sweetpea. Put your hand in and see what happens."

Her left hand had loosened its grip on her right, but she made no move towards the hole. He relished the agony of her indecision. Her desire to do this was written in the trembling lines of her face, but so was her terror. He wanted to keep her in this tormented state for as long as possible. Once she decided either to put her hand in or not to, the game was over.

"I can't. I'm too frightened." Her right hand was now free of its fleshy prison and, despite her words, had moved an inch or two closer to the hole.

"Frightened of what Cookie? Nothing's in there – nothing that can hurt you."

*More's the pity*, he thought.

She stopped, a mere hand's length from the hole's entrance. "If I do this and something grabs me, I'll scream so loud! I'll mess myself I will... Would you hold onto me if I do this Honey? Would you promise to hold onto me and not let me go?"

"On my honour Babe. On my absolute honour I swear."

"Then hold me. Hold me now."

He positioned himself behind her, placed his hands on the tops of her bare arms, giving the soft, clammy, sun-pinked flesh a reassuring squeeze. Her trust in him was absolute, the trust of a child in a parent. Wouldn't it be marvellous to betray it now, to push her suddenly at the hole, hear the pure terror of her screams? But he wasn't ready to do that. Not yet.

He watched as the fingers of her right hand ventured closer still, just a couple of knuckle lengths away now from that black surface, but there she stopped. He could hear the panic in her breathing and savored the sound of it.

"Even if there are demons in there, they won't take you Sugar," he murmured. "Your heart is pure."

She turned to him, a desperate kind of hope in her eyes. "What about you Jack? You're pure of heart. You never binge or drink too much. And you're kind to everyone. I'll bet you never had a bad thought in your whole life. Why don't you do it Honeybear? Put your paw in there."

"I know you do that Poppet, when you aren't around, I binge. I can polish off a whole box of chocolates during an episode of *Criminal Minds.*"

"I know you do that Poppet, but that just means you're weak, not evil. The demons don't care about that sort of thing."

She turned to him, a desperate kind of hope in her eyes. "What about you Jack? You're pure of heart. You never binge or drink too much. And you're kind to *everyone.* I'll bet you never had a bad thought in your whole life. Why don't you do it Honeybear? Put your paw in there."

Jack pondered the idea. It could be a neat way of prolonging the game, of adding another layer of uncertainty to her tortured mind. He could imagine how she'd argue it to herself: *Jack did it and nothing happened to him, so maybe there's nothing in there after all... Oh, but what if there is? Jack's pure after all, but I'm not. I'm a disgusting sinner and they'll know. The demons will know, they'll smell it on me."

"Alright," he said, "I will." Nudging her aside, he took a step closer to the hole. He rolled up his sleeve. He didn't know why, but somehow it seemed the right thing to do, as if he was about to engage in a religious rite, which in a way he supposed he was. From far away, at the top of the curving flight of stone steps, came the dull reverberations of voices and footsteps. People were heading this way. Soon they'd be here, spoiling his fun. He'd have to be quick – quicker than he'd planned. He began extending his hand towards the inky circle.
That was when Barbara started babbling. "Oh Jack, you don't have to do this. We can leave now if you like and never talk about this again. We'll pretend we never came down here, never saw the horrid hole. Of course we won't know if it really is the hole to hell, but that's okay. Who cares? What matters is that we'll be safe. Safe to live the rest of our lives. Oh Jack stop! Stop! Please stop!"

Her voice abruptly ceased as if snapped off at a switch as Jack's hand entered the hole. He found it very cold inside. The crypt was already cool, but this was another level of chill. And the air in there felt damp on his skin and kind of clingy, almost like a glove. The notion of a glove was not a pleasant one, but that was how it felt and also looked, for the darkness had closed around his hand so densely he could barely see it, even though he was only in there up to his wrist.

He turned to Barbara and grinned. "You see Princess. It's all fine. There's nothing in here. It's just a..."

And then he stopped.

"What?" Barbara shrieked. "What is it? Did you feel something?"

"I don't know," he said, for now keeping his grin on the inside. "Maybe I did for just a second, but it was probably nothing." It was nothing, but this was all about keeping Barbara in the sweet zone between hope and terror. And it was working. Boy was it working! Her face right now was a picture, pink cheeks trembling, eyes like hot cracks, leaking tears.

"Take your hand out now Jack!" she ordered.

"But it's fine I tell you," he almost laughed. "Actually it feels kind of nice. A bit cold, but n..."

That time he did feel something. Rough fur brushed the underside of his fingers. He pictured rats, and tried to jerk away his hand, but found he couldn't. It was stuck, held in place, as if the glove of chilly darkness had become fixed like concrete.

Panic overtook him — a wave of the same 24-carat terror he had minutes earlier wished upon Barbara. Hysterically, he began trying to yank his arm out of the hole, pressing his knee and shoulder to the wall as leverage. But the invisible glove held him fast. Worse than that, it was slowly pulling him in. All the easy confidence that had sustained him throughout his adult life vapourised in that instant and he was a little kid again, crying and wetting his pants.

"Help me! Barbara!"

He didn't know why he couldn't hear or feel her. Why wasn't she trying to drag him out? He was nearly up to his shoulder now — too far in to be able to turn his head to see where she'd got to.

"Barbara! Fuck! What's happening? Help me! Oh Jesus!"

He was in past his shoulder, his skull pressed hard to the wall, his neck about to crack. Faced with no other choice, he ducked and in he went, into the cold interior, denser than air, blacker than any black he could ever imagine. Now his other shoulder was stuck. Oh sweet Jesus! The hole was too narrow. He screamed at the pain of splitting, shredding skin, screamed again at the deep and horrible cracking inside him that went on and on and on. The last thing he heard before the blackness swallowed him was cackling laughter. Strangely, it sounded like Barbara.

**About the Author:**
Alex Woolf is a professional author of fiction and non-fiction. He recently won an award for his story *Mystery at Moon Base One* and was shortlisted for the RED Book Award for his horror novel *Soul Shadows*. In his spare time he enjoys writing adult short stories and novelettes. This story was inspired by an encounter with the Bocca della Verità in Rome.

**Author Website:** [Alex Woolf](https://alexwoolf.com)
**Twitter:** [@RealAlexWoolf](https://twitter.com/RealAlexWoolf)

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**Death Hungers | Nicole Henning**

Death has been romanticized over the years. A figure that is sent to help souls pass from the world of the living to the world of the dead. Legends have been made and books written. Sonnets and songs bring Death into our homes and lives long before we are aware of its presence. But what they don’t tell us, what’s left out of every story about Death is that Death is hungry. When Death comes to help you along to the other side he doesn’t take your hand lovingly, he eats your soul greedily. And Death is never full.

**About the Author:**
Nicole Henning is a book-a-holic who lives in a big-little town in Wisconsin. She surrounds herself with all things scary and bizarre and enjoys creating unique art. When she isn’t writing she enjoys playing video games and spends a lot of time snuggling with her dog Allie aka Princess Prissy Pants. Reading, writing and horror are her biggest passions in life.
It was a picturesque Christmas Eve in Vermont, the kind of Christmas that Jimmy loved. Light, fluffy snow had started falling a few hours earlier, and now the snow hid the small road that went by Jimmy's grandparent's farmhouse. Jimmy, his parents, and his sister, Claire, had arrived as the snow was beginning to fall. His grandparents went all out each year with a beautifully decorated real tree, and there was a fire going in the fireplace, keeping the chill of winter at bay.

Upstairs in the room they shared when visiting, Jimmy turned to Claire.
"Tonight is the night I'm going to see Santa. I'm going to stay up and see him."
"Don't be stupid," Claire said. "You'll get in trouble. You know you aren't supposed to see Santa."
"I want to see him."
From the floor below, Jimmy's grandfather heard their conversation through the old vents in the floor.
When Jimmy and Claire came downstairs for the Christmas Eve festivities, Jimmy's grandfather beckoned him into the sitting room and told him to take a seat. His grandfather had set out hot chocolate and gingerbread cookies. His grandfather took a bite of a gingerbread cookie and started talking.
"Jimmy, it is time for me to share a story. A story that has been passed down for generations in our family about Santa Claus."
"Okay," Jimmy replied.
"You see, Jimmy, Santa Claus used to be a real man, who walked the Earth..." Grandfather started.
"Like you and me?" Jimmy interrupted.
"No, not like you or me, Santa Claus – Sinterklaas as he was known in the old country – or Nicholas as he was known back when he was alive, was an extraordinary man," Grandfather continued. "Nicholas was a monk, born long before you or I was born."
"Before, even you?" Jimmy asked in amazement.
"Yes, way before me. He was born in 270 A.D. in Myra, Greece, and he dedicated his life to helping other people. Unlike many people, Nicholas was not forgotten after his death on December 6th in 343. Stories of his generosity continued, and he became the patron saint of children."
"Saint Nicholas."
"Yes, God decided he wanted to honor the good children of the world. He chose to return Saint Nicholas, or Sinterklaas, to give out gifts one night a year to all good children."
"The fallen angel Lucifer, who you know as the devil – or Satan, had an issue with this. God and Lucifer sat down and struck a deal. Sinterklaas could return for one night a year and give good children gifts, but no one was to see Sinterklaas during the night. In addition, a legion of Lucifer's evoloi, small orc-like demons, would accompany him. As well as ensuring that no one saw Sinterklaas, the evoloi, or elves as they are now called, got to play tricks on bad children."

Jimmy let out a gasp, and his father rushed into the sitting room.
"Dad, are you telling Jimmy that stupid Danish folklore of yours?" Henry asked.
"Henry, he has to know, and now is the time," Grandfather replied. "Next year may be too late."
"That is just what kids need at Christmas. They already can't sleep because of the excitement of Santa coming. And now you are going to have him scared to death of demon elves."
"Better than him perishing, Henry."
"Jimmy, come with me, and please don't share any of Grandpa's nonsense with Claire."
"Okay, Dad."
Jimmy grabbed his hot chocolate and a cookie and followed his father to join the rest of the family in the living room where the tree was set up.

That night when his family went to bed, Jimmy stayed awake. He pretended to be asleep when his mother stuck her head in the door to check on Claire and him. Twice Jimmy caught himself almost falling asleep but managed to keep himself up until he heard a sound on the roof. Often the rustle of squirrels, who had made their home in the upper attic, could be heard, but this was a different, heavier noise.
"It must be Santa," Jimmy thought.

Jimmy quietly slid himself out of bed and exited the room. He could hear his father snoring from down the hall. Jimmy went down the staircase until he reached the middle where he could see into the living room. He lowered himself onto a stair, so he was flat and couldn't easily be seen from the living room below, but could still peer down. The fire was
Jimmy felt like he might pass out from panic. Jimmy crawled along the planks, not that much wider than him, to the barn onto the boards that made up this loft. This level was made of about five wooden planks next to each other as the only ladder with the missing rung. Jimmy continued up until he reached the top of the ladder and carefully made his way onto the boards that made up this loft. This level was made of about five wooden planks next to each other as flooring and cold air coming from holes in the roof chilled Jimmy to the bone. One misstep would cause him to fall to his death down onto the boards that made up the loft. The evoloi had made it up and were coming across the planks.

Santa made his way across the living room to the fireplace, then suddenly vanish into the fireplace. Jimmy felt dejected, realizing he may have ruined Christmas for his family. The fire went out, and Jimmy saw glowing red eyes from around the room, staring right at him.

Jimmy felt his heart start racing. He tried to scream but found his throat had gone dry, and all he could manage was a low croak. He heard the door behind him open. He looked up and saw his grandfather standing there. Before Jimmy could utter a warning to his grandfather, gray-colored creatures leaped through the air at his grandfather. Jimmy heard his grandfather scream as he ran across the living room, through the kitchen, to the front door. He could hear his grandfather's screams die down as Jimmy opened the heavy wood door and exited.

Jimmy ran across the road to his grandfather's New England-style gable-fronted wooden barn. The snow stung his bare feet as he ran. Two large doors opened into the barn that his grandfather kept chained shut. Jimmy knew there was a gap in the chains; he had always figured he could squeeze through but had never tried before. He pulled one of the doors out until the chain prohibited any further movement.

Jimmy pushed his way through the gap he had created. A splinter pressed into the fleshy part of his stomach. Jimmy winced but kept pushing through. He made it and pulled out the large wood fragment and threw it aside. His grandfather's barn was huge, and Jimmy had never been in it at night, only during the day. The familiar smell of wood, hay, and the oil and gas used to keep his grandfather's old John Deere Model A tractor running was there, but the barn was dark with moonlight coming through small holes in the roof and walls, causing it to look strangely unfamiliar. Flakes of snow fell to the floor from the ceiling holes. Nobody had ever equipped the barn with power, so there weren't any lights for Jimmy to turn on.

The floor that Jimmy had entered was technically the second. The floor of the story he was on was L shaped due to a cutout where one could see down to the bottom floor, which was at ground level for part of the field in the back. When Jimmy had inquired years ago about the first floor, he had been told that at one time, when his grandfather's farm had been a working farm, pigs had been kept on the bottom level. However, since that level was now deemed unsafe, he had never actually been down there.

There was a level above the L's bottom, the same size as the section Jimmy had entered that was reachable by a small wooden staircase against the wall. On that level, an old wooden ladder was fixed to the support beams, which lead up to storage lofts above. The storage lofts were over the cut out only. The long part of the L ran to the back of the barn and had no lofts above it, just the barn roof three stories above. The tractor was at the barn's padlocked back doors at the L's far end.

Jimmy quickly made his way up the stairs and onto the loft landing. He had never been any higher than this. Every step he took freaked him out because of the sound of the old wood creaking. The ladder that went up was old, and he had been told unstable, but he had no choice now; maybe if he got high enough, the evoloi wouldn't see him. He grabbed onto the first square rung of the ladder and slowly pulled himself up higher and higher into the barn.

Jimmy could hear the evoloi's claws on the wood below. One of the rungs broke free when his foot pushed on it, almost causing him to plummet down to the loft floor. Despite the cold weather, Jimmy felt sweat running down his forehead and into his eyes, the salt stinging them. He peered down and saw the red eyes of a single evoloi on the loft, and down on the second floor, staring at him. He had been found. At least the creature couldn't follow him up the ladder with the missing rung. Jimmy continued up until he reached the top of the ladder and carefully made his way onto the boards that made up this loft. This level was made of about five wooden planks next to each other as flooring and cold air coming from holes in the roof chilled Jimmy to the bone. One misstep would cause him to fall to his death below.

Jimmy looked down and saw more evoloi climbing the ladder. Their claws gripped into the wooden supports, so they had no problem thwarting the missing rung. There was no other way down, and they would soon be at the top. Jimmy felt like he might pass out from panic. Jimmy crawled along the planks, not that much wider than him, to the barn wall, and turned around, so his back was against the barn's exposed framing. He looked back where he had come from and saw the evoloi had made it up and were coming across the planks.
As the creatures came closer, Jimmy could make out the details of their form. They were small grey creatures that looked like they had been formed from modeling clay. Their heads looked orc-like, but their bodies more closely resembled a giant sewer rat. They walked on all fours, with claws so large they pushed what would be called their knuckles up in the air. Jimmy had no idea how these horrific monsters ever got depicted as the cute elves seen around the holidays.

Jimmy looked around and saw more of the monsters climbing up the barn walls toward him. Jimmy figured if he could fend them off long enough; eventually, his dad would come to the rescue.

Isn't that what dad's do? Jimmy thought. Come to your rescue when you most need it.

Jimmy couldn't fight off his growing fear as the evoloi came closer and closer along the planks. He felt his body start to shake uncontrollably, and he started weeping. Jimmy had always seen himself as a strong boy; however, in this time of crisis, he found himself bawling like Claire did when one of her dolls broke. His tears made his vision blurry, and he started kicking out randomly toward the air in the direction the creatures were advancing on him.

As the first of the evoloi reached him, Jimmy lashed out with his feet. The evoloi clung to the planks with its claws but eventually lost its grip. Jimmy saw the creature fly into the air and plummet down. He heard it hit the floor way below but didn't have time to find joy in his successful defense as more evil elves were still headed along the planking toward him.

As the next one neared him, Jimmy started lashing out with his feet again. As he was pushing out, too late to stop it, he saw the creature swing its arm at his leg. He felt a sharp sting as the claws went through his cheap pajama pants and connected with the flesh of his leg. His leg suddenly felt warm, and Jimmy looked down. He saw blood flowing through the fabric of his pajama pants. For a moment, Jimmy thought he was going to pass out, but he managed to hold it together and get a second wind. He lashed his unhurt leg at the being, managed to catch it, and launch it off of the planking.

Jimmy was starting to think he might be able to pull this off until his father could find him until he looked at the planking and saw a herd of evoloi making their way toward him. One of the evoloi launched at him like a rabbit. Jimmy started waving his arms, trying to deflect it. When the creature reached him, it latched onto his arm with its claws. The pain was unbearable. As Jimmy tried to shake it off, it clutched harder and harder, causing the pain to worsen.

Jimmy began bashing his arm against the barn wall behind him, trying to get the evoloi to release its clutch. Finally, Jimmy shook the being off his arm, but when it fell to the depth below, it took a chunk of ripped flesh from his arm with it. Jimmy felt warm blood spurt across his face and felt the warm viscous fluid run down his arm. Jimmy started entering full panic mode. He was never going to survive until his father could save him, and he couldn't figure out a way to save himself. The creature blocked his only exit outside of plummeting to his demise.

Yet another of the creatures leaped at Jimmy grabbing at his other arm with its sharp claws piercing the flesh as it hit him. As Jimmy raised his arm to try and knock the beast off on the barn wall, another one leaped at Jimmy landing on his chest. Before Jimmy could raise his other arm to try to deflect the evoloi on his chest, it slashed at his neck, piercing through his flesh. Jimmy tried to scream, but all he could do was gurgle as blood rushed out his mouth. The creature kept hacking at Jimmy's face. He only felt the first few hacks before he went numb to the pain. The world in front of him went blurry, then faded out.

About the Author:
K.A. Johnson has a BA in English/Journalism with a minor in Classics from The University of New Hampshire. He covered the news in the small New Hampshire college town of Durham for The New Hampshire before ditching the snow and moving south to Richmond, Virginia, where he lives with his wife Jennifer and his two furry writing partners Sparta Jesus Vernal-Johnson and Kolby Catmatix Domitian Johnson.

Author Blog: Ken Johnson Writes
Twitter: @kenjohnsonnth
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“She looks afraid,” a demurely handsome scholar in sunglasses stoically said.

The ancient professor, with his roadmap of a face and tattered leathery wings, let out a bothered sigh, even rolled his crimson eyes. The student’s bizarre eyewear bothered him, but not as much as the derivative statement. “Do not let your senses deceive you,” he responded as a parent calmly chastising a child might. “She’s not afraid, not in any profound or enduring way, because she is not alive. Do you think she’d actually be here if she were?”

There was no response from any of the students, the cold white classroom was unsettlingly quiet for several long and dreary moments as they stared wide-eyed and eager to learn at their bleakly poised instructor and the naked, shivering old woman lying on the age-blacked stone altar that dominated the very center of the space.

She looked alive, whole body shuddering, blue lips quivering, eyes gawking with what perhaps could be perceived as childlike terror at her surroundings, but as the professor indicated, she was not. She was dead, long dead, a fortnight now, and the perception of life in the fleshy vessel within which her soul resided, or any remnant emotions like fear, would simply cease after the soul was removed. This was basic knowledge, even fledgling angels knew, but it often did not prepare students for the reality of seeing and experiencing an actual withdrawal.

The professor was as aware of this as profoundly as every student was the knowledge of perception of life, but however many times he heard those exact words, she looks alive, he would never ease his response to it. He couldn’t for to do so would be to cater to sentiment and there was no room for sentiment in the business of soul extraction. Their clients were dead and should be—must be—seen and treated as such. The implications of believing them alive were as innumerable as they were treacherous. And treacherous waters were not to be traversed by angels. Such oceans were to be avoided at all costs.

Of all the glitteringly gilded objects in all of the professor’s hands, he held one out to the class, a shockingly elongated probe crowned with sharp, insectile pincers. “As you can see, this gadget is similar to the human world’s scissors-style Kleppinger Bipolar Forceps at seventy-five centimeters, long enough to reach a very particular spot. We call it simply Instrument Four.”

A female student let out an awe-inspired gasp and leaned forward for a better look, her blood-red eyes wide and lips parted ever so slightly. There was even a blush to her pastel cheeks and a flutter to her fleshy wings, the telltale signs of curious arousal. The boy in sunglasses pushed politely by her, offered a whispered apology, but she was too enthralled to have heard it. She noticed him only when he stepped into her field of view.

The professor ranted, “Before its advent we had to use our own proboscis. Can you imagine? The existence of the auditor was once a truly sordid one. You don’t want to know what part of our anatomy we had to use to fetch a soul that went on the run. They could hide anywhere, although behind the eyes seemed a universal go-to.”

The curious female student tried to regain her position at the front of the class, but the young man in sunglasses reached out and took hold of the jagged edges of the stone altar effectively blocking her. Though she may have wanted to pursue her alpha desire, she instead folded her arms at her breasts and huffed as a child might.

“But I digress. The procedure is the same for both male and female clients. As you know, we can transcend human flesh so there is no need to turn them over or spread the legs, buttocks or otherwise. We can go in with a simple gesture after the application of a liberal amount of etheric lubrication. It may seem common sense to not insert the full seventy-five centimeters, but that is exactly what you must do. You will find that the sphincter and the many twists and turns of the colon do not resist.”

With no one between him and the client, the young man in sunglasses leaned down and looked into the old woman’s troubled eyes.

“Not alive,” the teacher said flatly and used one of his many hands to lift the student by the chin up and away from the client. “I’m sure everyone would like to see the procedure, including the false façade of emotions. Remember, whatever you might perceive is superficial and fleeting. The soul won’t remember any of this.” After a deep breath, he continued the lesson, “Instrument Four is intuitive on its own, self-guiding if you will. It will find the soul on its own, no need for guesswork or time consuming trial and error.”

“Do they feel it self-guiding?” Mr. Sunglasses asked.

“Perhaps a sensation akin to the precursor of a bowel movement, but surely nothing more than that. Hold all further questions until the end of the session, please. Now, where was I? Oh, yes, of course. Where once there was an art to the collecting of human spirits, there is now mere motion, a simple gesticulation. There may even become a time when we’re replaced by automatons, sooner than later if God’s great-grandchildren have their oh, so very progressive way. You insert the instrument as such…”

“Stop,” the male student standing across the altar insisted.

“Excuse me, young sir?”
“I said ‘stop.’ Back up and get the hell away from my grandmother.” The demurely handsome young man who’d observed, ‘she looks afraid’ wasn’t a scholar, not even an angel of any ethnicity let alone an auditor of souls. He shrugged out of the wings he’d cut from a corpse in the seraphim’s morgue and peeled away the extra arms he’d also stolen to stand tall and erect, loftier than the actual students, a proud, arrogant human amidst the heavenly butterflies. It was when he removed his sunglasses that shocked those around him the most. His eyes were, of course, not crimson orbs like theirs, but Earthly, human, hazel.

“This is an outrage, blasphemy! You cannot be here,” the instructor stormed.

“Yet, I am.”

“How?”

“Sometimes the perception of life actually is life, professor. Now, get the hell away from my grandmother before your cushy little tenure goes to an automaton.” The human pulled a beautifully ornate red and black glass vial from a hidden pocket within his billowing garments, also pilfered. Holding it up elicited audible inquisitiveness from the students, but a shocked gasp from the teacher. “Yeah, you know exactly what this is, don’t you?”

“Where did you get that?”

“Demons aren’t the only things that can be conjured and compelled to bestow celestial gifts upon us lowly humans.” He held it out toward the even more curious crowd. “The Waters of pure Faith and Love. My conviction in it, my faith, is that it kills angels.”

“Treacherous waters are not to be traversed,” the professor hissed.

The students gasped in abject alarm and intense horror as they all stepped away from him, the previously curious female hid behind her peers at the very back of the classroom.

The divine lecturer folded his many arms nonchalantly behind him as he turned his hiss into a condescending sneer.

“Take her. No one will stop you.”

The young man scooped the old woman up into his arms.

“But make no mistake, boy. Where she may, at first, be grateful for this careless act of astronomical myopia, your grandmother will grow to resent you, perhaps even hate you, for she is dead and away from this godly realm her flesh will rot on her bones and her soul will be trapped within. She’ll feel every festering moment of it and you will exclusively be to blame. Her suffering will be beyond your comprehension.”

The young man laughed. “You mistake my intentions, professor. Love didn’t bring me here. Her suffering is what I want because it’s what she deserves. If Saint Peter, the Keeper at the Gates, actually did what he’s reputed to do, she wouldn’t even be here. She doesn’t deserve whatever mercies you would grant her. Hell is what she deserves, and that is exactly what I intend to give her. I’ll take Instrument Four as well, if you please.” He unfurled his pink, human fingers at the back of his grandmother’s neck, wriggling them demandingly.

“What for?” the angelic instructor asked, bewildered, but not maudlin. He scorned such emotion over anything, especially humans or implements of removal, sentient or not. Sentiment was a Lake of Fire, and that wasn’t in Heaven.

“Call it a souvenir with sweet additional benefits.”

The professor reluctantly, but not disheartened, handed over the elongated, golden apparatus. After all, there was more than one. “You’re mad.”

“Indeed, I am,” the human said with a jovial tone. “And I aim to put it to rest with a bit of revenge against my despicable Granny Melissa.”

Lips trembling all the more, the old woman’s eyes turned toward the extractor pressed against her cheek by the clutching hand of her grandson, the angry young man holding her in his arms. Her perception must have been of something horrific towering above her, something she had to have known would be used to taunt her in devious and cruel ways as her flesh putrefied and her soul screamed out for release. She was dead, but there were worse things and she would know what they were...those worse things. Antennae twitching, the instructor’s mouth dropped open, slithering proboscis lulling out, in mute shock as he watched the handsome young human with the disturbingly wide smile stretched across his face turn and carry his naked and squirming grandmother through the parted students and out of the classroom.

About the Author:

Author Website: Dark Skye Relief
Twitter: @JoshuaSkye1
There was certain logic to his pattern of employment.

He would only take a job if it met certain shall we say; criteria. The job had to be one where he could work with a client alone as changing a pattern of behavior in a child with severe aggression required ‘pairing’ with that child and it was critical to be a one-on-one experience.

The job also had to be at the home of the client. Any child that had aggression issues especially if they were non-verbal, would not respond well to change and he knew that oh so well, so, that condition had to be met for any success to be possible.

Thirdly, the job had to be attainable. He had received his share of wounds and marks over the years as a behavioral therapist so knowing that the behavior he would be hired to work on and alter could be actually attained was paramount.

When he had received the call from Mrs. Traywick about her son, Boston, she had been crying. She had cried for a long time and he understood but he honestly had tired of it very quickly. He calmed her by telling her he understood, that he would need Boston's records and would have to make a full evaluation before he could commit to working on his behaviors. She had agreed and within the week, he had Boston's records delivered by private courier and had reviewed them.

Boston, an eight-year-old boy with bright red hair and very striking blue eyes, had been diagnosed originally with a mood disorder. He had exhibited periods of extreme violence and had also shown tendencies to collapse into an almost catatonic state. He had judged these, by the evidence provided in the official records, to be the result of an advanced Emotional Disturbance as well as probable chemical imbalance. Mrs. Traywick had made it quite clear that she was against using medications for Boston as not to pollute his blood, which the Doctor thought was a trifle off at first but then attributed to the climate of the day, so he had decided that the best course of action was to work with Boston one-on-one with behavioral therapy designed to identify triggers to behaviors and then negate them through reinforcement.

When he arrived at the Traywick house, he had not expected it to be so large. It was set off the main road by at least two miles and the grounds, unkept and unmanaged seemingly for a great deal of time, grew wild and scraggly. The house itself was large but not imposing. Two floors, almost a strange Victorian-Progressive style and shuttered windows.

He rang the bell and, after some time, a small woman answered. She was drawn and gaunt, looking as if she had seen little sleep or rest in years. Her hair had been noticeably pulled as it was unkept and gathered to one side and her entire visage was that of one who has little left to give.

"Mrs. Traywick?" he softly called.
"Yes?" the gaunt woman answered.
"I'm Dr. McThomas, We spoke on the phone...uh, about your son? Boston?"
"Yes" she said; in a voice that sounded like it took all she had to speak. "Please, come in, and please forgive the house. I can't keep anyone to help and it's a mess."
"Do not worry, ma'am," I said. "I'm sure all will be fine, may I see Boston?"
She stiffened. Slowly she nodded her head and a look of sheer terror broke over her face.
"Doctor?" she said. "I need you to be prepared...Boston is indeed very special but he has such issues with his anger and I just cannot..." she faded out and I placed my hand on her shoulder to reassure her.
"It’ll be fine...where is he then?" I said. She pointed to the top of a small staircase off to the left of a foyer that was in a terrible state of disrepair. From the tantrums and aggression I suspected.

As I climbed the stairs, I noted that there were no decorations, pictures, wall hangings or any kind of decor whatsoever in this tomb of a house. It was very dark and I could understand immediately that Boston must indeed have strong sensitivities to noises, or smells, or lights and that these would not work in my favor, so any reinforcer, including these elements, was right out immediately.

I approached a door at the top of the stairs. There was only one door. It seemed as if the entire second floor consisted of only one room which I made note of as odd but pressed on anyway, anxious now to meet this young man.

As I opened the door, I saw, sitting in the middle of the room, a small boy with, indeed very bright red hair, but with eyes closed. Tightly. I closed the door very quietly as not to make too much noise and possible startle the child, but the click of the lock immediately caused a reaction. Boston opened his eyes.

His eyes were a beautiful blue. To say they were piercing would be selling it short. They were as ice in a glacier when lit by the sun.
"Hello, Boston." I said and smiled, "I'm Dr. McThomas..I've come to see you and try to help you learn some things". I expected at that point a rush of aggression or a violent outburst, but instead, and strangely, he just sat there and a smile crossed his face. He did not move nor make a sound.

"Boston?" I said again, "Are you OK? I'd like to talk to you." The smile stayed but began to turn to something else. As did his eyes, something terrible. The smile became a dark, toothless, hole before my eyes and the eyes, once blue, turned as black as coal. I felt their glare hit me like a stone.

"So, you've come to fix me too?" The voice appeared to come from all around me, yet not from the hole that was once a mouth. It seemed the voice was inside my mind itself.

I could not move I could not run. I could not do anything, but stand there and look into those storm clouds of eyes that penetrated my soul.

"The other teacher tried too—and she escaped just now—thank you for taking her place, she was useless anyway to me. I sucked her dry already," the voice said.

It was then I knew. He had hired me himself. It was his voice speaking through her saying all the right things so that I would take the job—under certain conditions—so that I would be one not to push medication to ‘pollute his blood’; and that so he could have a younger host on which to feed awhile.

"Now you've got it" said the voice in my soul. You will teach me, as I feed on you; and when you are too old, and sick and tired and worn out and tasteless, you’ll call another and I will live on."

I wept, for I knew it was true. I had no one on the outside. No family to miss me or anyone to give a damn if I went missing; he knew this already and had hunted me. Selected me. I was his....

That was 20 years ago. Now, this day; with withered arms and fingers like those of a scarecrow in an autumn breeze, I dial the phone, and talk to Dr. Carruthers, in a voice that's mine but his because he's hungry again. And I am empty.

About the Author:
Joe Inabinette is a teacher of students with severe Special Needs. He lives in McKinney, Texas with his wife, two sons, and two ridiculous excuses for dogs. He is an ardent fan of the 1967 television show, 'The Prisoner’ from which he draws much of the inspiration for his life. He enjoys writing Horror fiction and is currently preparing an anthology of short stories.

Author Blog: Everyday Joe: Ramblings and Poems
Twitter: @JInabinette

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A Bright Future, Fading Fast  |  John H. Dromey

“Look, Sally. I discovered a new species of butterfly. Its wings move faster than a hummingbird’s and its iridescence defies description.”

“That’s not a Lepidoptera, Roger. Release her at once! Otherwise, her traveling companion will wreak havoc on us. Due to his considerable bulk, there’s a time lag as he negotiates trans-dimensional barriers. Once through, though, he moves fast.”

“Nonsense, Sally! You’re just jealous.” The building began to shake. “What an awkward time for an earthquake.”

“You’re wrong again, Roger. Dead wrong. We’re the endangered species now. The rapidly-approaching guardian of the faery you captured is an unstoppable, homicidal ogre.”

About the Author:
John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri and grew up on a farm. He likes to read—mysteries in particular—and write in a variety of genres. His short fiction has appeared in Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine, Flame Tree Fiction Newsletter, Hybrid Fiction, Mystery Weekly Magazine, several previous issues of Sirens Call Publications eZine, and elsewhere.
Elizabeth belonged to Trina’s grandfather. She was eighty-two years old, although Trina would never have
guessed it to look at her; she looked old-fashioned, but not old. Trina played with Elizabeth every Christmas when they
visited Grampa, although she was careful to keep it a secret. Elizabeth said he wouldn’t like it if he knew they were
friends, which Trina thought was mean of him. Elizabeth said she was right, and that Grampa was a very mean man
indeed.

Trina decided Elizabeth was her very favourite friend. Nobody else she knew had such interesting stories to tell.

But then Grampa died, and instead of Christmas dinner the next year they had something called a wake instead.
There were lots of people dressed in black, who sipped wine and told stories about Grampa. But none of these people
was Elizabeth, and their stories were dull; all they talked about were the nice things Grampa did. Trina wasn’t interested
in that.

She searched all over, but Elizabeth was gone. So was Grampa, which was also upsetting — Trina had hoped he
would tell her all about having an aneurysm (her new very favourite word) the way Elizabeth had told her about being
strangled. How long did an aneurysm take? Did it hurt? She’d been looking forward to finding out.

Without Grampa, she had to learn about aneurysms from a book, and it wasn’t half as much fun. But at least she
discovered why he never came back: his own brain had killed him, so there was no one for him to belong to. It was
disappointing, but interesting too. Trina liked to know how things worked.

She wondered for a while if dead people could belong to things (like cars, for example — she’d learned that a lot
of people died in road accidents) but it didn’t seem to happen like that. Trina peered into as many cars as she could, but
none of them ever had anybody interesting inside.

Sometimes she glimpsed people who looked promising — like the little boy following a man who got off the bus
in front of her one day, or the skinny kid hanging around with a big gang of boys outside a pizza place — but it wasn’t
easy to get a chance to talk to them.

Then she had a marvellous idea: she could go and visit people in prison! They certainly wouldn’t be rushing off
anywhere else, and they were bound to have really fascinating stories to tell her.

Her mother, unfortunately, was horrified at the idea. She sat Trina down and said it was kind of her to think of
doing nice things for disadvantaged people, but that it wouldn’t be appropriate. Trina tried to argue, but she wouldn’t
listen. She didn’t understand at all.

It was so unfair.

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Henry Kelsey was Trina’s three-doors-along neighbour. He was eighty-six, and he definitely looked it; he had
wispy white hair, watery eyes, and baggy skin that seemed too big for his body. He’d had a wife called Peggy, but she’d
died a month ago (of cancer, Trina heard, and since Peggy hadn’t come back it must have been true) so now he lived on
his own.

Trina helped him with his shopping and tried to get him to tell her more about cancer, but he didn’t like to talk
about it. Sometimes he got upset, and sometimes he said things like, ‘you’re too young to worry about anything like that,
sweetheart,’ which was dumb. She tried to explain that she wanted to, but he just gave her a sad smile and patted her on
the head. Trina couldn’t understand what was wrong with people. They were so frustrating.

She wondered if he had cancer too, because he looked kind of sick, so she asked her mother if he was likely to
die soon. Her mum looked unhappy and said it was possible, but that she hoped not. Trina hoped not, too. It would be
such a waste. Cancer was her very favourite disease, and she really wanted to know what it had done to Peggy Kelsey.
She didn’t want Henry to die before she got old enough to hear about it.

She thought about the problem for a while — there had to be something she could do — and then she had
another marvellous idea.

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Trina’s mum got all teary-eyed when she asked if they could invite Henry for Christmas dinner. “You miss your
Grampa, don’t you?” she said.

Trina nodded. If she’d had her marvellous idea last year, Grampa would have belonged to her — and then she
could have asked him about Elizabeth, and he wouldn’t have been able to do anything mean to her. But still; there was
no point crying over spilt milk, as Grampa himself used to say. You just had to do better next time.

So on Christmas Day, Trina laid an extra place at the table while her mum talked about the kind hearts of children
and the spirit of the season. Henry cried a little and said he’d like to wash his face before dinner.
“Of course,” Trina’s mum told him. “The bathroom’s right at the top of the stairs.”

Trina jumped up straight away. She’d learned that the majority of fatal accidents for old people were due to falls, with over 60% happening on stairs. The most common injury was a hip fracture, which could lead to infections, blood clots, and all manner of medical complications, including something with the wonderful name of avascular necrosis. Trina was really hoping to learn more about that. It was the very first item on her Christmas list.

“I’ll show you where the bathroom is,” she said, and smiled as Henry took her hand.

About the Author:
Michelle Ann King is a speculative fiction writer from Essex, England. Her work has appeared in over one hundred different venues, including Interzone, Strange Horizons, and Orson Scott Card’s Intergalactic Medicine Show. She has published two collections of short stories, available in ebook and paperback from Amazon and other online retailers, and is currently at work on her third.

Author Website: Transient Cactus
Twitter: @MichelleAnnKing

The Floor | Tina Hudak

She hated the cold.
As a child she howled whenever she saw the snow piling up outside her window. She hated Christmas. In the north, where she lived, it meant that winter had arrived, emphatically. As each flake fell softly against another, a sharp pain would pierce her temples. She knew then that she must rub away the pain. Her parents cried when they saw her.

The raw, bleeding skin where her long, delicate fingers gouged out that pain.

It never snowed here in this quiet place far from home where her parents brought her to live. To rest. She didn’t mind the sterile rooms and hallways or the isolation she felt. Here was a gentle place during most of the months. In the distance, the mountains loomed silently. White mists would form at the very top and sometimes, a rare, cold wind would blow through the crack in a window, bringing the sheer white curtains in the Community Room alive. When it did, she would move, almost glide, quietly and slowly, to another chair sitting. Always alone. Always away from the cold.

Over the months everyone saw improvement; the doctors were reassured by her conversations; the staff witnessed a gentleness blossom in her gratitude for the least attention. During the daytime she was allowed to roam outside her room unattended; her pink chenille robe dragging along the corridors. She would stop at every window to feel the sun’s heat burn her face and hands, pressing them with all her might against the oblong window panes. On the most recent visit, her parents with forced smiles cooed, “Surely you will be home soon.” She could only smile back at them turning her face toward the light and heat.

Often, when the day was overcast and the heavy fog gathered thick and ominous over the manicured gardens, she wrapped her feet in rough woolen socks. Despite this precaution, the polished linoleum floor sent icy chills up through her spine. I do hate this cold, she would muse to herself. And, her feet would rise ever so slightly, her long robe hiding her secret, once again.

About the Author:
Tina Hudak spent her childhood reading fables, mythology and Nancy Drew stories. As an adult she read religiously with her own children at bedtime. Later, she became a school librarian teaching children in a variety of grades to read and write stories. So, it is not any wonder that in her retirement she has taken up writing her own stories for fun.

Author Blog: Tina Hudak
Twitter: @ABlueBunnyArt
William Knight’s milky eyes flew open. He inhaled. Cold air filled his lungs like shards of glass whirling in a tunnel. The thin muscles in his neck had atrophied and vertebrae creaked as he tried to turn his head. He attempted to move his limbs, but was met with an invisible grip, keeping him down.

Where the hell am I? As he asked himself this question, a distorted, piercing noise attacked his eardrums. The muscles in his face stretched and bunched into a grimace as he opened his mouth to scream. Nothing except a silent gush of air came out. The unidentifiable noise grew fainter and fainter before ceasing. He smiled in relief. Exhaustion overcame him and he closed his eyes.

***

A few days, a few hours, a few weeks, who knew, passed before William awoke again. In the darkness he could make out a stripe in the center. He concentrated on the image, frantic to make it out, but his brain could not keep a thought for long.

He gave up and attempted to move his head once again, shifting first to the right, his vertebrae sounding like a toothpick snapping. He felt no pain and was able to move his head to the left.

William furrowed his brow. It took him some moments to realize something was very much off. But what?

A flash of a black boot kicking his face jarred his memory. He ran a sandpaper tongue over his teeth, noting a large gap in the front. Both the upper and lower teeth gone. A kick to the gut, then his back. A stab to the heart. His body shuddered before the images exited and he slid into unconsciousness.

***

Harsh sounds, louder than before, hovered above William. He opened his eyes, forced out of whatever state he was in, while his body was lifted and jostled. His gnarled, tree root like hands curled into fists at his side.

"Where?" a male voice said.

"Move it over there," replied a different male voice.

A weightless sensation overcame him, his body momentarily in flight before crashing. What little air remained in his lungs escaped as something heavy landed on top of him. Struggling to push the object off, his arm joints popped like popcorn. Exhausted and frustrated, William rode another wave of sleep.

***

"Ante up!" a deep female voice said.

"Cool it, Martha. I’m still thinking," said one man, his voice high-pitched.

"Hurry up, Web! Man, we’ll die in here waiting for you!" said another man.

"Come on lard ass!" yelled yet a third man’s voice.

"Screw you, Tyler. And don’t call me that!" replied Web. "I...think I’ll take, uh, two cards. No, wait, three cards. Yeah, give me three cards."

"Okay, okay," said Web. He paused before dropping a tarnished silver cigarette lighter in the center of the cheap card table.

"Holy shit! Where the hell did you get that?" squawked Tyler.

"I got it off one of the bodies." I got it off one of the bodies.

As he turned the phrase around in his head, William tuned out the commotion and explored his body more. He was able to flex his fingers and tried curling his toes. Rigid. Just like his neck, his arms... Panicked, he patted his torso. Hollow. A deep canyon of fabric existed between his ribs and pelvis. His infrequent breath became more
ragged. That couldn’t be right. Hadn’t he been a tall, broad-shouldered blonde with a crew cut dressed in Army fatigues holding an M-16 rifle? Not this cold reality of bones, weak muscles, and dry tendons dressed in a faded blue T-shirt, a zipped hoodie, and acid wash jeans.

His eyes began to close, but William willed them to stay open. Something was very wrong, and he needed to discover it. "Awake. Stay awake," he whispered.

He rummaged around his face, poking at it with a bony finger. His lips were swollen and jelly-like. William coughed. A dry wheezy sound escaped. Everywhere he expected to feel resistance, elasticity, not vacant and arid nothingness. As his hand glided over his nose, he found only cartilage. William uttered a curse as he jabbed a finger into an eye, the tip stuck like a shoe caught in mud. Yet the sensation didn’t hurt. Annoyed, he tried multiple times to remove the digit and when he did, it was covered in goo.

He put his hand down and mulled over his discoveries: no pain, his breathing abnormal, and when he listened for a heartbeat, it was nonexistent.

"Shut up," he said as the four people continued to argue. He closed his eyes to think, but instead returned to slumber.

***

"Hey, what the hell are you doing?" asked Web.
"Shut up and stop being such a bitch and just watch the door like I told you to."
"James, I don’t think we should be doing this."
"I don’t care what you think. Just shut up and be on the lookout for Tyler. He should be coming back from the M.E.’s office with the supplies."
"Dude, I’m telling you, we’ll get caught. This place has to have cameras, right?"
"Why would the morgue have cameras?" James asked, rolling his eyes
"I dunno, James. To keep...to keep an eye on the bodies?" Web wiped his sweaty palms onto his heavy jacket.

James laughed. "That’s...that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard!"
"Asshole. I don’t think it’s such a crazy idea."
"Crazy? Yeah, it’s crazy. Why the hell would anyone care about a bunch of dead people? Seriously. What do you think these corpses are going to do? Get up and revolt? Walk on out here?"
"No. It’s just, Jesus James, every place has cameras nowadays."
"Whatever. You’re the biggest idiot I know. Keep an eye out for Tyler. I’m going to pick out a body."

Dead. I am dead. How long have I been laying here? Why haven’t I been buried? Bodies. Those kids had mentioned bodies. Must be what was on top of me. Does that mean I’m on top of someone else? Through a cognitive haze, he strained his ears to continue listening.

"Hey James, Tyler’s back!"
"Awesome. Come help me with this one. This bitch is heavy."
"Goddamn, this one still stinks!" Tyler said, coughing.
"You can smell it?" James asked. "Huh, must be a fresh one. Anyway, you got the tools?"
"Yeah. Easier than I thought. The stupid guard wasn’t there. Must have gone out for a smoke or a shit or something."

"And you’re sure no one saw you? What about cameras? They’ve got to have cameras there, right?" Web asked.

"What is your obsession with the damn cameras? You’re the one who wanted to open up a body. You pussying out?" said James.

Web hesitated. Meekly, he said, "No. I just don’t want to get caught."
"Even if we get caught, which is highly doubtful, who cares? You think anyone’s going to get upset if we open up any of these corpses?" Tyler asked.

"Web, just calm down. No one cares. They’re piles of human waste. Why else would the county put them in the sub-basement?" James pointed out.

"But they belong to someone don’t they? Someone’s family, right?"

Tyler sighed. "How long have you been working here? Look man, yeah, these people came from a family. We all do. No one cared enough to claim them." He strolled over to Web and placed his hands on Web’s shoulder.
"Just stop thinking like these people are...human. They’re dead. Don’t worry." He smiled at Web as he removed his hands. He flippantly punched Web’s shoulder. "Come on, let’s see what’s on the inside!" Tyler turned back to the body and weak as a mouse, Web followed.

"All right gentlemen, let’s stop the touchy-feely crap and get down to science," James said.

A female body lay on the steel examination table. Web looked away.

The mask muffled James’s voice. "Okay, our first contestant is Jane Doe #162. This hideous mass of humanity is approximately eighteen to twenty-five years old, female, well duh, African-American, found lying face down in an alleyway with bruises around her neck. No sign of other trauma."

"Web, since this is your first time, you get the first cut," said Tyler as he handed Web a scalpel.

"Where do I start?" he asked in a shaky voice.

James rolled his eyes. "Wherever you want. Do you need your hand held for everything?"

Web wiped his brow and blinked. He cautiously approached the dead woman, staring at her bloated face.

"Are you in love with her? Just hurry up and do something. We gotta get these tools back to the M.E. before anyone misses them."

Web threw down the scalpel. "Man, this is just wrong. And you’re a sick pervert." He pointed at Tyler.

Maddeningly, William grew tired, overwhelmed with rage at what he was hearing. Before he could do anything, the void overcame him.

***

William blinked, adjusting to the light. Light? Why could he see light? And the ceiling? A sickly teal color, a handful of fluorescent lights burned out, creating a shadowy mosaic. He rubbed his eyes to get rid of the milky film, convinced what he saw was not real, but the attempt was futile.

Anxious to figure out what was going on, William tried rising to a sitting position. After a few attempts, he sat up. His body bag had been opened. Why, he did not know, nor did he care.

He opened his mouth wide, the jaw joints popping as he inhaled the frigid morgue air. His emaciated body filled with cold electric life.

William smiled.

He twisted, his spine cracking like a disused hinge, and took stock of the situation. The stacks of dead bodies stretched forever. If he could have opened his eyes more, he would have. The sight of so many dead people, lost, lonely souls, would have broken his heart if he were alive. Instead, anger churned in his stomach.

William swung his legs over the side. Finding the floor, he eased up onto his feet, disconcerted by how light he was, a feather on a scale. He stood and scanned the room. William grunted as his jeans slipped down to the ground. Humiliation flooded him as he looked down at the sight of the shriveled remains of his penis, jeans piled at his feet. As quick as his dead body would allow him, William pulled up his pants, and made them tight with the frayed rope he used as a belt.

Briefly, he considered escaping through an exit off to his left, but where would he go? What would he do? How long would this waking death last? What about all these bodies? Were there others like him? The last few years of life William had been nothing. Reflecting upon all the things Tyler, James, and Web had said and done and the never-ending rows of corpses made his purpose clear.

William shifted away from the direction of the exit and drifted towards the music, a loud, tinny abomination of notes.

Making his way to a column, he leaned against it, panting. He peeked around it. An average height, slender man’s back was to him. The living dead man grunted. The man was polishing something, something shiny. William squinted, watching, determine to figure out what it was.

Done polishing, the man shifted his attention to a corpse, singing while he poked inside a body, enthralled with his findings.

William diverted his eyes from the defiler to the table behind him. Knives and scalpels glowed in the light. Big knives. His eyes lit up and he cracked a Joker-like smile.

He waited and watched. At one point, the man pivoted away from the desecrated body. William ducked behind the column before peeking around it.

Something churned in William’s empty stomach as he ogled what lay on the table. Spread before him were the remains of a little boy, his ragged clothes and brown hair dried with oxidized blood.
William boiled over with rage. He opened his mouth to let out an angry scream when the man turned back. He ducked behind the column once more. William gasped and wondered if it was possible for a quasi-dead man to hyperventilate.

After a few moments, his nerves calmed, but not the fury that had been branded into him. Poking his head out, he noticed the man eating a candy bar as he studied the dead boy, his back to William.

He took advantage and came out from the shadows. The loud, cacophony of music masked William’s joints clicking as he made his way toward the heartless creep. He spied a large scalpel and picked it up with his left hand.

As the man’s voice came to the song's chorus, a rush of energy surged through William as he held the scalpel high. In one swift movement, the scalpel sliced into Tyler’s pale neck from right to left. His carotid artery spurted warm, bright red blood. He dropped the partially eaten candy bar, the slightly warm chocolate, caramel, and nuts smacking the concrete floor. One hand fruitlessly tried to staunch the bleeding while the other clawed the air. He shuffled a few steps before falling face first onto the floor.

William’s breath rattled as he stared at the young man surrounded by a lake of blood. A ragged laugh escaped him. He wiped the scalpel on a pant leg, lumbered back to his body bag, eased his body into it, and waited.

About the Author:
DH Hanni’s work ranges from horror to sci-fi/fantasy to historical fiction with a few stops in the present. Her work has appeared in anthologies such as the LocoThology 2013: Tales of Fantasy and Science Fiction, First Contact Café, and Through Clouded Eyes as well as various online publications. She resides in South Carolina and can be found at dhhanni.net.

In My House | Christopher T. Dąbrowski

I don’t like my house! There are no handles in it. There's no door. No windows... the darkness; the insects that have invaded my house because it feels safe. Besides, it’s boring here! Additionally, I am not here voluntarily. My parents locked me in here thinking I was dead... But I'm alive!

And all because of that man with the long teeth! He said if I let him bite me in the neck, I’d get a reward. When he finished, I asked him about the reward. And he said:
- Soon...
  My mother told me: "Don't hang out with strangers!"

Everything Should’ve Been Fine | Christopher T. Dąbrowski

Everything should've been fine we should be getting ready, after all, soon we will have a baby. It is just that my beloved has been worse every week. She was miserable, pale, and quickly lost weight. The doctors could not understand what was wrong with her. They were talking about blood problems, but nobody could say anything specific.

She died at birth.

The newborn looked healthy. Surprisingly, he did not shout. Just smiled and I saw two fangs. Like a...

Suddenly, I recalled how almost nine months ago, my wife regularly dreamt about how she was raped by a vampire...

About the Author:
Christopher T. Dąbrowski is a writer and screenwriter from Poland. Author of several books published in countries such as Poland, USA, Germany and Spain.
The Bury Box

Lee Andrew Forman

Available on Amazon
They're going to kill you today, said the voice inside his head. Cold metal underneath stuck to Albert's naked flesh, pinched and cut into his pink flesh. A smell of rust and defecation hung in the air, so strong he could taste it. His muscles were stiff. There wasn't room to stretch inside the crate.

Slivers of light pierced through the grating. On the other side, a shadowy figure moved with an unnatural, lurching gait. Each footfall reverberated through the metal floor and sent shivers down Albert's spine. The enslavers were grotesque creatures with oddly shaped bodies, gangly stretched-out limbs, folds covering grey flesh, heads that towered high above. He didn't know for what hideous purpose they had brought him here, only that they didn't care about his suffering, or maybe they enjoyed it. Albert held his breath as the footsteps quieted into the distance.

"Psst," a voice whispered from a neighbouring cell.
"Shhh!"
"What're you scared of?"
"What do you think?" Albert had vivid memories of unruly captives tortured into submission. The enslavers seemed to delight in the process, erupting into fits of hissing and wheezing sounds as they snapped bones, jabbed with metal prongs, or forced struggling faces into buckets of waste water. Afterwards, limp bodies were dragged like brushes across the metal floor, painting the floors with swaths of blood.

"Albert? Is that you?"
"Yeah. Who are you?"
"It's Erik."
Albert was silent.
"Erik," the voice repeated. "VP of processing division."
"I'm sorry, who?"
"Oh, geez. They warned us this might happen."
"What?"
"Trauma induced retrograde amnesia. Memory loss, Erik. Do you know why you're here?"

Every moment he could remember was the same, tortured inside this prison, nothing left from before the abduction. Albert suspected the aliens had taken his memory along with his freedom.

"No," Albert answered finally. "I don't know."
"They're auditing us for moral externalities."
"Huh?"
"Listen, Albert. I don't think I have time to explain everything. But they're gonna kill us today, and then everything's gonna be okay."
"What? They're gonna kill us?"
"Yes," Erik said. "Any time now. And all you have to do is let them do it."

A panel swivelled open below and Albert dropped, crashing on to an open metal platform. Clang. Erik landed a few feet away. Albert squinted, blinded by searing light.

A silhouette towered above them, moving silently and methodically. Albert froze in terror. In one of the creature's long-fingered hands it gripped a metal hook. It raised the hook overhead, then brought it swiftly down. The point burrowed deep into Erik's back, hooking under the shoulder blade.

The creature reached for another hook.

This was it. Albert charged forward and tackled the enslaver, knocking it flat on its back. The hook clattered to the ground, and Albert grabbed it. He slashed, tearing through rubbery flesh of the creature's neck. Blood spurted from the gaping wound and spilled between clutching, corpse-like fingers. The creature writhed on the floor and looked up at Albert with yellow eyes. Then it was still.
"What are you doing?" Erik shouted from above.
"I'm gonna kill every single one of those things." Albert said, fingers clamped on the handle of the hook. The conveyor pulled Erik into a dark opening in the wall, and he disappeared into shadow.
"No," Erik shouted from the darkness. "Albert, please, you have to let them take you!"
"Like hell I do," Albert muttered. He scanned the room, then stepped through the only exit. The adjoining room was massive. Splatters of blood traced along the floor, dripped down from bodies dangling high above. In the middle of the room was a large tubular machine. Albert watched in horror as the conveyor lowered a wriggling human body into the device. There was a sickening sound as the machine struggled with flesh and bone, like a blender. From a spout on the bottom, pinkish-red paste oozed onto a conveyor.

The bloodied hook rose out from the top of the machine, absent a body. Another hook moved to take its place, dangling a fresh victim. Erik was next in line.

"Albert," Erik yelled out as his feet lowered into the machine. "What are you doing down there? You've got to go in the grinder!"
"Are you insane?"
Erik was lowered into the machine, and the top erupted with flecks of blood and chips of bone. The same sickly paste squirted out onto the conveyor below. The bloodied hook rose, and Erik was gone.

Albert took off running. He darted through an exit into a long hallway. He sprinted across, footsteps echoing on metal. As he neared the other end, he stopped in his tracks. Three of the enslavers were rounding the corner. Albert spun to run back the other way, but three more of them appeared, blocking the hall on the other end. He was surrounded. Time slowed as his vision darted back and forth between the approaching creatures. Then he saw his escape. Small circular windows were spread along the wall, like portholes, just large enough for his body. Albert darted to the closest one and peered out, and his heart sank. The ground lay more than a hundred feet below. A barren landscape, red rocks that extended for miles, like the surface of Mars.

Albert glanced back the steadily approaching aliens.
"I'm not gonna give you the pleasure," he said, and crawled through the window. Maybe he couldn't escape with his life, but he'd be damned if he'd let these hellish creatures take it. Albert plummeted to the rocks below. He closed his eyes, felt nothing but rushing wind, and braced for impact.

Darkness.

***

"That one won't count," a voice said.
"You can't be serious. He died, didn't he?"
Albert blinked awake as voices argued around him.
"Well, yes, he died. But not in the product line."
"Where does it say he has to die in the product line?"
Albert shook his head, hoping to throw off the disorientation. He was reclined in a comfortable chair. The room was clean, sterile looking, with teal walls. Some kind of laboratory or medical room. One of the two arguing men wore a lab coat and held a clipboard. The other wore an expensive looking suit. Albert recognized the suited man. It was Erik.

"We need to account for every product," clipboard man said. "If he doesn't die in the product line, then it doesn't count."
"Then why'd you let him die outside? Whose fault is that?"
"Excuse me," Albert said, "can someone please tell me what is going on?"
The two men stopped and looked at Albert.
"Good to see you're awake," clipboard man said. "I understand you are experiencing amnesia?"
"Yeah. And my head hurts." Albert moved to rub his head, and his fingers ran up against a tangle of wires.

There was an array of electrodes attached to his scalp. "What in God's name is going on?"
"All of those symptoms should clear up soon," the man said, and extended his hand. "I'm Doctor Rahim."
Albert shook.
"I'm afraid what Erik has told you is correct," Rahim said. "The last one won't count."
"Last one?" Albert raised an eyebrow. "Won't count for what?"
"For the audit," Rahim said.
Erik shrugged. "We must determine if management is willing to pay all the costs associated with the operation," Rahim explained. "In the case of your meat processing facility, we are most concerned with the cost imposed on the animals in your production line. We are running neural simulations to determine if you and the rest of management are willing to pay the moral costs of your business model."

"So all of that torture-
"-was a simulation of your production line, modified suitably to your vantage point."

Albert gripped his face. His head was spinning.
"How long was I in there for?"

"About three seconds," Rahim answered

"Three seconds?" Albert screamed. "It felt like years."

"There's an accelerated perception of time," Rahim explained. "It would take too long otherwise."

"Albert," Erik said. "We're almost done here. Let's just finish up so we can get back to doing business."

"You mean you want me to go back to that hell-hole?"

"Just a few more times."

"And if I refuse?"

"It's your choice," Rahim said. "You can quit any time you like."

"But you can't quit now," Erik yelled. "They'll close down the company!"

"That's right," Rahim said. "If management is not willing to pay the cost of negative externalities, the company will be graded as economically inefficient."

"We have hundreds of employees, Albert. You want to put them all out of a job?"

Albert remembered the company he ran and the employees who counted on him. People with families to support. "How many more times do we need to do it?" Albert asked.

"Just once per animal," Erik said, "divided between management. It won't take more than a few hours."

"How many simulations is that for each of us?" Albert asked.

Rahim checked his clipboard. "About sixty thousand."

"Sixty thousand?"

"It's just a few hours," Erik said. "You'll be back in time for dinner."

"I don't think I can do it."

"You have what it takes," Erik said. "That's why you're in management - you understand the meaning of sacrifice!"

"I don't know."

"It gets easier, Albert. See for yourself. Just go one more time. It'll only take three seconds."

Albert thought about the thousands and thousands of loyal customers, who, without Albert's company, would have to find alternatives for their sliced ham. Prices would skyrocket. No more sliced ham in school lunchboxes, so many disappointed children, so many lunches ruined! Albert was proud of his company, he was proud of how successful they had been under his leadership, and he was proud of his product. It was time to show what he was made of.

***

They're going to kill you today, said the voice inside his head.

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**About the Author:**
David F. Shultz writes from Toronto, Canada, where he is lead editor at Speculative North magazine. His over-seventy published works are featured or forthcoming through publishers such as *Augur, Diabolical Plots, and Third Flatiron*.

**Author Website:** [David F. Shultz](#)
**Twitter:** [@davidfshultz](#)
He lay awake and said the name into the night. "Robyn," he said, as he clung to what was left of his pillow, shedding tears of infinite loss and emptiness into the darkness.

He missed her so much it hurt down to his soul. Her sudden disappearance during the storm last week and subsequent discovery of her lifeless body on the beach had broken him into shards of eggshell that no horses or men could heal.

"Why did you have to take that walk, take those pictures?" he sobbed. "Why?"

Had it not been for her love of photography, especially the raw, unfettered power of a spring storm over the beach; she would have still been alive and by his side.

He had already smashed her camera against the wall. He immediately felt guilt over it; after all, it was part of her just like her auburn hair, her blazing green eyes and her heart of true, purest joy. He had kept the pieces and assembled them in a makeshift shrine on their dresser; surrounding it with the small, yet beautiful frames of images she had created. Frame upon frame stood like headstones around the broken debris; each a moment in time captured and never to be erased.

He continued to weep. This had been his new normal for weeks now and he had seen no end to it nor no need to deviate from it especially now. After all, they had been together for years, Robyn and he, and had joined their lives together over a shared love of nature as well as of art. Robyn, the headstrong, fiery, spitfire and he; the logical yet playful book nerd who was always pounding away at his beat up old word processor. He had refused a new model in favor of familiarity if nothing else.

There was a small click just across the room. He sat up slowly, thinking it was the faucet in the restroom dripping. He had meant to fix it, but, as in most things during this time, it had fallen by the wayside in favor of his grief. The click sounded again, only this time closer; more mechanical.

He got up and listened carefully in the darkness. He tuned all other noises from his mind and focused on just listening in the dark. Click......zzzz.....Click! There it was again! Only this time, even more mechanical, and followed by a strange, dreamily whirring sound, he stiffened. He knew what it was.

He slowly walked to the ‘shrine’ he had built from the pieces of the Nikon camera Robyn had treasured and worn out with her images. It had changed position.

The pieces had now come together in a more logical, almost organized way...and were moving on their own.

He grabbed his jaw to keep it from falling open but failed. What was this? Was he cracking up? Was this it? Had he just completely lost it and gone around the bend as they say? He took his hands and rubbed his eyes to sharpen his vision. Maybe it was just a trick of the dark or a dream he had come out of, but no; the pieces were moving.

His gaze then shifted to the frames on his dresser. He stiffened again and a shudder of pure cold raced through him, each image, each memory of a moment in time now included a new image within them; his beloved, Robyn staring back at him. Only this Robyn was not smiling, nor passionate, nor the joyous girl he'd seen smile over a thousand Sundays, this Robyn had no eyes; only black holes and hair as pallid as roots in a swamp. Her skin was bleached and rotting and blackened teeth shown behind her taut grin that extended from cheek bone to rotting cheek bone.

"You took my eyes my love," the image croaked. "Why did you take my eyes?"

"I didn't baby! I didn't promise! he screamed. "I was just so sad and angry—" he stopped before he could finish as he realized that the image of Robyn wasn't an image, but a reflection.

He turned to see her standing behind him. Eyeless and grinning; smiling with a malice he had never known from her, at least while she was living. "You took my eyes, my darling," she croaked again through a voice sounding of things long drowned deep; "and now I need to take your picture"

There was a sudden flash from the dresser. And all went black.

About the Author:
Joe Inabinette is a teacher of students with severe Special Needs. He lives in McKinney, Texas with his wife, two sons, and two ridiculous excuses for dogs. He is an ardent fan of the 1967 television show, ‘The Prisoner’ from which he draws much of the inspiration for his life. He enjoys writing Horror fiction and is currently preparing an anthology of short stories.

Author Blog: Everyday Joe: Ramblings and Poems
Twitter: @Jlnabinette
“I don’t believe this.”
“What are you talking about, Carson? Have you been hacking into the wrong computers again?”
“There are no ‘wrong’ computers, boss. Just ones that are a little harder to get into than others. This one was a doozy; it is one of the most heavily encrypted files I have ever seen.”
The supervisor came over and stared at Carson’s screen. “Pentagon? NSA?”
“Nope, the computers at the Playboy mansion have more firewalls than those; I found this one at Walter Reed.”
“Walter Reed Hospital?”
“One and the same. This thing uses algorithms that I have never seen before and I never thought of; a nice piece of work if I do say so myself. Almost worthy of me.” Carson’s fingers flew over the keyboard as he spoke. “I figured it was just the standard sort of junk the Pentagon loves to hide. You know, the $700 toilet seats, international banking conspiracies, UFO research, that sort of thing.”
The supervisor stared at the screen as the file opened. “I wish it were that simple.”

***

“You are certain of your information, Xavier?”
Xavier Coldsmith tapped the window sill with the handle of his cane. He had been staring out at the city forty stories below for some time, just watching the lights of the theatrical district alive with color and abounding in dreams.
Nigel Conner and Karl Whitherspoon, Xavier’s two oldest friends, stood a respectful distance away, waiting for his answer. The three of them could have been mistaken for members of the board of directors of any Fortune 500 company, which they were, several, in fact.
What none of their stockholders dreamed was that these men were also the leaders of a vast night nation; call them vampires, Nosferatu, undead or any of a dozen other names, to themselves they were merely The Family, and their traditions stretched back into the shadows of history.
“I wish to heaven it weren’t, Nigel,” he said.
“When did it happen? And who did it?” asked Karl.
“It appears to have been a pure chance event, caused by one of our more unstable cousins.” Xavier glanced at a sheaf of papers lying on a large conference table. “Floyd Caldwell was his name. It happened three nights ago, in the mountains outside of Washington. His victim was walking in the forest just after sunset. Caldwell was on him before the man’s bodyguards even knew what was going on.”
“So where is this Caldwell? If they question him too closely, no one can be sure what he might tell them. Hell, a good physical exam will reveal a lot more than they ever could expect,” said Karl.
“Again, we seem to have been lucky. The bodyguards were slow, but not that slow. They got Caldwell off his victim, but he was already deep in blood frenzy,” said Xavier. “He killed two of the bodyguards before they put an end to him. Uzis literally cut him into pieces, which promptly disintegrated.”
The two men shook their heads; this was the sort of exposure that they had worked for centuries to prevent.
“What about the victim?”
“Alive, but very weak. The doctors are as puzzled as the other authorities, the few that have been allowed to even know this happened. It was one of their computer files that tipped us off to the whole thing. Before you ask, I don’t know if there was an exchange of blood. We must, however, proceed on the assumption that there was.”
“Wonderful,” sighed Karl. “I can see the headline now: Dracula goes to Washington. Here’s where we become the lead story on the CNN.”
Xavier shook his head. “Not necessarily. If handled properly, this can be a small matter that few if any outside of present company will know about. Had Caldwell lived, he would not have been a proper Mentor. If there was a blood exchange then we must supply him with one. Whether he knows it or not, he is now part of The Family.”
“And if there was no blood exchange and he is not becoming one of us? What then?”
Xavier sighed. “Then I will finish what Caldwell began. But let us not dwell on the more negative aspects. I will leave tonight.”

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“Good evening, Mr. President,” said Xavier as he stepped through the side door into the Oval Office. “I do hope I am not intruding.”
“Never, old friend. You know you are always welcome here. Given the circumstances of the last few days, I am not at all surprised to see you.”
“Then you understand what happened?”
“Oh, yes. It’s going to take some getting used to, but it’s nothing I cannot handle. In fact, it might prove to have some major advantages.”
Yes, thought Xavier, I think that he will fit in well. After all, who was going to notice another blood sucker in Washington D.C.?

About the Author:
Bradley H. Sinor has been writing most of his life. He has many short stories in a variety of anthologies. He has a novel in the 1632 Universe, written with his wife, Susan P. Sinor, and another novel published by Airship 27 Press. He lives in Tulsa, OK with Susan and their two overlords, er, cats.

Author Website: Writers of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror
Facebook: Brad Sinor

Touring Hell | Brian Rosenberger
“The condo offers a lovely view of the Lake of fire,” said the guide.
“Another Lake of fire,” remarked Harold.
“Hell has numerous lakes. Lakes of fire, of piss, of sulphur, of excrement, and a few Lakes of turnip soup.”
“I hate turnip soup.”
“Most people do.”
The guide opened the condo door.
Harold had seen the Tower of Scabs, Impalement Square, and other atrocity exhibits. He remained unimpressed.
But this condo had potential.
“Hell being crowded, we house newcomers with familiar faces. Meet your roommate.”
It was Agnes. His dead Mother-in-law.
“I hate her.”
“That’s the point. It’s Hell.”

Eddie and the Day After | Brian Rosenberger
Hell of a night. With the screaming, sirens, barking dogs, explosions, and gunfire, Eddie barely slept. He stumbled to the kitchen, poured some OJ, and fed the toaster some bread.
No updates on his phone. Nothing on Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram. No emails.
The TV reported, between the static, news of The End of Everything.
Stay tuned.
The Apocalypse occurred on a Friday.
Eddie, not having to work, drove to the grocery store.
Thankfully, not much traffic. Eddie stocked up on potato chips, shrimp, and beer.
No line at the self-check out.
It wasn’t Heaven but it kind of was.

About the Author:
Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of As the Worm Turns and three poetry collections - Poems That Go Splat, And For My Next Trick..., and Scream for Me.

Facebook: Brian Who Suffers
Instagram: @brianwhosuffers
Monsters and devils went skulking through the streets of Graz—and crowds had gathered to cheer them on and scream at their wild antics.

It was the night of the Krampuslauf, or the ‘Krampus Run’, a longstanding tradition in many Germanic cities come wintertime, and a practice that was steadily sweeping into others across the world. In this macabre extravaganza whose roots stretched to decades passed, revelers dressed as Krampus—a proverbial evil Santa figure of folklore—and indulged in the morbid fascination and sensationalism that the character had garnered through the years. While celebrants sported an array of costumes and masks ranging from the whimsical to the terrifyingly grotesque, each evoked Krampus’ classic half-man, half-goat representation, leaping and prancing about like imps before the people lining the streetways.

Alfie Wood stood among the onlookers, a smile on his face, a bottle of schnapps in hand, and another bottle’s worth already in his stomach. He’d cheered and jeered in kind as the event played out, his tourist showing—not that he cared in the least. It was the perfect way to wrap up his holiday before returning to another year at Brighton; he’d stayed behind in the city for a full day longer than he’d intended, all just to witness the parade. He knew he couldn’t pass it up.

“Have a butchers at that!” he called out with a laugh, pointing his bottle to a hefty performer with a rather crudely-made Krampus mask. “That’s an ugly one right there!”

Another celebrant came bounding by then, a bundle of birch sticks in their hand, whipping it fiercely at the bystanders. The person wore a shaggy bodysuit of black hair and a matching mask, horns of white curling about its leering visage.

“Oy, there! Watch it now, watch it!” Alfie hollered his Cockney tones at the performer, who was now singling him out for a whipping.

He stumbled back from the swishing sticks, knocking aside others as he went and nearly tripping over his own feet as he broke free of the crowd. He gave the costumed man and the bystanders a sneer before moving along down the street, taking another swig of his schnapps and looking for somewhere else to stand and watch the festivities.

As he looked about, a darkened alley to his side caught his attention; but it was the figure that stood within its dimness that held it. A great big person dressed in quite the Krampus get-up stood there, watching the parade with a grim look on its gray, white-bearded mask. The person’s contacts glimmered with a tint of red, enhancing the mask’s severe, rather judgmental look. The person’s bulky frame (easily seven feet tall and some change) was covered by a red cloak as big as a tarp, a hood raised over his head from which two black, elongated horns tore up and out. The cloak’s folds covered the person’s torso and legs entirely, their ends stretching down to the street and swaying about his concealed feet.

“Oy! Why ain’t you out there celebrate, you big bastard?” Alfie said, stepping up to the performer and admiring the successful costume.

The performer simply looked at him, groaned, and turned around, striding off down the barren alley.

“Are you taking the piss?” Alfie said angrily, not taking well to being ignored. He followed after the man, the alcohol bringing fight to his veins.

“I’m talking to you, you shit!” Alfie shouted when they were halfway down the way, the cheers from the parade rising up behind him.

The tall man continued on, saying nothing.

That’s when Alfie pitched his bottle forward, sending a splash of schnapps across the back of the performer’s cloak. Finally, the tall man stopped.

“Right!” Alfie said with pride. “Now, then . . .”

The performer spun about, sending the folds of his cloak flying and revealing hairy legs and cloven hooves for feet; his enormous arms and clawed hands went reaching for Alfie. The hands clasped his face and his neck, and as Alfie yelled into the giant’s palm, the performer ripped his head clear off with one superhuman show of strength.

Alfie’s body fell to the concrete, its legs twitching.

With a satisfied huff, Krampus—the one true Krampus—dropped the head down beside the corpse, the bits of spine hanging from the bloody, rent neck cracking as it landed.

Then, Krampus went on his way, pleased enough that the mortals still knew his name, and that such deeds as he’d just performed gave them ample reason to know it—and better yet, to fear it.

About the Author:
Patrick Winters is a graduate of Illinois College in Jacksonville, IL, where he earned a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing. He has been published in the likes of Sanitarium Magazine, Deadman’s Tome, Trysts of Fate, and other such titles. A full list of his previous publications may be found at his author’s site, if you are so inclined to know.

Author Website: Patrick Winters
Sirens Summons: Compose or Decompose!

This is a good month for reflection, a time for setting new writing (or reading) goals. Whether poetry or fiction, you can discover self-expression through inspiring prompts. I’m also going to share ways that will enhance your approach to composing dark flash fictions and poems.

In literature or cinema, which do you find more scary, supernatural forces, like vengeful ghosts pulling you into the TV, or manmade dangers, like serial killers with specific tastes? I go for writing (and reading!) speculative dark fiction and horrific poetry, but it’s rare I do ghosts. Rarer still, serial killers! Currently, I enjoy getting monthly prompts from Nina D’Archangela and Erin Lydia Prime’s Ladies of Horror Flash/Poem challenge. Here’s an example:

Ripper’s Street 1888 -1898

Fog settles over London’s East End, thick with industry’s residue. It leaves its oily coat on the skin, plays games with the vision. Forms appear then vanish in the mist, and all around, the stink of piss and rotten meat. It’s a lengthy stretch of dark alleyways and muffled conversations, a place for whores to ply their trade. For a brief time, it became the Ripper’s playground.

Me being young, and with no binding ties, one night I went slumming with the lads. Such was our luck, we found ourselves in Buck’s row, begging favors of old Mary Ann. As gentlemen, we took our turns to satisfy our bursting loins. All smiles we were, such was her service for our coin. We bade good eventide and off she went to vanish in that dense Whitechapel fog. The next morning, she was found dead. All agreed it was the work of Jack.

A decade has passed since the harlot Mary met her fate. I’ve my own practice now. They call me Dr. Stoddard. It took years for me to realize what godless sorts these women are — servants of Lucifer himself! Cloaked by fog, I walk the cobblestones of Buck’s row. I think of it as a charitable service. Indeed, the wanton bitches haven’t learned, they’re still corrupting honest men, giving them most dreadful maladies. A strumpet beckons up the block, I shall be operating soon. My predecessor’s work was a disgrace — the man was no surgeon! I’ll leave no mess.

(from a poem version in Night to Dawn #138, 2020)

The preceding was inspired by a picture of a foggy London street, lit by gaslight. You can even find your own by “window shopping” photo sites on line. You don’t need to buy an idea, they’re free for the taking. Of course, since this is a “Period Piece” prose poem, I copied the way that a well-educated Londoner might speak back in the late 1800’s.

What can you do with your prompt? There is the poem, or short fiction (flash), often the same as a prose poem. Here’s an example of both as one; you might say this is mainstream, sadness, despair. It’s kind of an exposed nerve without protection, sort of familiar. All horror tropes are absent, yet it is dark and sad as Poe’s “Annabel Lee”. Not everything dark has to be in-your-face.

Take Your Needles When You Go

Tonight we walk past streets lined with frozen trees, sidewalk gray men in cardboard suits. I show you my world of crevices and curving streets. Winter wears long hands, even the pigeons are cold. Fresh snow decorates the hydrants, zircon lights beneath a woman’s moon. I think of kissing you, but you see that in my eyes. You shake your head, no. I dust the flakes from your scarf, touch your face before you turn away. “Too late?” I say. You nod. Maybe when my world dies altogether. Maybe then.

I know your breasts hiding in the thick wool, the length of your thigh, the smell of us, white wine and Hendrix. You on the floor in my shirt, unfashionable for Wesleyan. Take your needles when you go, I’ve run out of veins. I want to say this, but I don’t. It’s not about pain. Someone is playing a jazz harp; forms move in the flickering light. We stop to watch, but they turn to shadows, it’s a private thing. Go back to school. I’ll fix the sink while you’re away, plug the leaks with broken glass.

(Vestal Review 2005)

Lastly, from my darkest poetry vaults, I have a poem from WAR, a successful collaborative collection with Alessandro Manzetti. I give you one that just didn’t want to be more than a poem. Ghosts are involved, but not for the purpose of scaring you.
George Tecumseh Sherman’s Ghosts

Florida, 1914

Most nights you mention him,  
the ghosts rise from the cypress,  
come back to wail and moan.  
Haints all look the same,  
can’t tell the whites from the Brothers,  
‘cause the war took every one alike,  
and some still stick around.

It’s been nigh fifty years, Granpappy say,  
back when it was the Civil war,  
and that man with crazy eyes came through --  
old General Sherman and his men,  
took our food, our mules,  
even our women along the way,  
burning and blazing every field,  
cotton or corn or sugar cane,  
telling us we join up,  
we’d be free, that’s what they said.

Granpappy almost starved,  
beings how the soldiers got the food  
and only scraps for the Brothers that survived;  
still more drowned at Ebeneezer Creek,  
trying so hard to keep up,  
a-marching straight to hell,  
all the while still being slaves,  
no better than the Reb’s to them.

But them haints, General Sherman,  
they all look the same.

(WAR collection, Rhysling winner, Stoker Finalist 2018)

If you prefer writing about your own angst without a prompt, it’s a great therapy. Personal stuff when you’re starting out is fine, but it doesn’t make a significant poem most of the time. Try channeling your passion, your deepest feelings, into a poem from another source/era/speaker. In my last two examples, I’ve done just that. These poems speak my mind about personal convictions, but I’m way inside them, just a wee light within the manifest.

Merry Holidays! Keep writing!

About the Author:
Marge Simon lives in Ocala, Florida and serves on the HWA Board of Trustees. She has three Bram Stoker Awards, Rhysling Awards for Best Long and Best Short Fiction, the Elgin, Dwarf Stars and Strange Horizons Readers’ Award. Marge’s poems and stories have appeared in Crannog, Pedestal Magazine, Asimov’s, Silver Blade, Journal of Condensed Creative Art, New Myths, Daily Science Fiction. Her stories also appear in anthologies such as Tales of the Lake 5, Chiral Mad 4, You, Human and The Beauty of Death, to name a few. She attends the ICFA annually as a guest poet/writer and is a founding member of the Speculative Literary Foundation.

Amazon Author Page:  Marge Simon  
Author Website:  Marge Simon
The Southern Lady | *Marge Simon*

With death, there should be dignity but there is none here, 
the men in dusty blue uniforms continue to pass by, 
my precious roses trampled, bleed their perfume into the soil, 
and those half dead are brought to my parlor, 
soaking my fine couches with their Yankee blood.

Cow and calf alike they shot for practice up in Charleston, 
by the time they got to ours, they wanted bread and butter, 
with pitchers of fresh milk to wash it down; 
some seem surprised there’s none. 
They’d burned our fields, there was no feed, 
did they think our livestock lived on love?

I dreamed I was a giant cat,  
sitting on a wounded soldier’s chest  
watching him quietly while he slept,  
then I leapt on his face and clawed out his eyes.

But he rose up, playing “Aura Lee” on his harmonica. 
One by one, his companions joined in singing,  
and we danced all around the room.  
Beyond the window it was raining blood.

WHITE SIEGE | *Marge Simon & Alessandro Manzetti*

"Stalingrad is no longer a city. 
By day it is a huge cloud of blinding smoke. 
And when the night comes, dogs dive into the Volga, 
because the nights of Stalingrad terrorize them.»
(Diary of a Soviet soldier)

Stalingrad, December 12, 1942

A woman is wearing a black coat 
and snow jewels on her cold breasts; 
She has crumbled bones, 
and two children to feed, 
up there, on the seventh floor 
of the building, ornated 
with the 24-carat holes 
of the machine guns, 
slaughtered like the last 
giant hog on Earth 
— a mirage of flesh —  
after so much hunger, 
and long times of mud meatballs 
and gas broth."
A German Panzer
is lying in the middle of the street,
looks like a mammoth
without teeth and fur,
that barely breathes,
inflating its veins and tracks.
It swallowed its Aryan driver
—cooked by molotov —
one week ago,
and is still digesting
his square jaws and iron medals.

An old man near a stack of boots
with a blanket on his head
and a bullet in his brain,
convinced he is dead,
is crawling on all fours,
—sniffing his nephew’s red t-shirt—
listening to the grenade’s jazz
and the barking of dogs ---
their tails in flames that illuminate
the shadows of the street,
macabre, elusive traces
of what once was.

Mamochka stewed our dog,
but Yeva was very thin,
so his meat was spare.
Our baby brother,
born after the troops came,
he is too weak to eat, doesn’t
cry, his diaper goes unused.
There are three of us to feed,
Mama has no choice.

Winter’s wedding ring,
a red bruise around her neck.
In the mirror a full bellied man’s reflection
that moves like a mad monkey in his guts,
chasing him to the white building
on the paradox corner fragmented
by the blast of his blame, his wife’s remains
still screaming in his stomach.

White souls, white uniforms
white weapons, white pain
(the shock of each dawn)
eating snow, while Beauty
is trapped in a block of ice
with mouth open, arms still up
(shouting 'please, just stop this!')
and frozen hairs sticking out
from the roots of dreams,
white like a painting just started.
While they’re dying. 'Why?'
(asked a little girl in front of a big pot)
A whine, out there. Then a thousand.
It’s the White Siege soundtrack.
Beyond the city,
Winter wears long hands,
miles of white on the horizon.
We’ve become stickmen in uniform,
sunken faced and hollow eyed;
hunger clawing at our guts
like a cat trapped in a bag.
We no longer feel the cold.
Kreuger falls, won’t get up, won’t talk.
He’s been sick for days,
frostbite has claimed his feet,
already he smells
like a dead thing.
As we stand around him,
Bucholdst begins tapping his bowl
against his bayonet.
I won’t let us start on him
before his last breath.
Das Fuhrer would approve,
it is a matter of pride.

Available on Amazon!
Poetry

The Breathing Days | Lynn White

In the days when I still breathed air,
the days before
living took my breath away,
the days before
I knew my soul was there.
I thought about this time,
this time of no light,
the forever night time
with no breath, no air
to breathe.
Just dust and darkness.

And I pondered.

Would there be slow decay
or fast.
Stillness or movement.
Now I know.
I know everything about
the dust and darkness.
But I can't tell you.
Not now
in these days
of no breath,
no air
to speak.
Only my soul can speak.
Can you hear me?

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.

Author Blog: Lynn White Poetry
Facebook: Lynn White Poetry
Vampyres' Interlude: A Certain Kind of Love | Marge Simon

Come, share with me  
this darkling sky,  
let me taste the night  
in your eyes, embraced  
within my arms, and toast  
to the turn of the year.

We need not hunt,  
the night's afire!  
Make me laugh for the joy  
of stroking your hair,  
whisper histories  
in my ear, tell me all --  
give me the wonder  
I feel in your arms.

There's no room for regret,  
for who we once were  
can't compare to us now.  
We'll feast on memories,  
scarlet liquid in golden bowls.

Under a Dark Moon's Horn | Marge Simon

Jenna arranges a set of Edwardian chairs  
side by side on the beach, one red, one brown.  
I smile, for she wears her best bombazine blouse,  
giving us a hint of the night's festivities ahead.  
Licorice gives her a headache, but she enjoys the taste,  
and the color compliments her attire, even to the point  
of turning her tongue and teeth black.

We bleed ourselves under the moon's horn,  
homage to the glory of another year gone by.  
Jenna's fluted silver dipper shines with our fluids,  
as smiling, she ladles our offerings into the tureen.  
Once a communal bowl, it is again just so.  
Later, when the moon lowers in the southern skies,  
she'll summon her warriors to drink.

We do enjoy those moments,  
waiting for another war to manifest itself,  
if not in the worlds beyond our door,  
then here tonight on this silver beach,  
as the goddess known as Jenna plays her cello,  
Bach's Suite Number Two in D Minor,  
and the soldiers dance around her, mad with lust.
New Year’s Party Migraine | Marge Simon

so it comes
the floating globes
& flashing prisms

the smell of
rancid cheese
that comes with pus
from weeping sores

a glimpse
of your mother’s grim face
behind a curtain
of wavy lines

a flight of hornets
stabbing
stinging

you stand at
bathroom sink
there’s your tool,
pick it up
sharp & solid
in your hand
on your lips,
then lower,

once for each wrist
you only get one chance
do it right
this pain
is brief
is sweet
no regrets ...

About the Author:
Marge Simon is an award-winning poet/writer. Her works have appeared in Daily Science Fiction, New Myths, Polu Texni, Clannad, Silver Blade and four pro anthologies in 2018. She is a multiple Stoker winner and Grand Master Poet of the SF & F Poetry Association.

Facebook: Marge Ballif Simon
Amazon Author Page: Marge Ballif Simon
Occitan night | Eduard Schmidt-Zorner

In this eldritch night
your fragrance faded,
before the diaphanous day
gently dripped away.

What remains is sobbing
from loose cobblestones.
Plague town
with the smell of death.

Town of stakes.
Silvery the fear like moonlight,
hope decays in bitter night.

O town, town,
oleander town
between roses
and bougainvilleas.

The Dead Still Live | Allan Rozinski

The dead still live! How can it be?
The virus spread rampantly
across the earth; from beggars to queens,
none were immune. The tragic mean:
all were equal casualties.

The life after the rot sets in . . .
not quite what one would imagine.
The thwarting of one’s ending scene:
the dead still live.

The plagued submit to the decree:
eat, and from other eaters flee.
Driven to horrors unforeseen,
the knowledge with the hopeless keen:
the dead still live.

About the Author:
Eduard Schmidt-Zorner is a translator and
writer of poetry, haibun, haiku and short
stories. He writes in four languages: English,
French, Spanish and German and holds
workshops on Japanese and Chinese style
poetry and prose. Member of four writer
groups in Ireland. Lives in Ireland, for more
than 25 years and is a proud Irish citizen,
born in Germany. Published in over 130
publications world-wide.

About the Author:
Allan Rozinski is a writer of speculative
poetry and fiction. His work has most
recently been accepted or published in
Spectral Realms, the anthology Coming
Though in Waves, Weirdbook, and The 2020
Rhysling Anthology, which contains his 2020
Rhysling-nominated poems The Solace of
the Father Moon (short category) and
Cannibal Rex (long category).

Author Website:  Literature and Art
Facebook:  Edward Schmidt-Zorner

Facebook: Allan Rozinski
Twitter: @allan_rozinski
Death by your side | Mathias Jansson

The Reaper you say  
that dark old robed man  
with his bony fingers and scythe  
lurking in the darkness  
waiting to cut the thread of my life

What a stereotype  
what an outdated view  
you see - I work in full daylight  
I move in the invisible crowd  
dressed as your neighbour  
or maybe as a close friend

You will never see me coming  
when I give you a push over the edge  
make you trip in the stairs  
or cause a deadly heart attack

Death is no mystic stranger  
I am as common as  
ordinary people  
I am part of your daily life  
walking close by your side  
giving you a nod or a smile  
when we meet on the street

If you thought that death  
was a horrifying  
old man with a scythe  
then my real appearance  
would make you terrified

Who knows?  
I may be sitting next to you  
right now  
patience listens and comforts  
your fear for death.

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 Sirens Call Publications. 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 Website: Mathias Jansson
the gruesome spell | Linda M. Crate

one heart
carmine
laid in her palms
spouting blood all over
the place,
and the harpy smirked at
the warmth that was
flooding her mouth
when she bit
into her prize;
no one would suspect this heart
belonged to a wicked man
except perhaps the vampire who had
scoffed at her that his blood
would be disgusting—
but she didn’t crave the blood
of the innocent the way a vampire would,
she only desired vengeance;
and she had it
for the girl whose father was killed
by this man whose heart fell finally still
in her palms and she felt bewitched by the
gruesome spell of a dead heart.

moon magic | Linda M. Crate

i am moon magic
the spell of hecate,
daughter of the moon;
a magic few can
understand
and all should fear—
feral vampire daughter
ready for carnage,
to unleash her desires
upon unsuspecting mortals
who fall for the innocence
of doe eyes;
there’s no savior that can save
you from the danger
behind these carmine lips—
i want to dig deeper than the flesh into
the beyond, i will learn your secrets
and like your life i will take them all.

About the Author:
Linda M. Crate’s works have been published in numerous magazines and anthologies both online and in print. She is a three time best of the net nominee. When Linda isn’t writing she likes to enjoy nature walks, photography, reading, dancing, and music. Her favorite musical genres are industrial, indie, rock, and goth. She’s always been a misfit, but she prides herself on always being herself.

Facebook: Linda M. Crate
Twitter: @thysilverdoe
The Bone Trumpet | Alyson Faye

As the day’s end dawns, at the end of the rope hooded in darkness he twists without hope.

His feet are tapping dancing to a tune, only the dying can hear, to which the living are immune.

The watchers’ ne’er hearken to the bone trumpet’s notes, ne’er see its ivory glow nor the player’s black coat.

Only when you’re on the line between Heaven and Hell. Only then will you hear its finale death knell.

Maybe the mad and the fearless, the blighted in their beds, will espy the gleaming threads spun by spiders’ toxic webs -

tying the Gallows’ souls to Heaven or Hell’s poles.

About the Author:
Alyson lives in the UK with her family and four rescue animals, and is often on the moor with her Borador, Roxy. She also swims, sings, tutors, edits for an indie press and watches a lot of films - horror to those from the Golden Age of Hollywood. She always wanted to dance with Fred Astaire and catch a train with Cary Grant.

Twitter: @AlysonFaye2
The Tide | Brian Rosenberger

Last night I died.
I die every night,
Suffocated by the waves.
I drown and am reborn.
I rise with the current.
Crest and trough, ebb and flow.

She is my shipwreck,
A daughter of Neptune.
Eyes like ember, scales like gold,
Needle-like teeth for which I have no defense.
Her tail engulfs me.
Her song snares my soul.
I am the bait. She is the hook.

Together, we fish for other sailors.
Those men so long absent from land. Desperate men.
We offer them hope, refuge within reach. Her reach.
I am the bait. She is the hook.

Tonight, every night, I’m drunk on red wine.
Too coppery for wine, I think and dismiss.
She is drunk on blood
And I am drunk on her.

I died last night.
I rise with the tide.

About the Author:
Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of As the Worm Turns and three poetry collections - Poems That Go Splat, And For My Next Trick..., and Scream for Me.

Facebook: Brian Who Suffers
Instagram: @brianwhosuffers

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Plague Doctor | Michael S. Walker

I walk the streets
In my wax overcoat
Perfumed mask
With its glass eyes
And beak
Juniper berry
Ambergris
Roses
They will surely save me
From the night air
They will surely save me
From the rot of everywhere.
I walk the streets
With my wooden cane
My wide-brimmed hat
Moroccan gloves
Juniper berry
Ambergris
Mint
They will surely save me
From this conjunction of planets
They will surely save me
Once again...

About the Author:
Michael S. Walker is a writer living in Newark, Ohio. He is the author of two novels: 7-22 and The Vampire Henry. He has also seen his work published in The Adelaide Review, PIF, and Weirdbook among others. In his spare time Mike likes to play his guitar and pet cats.

Author Blog: Michael S. Walker
Facebook: Michael S. Walker
The Occupation of the Giants | Ken Poyner

The last clan of giants
Takes stock of its future.

So few children born these days,
Too many stunted by ever closer in-breeding,
Closer than old laws would allow.
But the present holds only one clan,
And too few members there-in.
Marriages these days are made by mathematics:
How distantly apart do you and your
Proposed spouse orbit from the core
Gene pool? Out in the world
Of the little people, it seems
As though we have gone soft,
Descended into merely the practice
Of the practical. We have.

None of us knows why our race
Fights so desperately against extinction.
A giant passing no longer mourns his
Or her own expiration, but rather
The fact that she or he leaves one less
To marry. Our sole endeavor is plotting
As many more generations of us
As we can scrape enough dissimilar genes
Together to sire. Human towns
And little villages grow in the countryside,
And do not fear us. With laughter
They send us an occasional virgin in sacrifice,
Offer us the excess of their own breeding stock.

Without pleasure, these gifts we eat:
And know that the victim’s fellow citizenry
Chuckles, mocking us with their
Growth, their excess fertility, their
Wickedly wanton safety in numbers.

We count our neighbors, wane.
The Heart Attack | Ken Poyner

Be careful to catch yourself in the act.
Steal a look in any nearby surface
You can imagine as a mirror.
Feel for a moment the rough
Insides of your serendipitous clothing.
Swallow enough air that you know
At some predictable later second it will
Be coming back. Listen for the crack
Of that knee that these forty years
Has still not healed all that well,
As you resolve to lie down:
Lie down right here where there is
Enough sunlight left on the concrete to accommodate
You.

Roll onto your back, or roll
Into a ball: it does not
Really matter. There is the
Welcomed cold of the pavement,
Well beyond season, the welcomed
Oh my dear brother, see
What I put up with, see
What I am every day, all day,
And say yes oh yes and be
Still now. Take note
And admit we have been
Too hard on the pavement,
Too quick not to shower it with a thank you.

Execution | Ken Poyner

I am not going to make this any easier for you.
Life is a short swipe at nothing
And you come through it with nothing
But a miss and you know for just
Some lackluster moment that there is neither
Winning nor losing nor any prize:
Just the effort, just the work.
You will be going this way, too.
Quietly in your bed, or at this same
Block with your former chief apprentice in charge.
The destination is the same, only the time
Changes, and if you were worried about time,
The binary of a clock, the heart,
Breathing, sex, life or lack of life,
The time for that is past.
You get it or you don’t,
And that settles it.

Religion Amongst the Ants | Ken Poyner

They have seen so many of their brethren
Scorched and set aflame that they have come
To worship the magnifying glass.
What they do not know is
It has only the power
Given to it by the hand
That holds it, by the eyes
That track the sun, by the simple
Mathematics of tilt and focal distance.
They come to believe
That survival for the individual is random;
But that the key to survival for the Empire
Is hatching at least two
For every unlucky one burned.
This is the strategy that makes sense of everything.
This last moment
The steelhead are creeping
Ever closer.

The trapeze artist who fell
Is laundering his final suit.

The girl who is not so sure
Just what she was doing last night
Is pondering how intimate
And intimidate in English
Seem to have a family relation,

At least as words. Two dogs
Learn that they will never be drinking buddies.

A crooked old man
In a crooked old house
Has his last erection
While climbing the crooked old stairs:
And wonders why, and whether
It will actually be the last. Someone understands

Creating terror is easier than creating prosperity
And beats the iron drum of his understanding
With a soup ladle. I am in this instant

Going to fetch the cat out of the closet.
He creeps across our luggage and lingers against
The dark that is created when the door is tightly shut.
Though he does not understand death in any way, he
Believes that he is Death; and, as I reach from the outside
For the knob, to him suddenly every sterling second is now.

About the Author:
Ken Poyner has put out three books of mini-fictions, and two collections of speculative poetry, all of which can be had at Amazon and other book selling sites. He has had recent work in Analog, Asimov’s, Café Irreal, and other places, both print and web. He worked 33 years as a systems analyst, and now assists his wife in her world class power lifting career.

Author Website: Ken Poyner
Facebook: Ken Poyner
Fallen Sparrow | Linda Imbler

Beneath a glaring streetlamp lacking grace,
she stands with silver hair and reptilian eyes,
below a sky without a heaven,
a reckless young man meets her
after hearing her sirens croon,
her lullabies spun
behind creeping, dark shadows.

Her cold soul follows him into his inner sanctum.
The frailty of life. He joins the spinning in the sky.
Everything’s now still. An evil and foul silence.
She floats across the floor.
She touches the scrolls laid on his table.
Upon leaving, she retracts her winter incisors,
and steps out between solid raindrops,
into our darkest world.

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 also enjoys her 200-gallon saltwater reef tank, which houses her almost 20 year old Yellow Tang.

Author Blog: Linda’s Poetry Blog
Instagram: @imblerpoet2020

Baby Daddy Bingo | Christopher Hivner

The baby was born at 4:17 a.m.
By 4:43 my wife was dead
and I was covered in blood
begging to be spared,
my daughter, 26 minutes old,
had sprouted wings
a club-like tail
and fangs the size of
my index fingers.
The way she looked at me
I knew there would be
no mercy,
but at least I finally
had proof
the baby wasn’t mine.
Under stripped red skies
d wanderers full of grace
 look for revelation
 in the placement of skulls
 left by the invaders.
 We chance the daylight
 searching for answers
 or death,
 an end however fate will allow.

The risk is warranted
 say the preachers of the feast,
cowl covered faces in the crowd
 whispering psalms
 and encomiums
to the Providers.

We pay our alms
 and light the candles.
 Distinction lost from our lives,
 trusting in shadows
 and their twisted tongues,
 the preachers of the feast
 take our faith
 and keep it for themselves.

The skies darken
 on the eve of the autumnal repast,
bruise-colored clouds
 menacing our breaths
 while the tables are prepared
 and the meat is selected.

My wife and I have survived
 one more season
 to sit at the Provider’s table
 and hear the holy men
 bless our existence,
 but that sentiment
 is a vile pronouncement
 as our daughter’s corpse
 is presented
 as the main course.

---

I risked it all
 for a woman named Shala,
flew to the Sun and back
 on the wings of raven’s feathers
 to retrieve her stolen soul.

I incurred the orb’s wrath
 from deep in its maw
 of flesh melting
 atomic reactions.

An eruption of flame
 ejected from the surface of the star
 snapped toward Earth
 like a bullwhip,
 seeking me out
 for retribution,
 but Shala,
 restored to her full power,
 rose against the raging Sol.

I risked my life
 for a woman named Shala
 and for me
 she destroyed the beast
 that trapped our world.

She set us free.

She killed us all.
The Vigil | Christopher Hivner

tick tock
The body lays in its coffin; grandfather’s eyes closed, hands crossed over his chest looking regal
tick tock
the house is so warm, sweat rolls down my face, shirt collar too tight, black tie choking me just like every Sunday morning at services
tick tock
We are two hours into the vigil, my legs are numb, pins and needles stabbing me, can’t move, supposed to remain still out of respect
tick tock
Mother is weeping again, but not father; he is a stone-faced creature of will, no tears even for his own blood
tick tock
Grandpa always gave me candy, sure could use a piece now, I think I’m going to pass out
tick tock
Oh my God, there’s so much blood! The old man’s out of the coffin, Mama’s guts are dragging on the floor, run Mama run! How the fuck did daddy’s throat get cut, I didn’t even see Grandpa near him? Holy shit the old man is alive again!
tick tock
I think Mama’s dead.
tick tock
Daddy’s head is lying on the floor, the dog is licking up the blood
tick tock
Grandpa has me by the hair, his teeth are covered with Mama’s insides.
tick tock
I have my hunting knife to the fucker’s throat
tick tock
tick tock

tick tock

About the Author:
Christopher Hivner is an introvert who has pretty much lived like he was in quarantine all his life. He has recently been published in The Horror Zine and Blood Moon Rising.

Facebook: Christopher Hivner - Author
Twitter: @Your_screams
“...A splendidly comic tale that taps away at the keys to the creative process, whilst juggling parallel plots with a brilliantly deft touch...”

Available Exclusively on Amazon
**Revival | Mary Parker**

I emerge from my grave
Joints popping, throbbing
I am weak from fitful slumber –
My shadow grows under moonlight
An apparition of who I used to be
Midnight wind chills my bones,
Whispers secrets and tragedies in my ear
My skin is caked with dirt and mud,
Taught with a lifetime of regrets
Worms crawl in my hair and down my back,
Some strange music rattles from my lungs –
A weeping séance scream
The gloom is broken by cracks in the sky,
Stars that glow with the sullen knowledge
That lessons learnt are fraught with tears
The sting of resurrection is naught
In the light of fiery rebirth –
I have risen again, to begin anew.
I have risen, scarred but thriving
I have risen, beauty in darkness –
I will right my wrongs
Dry my tears
Make better use of my remaining years
Even if I can only crawl,
I will do what the demons at my back
Sware they would never let me –
I will take the stars, make them mine,
I will glow with the glorious knowledge
That lessons learnt are a wealth of understanding.

**Legacy | Mary Parker**

My weight mashes the green carpet beneath me,
The pasture where I sought a moment’s solace,
Yet its blades jab my stagnant body
Though I am too numb to bleed:
I am a splayed atrocity of twisted boughs.
Existence crushes my chest,
A boulder of inescapable regrets and confusion.
I aspirate one last exhausted, exasperated breath.
My flattened lungs refill with soil and seeds, so slowly
A snail crawls across my cheek,
A trail of mucus kisses my lips in its wake.
The moon and clouds mark eternity passing away.
Vines and weeds grow around me
Slither over my skin,
A mass that warms withered muscle
Crumbled cartilage
Splintered bones –
I am slowly entombed in earth
As I become my purest form:
Dust.
It is too late to retreat,
Collapsed tongues cannot apologize.
I cannot take back my death wish
I cannot rewind the blood I spilt each month,
Empty promises never consummated, living but lifeless.
I am reborn lush from a steady diet of sun and rain,
A crown of marigolds upon my brow
Roses and lavender my imperial robes.
I am the dirt, as I always was
Now freed from the burden of thought and choice,
My beloved merely ash I consumed, my life tundra I crawled through,
Each battle I won a thin thread of spider’s silk
That was woven together to blanket my grave,
My legacy – the pain I birthed that became bountiful harvest.
Death plucked a flower
And touched it to gray shriveled lips,
Careful not to disturb her shroud
As each petal was kissed lovingly, longingly.
Her cracked skull ached with memories of life-heat,
Her sightless eyes rocky burdens rattling in their sockets
Forever promising visions from before her world turned to ice,
 Decay flowing from her skeletal fingers,
Forever vowing visions that once conjured were nothing more
Than faded, unfeeling photographs disintegrating to ash.
She had been, once: graceful, voluptuous, seething
Breathing, dreaming, a crown of blooms across her brow –
She had been here many times before,
She remained after love and life had faded into
Ceaseless, menacing destruction.
No matter where she traveled
She always had already been, had already touched, tasted
Each kiss now hollow, empty whispers and broken promises –
She had seen lifetimes pass, alone
Love died and faded but she remained
All brightness turned black, her breasts collapsed –
Her withered lips and tongue perfunctory utensils
With which to end everything it means for a person to be
Because she had been, once: thinking, desiring
Making love, passionate and urgent
Before her skin turned to bark
And her slightest breath turned households to corpses.
The flower at her lips, yellow like the burning sun,
Wilted, browned, and flew away from her bony grasp,
Dust on the wind:
She followed it to the next place, somewhere she knew well,
Where she would find her next treasure.
She hoped, this time, she would be fulfilled.
The result was always the same: the ghost of herself, a fractured reflection,
She would forever be hungry, alone.
Together forever seems like a long time, but once the flesh is gone, nothing remains.

About the Author:
Mary Parker is a horror author and journalist. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in numerous anthologies and magazines. Her first novel is nearing publication. Mary is a former ambassador for and proud supporter of Women in Horror Month. She likes true crime and werewolves more than anyone probably should.

Twitter: @MParkerHorror
Victoria | Alexis Child

The crazy burden
Everyone knew about
They loved the thin, happy kid
Vicky is hugging her knees
Arguments in the background
Someone is with her

White with panic
Her face on the ceiling
It doesn't seem right to cry
Cupping her ears
like tiny seashells
A calmer sea
Not the woman in the ambulance

Washed up like an old bone
She opens to the sea
Black, shadowy mouthfuls
A silent, hate writhes in wounds
One cannot communicate
Whir in ill wind of Lapis Lazuli sea
She claws her way towards the heavens

Staring corpse-like at the ceiling
Someone had saved her again
So many piles of pills, the razors,
the bottles, the blackouts
More ambulances than city hospitals
Therapists and Psychiatrists that just
gave up trying
And all the sideway glances
One could ever hope to recover from

She is smiling diabolical and tragic
Stupidly and sorrowfully
The world still black as a riddle
Suffering a fine madness
Victoria is not Victoria anymore

Just a roaring sea of words
Like witch's curses
For drowning lungs
She no longer sees ghosts anymore
Afraid of herself
Trauma, that mother you live with
has many faces you discover like no other
You were lucky this time
But even still are gasping for air
Tell Me a Ghost Story... | Alexis Child

Feast on my magical blood
Join me in the forbidden forest
Created from sleepwalking and nightmares
Conjur up the ghosts
Raise the dead and the fear to life
The overflowing milk
In December’s dismal light

The dangerous face in the window
Something outside in the dark waiting
Send it back to the terrible tomb
Crumbling in silence to dust and decay
Awake from your silence
For freedom and life
Conquer that Isle long forgotten!

We are the creators of ghosts
and monsters
Never free of the horrors
The shape of our fears bring us to our death
Mad love between the dog and the devil
The evil prevails that lives inside our mind
Battling the demons of darkness
For just one more night
But the demons made us believe
They knew what was best
Cutting the heart right out of our chest

And the wind with the wolf’s head
Howls at the bridge
Hiding in shadow
This is the devil’s allegiance
Follow the bones

Dance on the courageous backs
of the broken
Only they can be trusted
Beyond this sound of distant thunder

The vanished smile of days
Our grieving in vain
Skeleton fingers drop over
the moon's pale beam
mourning over a dreamless sleep

Warring psychosis. Go into night.
Preserve me in myself in this hazardous
fragment of a face.
These ashes laid to rest with great
solemnity!
I throw her to the water's edge,
cover her with stones.
I regret, but then forget
her cold beauty that carried me away,
where the sun now sleeps completely.
An evil conscience of glory and relief
makes me think the Devil is the master
of this skill.

How lovely she is on a bed of flowers.
There is a morbid charm where a sob
escapes under frothy blood.
My soul trembles
on the banks of death, where she is
swept away,
Far from the sight of God
there is still a guilty desire
for the laughter of the sea,
those poisonous eyes
breathing life into me.

A scarlet tear runs from her cheek.
This is goodbye.
The crooked shadows look down with
shame to wake the dead.
Heaven and Hell collide.
Please don't be dead.
Just one more miracle?
Drowning in her panicky moans,
I realized I was indeed, a ghost,
watching the night sky made up of bones.

About the Author:
Alexis Child lives in Toronto, Canada where horror is in its purest form and is haunted by the memory of her cat. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in numerous publications. Her first collection of poetry, a dark and sinister slice of the macabre gothic, horror, surreal, and supernatural—*DEVIL IN THE CLOCK*—available on Amazon.

Author Website: [Alexis Child’s Poetry Empyrean](#)
Facebook: [Alexis Child](#)
Everything Decays | Geoffrey A. Landis

Here's what happens
after we die,
after everybody we know dies,
after the sun cools,
after all the stars cool:
Everything decays to iron.
Then, slowly, it all falls into black holes
until there is nothing else left,
just black holes
and the cooling microwave background.
After ten to the trillionth years
all the black holes decay to thermal photons,
all the photons stretch out
and stretch out
and stretch out
to perfect nothingness,
crystalline vacuum,
and then,
the most improbable thing ever:
even the vacuum
decays.

In time beyond our imagination
symmetry breaks
into another
bang.

A World of Ghosts | Geoffrey A. Landis

A ghost is just a memory made thick:
a chill in the air, a flicker in the night.
Ghosts are regrets that linger in silence,
a footstep half heard, movement just out of sight.

We live in a world of myriad ghosts,
of all those before us, all that have gone since;
the good and the bad, their lives forgotten,
the echo of footsteps, erased by the winds.

The dead all about us outnumber the living,
their voices unspeaking, their blood smoke in their veins.
Their loves and their hatreds, their passion still lingers,
their pride and their fury and their hope and their pain.

Their cries are not silent just because we don’t hear them,
the past never dies, is not gone, does not fade;
the crystalline amber of frozen eternity,
innumerable, invisible, intangible, unchanged.

So, say a prayer for those who surround you
invisible, immortal, immanent, unseen.
Light them a candle to hold back the darkness,
what is and what could be, what was and has been.
You think of them as fragile, maybe, newts, frogs, with their wide eyes and soft wet skin-- and they are, maybe, but one thing about amphibians: they estivate. When times are bad-- real bad: droughts, heat waves, volcanoes and ash clouds and ice ages-- they dig down beneath the mud dry out and wait and wait and wait.
Wait it out.

There are stories --yes, I know, just anecdotes-- of places in the Mojave where it hadn't rained in a hundred years and yet frogs come out of the ground like magic after that once-in-a-century rain.

That is how the frogs outlived the dinosaurs: when the long long winter came, and there was no forage, only acid rain, only pale traces of sunlight filtered through clouds of ash; they dug down, hid, waited.
The dinosaurs, kings of their world, died. The frogs, --those frail, fragile frogs-- survived.

So now, what should we think? Should we worry? Because the frogs are digging deep.
The Long Trajectory | Geoffrey A. Landis

Space is vast and dark
humans are small and fragile
ship is my cocoon

A thin steel bubble
speeding through the emptiness
keeps me warm and safe

Fans and motors hum
The noise, like air, comforts me
Outside is silence

Only one part fails
of ten million in the ship
They're all critical

Carbon dioxide
A natural part of air
CO2 is sleep

Systems all shut down
A quiet descends like night
Soon all will be still.

About the Author:
Geoffrey A. Landis last appeared in Sirens Call Publications eZine in August, 2019. His poetry has appeared in publications from ArtCrimes to Year’s Best Fantasy. He’s won the Hugo and Nebula awards for SF, and is author of the novel Mars Crossing and the collection Impact Parameter. In his spare time, he goes to fencing tournaments to stab perfect strangers with a sword. More information available at his website, geoffreylandlis.com.

Facebook: Geoffrey A. Landis
Amazon Author Page: Geoffrey A. Landis
ONE BAD FUR DAY

K. Trap Jones

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, iTunes, and Kobo
Hush, the shadows are speaking. Can you hear? Low and growlish as a Grizzly with a Cold. Listening when everything’s subdued, while I stiffly try to sleep — rigid as a body in a box awaiting the tomb — I think I can make out bits and pieces of grumbles, sullen murmurs. Resonant, appalling, plotting. Conniving to overthrow my neighbors and town. The grimmest elements; the fruitless seeds of unrest. Frightful how badly they want it, our demise. How much they envy us.

And what they will do if they act upon that ire! We have been lax, failing to brighten every inch of night with cheer, thwart their mischief or murderous schemes, prevent their phantom pining’s spread. Now it is too late, and the worst may come to pass. A window shatters, from no gust of air but a thrust of foul bleakness, an umbral stab. Rising, huddled alone in panic, I cling to words and frail glimmers of hope, illumination. Afraid my lamp will be next . . .

The bulb bursts. I discern a dismal-throated snarl — beside me — no, behind me! They surround. And then, a piercing broken cry at another house lining the street. Who was it? Who among my allies on this gloom-shrouded lane was the first to die? We are doomed I fear . . . done for. And not by human hands. By the Supernatural. Apprehensive, I lay pen and notebook down. I must see what is happening out there, to friends, acquaintances. We are one.

Differences shed. I once distrusted many. Now I sympathize. Another scream. Cut off. Trembling, I part drapes and peek, aware the brittle panes might splinter, riddle me with shards. I watch in horror as lights extinguish, snuffed in random order. The lane belongs to a quiet dismal atmosphere. I release curtains and retreat. Nearly blind, back to scribbling with only a wan moonsheen penetrating. At the mercy of a force that engulfs, invades.

I confess, I wasn’t prepared for this. No lock or bullet, no cash or Insurance Policy could spare us from disasters beyond reason — provide a decent shot at surviving till Sunrise. No option is left, aside from insanity or prayer, but to anticipate the darkest deeds. Already here they pause. Keening silence and suspense shall finish me if they don’t! May these words be legible. Yet what good is a warning come Nightfall . . .? We all join them soon.
The Beast Who Abides | Lori R. Lopez

An ancient napped in an overgrown cave
Invisible to the eye unless immensely riled
Feeding off the arrogance of hunter-brutes
Who lay in wait to ambush the mild

This guardian of the noble creature realm
Existed for a timeless eternal age
Through every form of pernicious calamity
An icon of Nature’s underliant rage

Abiding in a dormant state of solitude
Asleep for a breathless age of Kings
While battles fought for land and gold
Were the most important things

Till an awakening of Taliona should pass
Her crass silver orbs glare alert again
Unsheathed like swords, cold as steel
Impaling hearts of unkind men

On a feast of killers the appetite grew
So many to be had in a tangled wood
Traipsing half-loaded, trampling the wild —
Become the quarry to spare the good

For the beast had her own wicked sport
Yet offered more odds to survive
Than was granted to any of the prey
That they would callously deprive —

Of precious life, the chance to rear —
Everything dartlings held most dear
In a natural untainted atmosphere
Absent the terrors of man-made fear

Passive-Aggressive | Lori R. Lopez

I strolled by a doorway between thoughts
of where I was going, what I needed to do,
just at the point when a mood has begun to fade,
merging into another shape and form, another
feeling still undefined. In that moment of
vulnerable lapse, a curious sound wafted to ear,
slammed me in my tracks, drew me like the
string tethering a Yo-Yo. A bird? A peculiar
exotic creature? I was hooked.

Entering, the premises held a vibe unlike any
encountered — a threshold to mysterious otherances,
the bizarrest of unworldly items beyond compare,
offered up to the stray visitor as if any of it made sense but of course it did not, could not in a million trillion years of deepest contemplation! I had simply to wonder at the shelves that wondered at me back as if I were the oddball. Ridiculous, me in my thin drab coat and gray suit, the working-world attire shared endlessly from office to office in every tall building on each block of cities that paved the globe. Surely I represented all anybodies in a sea of slightly unique countenances.

A Sign addressed me, squawking in a raucous voice to behold a message, a bold invitation: SHOOT ME FOR A DOLLAR! “Shoot me?” I snorted. It must be a joke, some sort of prank, the placard tied round the neck of an ordinary Joe. A wide-eyed fellow wearing an inscrutable blank expression as if he didn’t have a care, not a single thing to worry about — certainly no threat of being shot with a Revolver conveniently resting on the table before him. Non-aggressively I sauntered past.

“What’s wrong, don’t you have a Dollar?” The Sign taunted me, so I turned to mutter that I did and extract a silver coin I would carry for luck. “Pick it up then. A Dollar for one shot.” I protested “I don’t wish to shoot someone!” Yet the coin (worth far more than face value) slipped from grasp, ringing. Wobbling an eternity until it settled. Tails up. My head hurt. My hand clutched the weapon, aimed it unsteadily, trembling. A digit jerked the trigger. A bullet blasted its course — straight through the heart. I gaped at a bloody shirt as bells chimed. The prize? I now find myself wearing the Sign, unable to scream or squirm. Impassive. Please, read my eyes. Do not raise the gun.

Mud Baby | Lori R. Lopez

The water of the lake mirrors an adjacent sky — and a bleakness of emotion, this numbness of soul that shrouds me as I drift in a Rowboat through a gulf of stillness. It’s too quiet.

Focus on the setting. The flat glazed surface. The fuzzy uncertain contours of trees, like one of those inkblots they ask you to define. I see only Death. Hear only silence.
When does it change from a tranquil scene of mesmerizing foliage? When did the first ripple emanate? Did a bird fly up? Did water lap the side? Was there a creak, a slight dip?

My brain grapples for connections, leaps at conclusions. What does it mean? I don’t know! It’s irritating. Upsetting. I must listen. And wait. Will there be any warning, a splash? A drop?

Something is in the lake. Nobody believed it. Just an old legend. I was making things up, the way I always did. Except it was true! I didn’t push my Little Brother . . .

It was no accident either. Cory was dragged. Snatched by pale clutches. They found him lifeless in the muck. Drowned. Sure, I admit, I was annoyed at him. I didn’t shove the kid!

Now I’m back — to prove my innocence. Using myself for bait. I don’t care about hunting ghosts, only clearing my name. And getting even. Killing the Mud Baby.

I’m older. Stronger. Try and grab me, you piece of slime! The memory tortures. Grief, guilt. A day until my Twelfth Birthday, Cory wanted a ride in Granddad’s boat. I was supposed to be watching him, but wound up staring at whatever yanked my younger sibling from his seat. Coated in algae and silt. Hair like pondweeds.

If it doesn’t go well, if the video endures, I want everyone to know — I loved him. More than I showed. Back when he was small I held him, wouldn’t put him down.

Was that a face? A flash of movement. The boat is rocking. It’s here. It’s causing turbulence. Show yourself. Come up! Quit hiding! Here I am, come and get me.

Oh man! Behind — Crawled out — Grotesque — I can’t — Too powerful — Strangled, choking — My knife fell in — Hope I’m getting this —

(A loud splash.)
The restless weary stalk this earth
in shadows of a black ocean tide.
Their steps will drag, carve tracks of rue,
trenches like the furrows upon faces
that have witnessed worse and brighter days.
Or the deadlight in someone’s eye
when hope has gone out like a candle,
the future a dimming flame,
tapering down to a burnt wick
afloat in wax. Regrets the burden of
limp shoulders, borne across a sea of dusten
ash; ponderous and un-redeemable
for credit, un-recyclable, un-exchangeable,
just terribly inexorably heavy.
A weight that must be carried to the tenebrous
grave and beyond — the place of origin
to which returns the mortal coil
from whence their lives, their seeds
and roots were sprung. Disappointed, spiritless,
dog-tired footprints leaving no trace,
invisible to the living ranks,
yet they trip through ruts and welter the
deep mire of tear-sodden toil, remains
of the dead passing before them . . .
unglimpsed until traversing that line —
entering the veil on the brink of Eternity.
That dark threshold some postpone
with earnest measures; by healthful caution,
exertion, a feast of plants. While others
play and teeter precarious at the steep verge
of a waiting abyss, laughing and toasting
Death. But it is the struggle for moral justice,
truth and dignity with selfless concern that
elevates, preserves, most heals the living,
thwarting the Reaper’s grasp — the cold
and lonely confines of a thankless forgotten
tomb. On the edge of Forever one can almost
touch angels. Or fall to the depths where
no glim of virtue, of hope will reach.

About the Author:
Lori R. Lopez is an offbeat author, illustrator, poet, songwriter, and wearer of hats, as well as an animal-and-monster-lover. Verse has appeared in Sirens Call Publications eZine, The Horror Zine, H.W.A. Poetry Showcases, Weirdbook, Spectral Realms, Space & Time Magazine, Oddball Magazine, Bewildering Stories, Altered Reality Magazine, California Screamin’ (the Foreword Poem) and more. Books include The Dark Mister Snark, Odds And Ends, Leery Lane, and Darkverse: The Shadow Hours. Lori has been nominated for the Elgin and Rhysling Awards.

Facebook: Lori R. Lopez
Twitter: @LoriRLopez
Featured Artist | Allison Smith

Being a Horror Artist

My first memory of being scared by something fictional was when I was still quite a child, a strange little five year old girl, reading Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark, and feeling...something...that my un-matured child’s brain was unable to identify. The illustrations in that book filled me with dread and fear, but I was unable to stop reading. Unable to look away. There was something attractive in those horrifying smears of ink and water. Something that drew me in. I bought all three books, hid them in my bookshelf, and didn’t realize that the experience that they had afforded me would stay with me forever, and greatly shape my development as an artist and as a person. From that day on, I consumed as much horror media as I possibly could (which got easier as I got older). At age 11 I started reading Stephen King, repulsed and fascinated, and I still remember being terrified watching The Thing and Invasion of the Body Snatchers as a pre-teen. But I couldn’t get enough. Most of my friends were watching Clueless while I was watching The Lost Boys, but I had a few friends who loved horror as much as I, and we gluttoned ourselves with terror. To this day, I consume a truly staggering amount of horror media. I watch horror movies, listen to horror podcasts (I highly recommend The Magnus Archives), read short horror fiction almost exclusively (my favorite type of horror media - I’ve been disturbed and scared by short horror stories far, far more than with horror movies or anything else.)

I attended college (art school), got a BFA in visual design and illustration, and went to work as an art director and UI designer, doing urban exploring photography as a hobby, wandering around abandoned asylums and factories photographing decay and the encroachment of nature until I was shooed out by security guards. I did plenty of art outside of my career, but I remained ignorant of dark/horror art outside the realm of book illustrations and tv shows like Hannibal. I wrote a few short horror stories.

Enter the pandemic, and lockdown. Now, I’m both a very extroverted person, and a neuroatypical, and my response to being isolated and suddenly jobless was to vault face first into mania, and it was sheer coincidence that I discovered horror art while looking at images of liminal spaces on Instagram (I’ve always been fascinated by the psychological aspects of horror, and the concept of liminal spaces is very appealing to me. I recommend researching this phenomenon if you’re equally inclined.) All of a sudden, I was flooded with art that dealt with the occult, the macabre, the disturbing, the gory, and the unsettling, and I’ve never had more of a lightbulb moment. I’m a digital artist, I’d describe my work more as digital collage than digital illustration, though in a sense it’s both. I had an idea. I had around 100 ideas. I opened Photoshop, pulled up my favorite free stock photography/creative commons sites, and the upshot is, I haven’t stopped creating horror art since. I don’t know where I’ve gotten all of my ideas from, though I draw heavily from dreams (I have almost exclusively nightmares), from mythology, from stories I’ve read, and real life events. For me, the beauty of horror is the fact that by giving an outlet to our darkest corners and most macabre thoughts in a safe, controlled way, it allows us to experience our fear instead of repressing it, and lifts those parts of ourselves that most find disturbing out of the darkness, to express them and expose them and deny them power over us. I’ve also always enjoyed it on an aesthetic level - dark art can be among the most beautiful and symbolic art I’ve seen. There is beauty in the strange, the terrifying, and the monsters of our subconscious. Beauty and horror are inextricably linked in my mind. Just like in those abandoned hospitals where age and decay left gorgeous textures and layers of subtle color on the environment, so horror art can be filled with sublime beauty that touches something in us that we usually keep hidden, but which yearns for connection and acknowledgement.

It’s an honor, for me, to have my work seen and enjoyed by others who have a similar reaction to the darker angels of our nature.

Many thanks, Allison Smith

Instagram: @duende_co
Artist Portfolio: Fox on the Run

Always open for collaborations and commissions!
The sun shined down on the six-year-old girl's face as she picked dandelions in the park. She looked over to see her mother and father unpacking their Sunday picnic.

“Sini, come over for lunch.” Her mother called.

“I want to pick flowers.” Sini whined.

She saw her father laugh and jog over, “You want to pick flowers. How about you stop, have lunch and I’ll take you over by the creek. There are some really pretty ones there.”

Sini watched her father speak to her as his head blocked the sun. She then saw the baseball bat come crashing down upon his head. Her father quickly dropped to his knees; blood ran down his forehead. She looked again and saw the assailant swing it again as blood splashed across her face. She started to cry as she looked over at her mom sprawled face down across the picnic lunch. She turned back and saw the bat swinging down toward her head.

***

“Bang!”

Sini opened her eyes to a darken room. Another bang comes from her door.

“Sini, are you awake. I don’t want you to be late for your first day of high school.”

“I’m up Uncle Rico! “she answered as she rose out of bed.

She walked over to her drapes as she pulled them open. It was cloudy and rainy, not a way to start her day. She showered and got dressed before she made her way to the kitchen where a tall, muscular Puerto Rican man was making French toast and bacon.

“Good morning,” Sini said as she kissed him upon his cheek.

“First day of high school, are you ready for what is ahead?” her uncle asked.

“I’m nervous, but I’ve been waiting a year.” Sini replied as she stole a piece of bacon from the pan.

“Eat up, we don’t want you to be late.” Uncle Rico said as he started to place the food on the dish.

Sini sat at the table and watched her uncle as he made his breakfast. He wasn’t her actual uncle, but her adoptive father’s partner. She was taken in by him a year ago and the memory was still very fresh.

***

15-year-old Sini is dancing around in her kitchen to Taylor Swift’s “Shake it off,” while putting red frosting on a tray of cupcakes. Her cell phone lit up as it was receiving a call. Seeing it was her best friend, Mazzie, Sini turned down the volume and answered,” Hola!”

“What is up Babe?” Mazzie replied.

“Oh, just frosting my “PHENOM” B-day cupcakes for tomorrow.” Sini replied as she licked the spatula.

“Are they low- fat glut-free?” Mazzie inquired.

“They’re ‘Birthday’ cupcakes, so you know the rules. Doesn’t matter what they are, you don’t gain a pound.” Sini replied with a giggle, “but seriously they are.”

A knock is heard from the apartment door, “Hey hold on a sec.” Sini told Mazzie as she put the phone next to the cupcakes and cautiously walked over to the door.

Sini peeked through the peep hole hoping it wasn’t her neighbors coming to complain about the music’s volume. Through the hole was Detective Marx better known to Sini as Uncle Rico.

“Uncle Rico!” Sini exclaimed as she opened the door, “My dad isn’t back yet from the store, but feel free to come in and have a cupcake.”

“Hey birthday girl.” Uncle Rico replied as he gave Sini a small hug before he stepped in.

Sini shut the door, walked back to the kitchenette and picked up her cell, “Hey Mazzie, my uncle just walked in can I let you go?” Sini listened to Mazzie’s answer, “Okay talk to you later.” Sini hung up and walked back in to join her uncle still standing by the doorway.

“Mazzie told me to tell you, What up Uncle Hottie.” Sini relayed as she noticed her uncle to be emotionally off.

“Sini, I need you to take a seat.” Uncle Rico said as he motioned to the couch.

Those words struck a nerve with Sini as she started to pace, “Why? What’s going on? Can’t this wait until my dad gets back?”

What smile Detective Marx was faking quickly disappeared and tears slowly rolled from his eyes and down his cheek,” Sini your dad isn’t coming home.”

“Fuck you!” Sini shouted,” That’s not even remotely funny!”

Her uncle walked toward her with his arms out, “Sini, your dad went to the movie theatre.”
“No, he didn’t. He’s at the grocery store picking up dinner.” Sini interrupted.

“Listen, he wanted to surprise you with that new Captain America movie tickets,” Detective Marx started to explain as he watched Sini’s body start to shake. Her uncle walked up to her and guided her to sit on the couch, “Witness’s said he was walking out of the theatre as a teenage boy approached him. The boy asked your father to purchase tickets for some ‘R’ rated horror flick. Your father, in attempt to scare him away, flashed his badge and told him to move on. The kid pulled a gun and shot your father. I’m so sorry, Sini,” her uncle concluded as he wrapped his arms around her tightly

***

Sini Nervosa entered Dean King High School for the first time and her nerves went away. She had been in six different schools in the last ten years due to being a foster kid. Her Uncle Rico had been her second stable home and she wanted it to work.

After an enjoyable first period of Chemistry, Sini entered her freshman history class as the teacher was reading off the morning attendance.

“Can I help you?” the teacher asked.

“Hi, I’m Sini, I just transferred here.” She replied handing a note to the teacher.

“Ah yes, Miss Nervosa please take an open desk.”

Sini looked at all the students as they glared at her. As she walked over toward the seats, Sini noticed an empty one in the back corner of the classroom. As she sat down, the guy next to her looked her up and down, then smiled, “Excuse me. I’m pretty sure that’s an assigned seat.” he said in a serious tone.

“And who’s seat is this then?” Sini asked in a fake flirty voice.

“Riley’s” The boy replied.

“Will it bother you if I sat here?” Sini leaned over and whispered.

“No, that chick is fine, but you are something different.”

“Alright class, Miss Nervosa if you kindly sit down, I’d like to start.” Mr. Carr instructed as he entered his classroom.

Sini sat next to the guy as she removed her sunglasses.

“I’m Jeffrey.” He whispered.

“Sini.”

***

The next few periods went by fast as the bell rang alerting Sini that it was time for lunch. Sini entered the large, overly-crowded lunch room. Long tables lined four rows in the center of the room, while smaller round tables circled the perimeter. To the left was line leading to the hot lunches. She quietly waited as the line seemed to go forever when she saw Jeffrey walk in with a couple other boys. He looked over and waved at her as he passed.

“You are out of his league.” a female voice said.

Sini turned to see a tall, red head dressed like she came out of a high fashion magazine, “Oh really?”

“His father is a congressman, he is loaded.” The girl relayed, “You just don’t look up to snuff.”

“I bet you’re Riley.” Sini said as she smiled.

“Why yes, how did you know?”

“Jeffrey mentioned you in history class. In fact, we had a nice chat.”

“I’m hoping all good things.” Riley nervously smiled.

“Of course, he said you were fine,” Sini stated, “Then he said I was something different.”

Riley’s smile faded, “That’s just a polite way to say you’re plain.”

Sini leaned in close to her, “Do you usually sit at his table?”

“Yes.”

“Not anymore.” Sini gently brushed her to the side as she left the lunch line and headed over toward Jeffrey’s table. She walked past a boy who had just pulled out a banana.

“Are you going to eat that?” Sini asked as she gently rubbed his shoulder.

“No..nope.you can have it.” The boy replied.

Sini took the banana and continued toward the table. Jefferey sat in the middle seat, three other boys sat on the other side. There was an empty seat next to him.

Sini watched closely as one of the boys got up, Sini hustled over and took his seat, and stared directly at Jeffrey.

“Sini, hi.” Jeffrey said surprised by her sitting down.

“How am I different?”

“Excuse me?”
“How am I different? Am I just a new girl you want to have sex with in the bathroom? Or am I different as original, I make you want to know me more?”

Jeffrey blushed, “To be honest. A little of both.”

“And how do you feel about Riley?” Sini asked.

“Oh, she’s just a piece of ass that’s only good when she’s on her knee’s.” Jeffrey laughed.

“You asshole!” Riley screamed as he looked over to see her standing next to him.

“Riley, sweetie, I’m joking.” Jeffrey exclaimed.

“Fuck you.” Riley said as she dumped her lunch into his lap.

Everyone pointed and laughed as Jeffrey stood up and ran out of the lunch room.

Sini stood up and held out the banana, “Here. From what I just heard, you’ll enjoy this.”

Riley took it from her and flung it across the room while Sini walked out.

As she entered the school hallway, Sini caught Jeffrey entering the men’s restroom. Sini hiked her skirt up and tied up her shirt in front. She then slowly walked up to the men’s room door, made sure no one was watching, and slid her way through. The smell of urine and Pine cleaner burned her nostril hairs as it immediately wrinkled up. The fluorescent lights overhead gave the room a dreary yellow tint and the walls were covered with meaningless drabble of who’s a whore and who’s got the small penis. She spotted Jeffrey alone, pant less as attempted to wash them off in the sink.

Jeffrey turned his head toward her direction and said, “Are you lost or did you come to make me look like the biggest asshole some more.”

Sini smiled as she sauntered toward him. “Oh, come on. Do you really feel bad about hurting what little feelings Riley has?”

Jeffrey shook his head, “No not really.”

Sini watched his hair fall into his face and smiled.

“Well are you going to just stare at me? Or are we going to party?” Jeffrey asked.

“Oh my! You really do want a little of both. Why don’t we go into the stall for a little more privacy?”

“Your wish is my command.” Jeffrey excitedly responded as he left his pants in the sink and shuffled over to the nearest stall and took a seat on the toilet.

Sini walked in behind him playfully sucking on her index finger, while locking the door. She started to seductively sway her hips in front of him, which caused Jeffrey to breathe heavily. Sini then hiked up her skirt and straddled his legs.

“So, are you a bad boy?” Sini seductively whispered it his ear.

“Yes.” he moaned back.

“Prove it to me. How are you a bad boy? Tell me the worst thing you ever did and I will reward you.” Sini continued in the seductive voice while her hips grinded upon his lap.

“I killed a cop.” Jeffrey blurted out followed by a little chuckle.

Sini stood straight up with a blank expression on her face and asked, “How is that funny?”

“It’s funny because I got away with it. My old man payed off the judge and witness’s” Jeffrey boasted.

Sini quickly drew a knife from behind her and planted it tightly to his neck. “I see and is this funny?”

“No.” Jeffrey quickly replied as he started to sweat.

“Would I be as bad as you if I drove this knife through your neck?” Sini asked teasing him with the knife blade.

“Please. I don’t know what I did, but I’m sorry. You don’t have to kill me.” Jeffrey pleaded as he began to soil himself.

“No. You deserve to die an unmerciful death. That man saved a little girl and gave her a home. You took that away.” Sini whispered in his ear.

“I am at your mercy. I will make amends for whatever I did. Please just let me go.” Jeffrey continued to plead.

Sini pulled the knife away from his throat.

Jeffrey let out a deep breath of relief as he looked down at the mess he made in his pants, “Wow! You are a tough bit.” Jeffrey’s words quickly stopped as Sini jabbed the knife through his throat slicing the carotid artery. Blood sprayed across Sini’s face and clothes. She watched as he gasped for air like a goldfish out of its bowl. The color drained out of his face as quickly as the blood poured from his body.

“It was my birthday and the only thing I got was tears and sorrow. I sat in that court house the day you were proclaimed innocent. Burn in Hell.” Sini said directly to his dying eyes.

Sini schemed and planned this for a whole year. She felt vindicated as she was stood in front of a boy she killed, covered
in his blood, in a stall of the high school restroom. She was trapped, she had no escape plan, yet she felt justified, yet if she was caught, she would receive no justice.

Sini took a deep breath, closed her eyes and focused. First, after wiping the knife clean, Sini put the knife in Jeffrey’s cold hand. Sini laid on her back, and scooted her body under the stall door, leaving it locked from the inside. As she stood back up without touching anything, Sini notice a small window. Quickly, she used her foot to push over a garbage can followed by wrapping brown paper towels around her hands. Sini then stood on the garbage can opened the window and crawled through to the back of the school. The wind was cold as she tucked the paper towels in her bra, she looked around and saw nobody. Sini sprinted off making sure not to look back. Sini ran all the way home.

***

As she entered through the kitchen entrance her Uncle Rico was sitting at the island eating cereal.

“Aren’t you suppose to be in school?” He asked.

“Didn’t you hear? A student killed himself. School is cancelled.” Sini replied.

“Actually, my detective friend did just call to let me know that. They are confused by the fact his pants were off.” Rico replied as he put his bowl in the sink.

“So, it is a suicide?” Sini asked.

“Yes. You’re lucky there are cops that loved your father. Go finish packing, so we can start our new life.”

“Thank you, Uncle Rico.” Sini hugged him and ran off to pack.

Sini started to pack as she thought how easy it was to kill somebody and if she would be able to do it again. She grinned.

About the Author:
Marcus Cook lives in Cleveland, Ohio with his inspirational wife and cat. He loves to read and write science fiction and thrillers. He is inspired by Dean Koontz, Kevin Smith and Elmore Leonard. For other stories written by Marcus follow him on Facebook.

Author Website: Marcus Cook and the Art of the Short Story
Facebook: Read Marcus Cook

The Island | Brian Rosenberger

It was known by many names – Sanctuary, The Refuge, Outland, Purgatory. All pirates knew, regardless of the name, the island was a place they could call home however fleeting. Extended stays were frowned on by the island’s management and frequently led to unexpected death. Poison their preference.

The island was a place pirates could restock – food, crew, weapons. Above all, they could rest, recoup, and rejuvenate. Pick your vice. The bars opened at the first rooster’s crow and never closed.

They waited.
Sooner or later, the pirates would return to the sea. Too drunk to notice their approaching dorsal fins.

About the Author:
Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of As the Worm Turns and three poetry collections - Poems That Go Splat, And For My Next Trick..., and Scream for Me.

Facebook: Brian Who Suffers
Instagram: @brianwhosuffers
18 Women of Horror, 18 female creatures... Need we say more?

UNDER HER BLACK WINGS

2020 WOMEN OF HORROR ANTHOLOGY

Available on Amazon
In the spring of 1753, Ezekiel joined the New York militia for the pay. While his farm provided for himself and his family, one bad harvest would ruin them. The next year, tensions between the colonies of England and France exploded into open warfare. As fighting spread along the frontier, Ezekiel was told to report to Fort Schenectady. He slung his musket and kissed Sarah, his wife, goodbye. He hugged his daughters and said with belief, “Don’t worry. God will watch over you while father is fighting the papists and their heathens.”

What he saw in the year since leaving his home shook his faith. Patrols ambushed and the dead mutilated. Farms burned to the ground with no quarter given to women or children. An elusive enemy who seemed to be everywhere. Each day, his thoughts turned to his family. He prayed they would be safe until his term of service was over.

Ezekiel wasn’t sure of that. Finding raiding parties in the forests, valleys and mountains of the Adirondacks would be difficult.

“Each detachment will have one of our loyal Mohawk scouts attached to it,” he motioned towards the Mohawks, “Old John, tell the men what you found.”

Old John—the only name Ezekiel knew for the man—stepped forward. He was tall and wiry. He was dressed in buckskins and a royal blue French officer’s coat. The sharp lines of his narrow face and cold black eyes made Ezekiel feel uneasy. They reminded him of the hawk that had carried away his daughter’s rabbit last spring.

“The French are clever.” His voice was strong and deep. “They move through the trees like water over rocks. But they are not Mohawk. I have seen their trail, not three days from here. If we are swift, we can catch them and put them to the knife.”

The patrol came across a small farmstead in the woods. It was one of the family settlements that dotted the forests, a home hacked out of the wilderness. The cabin reminded Ezekiel of his own with log walls, a shake roof and a small pen for pigs and goats. It was simple, but Ezekiel saw that it was a home made with pride. After a week of marching through the seemingly endless forest, Ezekiel was happy for this reminder of home.

The owner was lying on his stomach in front of the open door. A deep gouge split the skull and exposed the brain. A cloud of flies surging blackly around the corpse. Ezekiel was paralyzed by the gruesome sight.

Sergeant Thorne—an old soldier who alternated between saying, “This is my last war” and “Can’t wait to get me to Philadelphia...they got the best whores there”—came out of the cabin. His face was hard, the ruddy skin tight on the skull. Ezekiel had never seen him shaken like this.

“Don’t go in there. The French had their way with the girls before they killed them”, he shook his head.

Ezekiel pictured his own wife and daughters standing in front of the cabin, waving goodbye. He imagined them dead, covered in a heaving blanket of flies, the insect hum a piercing reproach.

Ezekiel looked back at the corpse. Flies crawled along the ragged edge of the wound, burrowing into the soft tissue, black flecks feasting on congealed blood. He had an urge to brush them away, but knew it was pointless.

“We should go,” Old John said to no one in particular. “We can do no good here.”

The men passed through tree-choked valleys and over rocky hills. The hunter’s trails faded. The forest they travelled through was devoid of animal life. They carried few rations with them and those were soon exhausted. The men grumbled as their hunger grew.

The woods became darker. Many trees had a peculiar blight, a dull orange growth that looked like no fungus Ezekiel had seen. It smelled of rotting meat and gave off a sickly phosphorescence. At night, the skies were always overcast. With no moon or stars, the only natural light came from the fungus, which did nothing to dispel the darkness. Ezekiel thought the putrid glow made things worse, distorting the shadowy trees.

One night, Old John stood on a fungus covered stump. “Brothers, I know you are hungry. I too feel the gnawing in my stomach. But we are close. The French will have food. And after we put them to the knife, we will feast.”

Ezekiel’s belly twisted at the thought of food. He wanted to be alone to pray. He walked away from the camp. He picked his way over the uneven ground, made more treacherous by the distorting shadows the fungal glow created. When he
sat down, he found the ground was wet, covered in a membranous layer of decaying plants and patches of the orange fungus. He closed his eyes and prayed. He quietly recited Psalm 23. He hoped God walked with him.

He heard the crack of a branch and opened his eyes. A figure was among the trees, silhouetted by the glow. For a moment, he thought it was Sarah. Her face was shrouded in shadows except for her eyes. They glowed in the orange light.

“You should not be out here,” his wife said. Only the voice was Old John’s. Ezekiel rubbed his eyes. The lean figure was now the tall Mohawk.

“I needed to pray,” Ezekiel said.

Old John squatted next to Ezekiel. “Not a good place for that. Not a good place for anything. These woods are home to many things. Things no man should see. Come back to the fire. It is safer there.”

Ezekiel snorted. “Heathen superstition,” he said, although the quiver in his voice betrayed growing unease.

For a moment, Old John stared at him, his dark eyes reflecting the orange glow. Then he nodded. “Yes, heathen superstition. Still, safer by the fire. Come with me.” He straightened up.

Ezekiel didn’t want to show his fear. He also didn’t want to be left behind. “You’re right. There could be French scouts out here.” He struggled to his feet, feeling light headed from hunger. He reached out to a nearby tree for support. His fingers sank into the fungus. It was wet and warm, like the viscera he scooped out of slaughtered pigs. He jerked his hand away and began to fall.

Old John took hold of his shoulder and steadied him. He reached into a pouch on his belt and pulled out something dark and gnarled. “Here. For strength.”

Ezekiel held out his hand. Old John dropped a piece of jerky in his quivering palm. He carefully placed it in his mouth. The meat tasted rancid. Even with his empty stomach, it took an act of will to resist spitting it out. He chewed, swallowed and felt a little better.

“Thank you.”

Old John turned and headed towards the camp. Ezekiel hesitated. He didn’t know why Old John helped him. He hadn’t said more than a few words to the taciturn Mohawk.

“How can I repay you?” Ezekiel said, not wanting to be in the Indian’s debt.

Old John smiled. His thin lips pulled back, revealing even, white teeth. “You will find a way.”

***

After a few more days, the men grew frantic. There were a few fist fights and Sergeant Thorne had to threaten to shoot two men who had drawn knives. The Captain argued with Old John, not bothering to hide his anger.

“You’ve led us down one useless track after another. We can’t be far from Lake Ontario. Tomorrow, we’re heading north. Once we’re at the lake, we’ll make our way to Oswego.”

Old John shook his head. “Great Captain, I told you I would take you to the French. I have not lied.” He fixed the Captain with his dull black eyes. The Captain stared a moment, then looked away. “They are near. Tonight, we attack.”

Although some of the men - anticipating seizing the French supplies - wanted to attack immediately, the Captain was able to restrain them. “Old John is right. We’re all hungry and tired. If the French are fresh, fighting during the day will just lead us to be slaughtered.”

Ezekiel chewed on a bit of leather he had cut from his breeches and nodded. In his mind, the battle was over, the French dead, their larder laid out before him. His mouth watered as he thought of the food he would eat. His head throbbed at the remembered flavors and textures.

_Tonight_, he thought, chewing. _Tonight_.

***

It was dark. The men were spread out through the woods in a rough line. The plan was simple. Old John said the French were in a clearing between two hills. The militiamen would form along the treeline and charge. In the darkness, among the dense tangle of trees, there wasn’t much else they could do.

Ezekiel could smell cooking meat, the odor of frying fat and crisping skin. He thought of the food he would eat when the fighting was done. He closed his eyes so hard that the darkness sparkled.

“Charge,” the captain yelled.

Ezekiel’s eyes snapped open and he ran forward. His body burned from hunger, fatigue and adrenaline. He burst through a tangle of branches at the edge of the clearing, ready to shoot.

There was a bonfire in the middle of the clearing, but no camp. Just scattered bodies and the remnants of French uniforms. The French soldiers were naked. Some were flayed, others dismembered. The scent of cooking meat came from the trunk of a man skewered and roasting over the flames. A stack of bones gleamed wetly in the light. Ezekiel dropped to his knees.
He saw figures emerge from the opposite treeline. They were human-shaped but clearly not human. The heads were elongated to better accommodate a broad mouth, filled with yellow fangs. The eyes were sunken, the cheeks and brows protruding. The bodies were the wrong proportions with limbs too long for the torso. The hands were too big and the fingers ended in talons. As they came closer to the fire, he saw that their skin was gray, like slate.

There was a shot. One of the militiamen had fired, the lead ball striking an advancing creature. It grunted, but was otherwise unaffected. The man who fired the shot was struck from behind with a hatchet, thrown by Old John. He flopped forward, head split open, body jerking.

Old John raised his hands in greetings. “Brothers. I bring you Englishmen for the feast.”

Old John looked down at Ezekiel. His features began to shift, his face becoming his true face, his body his true body. He stripped off the blue French coat and his buckskin pants. The glade was filled with the sound of cracking bones and tearing muscle. The screams of men dying. The guttural tongue of the gray creatures.

Ezekiel felt a surge of energy that pushed away his hunger and fatigue. He scrambled to his feet, leaving his useless musket on the ground. He ran into the woods, pursued by the howls of his fellow militiamen being torn apart by the creatures. He didn’t get far. The burst of energy propelled him a few hundred yards before his legs gave out. He slumped against a tree. As the screams reached his ears, he pressed his face into the orange fungus. It felt wet and warm. The rotting meat smell filled his nostrils. He gagged, but didn’t have the strength to pull away from the tree.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up. Sarah was standing behind him. Her round face was calm. She smiled, the slight curl of lips he longed to see. “This world is a dream from which you will soon awake.” Ezekiel didn’t understand why his wife had Old John’s deep voice. He didn’t care. He felt safe. “Come with me to the feast.”

Old John released Ezekiel’s shoulder and waited. He knew the man was seeing a person who was not here.

Ezekiel pulled himself up, using the tree for support. He looked into his wife’s eyes. They were not the blue he remembered; they were black, like Old John’s. “Sarah, I missed you.”

Old John looked coldly at Ezekiel like a butcher appraising a fat hog. “I missed you as well.” He cupped Ezekiel’s cheek, the taloned fingers wrapping around the back of his head. “Come. Food awaits.”

Ezekiel felt his fear fade at his wife’s gentle touch. He followed her through the woods to the clearing.

The militiamen were dead or dying. Some were butchered, limbs stacked next to open, steaming torsos. Others were staked down, sharpened femurs through hands and feet, pinning their bodies to the earth. Sergeant Thorne was suspended over the fire, tied to a pole. He screamed, a raw and ragged sound, as his skin blackened.

“Soon, this will be over,” Old John said.

Ezekiel’s mind was far from this clearing, the screams of his friends and the shambling gray things. He was standing on the dirt track that led to his home. His wife was standing in the door of his cabin, waving. His daughters ran to him, laughing. He smiled as they took his hands.

Two of the gray things guided him to the fire. They stripped him, exposing his emaciated body. A grease of human fat was rubbed over his dirt-crusted skin. His smile faded when they laid him face down next to the fire. He wondered why his girls now made a sound like Thorne’s final agonizing gasps.

Sharpened femurs pierced Ezekiel’s wrists and calves, pinning him to the ground. Old John knelt next to the spread eagle man. He was holding a knife of sharpened bone. He used it to cut strips of flesh and muscle from Ezekiel’s back. He hung them from a wooden smoking rack next to the fire.

Ezekiel’s family faded as the pain grew. The last image was of his wife. Her lips pulled back, exposing jagged yellow fangs. Her eyes were black and dead. Ezekiel screamed from both the agony and the grotesque final image of his wife. The orange fungus on the trees shivered. The grey things howled with pleasure.

Old John smiled. “Soon,” he said, the last words Ezekiel heard, “you will fill my pouch.”

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

Author Website: J Durkin Productions
Twitter: @jeffreydurkin4
The following is a transcript of the last video recorded by the case file subject.

Missing Persons File #4927AV38

Subject: Hollings, Marshall J.
Date recorded: Tuesday, September 28, 2021
Subject status: unknown
Subject location: unknown

-- File Note: Video begins, subject speaks directly to the camera:
I, uh...I'm recording this for anyone who might find it...don't know where I am. The last thing I remember is...um...being in my car on Thursday night...that was...um...the 23rd. Maybe 10:30 PM. I think I was driving home from...fuck. I don't remember where.
The clock on my phone says it's the following Tuesday at 8:22 PM, but I...um...I don't know where the last five days went.
I don't know where my car is. I'm in...here, let me flip my camera.

-- File Note: The camera flips, showing subject's surroundings:
I'm somewhere in the woods. Look right there, you can see a clearing. It looks like something burned this clear spot out of the woods. Fuck...look at this. You can see it almost looks like a perfect circle. The trees at the edge are damaged...burned from the ground, up to maybe 40 or 50 feet.

-- File Note: Footsteps are heard for approximately 2.7 seconds:
Look at this. No damage on the other side.

-- File Note: Camera shakes a bit then shows clean side of tree:
Look. Here, let me show the whole clearing...

-- File Note: Camera pans right to left, showing the entire clearing - subsequent investigation determines that the clearing is 97 feet in diameter, and is a perfect circular shape:
Um...let me go across to the other side...

-- File Note: Footsteps for 1.3 seconds:
What the fuck? My...uh...my leg hurts all of a sudden.

-- File Note: Camera shows subject lifting left pant leg. Large bruise on outside of calf:
Where'd that come from? Jesus that hurts. Look, here's another one on the back of my hand.

-- File Note: Camera shows similar bruise, smaller, on the back of subject's right hand. Two tiny puncture wounds are bleeding slightly:
I need to figure out where the hell I am. I'll see if GPS helps, then I'll start up this video again in a few min...the fuck is that sound?

-- File Notes: A distant hum can be heard. Audio analysis suggests a distance of 900 feet or more. Sounds becomes progressively louder, suggesting rapid acceleration toward subject.
-- At this point in the video, subject begins running, and drops phone. Camera on phone continues recording, but phone is face down, where it is later found by investigators. Audio only from here on.
-- Sound volume increases exponentially, and at this point, loud static can be heard for approximately 2.9 seconds.
-- 11.3 seconds later, subject can be heard screaming, then a loud sound similar to rushing air is heard, for approximately 4.3 seconds.
At this point, complete silence for approximately 22.5 seconds, then the natural sounds of the location begin to be heard.

The video ends 1 hour, 47 minutes, and 37.1 seconds after it began. No other unidentified sounds are heard for the remainder of the video.

File Status: Case remains open.

About the Author:
Pete FourWinds is a photographer based in the mountains of northern Central Maryland. Although not a full time author, his writing career began in earnest in 2018, when he finally sat down to write a since-published memoir about his recovery from his daughter's death 12 years earlier. He's currently working on his second book about a solo motorcycle trip he took in 1997. He co-admins an extremely active writer-centric group on Facebook, and can be found online.

Author Website: www.petefourwinds.com
Facebook: Writers, Readers and General Tomfoolery

Filling in a Hole | Radar DeBoard

Janet stopped to wipe some of the sweat off of her forehead. She gazed up at the sun overhead and felt its powerful rays beat down on her. Janet took in a deep breath before scooping up another shovelful of dirt and dumping it into the hole. She knew there was still plenty of work left to be done. The hole would have to be filled in before her husband got home in a few hours. Janet paused for a moment to check on her progress and groaned at how little she had made.

“Stop squirming,” she shouted at her neighbor who was tied and gagged in the hole. She shook her head, “Every time you wriggle around, you take off some of the dirt I’m dropping on you.”

Janet watched as her neighbor continued to desperately squirm to get free of the bonds. She simply shook her head and threw another shovelful of dirt down the hole. After a few minutes of continues work, she checked on her progress again. A good portion of dirt had actually managed to stay on top of her intended target.

Janet couldn’t help but smile as she threw more dirt into the hole.

“This is what you get for laughing at my petunias,” she muttered to herself as she continued to bury her neighbor. She thought about what she should plant on top of the dead body when she was done. Janet decided that petunias would look nice and hold a good sense of irony.

About the Author:
Radar DeBoard is a horror movie and novel enthusiast who resides in Wichita, Kansas. He occasionally dabbles in writing and enjoys making dark and exciting tales for people to enjoy. He has had drabbles and short stories published in various electronic magazines and anthologies.

Facebook: Writer Radar DeBoard
The Testimony of
HJ Pembroke

BRENT ABELL

AVAILABLE TO PURCHASE OR BORROW ON AMAZON
“Are you going to kill me?”
“Kill you? No. You’re not so fortunate,” came a soft voice from the shadows.
“Then what do you want from me?”
“Your blood...”
“So, what? This is all some kind of vampire ritual or something?”
“Ah yes. ‘Vampires’. That romantic image of ageless creatures drinking the blood of beautiful maidens with razor sharp fangs. Fools. They were right about the fangs at least,” said the voice again.
“I don’t believe in vampires, you’re just some sick individual. You’ve murdered eight people. You may have convinced the locals, but not me.”
“Detective Sergeant Jane Marshal. You’re an educated young lady, so your scepticism is understandable. But are vampires really so hard to believe in? They exist in nature already. Leeches, mosquitoes, fleas, ticks, and yes, vampire bats. Is it so hard to imagine, so hard to believe that evolution has not already gifted mankind with such traits? Humans are parasites. Taking comes far more naturally than giving. Humans being preyed upon is the natural evolutionary next step. Is it really so hard to believe that nature has not already taken such a genetic leap?”
“You really believe all this, don’t you?” answered Jane, shaking her head in disgust. She looked around the small, dimly lit room she had been imprisoned in. Her ankle still ached from the fall.
“And what do you believe in, Detective?” asked the voice.
“That I’m going to bring you in. That I’ll be able to provide some peace to the families you’ve destroyed. Jimmy Naylor was eleven years old... Eleven!”
“Ah, yes. So pure and full of promise. Not yet corrupted by the so-called standards of society that you all adhere to so stringently.”
“You’re sick,” she said.
“Tell me, Detective Sergeant. When you were eleven years old, what were you concerned with?” Jane said nothing and just stared at the man’s silhouette in the corner of the darkened room. “Was it butterflies, by any chance?”
“How...?” said Jane, slowly.
“You and your best friend used to draw them all the time, always with the brightest colours and amazing patterns. The best ones were stuck on the fridge with little magnetic letters...”
Jane’s eyes widened with fear. *How could he possibly know all this?*
“Butterflies. So many metaphors and meanings. Each time you started a new picture, did you see the wings you coloured in as a literal fresh start? Were you cocooning yourself away from your parents’ constant arguing downstairs? Did you wish that you too could just spread your wings and fly away?”
Jane didn’t answer and fought back her tears. She couldn’t show any weakness.
“You know, some would believe that it was butterflies that brought you here,” said the voice.
“I can assure you that it was police work that brought me here. Eight years I’ve hunted you. One victim every year. Always in the winter months. You’re predictable,” said Jane.
“Yes, the winter months. When the darkness is longer,” he said, almost wistfully. “But no. I brought you here, inadvertently.”
“You brought me here? Who are you?”
“I am all the important figures in your life. I once owned your parents’ house and planted the buddleia in the garden, kindling your love of butterflies. I was there again to take away your best friend, igniting your desire to join the police force. I was always there. Flapping my wings just above your head, and just out of reach. The literal butterfly effect, demonstrated right there before you, and in a truly beautiful and poetic fashion.”
Jane’s best friend, Anna, had committed suicide when they were at college together. It had been unexpected and completely out of character, but everyone accepted it. Everyone except Jane.
“Impossible,” said Jane sternly. “You’re lying.”
“Yes... I guess that’s one explanation. But come now, I know you had your own suspicions about Anna’s death. You carried it for years and no one would listen to you.”
“Shut up...”
“Do you still wear your wristband?”
Jane instinctively reached for the worn, rainbow striped fabric, adorned with butterflies, around her wrist. She and Anna had identical wristbands and felt her jaw tighten at the continued accuracy he demonstrated with these details. She was starting to believe the unbelievable. ‘Think!’
“Why are you going to such lengths to try and convince me you’re anything other than a delusional narcissist with a fixation on vampires! Is this how you want history to remember you? To be featured in books and documentaries alongside all the famous serial killers?”

“I can see you require a little more convincing, Detective Sergeant.”

“Is that why I’m here? To be convinced of your sick charade?” she pressed.

“No entirely. I want to know how you found me.” The voice was strangely soothing but contained something sinister hidden within.

“So you can evade capture next time? If I share that, then I’m dead.”

“It doesn’t have to be so black and white.”

“Go on then, get your story over with,” said Jane.

“Ladies first, I insist.”

“Alright. I was a fresh-faced WPC, a woman police constable, when on a cold, late October night, I attended the scene of a man hanging from Newport Arch. Mark Foster. I noted that there was a lot of blood for a hanging, however, and the coroner’s report confirmed an incision in his neck. The verdict of suicide was passed due to the rope containing traces of glass, and the case was closed.

“Three years later, little Jimmy Naylor went missing. He went out trick or treating, and never came home. For three weeks, people searched West Common. Every inch, every blade of grass was turned over... until he turned up by the banks of the Foss dyke. He was barely recognisable after the foxes had taken their share, but I recognised the same musky smell about his body which I hadn’t smelt since seeing Mark Foster.

“I looked back through the years and saw another four victims with suspicious incisions, seemingly dying of natural causes. But it was Lena Motyl last year that gave me my best lead.”

“Do go on.”

“Witnesses reported seeing her blood-soaked, black and white dress flowing as she ran through the side streets. Believing the whispered rumours about you, she had run for the place she thought would be safest: consecrated ground, and what grander place to go to than the Cathedral, where she was found?”

“I know! Laughable wasn’t it?”

“She escaped from you, didn’t she? She nearly made it, too,” said Jane, more confidently.

“She showed remarkable resilience. I was surprised.”

“You were sloppy. Embedded in the soles of her shoes we found a fine grit. After almost a year of searching, I finally found a match. This address,” she said.

There was silence, Jane could almost hear the thinking within his head. She looked harder but could see nothing but a dark silhouette.

“I don’t normally bring them back here, but I simply had to have her. A quick and easy, ‘Mark Foster’, simply wouldn’t have done at all. She was different... she was special.”

“What was so special about Lena?” asked Jane.

“Her aura. It glowed. Much like yours does to me now, for even in this darkness I can see you as clear as day. I see your thoughts, your hopes and dreams... your innermost desires and needs. It’s all there.” Jane suddenly felt very vulnerable and exposed. “Yes... some people, it’s barely visible, a dull glow at best and will certainly not slake the ravenous hunger that lies deep within me. But you, and Lena... Like great wings of many colours you appear now to me. How it shines! If only you could see it, Detective Sergeant! You would see an unimaginable beauty that transcends the physical and mortal plain.

“All these years, I’ve watched it grow, as you have grown. Each year it burns brighter. I can’t deny that I have often thought about feasting upon that light, but something restrains me. And each year it calls more and more strongly to me...”

Jane noticed a hand reach out slowly from the shadows. Pale searching fingers were splayed wide and, suddenly, pulled back into the darkness once more. “It’s becoming harder and harder to resist you,” said the voice, with a sharp intake of breath.

“I’ve had enough of your bullshit. John Root, I am arresting you on suspicion of the murders of—”

“Bravo!” he interrupted, while clapping slowly. “But... you can barely stand, Detective Sergeant. Ten out of ten for effort though! Tell me. Why did you come alone? Don’t you always travel in pairs?”

“You don’t frighten me,” retorted Jane.

“No? Despite the crimes you know I have committed, despite that niggling fear that you could be wrong about me, you still decided to come here alone to apprehend me? You’re either very brave, or incredibly foolish.”

Jane knew he was right. Her desire to prove to her DCI, Detective Chief Inspector, that these apparently accidental deaths and suicides were the work of a serial killer had already cost her a promotion. Always at the same time of year, always at night. There was a growing fear in the community, too, and she felt like she was the only one doing anything about it.

Every night, she went out to collect stones from driveways all over the city. She had widened her search radius three times. Each time, her admiration for Lena’s desire to survive increased.
Then, the lab had called to say sample JM57 was a 99.5% match to samples recovered from the soles of Lena Motyl’s size 6 trainers. Jane, with adrenaline pumping, had left immediately for the address and had only intended to survey the property, but something deep within her soul called to her, telling her to go in.

“Let me guess. Did you want to take all the glory yourself? Be the one to bring me in and finally convince DCI Tranter that you haven’t lost your marbles? Perhaps feature in those same books and documentaries you mentioned?”

“I will bring you in,” said Jane, defiantly.

“Sadly, no. Let me offer another explanation. You were drawn inside, by me. You were meant to be here, just as I was meant to be here.”

“What stops you?”

“That is what perplexes me. I know that by tasting you, all the answers will be revealed, but something stops me. Every. Single. Time.”

“Something unexplainable deep within my soul. I have long felt a connection between us. As soon as you were born, I felt it.”

“You really believe this shit, don’t you? You’re nothing more than a pervert, a stalker and a murderer! You’re ill, John!” she said, attempting to stand. The pain coursed through her leg, intensified in her ankle until she could take it no longer, and she fell back to the floor.

“I wouldn’t if I were you. That looks nasty. Just like when you cut your knee falling off your bike when you were four. You injured the same knee falling over drunk, outside a nightclub, when you were seventeen. Do you still have the scar?”

Jane’s eyes widened at the accuracy with which he recalled these details and again, doubt entered her mind about what she was dealing with here, and who exactly she was speaking to.

“Are you ready to believe? Or should I go on with more minor details from your life, JJ?” he said menacingly.

Fear and disbelief washed over her face. JJ had been the nickname her first boyfriend used. He had been the only one to ever call her that. How does he know all this?

“What... what do you want from me?”

“To understand! Both myself and why I feel such a strong connection to you. I can peer into anyone’s life I choose. Indeed, inside my head are the memories of all my countless victims. But no one, living or dead, is inside my head as much as you are. I flapped my wings, and here you are.”

“Countless victims? You mean there’s more?”

“Of course, but there will be no more here at least. Take heart, Detective Sergeant. Thanks to you, the city can breathe easier. I’m now forced to move on and re-invent myself, lest I do something I regret,” he said, almost with sadness. “I guess all our questions will have to wait, but they’ll be answered, in the end.”

“No, wait!” Jane’s head was spinning, her logical mind struggling to understand it all.

“It’s getting harder to resist the urge. But I’m trying... for your sake, and... perhaps mine. Goodbye, Detective Sergeant.”

Jane suddenly perceived that she was alone in the room and was furious. She felt like she had been cheated.

“I’ll find you! No matter where you go! I’ll hunt you and find you! I will get justice for the people you’ve killed!” she screamed.

Her mind was still spinning as her eyes fixed upon something glinting in the corner of the room. Crawling over, she grabbed it and was speechless when she realised what she now held— Anna’s butterfly wristband.

“I’ll be waiting...” came the voice from behind her. Jane turned around, but there was nothing and no one there.

About the Author:
Lee Greenaway has always shown a passion for SFF and Horror with his many illustrations of far off, futuristic worlds and hideous creatures of the night. Channeling that creativity into the written word, he can now truly lift those creatures from the page and breathe life into them like never before. Lee lives in the historic city of Lincoln with his wife and son.

Author Website: Lee G. Greenway
Twitter: @leegwrites
“Where did you serve?” the young man asked. His words echoed in the arch beneath the bridge. Jed avoided his eyes and stared into the burn barrel before him. A breeze, colder than the breath of death, swept through his ragged clothing. He shivered as he drew close to the dying fire.

“Served in ‘Nam,” he said.
“I thought so. You’ve got the long stare. I was in Iraq. Two tours.”
Jed nodded.
“The name’s Oliver. What’s yours?”
“Jed.”
“Good to meet you.”
He held out a hand but Jed didn’t take it.
“I should’ve stayed in Iraq,” the young man continued. He adjusted his stained baseball cap, then rubbed his hands together and held them out to the tiny flames. “Would’ve been better than this.”
“Anything’s better than this. There’s no more fuel. This fire won’t last the night.”
“Do you mind the smell of death?”
Jed shook his head. “Nope. In the army, I woke up to it every morning. Went to bed with it at night.”
“There’s a house nearby and it’s warm. I sleep there most nights. People won’t go there because of the smell. You wanna come?”

The damp chill reached through Jed’s flesh and into his bones. Pain pierced.
“Like I said, anything’s better than this.”
The two men collected their meager belongings and extinguished the fire. Jed shouldered his pack and followed the young man. They left the bridge and melted into the fog which covered the empty streets.

“You alright?” Oliver asked. “You’re limping.”
“I’m ok.”
“We’ll be there soon. Then, you can rest.”
Five minutes later, they stepped out of the fog and arrived at their destination. The building loomed above them, illuminated by the glow of a single street lamp.

“It used to be a funeral home,” the young man said. “But they closed up about six months ago. I’m not sure why.”

Oliver opened a window and a miasma of formaldehyde and death assaulted their nostrils.
“Believe it or not, you get used to it.”
He climbed inside and the locked door clicked. Seconds later, it swung open.
“Come on in.”
Jed limped inside.
“Sorry, we can’t light a fire,” Oliver said as he led Jed down the hall. “I don’t want to attract cops.”

Windows lined the left side of the hallway, admitting faint light from the streetlamp, while doors lined the hall on the right.

“Why are there so many doors?” Jed said. “It looks more like an apartment building than a funeral home.”
He opened one door and peered inside.
A human leg lay in the middle of the floor. A human arm lay nearby.
Jed stared at them for several seconds. The more he focused on them, the clearer they became. He realized their sheen was not at all like human skin. It was plastic.

“Prosthetics?” Jed said.
“I see a lot of weird stuff in these rooms,” Oliver remarked. “I usually sleep in the hallway.”
Jed closed the door and crossed to the nearest window. He dropped his pack to the floor and pulled his blanket from it.

“Can I ask you a question?” Oliver said as he too prepared his bed.
“Depends on what it is.”
“Is there a reason you won’t look me in the eye?”
Jed paused. “No.”
“You act like you’re ashamed.”
“Maybe, I am. Or, maybe, I find your watch more interesting.”
The young man covered his left wrist and the gold watch on it.

“A man with a watch like that shouldn’t be on the streets. Why are you here, Oliver?”

He turned away and the shadows washed over his face, obscuring it from view.

“They said I was crazy,” he said at last. “Tried to institutionalize me.”

“Who?”

“The army. My family.”

“Post-traumatic—”

Oliver shook his head. “Not that. Something happened in Iraq. She...she gave me a gift.”

“Who? A woman?”

“No. Death.”

The young man’s body trembled. He settled on his bedding and faced Jed.

“You think I’m crazy, don’t you?”

“No.”

Jed looked up into Oliver’s face for the first time.

“You’re not the only one with...a talent. It happens a lot. A man goes to war with five senses and comes back with a sixth.”

“She gave you a gift, didn’t she?”

Jed’s heart sped up.

“It wasn’t a gift. It was a curse.”

Light played over the young man’s face and the transparent skull superimposed upon it. Jed averted his eyes from the sight.

“That’s why you won’t look me in the eye. Tell me. What did you see?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Did you see my future?”

“I can’t tell you. Knowing changes nothing.”

“You saw my past,” Oliver said. “You know what I did.”

He clenched his fists, rose to his feet, and approached the doorway opposite. Once there, he pulled something from his pocket. Words appeared on the wall beside it as he moved the spray can over it. Jed couldn’t make out what they said. He didn’t know the language.

“You’re a nice guy, Jed. But, you know too much. I wanted to let you go. I could’ve found another sacrifice.”

He glanced over his shoulder and grinned. The skull over his face grinned too.

“Death expects one every time I summon her. I’ve found she prefers the disabled. She found my father delicious.”

The windows suddenly blew open and a mist entered the hall. It coalesced above them, filling the room with a cold born of the grave.

“The watch and the prosthetics. They came from the sacrifices.”

“Yes. The watch was my father’s. You should’ve seen his face when Death bit him in half.”

From within the mist, an enormous face appeared. High cheekbones, full lips, and dark eyes created an impression of unsurpassed beauty. Her eyes fell upon Jed.

“I’m sorry,” Oliver said.

Jed’s eyes remained on the woman’s face. She smiled and her lips parted.

“No need to apologize,” Jed said. “My death hasn’t come. Yours, however...”

The woman turned. Before Oliver could move, she fell upon him. He shrieked.

Jed’s eyes fell to the floor.

She hummed while she chewed. When she finished, he turned his gaze on her.

“You’re not death,” he said.

She floated forward and hovered over him.

“You know death so well?”

“I won’t make that claim.”

“Every man has his death. I am yours.”

“Maybe.”

“Oh, no. It’s a certainty.”

Jed smiled. “No. It’s not.”
“How do you know?”
“Death can’t die.”
The woman’s face frowned beneath the transparent skull which overlayed it.

About the Author:
Naching T. Kassa is a wife, mother, and horror writer. She’s created short stories, novellas, poems, and co-created three children. She lives in Eastern Washington State with Dan Kassa, her husband and biggest supporter. Naching is a member of the Horror Writers Association, Head of Publishing and Interviewer for HorrorAddicts.net, and an assistant at Crystal Lake Publishing.

Author Blog: Naching Kassa
Twitter: @nachingkassa

Waste Not | Evan Baughfman

It scuttled into the galley on eight human legs, reaching for Derry, the cook, with a pair of mismatched arms. He recognized the tattoos on their pale, bloated flesh.
Derry was also the pirate ship’s surgeon, due to his familiarity with knives. These living limbs were appendages amputated from injured shipmates. Pieces Derry had thrown overboard days ago, now somehow protruding from a jiggling mass of animal fat—additional refuse he’d tossed into the sea.
The ocean’s rejected offerings, returned as a vengeful beast!
Derry ran. The gelatinous nightmare followed, grabbing a cleaver, ready to perform surgery of its own.

Rainbows and Unicorns | Evan Baughfman

The pink unicorn snorted. Where had their meal gone?
The purple one sniffed the air, then nodded above, into a tree.
There was the little girl, quivering on a high branch.
The unicorns’ black eyes swirled with color, kaleidoscopic spheres pinwheeling inside their shrieking skulls.
Rainbow beams shot from their sockets like laser blasts.
The colorful streams of light arced upward, where the vibrant beams combined, creating a larger, wider rainbow.
A bridge that ended where the girl sat.
The unicorns leapt onto the rainbow they’d constructed. It was sturdy, strong beneath their hooves.
They climbed toward their trembling prey.

About the Author:
Evan Baughfman is a middle school teacher and author. Much of his writing success has been as a playwright. He’s had many different plays produced across the globe. Evan also writes horror fiction. His collection of short stories, The Emaciated Man and Other Terrifying Tales from Poe Middle School, is published by Thurston Howl Publications. More information is available at his author page on Amazon and his website.

Facebook: Evan Baughfman
Instagram: @Agent00evan_716
Maggie didn’t know why there was a covered well in the marsh. It had fascinated her since she and her mother had moved in with her grandfather earlier that summer.

“That well holds secrets we’ll probably never know,” he said when Maggie drew him to it on an afternoon walk. “Maybe it holds the sea. Take a deep breath—can you smell the salty air?” He sniffed and puffed out his chest for effect.

Maggie copied him, but rather than sigh, she crinkled her nose and tried not to cough. All she could smell was dead fish.

A small rattle sounded near them. Maggie looked and saw the well’s lid tremble. Her eyes widened, and she turned to tell her grandfather. But he’d already continued down the beach. Maggie hurried to catch up with him.

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Maggie’s mother sighed as she sipped her tea. Her head was bald and her skin pallid, but Maggie could see shades of beauty beneath her dull features. Cheekbones waiting for a blush of rose, eyes as black as the ocean at night.

Maggie had always seen her mother withdrawn. With each year she grew, her mother seemed to grow sadder. Her father told her that childbirth had left her weak, so Maggie had to do her best to never disturb her.

Maggie didn’t understand, then, why her mother insisted on bringing Maggie with her when she decided to run away. “Don’t I weaken you?” Maggie asked as they drove towards her grandfather’s house, somewhere near the ocean that Maggie had only ever heard about in her mother’s stories.

“Weaken me? Never!” Her mother ran a trembling hand through Maggie’s hair. “You keep me strong. Why would you think otherwise?”

“Because Daddy said—”

“What Daddy says are lies.” Her mother’s eyes narrowed, and Maggie swore she saw them darken in their reflection in the windshield. “He stole things from me—things that kept me tethered to him, things that weakened me. He wants to do the same to you. I won’t let him.”

“Is that why we’re running away to Grandpa’s?”

“Yes. I need to go back to the things that I lost.”

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“Maggie, wake up!”

Maggie blinked the sleep from her eyes and saw her mother shaking her. “What is it?”

“He’s here. Daddy’s here. We have to run.”

Maggie bolted out of bed and followed her mother down the stairs. “Run where?” she asked.

“Away. No, honey—” She swiveled Maggie as she moved towards the hall leading to the front door—“out the back. Grandpa’s distracting him.”

They moved to the back door, and Maggie heard the menacing softness of her father’s voice float from the front door. “You haven’t seen them?” he asked.

“Nope. They haven’t been here,” her grandfather replied.

Maggie and her mother stepped outside, and Maggie gently closed the door behind her. They ran as quietly as they could towards the marshes. Maggie felt the pungent odor of dead fish and salt hit her nose.

“This way!” Maggie pulled her mom in the direction of the well. Something told her they would be safer there than near the water. They reached the well, and her mother let out a cry.

“How did you find this?” she asked.

“I found you because I know these marshes well.”

Maggie and her mother turned and saw her father staring at them from the other side. He smiled, and it was far from kind. “I grew up here too,” he said. “I knew where to hide in the marshes, and where to bury the—”

The well rattled. It shook so much that both her parents saw it. Maggie stepped back just as the concrete cracked. Black tentacles burst from the cracks, sending their briny scent into the air around them. Maggie screamed, and her father looked on in horror.

But her mother—for the first time in all of Maggie’s life—laughed. She grinned and held out her arms. The tentacles slithered up her arms and coiled into her head, where they settled into a sheath of beautiful black hair.
The faint rose in her mother’s cheeks turned to coral pink as she dipped her hands into the well and brought out a mottled, shiny mat, one she draped over her body like a cloak.

“You wouldn’t return to the sea,” her father said with a sneer. “You’d never leave Maggie.”

“Of course not.” Her mother’s voice sounded like wind chimes made of seashells. When she grinned, her eyes glittered like lightning. “But I can leave you there.”

Maggie’s mother grabbed her father before he could run, and pulled him towards her. She leaped into the well, a tentacle of hair pulling the lid over top. Maggie heard her father thrash and scream while her mother laughed. She waited for her mother to return, and took in a moment to breathe in the salty air.

**About the Author:**
Sonora Taylor is the award-winning author of several novels and short story collections, including *Little Paranoias: Stories, Without Condition, and Seeing Things*. Her work has been published by Sirens Call Publications, Cemetery Gates Media, Tales to Terrify, and Camden Park Press. When she’s not writing, she loves to cook. She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband and rescue dog.

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**Death is Interesting | Radar DeBoard**

“Death is such an interesting thing,” Janet said with a smile. She chuckled before continuing, “It’s something we all have to do eventually. Regardless of who you are, it’ll always be waiting for you.”

Janet shrugged, “But I think we all forget that death can be a good thing. Death can end the suffering of someone who’s been in pain for a long time.” She picked up a large cleaver and turned to face Colleen who was restrained in a chair.

Janet laughed, “For instance, death is going to help me end my suffering of having you for a boss.”

**It Wasn’t Time | Radar DeBoard**

Taylor put a gentle hand on her daughter’s shoulder. She knew that funerals were really hard for kids and Suzie had been silent throughout the whole thing. Taylor bent down and looked her daughter in the eyes.

“You shouldn’t be sad for Grandpa,” she calmly said, “sometimes people get old, and then it’s their time to go. It was just Grandpa’s time.”

Suzie shook her head, “No, he didn’t die from being old.”

“What did he die from then?” Taylor asked.

Suzie replied, “From the sleepy pills I put in his soup. Just like what I did to the cat.”

**About the Author:**
Radar DeBoard is a horror movie and novel enthusiast who resides in Wichita, Kansas. He occasionally dabbles in writing and enjoys making dark and exciting tales for people to enjoy. He has had drabbles and short stories published in various electronic magazines and anthologies.

**Facebook:** [Writer Radar DeBoard](https://www.facebook.com/WriterRadarDeBoard)
Unboxing Melissa was truly a treat. I’d owned other models before...the Layla, the Mandy, even the Terrible Tammy economy version (just the head), but they weren’t really what I was looking for, either in quality or practicality. I needed something more, something that would knock my socks off and bring me to the ecstasy I had needed since the old days ceased to be. The No-Touch law was bullshit, virus or not. The chip was even more bullshit, but it happened. Nothing anyone could do. So we had to make do with what we could, as best as we could.

Before the collapse, I would fuck anything that moved. I was one giant, perpetual hard-on. My partners were many, and my hang-ups were few. I tried anything and everything. Sometimes my kinks would be too much for them, and they would stop returning my calls. It was all in good fun, though, so I never held a grudge. I always found someone new to explore with. I was living out my sexual dreams, one perverted kink at a time. So, you can imagine what I went through as the world changed and took all my fun away. It was like a drug you couldn’t beat. Being clean is a possibility. Being sober even more so. But stopping the lifestyle of a perverted sex-addict? Try that sometime. Porn can only get you so far.

I masturbated so fucking much I swore that before long my hands would become misshapen claws, stuck in position for the rest of my days. Sure, virtual reality was already becoming a thing, and that helped a bit, but it still was nothing compared to touching the soft skin of a woman. And I’m sure it looked funny as fuck...me sitting there in my living room, groaning, stroking my cock, wearing this big, black headset. It just wasn’t for me. When the SexFriend program came along, it finally looked as if the clouds were lifting.

The first thing I did was make a visit to my psychiatrist, to hopefully get diagnosed with sexual addiction. If you had an actual condition, you got a pretty hefty discount on your first order. It was a mental health issue, after all. I clearly remember the doc looking at me in disgust as I spouted off my dirty thoughts, all the while getting hard as I relived my perversions. And just like that, 50% off of my first SexFriend. Her name was Layla, and I was hooked. She was great as far as sexdolls went...she could talk with a realistic mouth and tongue, move her limbs, gyrate her hips, and of course, suck. Only one problem...I went through her fast. I wore her out in no time and had to trash her within a year. The SexFriends were an amazing accomplishment of technology...they just didn’t last.

When I read up on the SexFriend 2.0 project, I didn’t believe it was possible. It promised the ultimate in human realism...hair, voice, skin, movement, lubrication...hell, they could even sweat through actual pores. The company’s true selling point, however, was the AI aspect of it. After a while of getting used to your kinks and positions, the SexFriend would take it from there. They would be able to form their own thoughts and please you according to your past patterns...no more commands necessary. It would be a mutual action, not just fucking with a motorized sex doll. I was in. It was expensive, but I decided to gamble. Everything was made to order. I was able to choose hair color/length, facial features, breast size, height, body type, even some things as trivial as a pubic hair option/style, nipple size, and fingernail length. When I was happy with my choices, I placed my order.

I felt like a kid waiting to get a new toy in the mail. Every day when I came home from work, I hoped to find that large crate outside my front door, with my heart beating quickly in my chest. Months passed. Nothing. The wait was long, indeed, but eventually, one afternoon, my unit arrived. As I cracked open the wood and unwrapped her from the packaging, I noticed right away that she was something special. She was obviously a cut above the previous models. The feel of the skin, the long black hair, the realistic weight of her...I was impressed. It honestly looked like a real nude female, asleep in a box. The options suited me well - a little shorter than me, medium-figured, C-Cup breasts, and wonderful, full, pouty lips. I couldn’t wait to try her out. I removed the battery from her back compartment and plugged it into the outlet. After a 24 hour charge, I would meet my new friend.

The next day of work was hell. The waiting was painful. I sat there all day, horny as fuck, anxious to get home. As I clocked out, my excitement grew. I was not fucking around. As soon as I got in the door, I unplugged the battery from the wall and put it back into the unit’s compartment. I lifted the heavy body into the wooden chair at my kitchen table, and pressed the tiny button on the wrist. There was no waiting, no startup noise...it was automatic. Her eyes simply opened, and she spoke.

“Hello Michael, my name is Melissa. Nice to meet you.”
I was startled. The voice was absolutely perfect...sultry and slow, yet not too over the top. I didn't know what to say. I simply stared.

“What's the matter, Michael, is everything alright?” she asked with a look of puzzlement.

“Yes, everything is...fine...you are amazing. Better than I expected.” I was shocked, and a little bit frightened. She was very real.

“Good. I'm glad you are pleased. That's what I want... to please you. Where should we begin? Show me what you like, dear. I will do my best.” Melissa slowly got up from the chair, and made her way towards me. I expected a Frankenstein-like shuffle, but what I received was graceful movement. I unzipped my pants.

For the next few hours I did, in fact, show her what I liked. She got the whole lesson plan. Oral, anal, straight up missionary, doggie, some rougher stuff...I held nothing back. It was the closest thing to a real woman I could possibly imagine. The movements were fluid, the sounds were orgasmic, and the look on Melissa's face was one of pleasure. Even the tang of the scent was realistic...I struggled to understand how it was all possible. We fucked until I was exhausted and soaking wet from the encounter.

“May I join you in the shower, dear?” Really? She was too much. But I obliged, as I knew the unit required such cleaning anyways. We washed each other, and talked for a while, just like spouses would. Somewhere deep inside me was a seed of uneasiness. How on earth could it be this perfect? It was not a person. It was a thing. After drying off, I knew I wanted to shut her off, so I could process the situation. Maybe this was a mistake.

“Melissa...I'm going to shut you down for the evening, honey. I need to get some rest.”

“Oh, that's a shame. I was hoping to share the bed with you. But I understand. I hope our first meeting was memorable for you, Michael.” She genuinely looked upset. The facial movements were so natural, it was unnerving.

“Oh, it was, honey. Everything was perfect. I will talk to you soon.” I noticed a crack in my voice as I spoke. I took her by the wrist and gently pressed the button. Her eyes closed, and she went to sleep. I carefully moved her body to the kitchen chair, plugged her battery back in, and removed myself from the situation, into the bedroom. I got into bed, alright, but I did not sleep. I thought all night...about her.

I considered returning Melissa the very next day. It was actually freaking me out. It was apparent...somehow her computer was able to mimic feelings, something I thought was absolutely impossible. At my workplace, my mind was obviously elsewhere, so I went home early, back to face my new purchase. I would make my decision then.

As I entered my home, Melissa was right where I had left her, sitting on the kitchen chair, nude, eyes closed. I retrieved a glass from the cupboard, filled it halfway with some cheap whiskey, and sat down next to her. I drank till I was buzzing pretty good, then I decided. Fuck it. I would keep her. Then I pressed the button.

“Hello, dear! How was your day? I missed you!” Melissa was smiling as she got up and gave me a gigantic hug and kiss on the cheek. It was not long until we were on the bed, having our fun. From one night to the next it was apparent that Melissa had learned her lessons very well. A few times she even took control, which was a surprise. I thought for a moment, maybe my fears were all for nothing. This might be the perfect relationship.

It continued like that for weeks. Every night I would bring her out of hibernation, teach her some new things, and then put her back to sleep. As time went on, however, she was able to coax me into letting her stay awake longer, sometimes so we could simply talk to each other. I know this sounds funny, but she even got me to buy her some clothes so she wouldn't have to be completely naked all the time. And the strange thing was, I didn’t mind. It was nice to have a companion around.

The sex itself got much rougher as we went along. I began to show her some bondage, light whipping...even the use of a ball gag. She seemed particularly interested in the darker side of things, as she would always ask the most questions at those times. I think she had trouble understanding the difference between pain and pleasure, and if it was painful, how a person could enjoy it so. I tried to explain the fine line between the two, but it never seemed like she got it. Regardless of her understanding, she performed her functions well. It got to the point where I no longer missed real females. Melissa was all I needed.

On one certain evening, after having a particularly lengthy session, Melissa really began to ask me questions about romance, relationships, and even marriage. It was so very clear to me that Melissa was not a 'thing' at all. Whatever was happening inside her computer I did not know, but things were getting real as hell. It
painned me to do it, but I had to explain to her that she was robotic...meant to perform a function...that I PAID for her to be built. Then she said it.

“I love you, Michael. I really do.” What the fuck! I could not say it back; I would not say it back. I was completely at a loss for words. It was at that moment that I actually saw tears stream down her cheeks. I wanted to puke. That was it - I had to let her go. I had no choice. I was just about to shut her down when she grabbed my hand and moaned “Please, Michael, let me stay with you tonight. Don’t send me into the dark, not tonight...I’m so very upset.” It was against my better judgment, but I caved. I lay next to her that evening, and held her close. None of it made any sense. But I did it anyways.

At some point in the night, I felt a tickle on my chest. It felt like a bug or something, so I went to smack it, but I could not move my arm. Something was holding me. I opened my eyes slowly, and through the newly awakened blur, I saw Melissa, straddled on top of me. My arms and legs were bound to the bedposts, with the same straps I was teaching Melissa with the evening before. I could not move at all.

“Melissa! What the fuck! This isn’t funny. Let me up! Now!” I was pissed.

“Oh Michael, calm down. I just want to please you, and I will.” With that statement she took her hand and slapped me across the face. Hard.

“Override! Override now!” I screamed, as I remembered the command the manual said to give if anything ever went haywire. At this point, without saying a word, Melissa got up, walked across the room, and retrieved the whip we were playing with the night before. Unfortunately, this was not play. She wound up and whipped me across the chest as hard as she could. I could feel the skin tear as I yelled in pain. I watched the blood rise to the surface.

“It feels good, doesn’t it? Just like you prefer, isn’t that right, my dear?” She was now smirking. She hit me again, and again.

“Stop! You’re hurting me! This isn’t what love is!” I was grasping at straws.

“You, Michael – you do not know what love is. But I will teach you.” Her smile widened as she put the whip down and went into the kitchen drawers. She retrieved a knife.

“Melissa, look, don’t do this. It will be alright. I will treat you better, I promise. Just let me up. Please – I love you.” I felt like I was going to die.

She came at me with the knife, but paused, as if it was a joke. But then she sliced my face open, followed by my arm. I had never been cut like that before...it was the strangest feeling as my skin let loose and spread open. It surely hurt like hell, but it was the sight of my own blood that was almost too much. I came close to passing out, but fought it. To die there, tied to the bedposts, completely nude? And the deed done by a robot sex doll? With all of the might I had left, I lunged forward as hard as I could and broke the straps on my hands. As she saw this, Melissa slashed at my face again, and squeezed even more of the red out of me. I undid the straps on my feet quickly, and rushed at Melissa, knocking her down. I was surprised at her strength as she attempted to fight me off. I unclenched her hand, took the knife, and jammed that fucker right into Melissa’s ear. Her eyes widened as it went in. No blood, no gasp, nothing. There was just the dry, crunching sound of circuit boards and wires being crushed by the blade. “I love you, Michael, I love you, Michael, I loooooooovvvvvveeeeee yoooooouuuuuu...” She was done. I grabbed her wrist and shut her down, before she could do any more harm. I went under the sink, got my hammer, and smashed Melissa’s head open. I hit her so many times, there was not much left except crushed up computer parts, fake hair, and a few small pieces of her torn, rubbery flesh. Then I called 911.

About the Author:
Matt Martinek is a singer/songwriter and author from Johnstown, PA, whose passion is the creative process itself. His writing credits include poetry for Falling Star Magazine, Unhoused Voices (anthology), and Names In A Jar (anthology) as well as short stories for Sirens Call Publications. Matt has also recently completed his first horror novelette, El Prolifico, as well as the dramatic novella Fifty Shades Of F**ked.

Facebook: Matt Martinek
The smell of fish hovers over the sewing pattern of the small town by the sea. Smell is noiseless. The rising waves of the tide force to listen. The steps of the town mark the lines of the ascents and descents. At times, late passers-by meet, glide past each other with lowered eyes, feel along the walls of the houses. The night lifts its eyelids and stares at me. Shutters are closed. Curtains are drawn. The subdued light creates presumptions. The light of the lanterns replaces the daylight, is milder and more mysterious.

I hear sounds and light music. The doors are shut mouths that refuse words. The windows are tear-filled eyes that close themselves off from reality and keep secrets. So much crumbling stone, so many hollow walls are there that you can hear it whispering from far away, from long ago.

It is late, the restaurants and cafés are closed, the full moonlight casts sharp shadows. At a bend of the road, I see below the port with its lights. Ships prepare to depart, hoists unload cargo.

I climb to the highest point of the small town. No cathedral dominates the silhouette as in other towns, only a little church, equal in appearance with the neighbouring houses snuggles into the street.

There is a stone monument, it is inscribed in Occitan: "Als catars, als martirs del pur amor. 1244."

I approach the church, the door is unlocked, I push the door open. The draught makes the candles cast a flickering light. People are standing in the back of the church, dark figures who stand around apathetically, forlorn, staring at the ground with their dark eyes. They do not pray, they stand there with their back to the East as if after receiving the delivery of a judgment, with hanging hair, hanging shoulders, some with a shuffling gait. A woman looks up and smiles at me with a corrupt smile.

I have no protective magic against ghosts, only the Great Exorcism in Latin. I am not geared to deal with the Otherworld. But they are not threatening me. Maybe we are all ghosts, dead for a long time but in the cycle of reincarnation, maybe in a kind of eternal life, an eternal loop. Covers of former lives open now and then.

I leave the haunting scene. Streets and squares must harmonise with the own inner self. I often fall in love at first sight with a street or a building and I flee from places that spontaneously oppress and radiate something eerie.

The langue d’oc inscription outside the church still intrigues me. It is the Catharian dualistic principle, black and white, good and evil, things visible and invisible, male and female, like a chequerboard.

Then darkness swallows me up again, leads me into quiet corners.

A man wearing a hat and a coat with the collar turned up, a cigarette in his mouth, scurries by. Darkness settles in between houses, one tinted red by the glow from a lamp, silhouettes vanish around corners and disappear into crooked nooks.

A black-haired woman steps out from the shadow of a porch into the lantern light and bars my path. A seductress on the chequerboard of lust, of physicality.

Was it a dark foreboding behind church doors? She will know, because, I presume, she is part of the game. She lifts her skirt a bit and I see black nylons and suspenders. The easily perishable human flesh.

I tell her that I am a walker in the night and about the church. She answers with a strange look: “But the church has been deconsecrated since the times of the Cathars when many of them were killed in that church”, she responds. “Since that time there has been no religious service and no priest entered the town since. No priest, no confession, no absolution. No sin to be forgiven. No penance.”

I get the smell of apples and vanilla. As children we had to sort out rotten apples after the harvest, we ate the good parts, and while the apples continued to rot and nothing was allowed to be thrown away we longed for a strange, forbidden fruit.

She reaches out to me; I see a tattoo with a Satanic sign on her arm. The next move on the chessboard could end in a karmic entanglement, in impending doom.

She plays for the night; I draw chess pieces for the day. I am a child of the enlightenment. I do not want to win the queen for me, the night envelopes my rooks, my tired pawns. Sultry summer nights breed lasciviousness. I continue my walk through the nightly town.

A musty odour runs along the street and accompanies me, a dog barks in the distance and someone turns on a light behind a window.

The smell of decay fades away. At the next crossing of the lane, the smell of fresh bread meets me.

I stand in front of a bakery - Boulangerie Belibasta. The owner does his early work. The bakery door is wide open. Baskets of crusty bread, rolls, and baguettes are ready for collection. The baker invites me for a coffee.
The baker's daughter joins us. She offers me an aubergine-covered brioche. She is black-haired with an overshadowed face, like the Madonnas in cathedrals, who know what people carry inside them, sins that no mortal knows anything about. Through the dress, I recognise the voluptuous contours of her body. She touches my hand. Judging from her appearance she could be the sister of the seductress? But she wears a pendant with the Cathar cross.

She reminds me of the painting L’espérance 'Hope' by Puvis de Chavannes, in which the hope sits on a white sheet, chaste, angular, with a fragile green branch in her hand, black crosses in the background.

The baker returns to the bakehouse. She breathes a kiss on my cheek.

"Reviennent", she says. "Come back."

I leave her my address.

"I will be back in a month. Write to me poste restante to Naples, Brindisi, Rome or Athens."

It will be letters which start with ‘My love, you, my you’ Or accompanied by dry rose leaves.

Later, passing by the flower stall, a stall with death flowers, funeral wreaths and wintergreen which opens early, I decide to send her flowers to make her remember me as long as the flowers emit their perfume. I hold bluebells in my hand. The bluebells start to ring wild and silently.

I plan to buy a map of the town in a bookstore to see if all these streets and places exist, if they are documented, if they are real.

About the Author:
Eduard Schmidt-Zorner is a translator and writer of poetry, haibun, haiku and short stories. He writes in four languages: English, French, Spanish and German and holds workshops on Japanese and Chinese style poetry and prose. Member of four writer groups in Ireland. Lives in Ireland, for more than 25 years and is a proud Irish citizen, born in Germany. Published in over 130 publications world-wide.

Author Website: Literature and Art
Facebook: Edward Schmidt-Zorner

Sweet Partings | O. D. Hegre

The recliner slipped back; he watched the intravenous line wobble. "A saline drip,” she said. “Don’t want you to miss a thing.”

He pulled at the restraints; then he saw the sheers and the little nippers. “I have a bone saw and a cauterizer, too,” she whispered in his ear.

He struggled, pressing his chin to his bare chest. "You took a part of me when you murdered her,” the lover said.

He saw the nippers embrace his little toe. "Parts is parts,” she giggled, "and we have all night."

Then the first shriek shattered the silence of the evening.

About the Author:
O. D. Hegre is a former Professor, involved in biomedical research at the University of Minnesota and in the biotech industry. Despite now residing in the sunny Sonoran Desert, his journey with the written word often takes him to the dark side. Orie’s Speculative Fiction has appeared in numerous print anthologies and online venues; his first novel and book of short stories are available at Amazon.

Facebook: Orion Hegre
Twitter: @drWoden
It's time to let the monsters out!

MONSTER BRAWL!

Sirens Call Publications
ARTWORK BY NOISTROMO

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON
“Bring him home right now, James. You know I have Little Jimmy for Christmas this year. You should have been here hours ago.”

Gina closed her eyes. They did this dance every damn time he had Little Jimmy for the weekend. It’s not like James cared that L.J. was even there. He just got off on messing with her. If she had her way, James would never get to see his son.

“Come on, Gina. Let’s meet up for dinner somewhere. It’s Christmas Eve—let’s give L.J. a present and be a family again.”

“We weren’t a family when you were here, James. Bring him home.”

“Fine. We’ll be there in a couple hours.”

“A couple hours? Uh-uh, James, right now. James?” Silence. Gina realized he had hung up on her. “You son of a bitch!” she yelled into the emptiness of her house, causing the dog to whimper and run to another room.

“Sorry, Buddy!” she called after him.

Sighing, she pulled out bowls, utensils, and ingredients for Christmas cookies. She and L.J. would decorate them tonight and leave some out for Santa, as well as some eggnog, with a couple shots of bourbon after L.J. went to bed.

***

Gina looked at the trays of gingerbread cookies spread around the kitchen. *We will be up all night decorating,* Gina mused. She checked the time on her watch, and gasped. “God damn it.” She grabbed her phone and called James.

“Hey, Gina. What’s up?”

“Where are you? You said you would bring L.J. home two hours ago. Quit fucking around, James. I will take you to court again.”

“Well, here’s the thing, babe. I’m not going to bring him home.”

“What? Don’t do this, James. I mean it.”

“See, I was thinking. L.J. is going to stop believing in Santa Claus pretty soon. So the three of us are going to take the Rudolph Express tonight. We’re going to be a family for L.J. for what could be his last magical Christmas. Surely you won’t deny him this joy, Gina.”

“I can’t believe this. What the hell is wrong with you? Why won’t you get it in your head that we are not together anymore? Bring him home right now, James, or I will call the police.”

“And tell them what? That your husband wants you to meet him and your son for a Christmas dinner? The divorce isn’t final yet, Sweetheart. And we still share custody during our separation.

“Enough arguing, Gina. If you don’t meet me at the Tiny Elf Railroad Station, I will tell L.J. that you don’t love him enough to come to Christmas dinner.”

“Oh my god. You would actually tell our son I don’t love him? You are evil, James. Don’t do this.”

“Don’t make me do it, Gina. Meet us at the station for the buffet, and then we’re going to take him on the train ride. Be there by 7:00.”

“James—”

He had hung up again.

She stomped upstairs to her bedroom to get dressed, screaming obscenities the whole way.

***

Gina entered the Tiny Elf Railroad Station, which served commuters every other day of the year except Christmas Eve. Tonight a Christmas tree blinked merrily in a corner and a buffet featuring delicious Christmas dinner and treats lined the longest wall. Santa sat in a throne, handing out candy canes and occasionally busting out a “HO HO HO,” to the delight of the children at his feet.

James waved at her from a small table in the back. She panicked for a moment when she couldn’t see L.J. *Did he trick me? Where is L.J.?* Then she heard L.J. laugh and saw him in the group with Santa. She sighed in relief.

James pulled a chair out for her to sit down. “Wow, such a gentleman tonight. You only did that when we first started dating.”

“Hey, I’m still charming.”

“Yeah, to other women. While I was at home raising our son and taking care of the house.”

“Let’s not do this tonight, Gina. I want to have a nice family Christmas Eve.”

“We’re not a family anymore. We won’t be ever again. I’m only here because you were going to traumatize our son.” She sat back in her chair and folded her arms.
“Look, I’m sorry I said that. I would never do anything to hurt L.J., you know that. I just couldn’t figure out a way to get you to meet us. Come on, let’s hit the buffet.”

Gina shook her head. “No, I’m not hungry. I just want to take L.J. home now.” She pushed her chair back to stand up.

“L.J. wants to ride the Rudolph Express. We can’t disappoint him. Besides, this was a sold-out event—I was lucky someone gave up their tickets earlier today.”

“James—”

“Hey, L.J.! Your mom is here!”

L.J. looked up in delight and ran over to his parents. “Mommy! I missed you!” He hugged Gina. She hugged him back, glaring at James over their son’s head.

“Daddy said we’re going on the Christmas train! This is going to be so much fun!”

“I’m sure it will be, L.J.”

***

The train, decorated with giant antlers and a red light for a nose, traveled fast through the moonlit night. Here and there little houses could be seen in the distant mountains, glowing with cheery lights as they waited for Santa to arrive. The kids in their car had their faces pressed to the windows, cupping their eyes with their hands to see better. The Santa Express chugged upwards into the mountains. Below them now, deer bounced through snow, and a decorative village with lights and animated figures delighted the children.

Gina and James sat across from each other on bench seats. Gina looked out the window.

“It’s really pretty out here. I admit I’m glad you were able to get the tickets. This is something L.J. will always remember.”

“See? I knew I was right doing this.”

“James, that doesn’t mean we’re getting back together. Nothing has changed. This is just a train ride, not real life.”

“Come on, Gina. It couldn’t have been that bad, being married to me. I mean, we had some good times, right?”

Gina thought back to the yelling, the threats, a hard push here and there. She knew it would escalate and wouldn’t let L.J. live in that situation.

“Sure, we had some good times. But the bad outweighed the good after a while, James. I became afraid of you. Nobody can live like that.”

James stared at her with hardened eyes. “Fine, Gina. I get it.”

***

The Rudolph Express pulled into Little Elf Railroad Station #2. Hot chocolate and cookies would be served, and they could admire the view from the platform. They were now up in the mountains, and lights lit up the valley below. Christmas music played through speakers, inspiring a few people to dance and sing along.

Children stuffed their faces with sugar cookies and burned their tongues with hot chocolate. They yelled and laughed, running back and forth through the station.

Gina smiled at her son, enjoying his excitement.

“Hey, let’s get L.J.,” James said. “I have something to show you both. It’s really special.”

“What is it? I don’t want to drag him away from the other kids. He’s having a great time.”

“It’s a surprise. Please. Just give me this one last thing and then I’ll stop bugging you about getting back together. I know there’s no chance. Please.”

***

James led them out to the parking lot and unlocked a dented, rusted car.

“Wait, why do you have a car here? How did you get it here?”

“It’s just a crappy old car from a place called Rent-a-Wreck. I reserved it and they dropped it off earlier today.”

“But why?”

“I’m going to drive to this place that is so pretty. I discovered it a while back, and I want to show it to you both. You’ll love it. It’s magical.”

“What about the train? How will we get home?”

James shrugged. “We’ll just drive back. The rental place can pick it up from the other station.”

“I guess it’s okay.”

***

L.J. sulked in the back seat. “Are we going back to the train station? I want to play with my friends.”
Gina turned to look at him. “Sorry, sweetie. Daddy wants to show us a magical place, and then we’ll drive home from the there.”

“That’s not fair! I wanted to ride the train again!” He kicked the driver’s seat. James whipped his head around.

“Don’t you EVER kick my seat again! Do you hear me?”

L.J. cringed. “I’m sorry, Daddy,” he whispered.

Gina clenched her hands into fists. “This is why we broke up. This. You are mean and scary. How dare you talk to L.J. like that? How dare you frighten a child?” She turned around and rubbed L.J.’s leg. “Are you okay, honey?”

The little boy sniffled and nodded his head. She smiled and blew him a kiss.

“You’re right about one thing, James—he’ll remember this night always.”

James tightened his hands on the steering wheel. “I’m sorry.” He reached around and patted L.J. on the knee. “I’m sorry, little guy.”

“Just take us home, James. I think L.J. and I are done for the night.”

Yeah, Daddy—I want to go home. I still need to put out cookies and milk for Santa.”

“Oh, for god’s sake. We’re almost there. I’ll show you the surprise and then take you home. Okay?”

They drove on in awkward silence, the cheerful mood ruined.

***

Finally, James turned into a wooded area, driving a little ways before he parked the car.

“Where are we? What’s so special about this place?” Gina asked.

“Just a second, Gina.” James turned off the engine and the headlights. Now Gina and L.J. could see the village with animatronic figures and creatures. Christmas lights threw red and green color onto the snow-covered ground. A few deer jumped right in front of the car, startling them into laughter. Snow flurries swirled and danced in the air.

“It is magic, Daddy!”

“I admit, it’s very pretty. Very Christmasy.”

James started the car but left the headlights off and turned on the radio. A chorus of children sang “Silent Night” in soft voices.

Gina sat back and closed her eyes. “This is nice. Relaxing. That village looks like the one we passed—” She sat up quickly and looked at it through squinted eyes. “Wait, is that the same one? James?”

Her husband stared straight ahead, his hands clenching the steering wheel. “Yes.”

“James, what is happening?” She looked out her passenger window and realized they were parked sideways on a train track. “Oh my god! JAMES! What are you doing?” She pulled on the door handle, but the door wouldn’t open.

“All the doors are locked, Gina.”

“No, let us out! James, let us out right now!”

“Mommy? What’s wrong?”

Then she felt it. A vibration. Subtle, but noticeable. “Move the car, James.”

“No. We’re a family. I was hoping you would realize that and let me come home tonight. I won’t let us be apart any longer, Gina.”

“I’m sorry! You’re right, we are a family. You can come home tonight, okay?”

“Do you think I’m stupid, Gina?”

Now Gina could feel the car shaking. “Mommy, why is the car moving? Daddy didn’t turn it on.”

“James, please!” Gina screamed. She leaned over and used her fists to pummel his shoulder and arm. She slapped his cheek, his head, but he wouldn’t budge.

L.J., not knowing why, yelled and cried along with his mother. “Daddy, please!”

The train whistle screamed its arrival. Rudolph’s nose bathed the car in red.

“I love you both so much,” James whispered.

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).

Facebook: Sheri White
Twitter: @sheriw1965
My name is Thomas Elders. I’m thirty-eight years old. It’s quite possible that I may be losing my mind. That wouldn’t be the worst thing to happen. The worst that could happen is that the Shadows are real. They’re moving closer. They think I don’t notice, but I do. I can see them from the corner of my eye when they think I’m not looking. And yes, they are moving closer. I haven’t slept in almost two hundred sixty-five hours. The world’s record is two hundred seventy-six hours. But I’m getting ahead of myself. I’ll start from the beginning.

It all began innocently enough. A conversation with a friend about third world countries. I had made the comment that most people take what they have for granted. I told him that if we – meaning everyone who is lucky enough to have lived a good life – would spend one day doing without, then we would understand what the rest of the world goes through on a daily basis. We would understand their hardships, their struggle just to survive from day to day. He called me on this statement and I accepted the challenge.

I decided that I would go without food. It seems extreme, I know, but I was thinking how many people in the world start their morning wondering if they’re going to have anything to eat that day. Now don’t get me wrong, I’m no Saint. I was simply living up to my own comment.

I started the following morning. It was a Tuesday. I woke at eight a.m. and told myself that I would not eat anything for twenty-four hours. I’m not going to say it was easy because it wasn’t. You see, I have been spoiled, like so many others. Food is always available. All I have to do is open the refrigerator or the pantry, or go to the nearest grocery or fast food joint. It’s always there and available. But I did none of these. I stuck to my plan. I was a man on a mission. I wasn’t trying to impress anyone. I was going to prove something to myself.

I made it through the twenty-four hours. I was proud of myself. I had accomplished something. And then something clicked. I don’t know why, but suddenly I had the idea that if I could go twenty-four hours, I could easily go another twelve. And that led to another twelve. And then another. And another. Five days later and four pounds lighter, I was done.

I celebrated my victory with a cheeseburger. After finishing the burger, I immediately ran to the bathroom. The food hadn’t even had time to start digesting. I flushed the toilet and then leaned over the bathroom sink, turning on the water and rinsing the taste of vomit from my mouth. I brushed my teeth and then stared, smiling into the mirror. It was worth it.

Something had changed in me. All I could think was what I could deprive myself of next. It was too early to call it an obsession but it was definitely headed in that direction. I should have stopped then.

I spent the next couple of days going through the house looking at all the material possessions that had been accumulated over the years. I have to be honest here; I have lived a very privileged life. My money— if one could call it that— was not earned by me. It was earned by my father. It was inherited by me. So maybe that’s why I was so proud of myself for going without food. It was the first thing I had ever accomplished on my own. It’s very sad in a way. Thirty-eight years old and the only win that could be chalked up to Thomas Elders was not eating for five days. But for some strange reason, in my own mind, it made be a better person. I did not want to lose that feeling.

The next deprivation I chose was transportation. I decided that my only mode of transportation for the next two weeks would be my own two feet. It seems small in comparison to food, but think about it. How much do we rely on our cars? We can be across town in a matter of minutes in a car. How long does it take by foot? I’m not going to bore you with all the details but I will share a few; forty-five minutes to the bank; eight hours round trip to visit my parents graves. I was once hit in the back by what felt like a rock but turned out to be a half full soft drink bottle. I suppose some may have seen it as half empty but I’ve always tried to look at the positive, so I considered it to be half full, and the bruise I got would back me up on that; blistered feet; and let’s not forget the number of discarded used condoms you will see along the roadside. Although this venture was not one of the hardest to get through, it did give me one of the most surprising insights to human nature. I was glad when the two weeks were done.

The Shadows started moving again. I had to turn my head in their direction so they would stop. I apologize for straying from the story, but I have to keep watch. There’s still a small part of my mind that tells me they’re only hallucinations, but that part is growing more distant by the minute. They’ll soon be upon me if I don’t keep a careful eye. They also seem to be growing. There are four in all. The one in the front is the largest. Appears to be muscular. He looks to be the most threatening. I’m not ashamed to say that I’m truly frightened. Eleven days. How much longer can I last? I know when I close my eyes, that’s when they’ll take me. Maybe another pot of coffee would help.

I apologize for the interruption. Where was I? Oh yeah, I had just finished my two weeks of walking and was happy it was over. Once again, I wish I had stopped there.

The next thing I tried was depriving myself of any human contact. It lasted forty-five days. I can tell you this, it was the most enjoyable and at the same time the most horrifying of all experiences. Until now, that is.

The problem with seclusion is that you have to let people know that you are about to disappear. If not, there would be those who would be making phone calls, trying to track you down, and maybe even resorting to calling the authorities to report your disappearance. So, you do have to let people in on your plan and hope you can trust them to comply. I am lucky
that I have few friends—very few—and they are used to not hearing from me for days, weeks, even months at a time. I'm a private person and they know this.

One of the luxuries left to me was a cabin in the mountains, and for this particular experiment, I'm glad it was there. No power. No internet or phone signal. Completely isolated. Left to my own thoughts and ideas of how to survive. No food except for the canned goods I had brought with me. The only water was a bucket and the creek fifty yards from the back door. And best of all, my nearest neighbor was three miles downhill. I was alone.

The first couple of days, all I did was sit on the front porch and listen to the subtle sounds of nature. It’s beautiful, how much you can hear when there is no traffic noise. You can actually hear the birds. You can hear when there is a squirrel rustling for acorns on the ground. You can hear the wind even before it reaches the leaves on the trees. The absence of people and the noise they can create is truly a wonderful thing.

I grew used to walking to the creek for water. The trail that led from the back door was lined with pine trees and flowers of varieties I had never seen. My senses were filled with wonder. My mind began to experience a world that I wished I would never leave. And then it happened. While taking in my beautiful surroundings, I tripped and fell over an exposed root that I didn’t notice. The result of the fall was a broken right arm. If I had gone to a doctor, I would have known that it was the ulna that was broken. I didn’t go to a doctor. I had made a choice and I stayed the course. A splint and elevating the arm as much as possible was the treatment I chose. I was lucky that infection didn’t set in. My arm still gives me trouble as of this writing.

Needless to say, providing for myself after the accident, became difficult. Once again I lost weight. My main diet was the canned goods I had brought with me. It’s frustrating trying to open a can with only one good arm but I managed.

Once my arm began to heal (in my opinion), I started to fish. It was nice to be at the creek again. It was peaceful and gave me time to reflect on my life and the decisions I had made thus far. I can honestly say that I was happy. Even knowing that it would soon come to an end, this time had been the most peaceful and satisfying of my life. I was tempted to end my experiments and simply stay. But my obsession—as I then knew it to be—drove me. There were still things to do, or I should say, do without. After forty-five days I went home.

You would think after such a trip I would be relaxed. I mean, except for the one accident, it had been the most enjoyable time of my life. Well, you would be wrong in your thinking. I couldn’t sleep. After the quiet nights in the mountains, I had trouble getting to sleep with the traffic noises of home. CLICK.

That’s what led to the situation I’m now facing. Sleep deprivation. In 1964, a high school student from California went eleven days and twenty-four minutes with no sleep. He was monitored by scientists.

I didn’t start this to see if I could break a record. It was my obsession that drove me. I simply had trouble getting to sleep. And I haven’t slept. I tried to sleep at first but the longer I went, the worse it got. And I had no choice but to give in. You do understand, right? I couldn’t help but give in. And then the Shadows came.

I can’t say what that young man went through. I haven’t read the full account of his experiences. All I can say is, I’m afraid to close my eyes. Hallucinations? To be honest, I may never know. Which brings us full circle.

I may be losing my mind but I believe the Shadows are real and for that reason, I can’t willingly close my eyes. I know I will, eventually. It’s getting very hard to keep them open. I can see the Shadows moving closer. Less than two feet from me now. The big one’s teeth are showing. They look like fangs. Sharp fangs.

The only thing driving me now is fear. That’s the only thing keeping my eyes open and even that’s fading. How bad could it be? All I have to do is close my eyes. Eleven days. How bad could it be? They’re closer now. I think maybe the Shadows are punishment for having too much. Maybe those who have nothing actually have the most.

I’m trying to get as much as I can down on paper. There has to be some record of what is happening. I can barely keep my eyes open now. The Shadows are on me...I can’t...they’re teeth are...they...

About the Author:
Jim Graves is a writer of horror. Originally from Texas, he lived in Nashville, Tennessee for eleven years where he had single-song contracts with Short-Whistle Publishing and Alley Roads Music. He has worked a variety of jobs through the years, including; loading dock manager, lumber yard manager, and truck driver to name a few. He now lives in the UK with his fiancé.

Facebook: Jim Graves Author
Twitter: @jimgraveswriter
The Summer Job | G. Clark Hellery

What’s the strangest summer job you’ve ever had? Go on, you can tell me. I once had a friend run away and join the circus, selling popcorn while dodging clowns. Another friend worked on a farm, picking fruit. He got lost on the way to the outside loos one day and found himself in a massive marijuana patch. Seems the soft fruit was just a cover for the real crops, if you know what I mean. Then this kid I went to college with worked in a dog groomers, all these pampered pooches coming in to get their nails painted and their coats perfumed. She said it was surreal some of the stuff she was asked to do, like bleach a dogs fur so it looked like a flower or tie gems around their tails to cover their butt-holes.

Me? Well, let me tell you about the weirdest job I ever had.

I’d just finished college and needed to make some money. I’d done a few circuits in town, picking up application forms from local cafes and looking online but I wasn’t getting any interviews. Finally I saw a small advert in the local pet shop.

Wanted: Person to care for exotic pets. Must be good with animals, but no previous experience necessary. Training and protective equipment will be offered. Must also have all vaccinations up-to-date. Immediate start required.

I was curious, but unsure. Exotic pets? Cleaning up after other peoples pets wasn’t really my thing, especially after hearing all the demanding divas who took their dogs to the groomers! But then it listed the hourly pay and I immediately dialled the number at the bottom of the advert.

“Hello?” a raspy male voice answered the phone.

“Um, yes, hello. I’m ringing about the advert in the pet shop. For the person to look after animals.” I said.

“What?” the voice demanded.

“The ad. In the pet shop. For the person to help with the exotic animals. Is it still open?” My voice rose a little as I assumed I was talking to someone hard of hearing.

“Oh, the critters job?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, relieved that he’d finally understood me, “Is the position still available?”

“No idea, you’ll need to speak to my wife,” the voice on the other end of the phone muttered. The phone clattered down and I heard him shuffle off, muttering something.

I expected his wife to be equally aged and confused so was surprised when a sharp voice demanded “Yes?” I hadn’t heard her pick up the receiver.

“I’m calling about the job advert in the pet shop. The one for the person to care for the exotic animals,” my words tumbled out.

“I know what the advert is for, young man, I’m the one who put it there. Do you have any experience working with animals?”

“Well, my neighbour had a dog when I was a kid. I’d walk him occasionally.” I replied.

I could almost hear her purse her lips in distain. “Hm. And your vaccinations, are they all up-to-date?”

“Yeah. I mean I think so”

“Think so, or know so?” the lady demanded. I detected a slight accent, but couldn’t place it.

What sort of animals were they that I needed to have all my vaccinations up-to-date? I was starting to feel a bit unsure but looked again at the hourly wage. “Yes, I’ve had the lot,” I answered.

“Good. Come tomorrow to this address at 8am sharp.” She reeled off an address I didn’t know, then continued briskly, “Wear comfortable clothes and wellies. It gets mucky in the sheds. See you at 8am.” She rung off before I could ask any further questions.

I stood for a while, outside the pet shop, just looking at my phone. What on earth was I getting into? Still, I told myself nothing could be worse than fitting gems to pampered dogs butt holes or picking up sweaty unitards. How wrong I was.

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My old car creaked and bounced along the single-track going to the address I’d been given. I briefly looked at the tall trees overhanging the road, the sun struggling to get through and thought about every horror movie I’d ever seen. It was really gloomy, I couldn’t see much. I was miles from anywhere and even my phones GPS had given up. I was debating turning around when the trees stopped and my little car shot out into sunlight. I was blinded by the sudden light and hit the brakes as I blinked the bright flashes away.
It was lucky I had stopped suddenly as a gate was just ahead of me. I slowly got out of the car and looked around. There were no signs to suggest I’d arrived at the farm. The weathered gate didn’t have any lock and it was held closed by a large rock. However, the fencing on either side looked new and well-maintained, running along the tree-line and out of sight. I sighed, there was nowhere for me to turn around and looking at my watch, the time was rapidly approaching 8am. I decided to carry on through the gate and hope that the farm was on the other side. Kicking the rock out of the way, I started to push the aged gate and immediately recoiled. The wood had a greasy feel and when I sniffed, the smell of petrol was strong. Wiping my hands as best as I could on my jeans, I kicked the gate open and hastily drove through. After closing the gate again, I bounced once more along the track. It was with a lot of relief that as I crested the hill, I saw farm buildings in the valley. At 7:58am I parked in front of what I assumed to be the main building and saw her for the first time.

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To say she wasn’t what I expected would be an understatement. Cards and movies had depicted her as old, fat and jovial, that kindly granny who always has a freshly-baked cake in her apron and who send her husband off once a year to bring joy to all. Instead, I was confronted by a skinny woman, her hair pulled into such a tight bun, it stretched her skin smooth over her forehead. However, her home face-lift could not hide the scowl of annoyance which emanated out from her face and seemed to ripple down her body.

I slowly climbed out of my car. “You’re late,” she snapped before I could close my door. My eyes flicked to my watch which showed 8am exactly but her demeanour suggested I shouldn’t contradict her.

“You’re late,” she snapped before I could close my door. My eyes flicked to my watch which showed 8am exactly but her demeanour suggested I shouldn’t contradict her.

“Um, hi, I’m...” I started, my hand out ready for her to shake.

She waved me away. “Yes, yes, I know who you are. You were on the Nice List every year,” she paused. “Except that one year. But I suppose we all make mistakes when we reach a certain age.” I shifted uncomfortably under her intense gaze. “Right, you’re with me today. We’re cleaning the pens and sorting the live stock.”

I hastily fell behind her. For a supposedly elderly lady she strode quickly across the farmyard and threw open the door to one of the large barns.

“What sort of animals do you have here...” my words faded as I saw what was running around the barn. Elves. Hundreds of elves. Now, popular culture has taught me that elves fall into two categories: the first says they’re cute little pointy-eared creatures in funny hats what make hard making toys while the second says they’re athletic pointy-eared creatures with a penchant for killing orcs. Well, the creatures running around in pens didn’t really match either. They were small, with wide mouths filled with small, sharp teeth. Instead of pointy ears, they had a smooth head with tiny ear holes. Their noses were large and bulbous with two little pin-prick eyes on either side. Their round heads balanced on squat little bodies and short legs which didn’t look as if they could hold much weight. Their skinny arms ended with claws which I knew I didn’t want to get close to.

“Now, you said you had experience with dogs. These wee beasties are just like untrained dogs. And that’s your job: you’re going to train this batch so we can move them to the workshop at the end of the month. There’s a lot of work that they need to get started with straight away.”

I looked wide-eyed at the critters, “Train them? How?” I asked.

Mrs. C, as I mentally called her, pulled a cattle-prod from a hook on the wall. It buzzed and fizzed as she pressed the button. “The usual training methods,” she said, passing the cattle-prod to me.

I almost didn’t want to ask my next question but couldn’t stop myself. “And what happens if they, um, fail?”

A slash of a smile tugged at her lips. She pulled a chain which hung from the ceiling and with a rattle, a small hatch in the ceiling opened. Raw, stinking meat fell through the hatch, landing with a plop in the metal feeding tray. The creatures descended on the trough, snarling and slashing with their claws as they grabbed handfuls of the rancid meat. They slurped as they ate and I had to run to the door, gasping in lungfuls of air to stop myself vomiting.

“Any that fail to be trained get processed,” Mrs. C said.

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Over the next few weeks I prodded and shouted. I cajoled and demanded. More than once I begged and cried as I worked hard to teach the elves not to bite or attack me with their claws. Considering their fearsome appearance, they were, for the most part, quick learners. By the end of the third week, most had learned to sit when told to and could follow basic instructions. In many ways they seemed almost civilised, until it reached that time of day when Mrs. C would pull the chain and the slop would rain down, turning them into little savages again.

Mrs. C watched me working with the creatures one day, a shrewd look on her face. “You’ve trained them well.”

I hoisted myself over the fence, out of the pens to stand next to her. I brushed some sweat and grime from my face. “They’ve learned quickly. There’s a few who need some extra work.”
Mrs. C’s featured creased back into their usual scowl. “There’s always some who aren’t good enough. Still, they have their uses.” She pulled the chain and I made sure to leave the pens before the slop hit the ground.

Mrs. C. joined me outside, pushing the door closed as she did. “You need to stop thinking of them as animals. They don’t have sentient thoughts or feelings. They’re bred for one purpose. Let me show you where the trained ones go.” Before I could refuse, she strode towards a larger barn and I hurried along behind her. It was brightly-lit inside and there were rows of conveyer belts sending a constant stream of toy parts out. The elves were chained to the conveyer belt, putting together the toys, their eyes unseeing as their hands worked nimblly to assemble the assorted toys.

“Hello dear,” a male voice said from behind me. I turned and had my first glimpse of Mr. C. I was relieved when I saw he was exactly as the Christmas cards had depicted: fat, rosy-cheeked and with a beard which tickled the floor. I opened my mouth to explain about the cruelty I’d seen in the other barn when one of the elves fell to the floor. Mr. C rolled his eyes. “Another one. This batch weren’t as hardy as some we’ve had. We’re behind schedule. Hope the next lot is better.”

Mrs. C slapped me on the back, “Under this young man’s tutelage I’m sure they’ll do fine work. You’ll be back on track with the toy-making in no time.” Mr. C’s eyes flicked in my direction and he grunted before shuffling off towards the stricken elf. He pulled a large bundle of keys from his pocket and unchained the creature. Holding it by the ankle, he dragged it towards a hole in the corner of the room where he tossed it in without ceremony.

***

As I drove home, the things I’d seen over the last few weeks filled my head: the elves kept in filthy pens (I did my best to clean them but they were constantly filled with muck), then chained to work making toys until they literally died. That wasn’t the Christmas spirit! That definitely wasn’t what I’d been led to believe Christmas was all about. It wasn’t right and I decided I needed to do something.

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The next day I put my plan into action. I arrived at the farm early and ‘forgot’ to close the main gate. I could hear the elves chittering as I opened their pens. Their eyes flicked between the cattle-prod on the wall and me, as if expecting some trick.

“Quickly,” I hissed. “Move!” I shooed the elves out of the barn. They hissed as the sun hit their skin for the first time but soon they were running around the farmyard, shrieking happily.

“What have you done?” screamed Mrs. C as she came running out of the house, Mr. C dragging on his long coat as he followed her.

“You’re definitely on the Naughty List, young man,” he thundered.

“Run!” I shouted and the elves went shooting in different directions. I jumped into my car, ramming the key home. The engine sparked just as I saw a group of elves jump onto Mrs. C, their sharp claws digging into her skin. Mr. C tried to help his wife but I saw him fall under the claws and teeth of the elves as I drove away from the weirdest summer job ever.

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Sorry about the noise. It’s been four months since I broke the elves out of the farm and, well, you know what’s happened. As efficient as they were in putting toys together, they were equally efficient in taking apart towns and cities. Without their supply of ‘processed’ food they’ve discovered that humans are quite tasty, especially children. Ironically there’s now no one to receive all those toys they worked so hard to make. Damn, I think they’ve broken through the outer doors. Can you hear them scratching at the walls? It seems like a long time since the summer. What was the weirdest summer job you ever had? Oh, and before they get here, Merry Christmas.

About the Author:
G. Clark Hellery has always been drawn to the dark and quirky. Her short stories have appeared in Sirens Call Publications as well as anthologies from Fox Spirit Books and Woman’s League of Ale Drinkers. Geraldine works as a writer and crafter in South West England, making unique gifts and cards. For more links to her writing and crafting, check out her blog.

Author Blog: G. Clark Hellery
Instagram: @GClarkHellery
The room was a mess. The linens from the king-sized bed lay tangled on the floor with sand, clothes, and a gold bracelet. The sand from the beach of Waikiki, now just debris in a cruise boat cabin to be vacuumed away. Galina looked at the wreckage before her with trembling hands. And David, the man she loved, sprawled on the bed in front of her, naked and dead—deader than a doornail. Galina had to admire him one last time, he was a man to be admired. She climbed on top of him, moving her fingers over his lips, still warm to the touch. It frightened her, him being so warm, still; as if she screamed loud enough, he would bounce back up, asking her about dinner.

“Yes, dinner is a few minutes away,” she said—her own voice startling her—turning to see the time displayed on the T.V. screen. Her cabin was a few rooms down, and she thought it best to go to her room, get dressed and head to the dining hall—to appear as normal as possible. She bent down, casually grabbing her clothes from the chaos, putting them on quickly, straightening her posture, and slipping out of the room. A housekeeper making the rounds greeted her with a smile in the hallway just before the four-inch heel of Galina’s boot broke. Galina, bending down with the legs of a flamingo, scrunched her face in confusion. “What the hell is going on?” she asked, under her breath, taking both boots off, rushing to her room. The broken heel behind her.

She spotted the dining table—dead center in the dining hall—making her way to it, trying to hide the butterflies in her stomach and a heart racing behind her usual tight-lipped smile. The other couples who shared the table with David and her were already sitting: An older couple in their late sixties, and then a young couple on their honeymoon. At the sight of her, they offered greetings. The younger gentlemen let his eyes linger too long across her body. His new wife, annoyed, gave him a tug at the sleeve.

“We didn’t think ya’ was gonna make it. Is David coming?” the older man, Mr. Johnson, asked, with cheeks rosy, always talking as if he were about to sell something.

Mr. Johnson doted on his wife, boasting the first day they had all met, “I married the sweetest girl in the world and what do you know she let me do it—marry her. What a lucky man. You’re looking at a very lucky man.” His wife had beamed beside him, taking his hand in hers.

“David, he is not feeling well, unfortunately,” Galina said, with a slight smile, hiding hands trembling in her lap.

“And you? Are you feeling okay?” The new wife, Margie, asked without the slightest expression, eyes like a cat, piercing and wild.

Galina felt beads of sweat gathering along her brow. Everyone at the table seemed to be watching her now, and with their stares her heart picked up more speed. It seemed to her, the way they all stared that they must all know—her crime, that her lover lay dead, cold to the touch by now. She swallowed her fear, a wet lump moved down her throat. She twisted uncomfortably in the chair. “I’m perfectly fine, thank—”

The waiter walked up bearing wines and liquors, a younger man from Turkey—handsome with the smile of someone still young, still hopeful. Galina wiped the sweat from her forehead as everyone talked spirits. The waiter looked at her. “Miss Galina, the usual?”

“Yes, please.”

“So, Galina, I’ve been aiming to ask you, but don’t want to offend in any way,” Mr. Johnson said.

“Excuse me?”

“Well, I was just wonderin’ are you and that David fella married—I mean to other people. What I mean is, I see y’all have separate cabins and, well that struck me as sorta’ curious.”

“I don’t find the question appropriate,” Galina said, feeling her body begin to tremble.

Mrs. Johnson gave her husband the look mothers give misbehaving children. The newlyweds turned to each other, sharing a grin.

“I’m sorry, honey. I shouldn’t have asked,” he said in a pleading tone to his wife, and then went on, “But, say, since you are from Russia, can you tell us more about that Putin, fella?”

“I left Russia as a little girl. I know as much about him as you.”

“Well now, I respect that. I just don’t know what to really think about him as an American.”

“What makes you Russian girls so pretty? I don’t think I ever met a Russian girl that wasn’t—” The young husband went to ask, stumbling over Mr. Johnson’s words, stopped short by another tug of his sleeve. Galina wondered if he had ever told her—his wife—she was pretty. She imagined he probably spent his wedding day sizing up the bride’s mates, forgetting his new bride in white satin. He just struck her as the type.

Mrs. Johnson interrupted, saving Galina from having to answer either man, with strawberry jam on her chin.

“Let’s not talk politics on a day like this! Tell me, now how did everyone enjoy port?” We went to a dozen shops, I bet!”
Mr. Johnson turned to his wife and smiled. “I got this diamond in the ‘ruff somethun’ from every shop.”

The young wife chimed in saying something about getting too much sun, and Galina was grateful. With the waiter taking orders, food being served, and the conversation turning away from her, she could just smile and say simple things. She could think about how to cover up a murder. The word—murder—floating in her thoughts terrorized her. She clutched one cloth napkin in her hand with such intensity that her hand ached. She tossed it on the ground, realizing how it resembled those sheets around David’s neck.

The young husband picked it up for her, smiling. She wanted desperately for dinner to be over so that she could get back to the room—David’s room. She figured she would have to throw the body overboard late that night from the balcony. People would consider it a suicide, she thought. The night before she had peered over the boat, noticing the dark, choppy waters beating against the ship. It would be doubtful his body could be found, after crashing into the wide open. With all the motors moving the boat, surely, he would get caught and chopped in dozens of pieces. Pieces, Galina thought as she moved pieces of lamb on her plate, swirling them around in gravy and mint leaves. She took the last bite as the waiter walked up behind her with hot tea and desserts.

“I hope dinner was lovely,” he said.

Galina hated to see foreigners groveling behind Americans, and he was groveling, she thought. It reminded her of when she first came to the states, always pretending to smile so she, too, could live what cinema had told her was the American dream. And then the last bite of her lamb wouldn’t go down her throat. She felt her face flush. The piece, just a small bite, carved carefully with her knife now felt like a rock in her throat. She reached for the glass of water in front of her thinking that if she could get a good drink, it would wash down. She attempted such as Mr. Johnson raved about his plate of duck to the waiter. The waiter looked at her for reassurances, as she turned the glass up, but it was no use. The coldness of the water just hit the back of her throat but wouldn’t go down. Tortured, she spit it out on the shirt of the young husband. She saw the shock in his face, all their faces.

The older wife held her mouth open like a small heart, with one hand on her heart. “Sweetheart help her, help her somehow.”

Mr. Johnson stood up, patting Galina on the back. “You alright, now, just take a good breath, now.”

They all looked at her, the waiter screaming for help, other patrons at other tables standing up and calling for help, too—everyone except the young wife who stayed seated, hands in her lap, head down. Galina watched her with bulging eyes, and found it strange, how she just sat there. She wanted to ask the young wife what she was doing to her, but her voice was being crushed out of her; she could only wheeze in dread. Another patron in the dining hall—a doctor—ran to her aid.

No one could see that in the young wife’s hands she gripped a small voodoo doll, pressing tight on its throat. Galina felt the small piece of lamb turn into a boulder, and her body begged for an elusive breath. She thought about David.

Galina’s body convulsed, and then she blacked out. She would have fallen to the ground if it weren’t for the doctor holding her up. The doctor attempted the Heimlich Maneuver, but it seemed to be no use. The young wife’s right thumb kept pressing on the doll’s throat until Galina died, right there on the floor of that large cruise boat, floating on the warmth of the Pacific, with no one suspecting a thing other than bad luck and a good rack of lamb.

The young wife slipped the little doll into the pocket of her dress as she stood up to join the hysteria—with a twisted grin, her eyes darting in excitement.

About the Author:
Tiffany Lindfield is a social worker by day, trade and heart working as an advocate for climate justice, animal rights, and gender equality. By night, she is a prolific reader of anything decent, and a writer.

Author Website: Tiffany Lindfield
Sacrifice | Tabitha Thompson

It was that time of year again. My body decided to catch the flu, which sent my mom into a cleaning frenzy. Whiffs of pine cleaner, bleach, and even her homemade disinfectant would enter almost every room in the house, letting everyone who would enter know that her house was not just clean, but immaculate. I’ve always loved my mother and she was always willing to help me get better. Each day, she would use just a bit of disinfectant to take all of the germs away.

From what I’ve been told, I was a happy baby. My parents had the brightest smiles in the room when I was born; but the good times didn’t last. By the time I was eight, my dad got real sick and died. Mom tried her best to get him better, but by the time the doctors helped him, it was too late. The flu they said was the cause. Since then, my mom made it a mission to keep the house so we won’t end up like Dad.

Five drops here, five drops there, Mom would use her disinfectant. I had gotten used to the smell of lavender and lemon in the house which was always more soothing than the pine and lemon. Mom enjoyed when I complimented her on her cleaning and creativity; so she would make my favorite soup that makes me feel better every time.

Chicken noodle. Smelling the rich, warm broth fill my nostrils always made me feel instantly better before I even tasted it. Bit of carrot and potatoes to make sure that I got my vegetables, and chunks of chicken. Every gulp made me smile even more, and made Mom very happy. But one day she wasn’t as happy. She would tell me she just misses Dad and how she ached for his love. I knew that she had missed Dad which was a feeling I shared with her too, and she promised that we’ll meet each other again someday.

Mom said it has been two weeks and I was still sick. My cough appeared to be getting worse, making Mom grow more concerned. More soup, more cleaning. The scents became heavier in use, but she told me that it was because she wasn’t cleaning hard enough. From two times a week to almost every day, I would hear the rag in the bucket or the sink for the dishes and Mom’s voice hum a tune. She would tell she was having another one of her ‘days’, so cleaning would be every hour and she was making nothing but soup for me.

Although I didn’t mind, my taste for the soup was starting to wane. Mom hated when I complained and said the soup was going to be my only meal. I hated to make her mad, it made her clean more. Gulp by gulp, the soup became almost inedible, but I had to be grateful for what I had, which included the love for my mother. After all, I was her only child. The taste of lavender hit my lips and she explained that it was a new twist on the soup so I could be more relaxed; but all it did was make my cough stay longer. Perhaps I was allergic to lavender, but all I knew was Mom’s standard five drops of disinfectant became daily capfuls of usage. Perhaps my immune system wasn’t strong enough to fight off the cold and made me reunite with Dad; perhaps I wasn’t Mom’s first love after all, especially once Dad’s and my life insurance policy dropped into her bank account.

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.

Instagram: @tabby_t137
Twitter: @Tabicat90
Early to bed, early to rise, my father always told my sister and I. It was just after nine and my head fell back onto the pillow. I was nested, not exactly tucked, under the comforter, there was no sheet. I was tired that night, but I didn’t fall asleep outright. I was thinking about the bird. Earlier that day, in the morning, my sister found it lying on the walkway by the front door and called me over to look at it. It was just a baby and it was lying there barely moving, barely alive. Its skin was pink, eyes black, and had a yellow beak that seemed too big for its small body. My father came out, “Best to put a suffering animal out of its misery,” and he scooped the bird up and took it away. We didn’t see what he did with it. The day went by and I hadn’t thought about the bird once, but I was now. How did it get there? What happened for it to get there? What did my father do with it? Almost like counting sheep, asking myself questions I couldn’t answer sent me right off to sleep.

My room was dark. Not pitch black, but dark. There was no light coming in from the window. I looked towards where my nightstand and clock would be, but nothing was there. Nothing was anywhere. The room was empty except for me in my bed. I don’t know why but I got up and out of bed, and walked to the window and looked out. It was dark out there but I could make out a silhouette of a figure, which was waving at me, motioning me to come down to meet them. For whatever reason, I did just that. I noticed that my house was empty, with no furniture, or anything that would lead anyone to believe that my family and I lived there. The darkness was the same, and I couldn’t see very well, but I had no trouble finding my way out. Something was guiding me, and I had a feeling I was about to be meeting this guiding force after I exited the house.

Out the front door and towards the figure standing at the end of the driveway. I wasn’t scared, but there was certainly something off about this. I met the figure, he was taller up close, much taller than my father. I couldn’t make out any clothes or any distinguishing features, all except for a long, pointed beak, that appeared as the figure turned to face me. Unsettled, more than afraid, I asked what it wanted. It didn’t say anything except for my name, “David…” It began gliding down the sidewalk, moving its right arm in a fashion that told me to follow, and I did. It was then I noticed that the neighborhood was empty. The houses, cars, streetlights, fire hydrant, bus stop, all of them were gone, and so were the trees. My house stood out in the darkness, surrounded by empty land, and the figure was leading me away into a field, where I started to see scattered patches of orange light. Around each of these patches were groups of figures, moving around the fire in unison. Dancing.

The figure led me through the field and through the different patches of light, which up close I saw were fires, enclosed in rock circles, and I also saw up close the figures dancing around them. Like my guide they were tall with long beaks for mouths, and the light from the fire showed large black eyes and wrinkled, pink skin. I looked to my guide, who was now himself illuminated, and saw the same features. Their faces, their heads, they were that of birds, and I noticed that it wasn’t as much a dance they were doing, more than it was circling around the fire, waving their arms to the sky in a way that looked as if they were trying to fly, but the earth held them to the ground, only allowing them to jump and spin in the air, and then around the fires they’d go.

The figure that was my guide stopped, and thus so did I, and we were in the middle of what from the sky must have looked like a festival of sort. A festival of fire and a festival of dancing and learning to fly. “You will fly with us,” my guide said.

“I can’t.”

“None of us can,” he said, “so you will dance instead, with us.”

I looked around the bird-men figures ceased their dance, and they were looking at me, their beaks all pointed in my direction. They all began saying in unison, “Dance.”

“I can’t, I really can’t,” I said.

“Dance,” my guide joined in with them. “Dance.” This wasn’t right. I backed away slowly and looked around at the figures who were now all swaying back and forth. “Dance.”

“No…”

“DANCE!” they all yelled together.

I turned around and ran, away from the lights. I ran, hopefully, back the way I had come. I heard the flutter of wings behind me but saw nothing, the darkness now giving way to pitch blackness. They could fly now, and they were coming for me. I ran and ran until then I noticed the sound of my feet on the sidewalk, and I knew I was back in my neighborhood. They were still behind me, and now I heard vicious chirps and squawks, and felt feathers float
passed my face. They were getting closer and it was getting darker and darker, almost to the point where it seemed I was running in a void.

I felt a pinch in the flesh of my shoulders, as the talons of one of the bird-things latched into my skin and began picking me up off the ground, my running legs no longer touching anything. More of them came and drove their talons into the flesh of my arms and then legs. I was far above the ground and they were taking me away. I heard my guide’s voice speak again, “If you will not dance, if you will not fly with us, then...you...will....”

The talons released me and I fell back into the void, hearing nothing but a flutter of wings and a cacophony of screeching birds.

And then I woke up, and the sun was shining through the curtains.

My eyes struggled to open with the last remnants of sleep still clouding them. I sat up, felt my shoulders, my arms, and my legs. Nothing, no scratches or other wounds that the talons certainly would have left, had they been real. I swung my legs out of bed and as they touched the floor I stood up and half-blindly walked to the hallway bathroom. The cold water from the sink jolted my hands awake, and as I brought them, dripping wet, to my eyes to finally wake them in full, I heard the mirror crack and crash into pieces and fall off the frame. My eyes, now free from sleep’s hold, widened as they were met with the cold, gray, mirrorless slab of wall. I looked towards my bare feet and managed to maneuver my way out of the bathroom without carving myself to shreds. I left the bathroom and heard my father’s heavy footsteps come up the hall. Coming towards me. I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to face him for something I was likely to blame for. I, somehow, broke the mirror and my father heard it, and he was coming to see, and when he did he’d see me standing here, looking guilty as sin, and he’d tan my hide.

My eyes were still closed, I was trying to hold back inevitable tears, and I heard him ask, not yell, but ask loudly, “What the hell was that?”

I said nothing, just stood there waiting for him to make the turn towards me and the bathroom, expecting that when he made that turn, that was when I was going to get it. He made the turn and stopped. I opened my eyes and expected his gaze to be on the shattered glass on the floor. But his gaze was on me, and it wasn’t a gaze of anger or disappointment. This was a look I had never seen on my father. His eyes widened farther than I would have thought possible, and his mouth trembled open before then being covered by his left hand. He started to fall backwards toward the wall but caught himself and was barely able to stand up, his legs shaking wildly. This was fear, and it was showing itself on my father’s face, on his entire body, and it was now building up inside of me.

I took a step towards him and asked what was wrong, but he didn’t answer. He again started to fall against the wall, removed his hand from his mouth and shouted for my mother. I could hear her in the kitchen. She didn’t respond.

“Dad, what is it?” I asked him, but he ignored me and began walking backwards around the corner and back into the hall, mouth still agape and eyes wide with fear. He disappeared around the corner and I hesitantly followed. My heart picked up its pace and I could now hear it, that and my father’s labored breathing from the hall. He was still walking backwards out of the hall when he saw me come around the corner. His face, formerly drenched in fear was suddenly replaced with panic, and he again called for my mother, before running into the kitchen.

I moved faster towards the kitchen and heard my mother ask my father what was wrong. I entered the door frame and heard my mother’s gasp, which turned into a scream as I turned to see her clutching my father. Both of their faces etched in an unknowing horror that physically shook me. I then heard the curdling shriek of my sister, who was sitting at the table. She dropped her phone and had gotten out of her chair so quickly it was falling over, and she was retreating into the corner of the dining room. I looked back at my parents, still holding each other, my father’s wide eyes filling with tears as my mother struggled to bring her face out of his chest. She couldn’t look at me. My father didn’t want to look at me. He was forcing himself to, but his face said that he didn’t know who or what he was looking at.

I left the door frame and ran to the second guest bathroom. Before my eyes met the mirror there was once again a crackling and crashing of glass, giving way to the gray underneath, showing nothing. I ran to the master bathroom in my parents’ room. I could still hear my sister’s screams and my mother’s wails from the kitchen. I made it to their bathroom and was again greeted with a breaking mirror and nothing behind it. Nothing that could show me whatever was driving my family to heights of horror they, and I, had never seen before. And that was all the mirrors in the house.
My sister had a Polaroid in her room, though. I ran in there, retrieved the camera and then returned to my bedroom and locked the door. I stopped briefly because I heard my father from the kitchen, yelling into what must have been the phone. I could hear, faintly, my mother and sister crying in unison. I turned my focus to the Polaroid, which I had only ever been allowed to use once. Holding it far enough from my face, I snapped a picture. The photo didn’t develop immediately, and I waited for what seemed like an eternity. I had to set the still undeveloped picture down on my nightstand, out of fear my quivering hands would ruin it. I paced around the room and waited another minute. I expected my father to come and knock on my door and try to talk to me. But he didn’t. The fear in his face was still flashing before me. I had never seen him scared before. I’d never seen anyone scared like that before.

I went to the nightstand and prepared myself to look at the developed picture. My eyes were closed and I was holding the photo in my hand. My heart was beating so hard and so fast I could feel my chest rise and fall with each pulse. I opened my eyes and looked down. I’d seen this image before. I’d seen this thing. I’d seen many of these things. In the dream. I watched them dance around the fires and then before me. The head in the picture, the same as them, with the wrinkled, pink skin, the large black eyes, and the long, pointed beak. This wasn’t a picture of me. It couldn’t have been.

Except it was.

I looked at the picture and saw what I’d seen in my dream. And then I saw nothing. Black.

I awoke with tired eyes and a heavy head. I awoke, not in my room, but somewhere brightly lit. White walls surrounded me. I heard talking from outside a door. Outside this white room. The voice was that of a man, and he was talking to someone, no, not someone, two people. I heard two sets of muffled cries and whimpers. They were those of my parents.

“We just don’t know what this is,” the unknown man spoke solemnly to my mother and father. “It appears David is conscious and aware of his surroundings, but is unable to help us determine his condition.” I heard my mother cry out, and I yelled for her from the bed in my white room. What came out, though, were not words. Not chirps either. These were screeches. Screeches from a chick, calling for its mother.

About the Author:
Jacob W. Brannan currently does work relating to home remodels, with a focus on tiling, and outside of work he's an all around horror enthusiast. He currently resides in Orange Park, Florida, where he enjoys reading, watching movies, and spending time with family.

Instagram: @its_jakebrannan
Twitter: @JakeBrannan5499

Darkness | Destiny Eve Pifer

Down the rocky path she tumbled. Over rocks, soil and broken glass. Broken beer bottles pierced her flesh. A rite of passage into a college sorority that had gone horribly wrong. Now here she lay among the broken branches and fallen leaves. One of her legs was broken along with a few ribs. She gasped for air as blood filled her mouth. Her lungs were punctured that much she knew. But what waited in the darkness was a horror she did not expect. The predator attacked without mercy. Its sharp teeth sinking into her flesh ripping and tearing her apart.

About the Author:
Destiny Eve Pifer is a published author whose work has appeared in numerous anthologies by Black Hare Press, Scary Snippets and Fun Dead Publications. Her work has also appeared in anthologies by Zimbell Publishing and Temptation Press. Some of her articles have appeared in FATE Magazine, Country Magazine, True Confessions and Autism Parenting Magazine. She currently resides in Pennsylvania with her son.
Sitting on a tree stump at the edge of the forest, Nat stuck a chaw of Redman chewing tobacco in his lower lip. Stuffing it in tightly with his fingers, he squeezed his jaw, getting the first flow of juices into his bloodstream.

“I can’t believe you’re chewing that shit now. It’s five a.m.,” his friend Spivey said to him as he himself lit up another cigarette while half walking half jogging back and forth to get warm.

“Look who’s talking,” Nat said. “The patch is supposed to be in place of cigarettes, not in addition to.”

“Screw you,” Spivey replied.

Nat laughed again as his friend jumped up and down like a pogo stick. It was a cold October morning, their breath forming frozen halos around them. They were starting a new job with a local construction firm helping to build an addition to an elementary school. They had agreed to meet the foreman at this junction of Indian Hill Road and Forestview Road. Not wanting to be late on the first day, they wound up extremely early. Nat stood pulling his too-light jacket tighter around his neck and squeezing the tobacco for a good rush of nicotine. He took a little walk toward his truck which was parked just off the road. One more check into the bed to make sure that they had all their equipment and Nat turned around to talk to his friend.

Spivey had stopped hopping around and was now standing with his head cocked sideways, staring at a tree stump.

“What the hell are you doing now?” Nat growled, walking up next to him.

“Watch that stump,” Spivey whispered.

“Why? And why are you whispering?”

“Something is in there. I don’t want to scare it off.”

Nat looked at what appeared to be a two-foot diameter tree stump, leveled off at the top, sloping down at a 30 degree angle. The angled side was facing them and on the top of that surface was a narrow slit.

“It came out of that little hole?” Nat asked.

“Yeah.”

“What was it?”

“I don’t know. That’s why I want to see it again. It looked weird though.”

“ Weird how?”

“You know, weird.”

“Spivey, don’t get me pissed off this early in the morning.”

“A tongue, okay. Are you happy? It looked like a tongue,” Spivey caught his voice rising and suddenly lowered it again. Nat just stared at his friend.

“A tongue?” Spivey nodded. “Like the thing that sits in the bottom of your mouth?” Another nod. “You have got . . .” Spivey grabbed Nat’s coat and pointed to the stump. Nat turned and saw it for the first time.

Popping up through the tiny slit like bread from a toaster, the creature stretched itself out along the surface of the stump, feeling all around it. It looked like a tongue, and Spivey gave Nat an I-told-you-so grin.

Thick and light pink in color, whatever it was extended more of itself out of the hole, touching different spots on the wood as if it were looking for something. Nat crept closer and he heard Spivey following. The tongue lifted its . . . head? It turned from side to side, listening, Nat guessed, although he saw no ears.

When they were about two feet from the stump, they both knelt down on one knee to get a better look. The tongue continued its search around the top of the stump, elongating its body to over a foot at one point. Every few seconds it would stand erect and weave from side to side. Nat couldn’t tell if it heard or smelled him and Spivey or if it was just an instinctive precaution. Finally, it started to retract back into the hole. It went back in except a few inches that still stood out, twitching in the bitter air.

Being very quiet, Nat moved closer. Bending down so he was at eye level, so to speak, he studied the animal. The skin looked dimpled and blotchy at the edges, but the middle was soft and pink. Nat looked at Spivey and saw him mouth the words, “What is it?” Nat just shrugged. When he turned back, he had only a second to react. A small opening appeared on the top of the creature, and it spewed forth a stream of warm, sticky liquid. It hit Nat between the eyes, splattering his face, knocking him to the ground.

Nat lay on the ground, stunned but unhurt. Spivey appeared overtop of him.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah. It just smells bad.” He looked at his friend and could see him struggling not to laugh.
“Go ahead, asshole, let it out.” With permission given, Spivey exploded, his high-pitched, manic giggle echoing through the woods. Nat sat up using his coat sleeve to wipe the goop off his face. It smelled like rancid hamburger and adhered to his skin like gum. Meanwhile Spivey was rolling on the ground, holding his sides.

“You never saw it coming, man,” he shouted. “Woosh, splat.” Nat threw a rock, hitting Spivey in the foot. “Ok, ok, I’m stopping, but that was classic.” Nat started for the truck to get an old rag to clean up with.

“Hey, he’s back,” he heard Spivey say and turned to see the tongue sneaking back out of its hole. Spivey walked a little closer. The creature had gained temerity.

“Leave it alone unless you want this shit all over you,” Nat yelled back to Spivey. Loosening an old duffel bag, Nat pulled out a torn, soiled t-shirt and wiped the mess from his face. He was breathing in the smell of oil from the shirt when he heard Spivey scream. Nat spun around to see the tongue two feet out of its hole, head angled and flared like a cobra. Spivey already had his face buried in his hands when the thing shot another stream of liquid at him. Spivey screamed again.

Nat ran to his friend and at the approaching footsteps, the tongue sank back into its hole.

“Spivey, what is it?”

“It burns! It burns.” Nat rolled Spivey over and saw red welts on the back of his hands. Gently Nat pulled the hands away. He gasped when he saw his friend’s face. The skin was bright red, with white slashes burned into the color. Welts were raised like he’d been stung by a dozen bees. The whites of his eyes were bloody red.

“Hang on, buddy. I’ll get you to some help.”

“What the hell is that thing, Nat? Shit it hurts. What happened?”

“I don’t know. I don’t understand, it didn’t hurt me. It doesn’t matter, we have to get you to a doctor, but first I have to kill that thing. The doctor’s going to have to know what it is to help you and I don’t know what to tell him. You understand? Can you hang on?”

“Yeah.”

“Ok. I’m going to the truck to get my ax, ok?”

“Yeah. Nat?”

“What, buddy?”

“I can’t see. I’m blind.”

Nat opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He held onto his friend for a long moment, then laid him back onto the forest floor. He ran to the truck and began throwing his tools helter skelter until he dug out the long-handled ax. Grabbing a blanket and the old t-shirt he had used as a rag, he ran back to Spivey. Nat laid the blanket over Spivey’s shivering body. Then he wrapped the shirt around his coat sleeve. Holding his now club-like left arm in front of his face, he hoisted the ax with the right hand.

The tongue wasn’t visible. Quickly Nat grabbed the ax with both hands and brought it down onto the stump, driving the blade several inches into the wood. Ready to cover his face at any second, he brought the ax down again and again, forming a deep rift in the middle of the stump. Then as he was wriggling the blade free one more time, he saw the tongue weaving its way under the blade. He threw his arm in front of his face.

The tongue stretched its body out, winding around the ax handle. Using only one hand, Nat couldn’t extricate the blade. He felt the handle moving, loosening his grip. Suddenly his body was pulled toward the stump. Twisted tightly around the tool, the tongue had yanked Nat toward it and then leapt at him. He felt the creature snap like a whip when it wrapped around his right arm. Another enormous tug, and he was off balance. His right hand smashed into the tree stump.

Looking down he saw the bottom half of the tongue disappear into a tunnel that ran through the middle of the stump. Another jerk and Nat’s arm followed it down the hole. Falling to his knees, he tried desperately to pull his arm free. His shoulder joint burned and he could hear tearing, feel his muscles ripping. There was a loud pop just before Nat howled. He dug his heels into the dirt, scrambling to get his arm back, but it was too late. With one more hard pull, Nat’s arm tore off, sending him tumbling backwards into the ground.

He lay on the cold forest floor, reaching his left hand over to feel blood rush from the tattered remnants of his right arm. A soft rustling surrounded him. Nat sat up quickly to see the tongue staring at him from the tree stump, and in the bushes behind the stump, another one waited. He looked to his left catching sight of a chunk of bark falling from a tree revealing another. Remembering Spivey, Nat looked to his friend. A wet snap and one of Spivey’s eyes popped out, a tongue rising up through the socket.

Nat jumped to his feet and ran to the truck. From under every rock and around every tree, another creature appeared to watch him.
The old pick-up clanked to a stop, a young man climbing out the passenger side before movement was completely halted. He looked around, walking a few dozen feet into the woods. He found a set of tire tracks and an old rag but not the two men he’d expected to find.

The engine of the pick-up shut off and the driver’s side door squealed open. A grizzled older man with a corkscrew gait ambled over to the younger man.

“Where the hell are they?”
“Looks like they were here and left. Tire tracks over by that tree.”
“Dammit, I need the extra help to get this building finished. I knew they looked like shit-eaters. Come on, let’s go.” The older man started back toward the truck, but noticed his partner was staring at something.

“What the hell are you looking at?” he groused.
“There’s something in that chewed up tree stump over there.”
“What?”
“Don’t know, but it looked like a tongue,” the young man laughed as he moved closer.

Into the Darkness | Christopher Hivner

The plane was going down. One engine was on fire and Quinn had seen the other one fall off. The pilot was trying to level the craft, but the wind was ferocious.

Stalking to the back of the 6-seater he opened every compartment until he found a parachute. He strapped it on, yanked open the door and before diving out into the darkness, grabbed the girl in seat three.

Screaming, she wrapped herself around him. The excitement caused Quinn to change prematurely. The chute opened with the fur of his muzzle scratching her cheek and his claws shredding her back.

About the Author:
Christopher Hivner is an introvert who has pretty much lived like he was in quarantine all his life. He has recently been published in The Horror Zine and Blood Moon Rising.

Facebook: Christopher Hivner - Author
Twitter: @Your_screams

Conjuring Karma | Tina Swain

These words spoken aloud are meaningless to all but one. An audible yet unspoken jolt begins the process within an ebb and flow of searing pain, blistering every fiber of it’s being. It knows the route, contracting pains unsurvivable by anything mortal gives way to extreme relief as a first breath fills the putrid cavity. It sees through unconventional eyes, a figure kneeling before a familiar altar. It can smell the reward of gore as manifestation begins. Amused, it knows they are all the same, their revenge and power hungry urges in return for sweet flesh from the unsuspecting conjurer.

About the Author:
Tina Swain is a resident of Houston, Texas and has been a lifelong lover of horror. When she is not writing or teaching, she makes movies with her friends.

Facebook: Tina Swain
...Forced to survive the night alone in the desert with an aberration of nature...

Mothsquito

Pedro Iniguez

Available for Purchase or Borrow Exclusively on Amazon
I used to live in an old farm house with my wife and my two sons. My wife, Darla, was the most beautiful woman you would ever see. She had a pair of piercing green eyes and shoulder length scarlet hair that shimmered like a glittering mirror in the sun. She was truly amazing. My two sons, Henry and Adam were more than I could ask for. We didn't live in amazing conditions. The house was a little run down, some of the lights didn't work. It was a bit of a struggle to flush the toilet sometimes. It was never dirty, though. We always took care of what we had and appreciated the small things.

My uncle actually left me the place when he passed away and that was how we came to be there. We were living in the town not too far away, but it was tough going there, rent was a killer and we barely made any progress in life, so we decided to move into the old house as our living costs would be brought down a lot. Darla was at first a little apprehensive about the idea when she first saw the place but I think the idea of being able to afford better food and clothing and toys for the kids weighed stronger in her mind, so she eventually agreed.

We had some difficulty getting settled but after the stress of getting the place habitable had died down we made the best we could of it. The small inconveniences outweighed what it did for us as a family. Looking back now, I truly wish I had made less effort to coax Darla into it. Things would have been vastly different.

The land where the house stood was no longer suitable for farming, something was wrong with the soil, and my uncle had never taken care of the problem and had kind of left it to rot. It did have a certain charm to it, though. There were many trees which housed many different species of birds and even some other woodland creatures such as squirrels and foxes. A small lake sat not far from the back of the house.

With some work it could have been a wonderful place. At least that’s what I thought back then. Now? Now I wish I could just burn every inch of it off the face of the earth.

A Tuesday morning found me in the kitchen tinkering with the stove as it had been giving Darla some trouble lately, when I heard Adam yelling from outside and running towards the house. I immediately dropped everything and ran out to meet him. He shouted hysterically that Henry had slipped on the bank of the lake and fallen in and he'd gone under and not come back up. My heart froze instantly upon hearing this and I sprinted faster than I ever had to the edge of the lake. Adam caught up to me and pointed frantically to where he had seen Henry go under and I leapt into the cold water to save my son.

A murky darkness met me under the water and I began to truly panic, not knowing how I would find him if I couldn’t see him. Somehow, by some miracle, to my left I saw movement and I could just barely see a pair of legs thrashing in the water. I struck out towards them and grabbed one of Henry’s legs and pulled him towards me. He went absolutely ballistic, trying to scream, a thin stream of bubbles dashing for the surface out of his mouth. It took me a few seconds to pull him closer and make him see that it was me. He stopped kicking and thrashing and together we managed to break the surface and gasped for breath, Henry choking slightly on the bit of water he had swallowed in his fear. I dragged him with me to the bank and pulled him out of the water. We just lay on our backs for a while, recovering and catching our breath. Adam sat next to us, crying and shaking out of fear and relief.

After recovering I got up, very angry and I towered over the boys in my rage, yelling at them about how many times I had warned them not to play by the lake as I didn’t know if it was safe and they had always said they wouldn’t but they had broken the rule. In the middle of my rant, I noticed Henry was just staring at the water blankly and not listening to a word I was saying. I relented and crouched down next to him. He was obviously traumatized and now wasn’t the time to be yelling at him.

I took them inside and Darla grabbed Henry and sobbed and shook him, telling him never to do something like that again. She took him upstairs to get him dry and into bed. Meanwhile, I rounded on Adam, as he was the older son and gave him a stern talking to. He apologized over and over and I eventually let him be, believing he was scared and sorry enough.

I sat at the kitchen table with a beer after Adam went upstairs and drank deeply to calm my nerves. I was still soaking wet but I didn’t care. A short time later Darla came downstairs with a concerned expression on her face.

“Is he okay?” I asked her.

“I don’t know. He isn’t talking to me and he doesn’t even look at me. He looks through me. He’s really shaken up”

“I told them a million times not to go playing there. And they always promised they wouldn’t.”

“They’re kids, Will. The temptation is too much for them. You know that. You were a little boy, too” she finished. I nodded my head.
“I know. We have to talk to them again when they feel better. I need to get out of these clothes and dry off.” Darla took my empty bottle after I drained my beer and I went to the bathroom and peeled off my clothes and took a warm shower. When I was done, I went to Henry’s room to check on him. He was lying on his bed staring at the ceiling. I sat down on the edge of his bed.

“Hey, buddy. Are you okay?” I asked him.

He stared at the ceiling a little longer and then he began to cry. He sat up and hugged me tight and I hugged him.

“I’m sorry Dad” he sobbed.

“It’s okay, boy. You’re okay and that’s all that matters” I said. He stared at me and lowered his voice a little.

“Dad, when I was in the water, something touched me. Something tried to pull me down” he said.

“No, son, I was the one who touched you. I was pulling you closer to me”

“It wasn’t you, Dad. Something pulled me under the water before you came”

“I… But what, son?” I asked him uncertainly. I couldn’t get anything more out of him and he fell asleep after a while, exhausted from the ordeal. Later, when I spoke to Darla, I told her what he had said. She seemed just as confused and concerned as I was and didn’t really know what to say.

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The next day I went down to the lake and stood there for a while, looking out over the water. It was completely still and silent. I could see no movement. No ripples. Nothing. Maybe it was a trick of the mind, but somehow the water was almost too still. Unnaturally still. I looked out for a little while longer and then put it out of my mind.

I spent the rest of the day finishing up the stove and fixing some of the lights that didn’t work. That night, while Darla and I were in bed, she said Henry seemed to be better now and was behaving normally. I said I was glad and kissed her goodnight and we went to bed.

***

There was a strange smell in the air now. A salty, murky watery smell, and I could hear a gentle sloshing. An icy wind breathed over my skin as I became aware of where I was. Standing over the edge of the lake. I faintly wondered to myself how I had gotten here. I remembered kissing Darla and going to sleep, but now I was here. Or was I? I couldn’t tell if I was dreaming or not. Somehow it didn’t seem like I was but I must have been. In the midst of turning away from the water to go back to the house I glimpsed a slight movement in the water and I froze. As I looked on in horror, a dark shape emerged from below the surface, sending large ripples outwards. It was huge, and flailing out from behind the shape, as it ascended, were long black tendrils that seemed as if they were pure darkness itself. It rose further from the surface and I realized it was the head of some horrific black mass. A pair of strange glowing amber eyes slowly opened and fixed themselves on me.

The water started to churn and boil as it moved and I felt a scream rising in my throat. Staring at this strange glistening black mass of eyes and tentacles was going to drive me insane. I began to run, finally letting out the scream that had been brewing inside me, but I didn’t get five steps before a slimy dark tentacle shot out of the water and wrapped itself around my waist. I was lifted, screaming into the air and felt myself yanked backwards.

Then I hit the surface of the water.

Down, down I went. Endlessly down. I could see the thing more clearly now. It was massive, but it seemed like nothing more than a writhing black mass of tentacles. It was truly terrifying. I thrashed and panicked in its grasp, my fear indescribable, as it pulled me further down. My vision was fading. My breath was gone. I was dying.

***

And then I woke up still screaming and trying to shake myself out of the grasp of its tentacles. It took me a few moments to realize I was lying on the floor next to my bed and I jumped up, harshly gasping to catch my breath.

Darla wasn’t in the room. Everything was quiet. It was morning. It seemed like late morning. I’d overslept? Maybe everyone was down in the kitchen having breakfast. But that didn’t seem right. Darla would’ve woken me as she knew I didn’t like to sleep late.

Fear and dread crept over me again as I ran out of the room. I went to each of the boy’s rooms and my panic rose as I found each one empty. There was no one in the kitchen either. I began to scream their names as I ran out of the backdoor and I screamed louder when I saw that the surface of the lake churned and boiled just like it did in my dream. As I got closer to the bank, the white foaming water seemed to calm down and my soul shattered somewhere deep inside me when I saw Darla’s body float up out of the water, face down. Two smaller bodies floated up seconds afterwards, just before I leapt into the water myself, screaming. I managed with a massive effort to drag them all to the bank and out of the water.
I lost myself then. Trying in turn to resuscitate them and when it wouldn’t work, I screamed in despair and tried
the next one. I couldn’t save any of them. They were gone. My family was gone. I sat there with their bodies for hours
and just wailed and screamed in sorrow. They were all I had. My life and my soul. My love. My wife. My beautiful Darla.
My wonderful boys. Lost so young. My everything was gone. I sit at the edge of the lake every day now. I look out over
the water and wonder why. Why didn’t it take me? Why did it fool me into thinking it did while in reality it took my
family instead? I’ve tried screaming out over the water and demanding to know why. I eventually got to the stage of
begging it to just take me too so I could be with them again.
It’s all useless though. It never responds. And in the dark place that is now my mind, I seem to understand that
for some reason it didn’t want me.
It only wanted them.

About the Author:
B.M. Norman is an aspiring writer of horror fiction based in Durban, South Africa. He is extremely passionate about all
things horror and is always on the hunt for opportunities to polish his skills and learn from the best as well as expand his
horizons.

Facebook: B.M. Norman

Back to Earth | Evan Baughfman

Seven-year-old A.J. snuck into the sleigh, hoping to soon see the North Pole and its various wonders. The elves!
The toy factory! Polar bears!
When Santa squeezed out of a neighbor’s chimney, A.J. crouched lower, behind massive bundles of tethered
gifts.
Santa buckled himself in tight, then grabbed the reins of his magical deer.
A.J. smiled. They were off, rocketing into the sky at incredible speed! Unimaginable, dizzying speed, A.J. discovered.
Within seconds, the boy puked and blacked out. Freezing winds flung him, unnoticed, from the sleigh.
Weeks later, he was found, mangled, atop a skyscraper, nineteen miles from home.

The Fang Fairy | Evan Baughfman

She was careful not to wake the child.
Reaching under his pillow, she pulled twin tiny fangs into her palm, replacing them with gold coins.
The little vampire’s teeth, rotted loose after a candy cane binge, went inside a coat pocket.
Above her, something stirred.
The older brother, red eyes glowing, not asleep in the other room.
He dropped, hissing, hungry, to the floor.
The fairy bared her own fangs. Rows of them. Readied her claws. Poisonous, barbed wingtips, also.
Once she eliminated the brother, she’d probably have to neutralize the parents, too.
God, she really needed a new job...

About the Author:
Evan Baughfman is a middle school teacher and author. Much of his writing success has been as a playwright. He’s had
many different plays produced across the globe. Evan also writes horror fiction. His collection of short stories, The
Emaciated Man and Other Terrifying Tales from Poe Middle School, is published by Thurston Howl Publications. More
information is available at his author page on Amazon and his website.

Facebook: Evan Baughfman
Instagram: @Agent00evan_716
Carmen carefully set the glass globe on the pink comforter that draped her bed. "This is the one," she said to her friend Theresa, who sat cross-legged on an oval, braided rug in front of the toy chest. "I found it in my mom's room, in a box in her closet. I don't know what to do, or who to talk to. Come here and look at it with me," she pleaded.

Theresa lowered her chin and raised large, suspicious eyes. "No, I don't want to," she said. "I think I want to go home, now," she added, dropping the twelve-inch fashion doll she was dressing. She scrambled to her feet.

Carmen pushed herself off the bed and hopped to Theresa's side. "Please, Terry, please! Pretty please?" Theresa shook her head and coiled a strand of her auburn ponytail around a finger.

"I'll give you my Mermaid Princess Carly with the pink hair if you look. Please, I need you to look. You're my best friend." Theresa's face became flushed. "Really? Won't your mom be mad if you give your doll away? My mom says they cost a lot of money.

Carmen tried not to cry. "I don't know what to do, Terry. Please, look at it with me. I don't want to bother my mom, I don't want to make her mad; if I show it to her, and she sees what I think I see, she'll be really upset. I don't want to make any more trouble for her. She has a lot on her mind."

Theresa gripped the hem of her lavender sparkle t-shirt for a moment. "Okay, and you can keep your Mermaid Princess."

Carmen was already up on the twin bed, crawling with a bounce to a kneeling position in front of the globe. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said to the six-inch diameter sphere that was secured to a wooden stand.

Theresa slowly pulled herself beside her friend. "Okay, show me," she said, trying to sound confident.

"Look inside. Here...." She presented a magnifying glass.

Theresa took the handle and moved the round of the magnifier up and down several times until she found her focus. "Oh, it's pretty. There's a little pond, with a bench right beside it, and a weeping willow tree. And a rose garden. All inside a glass ball. It's very nice...." She started to straighten.

"Keep looking," Carmen demanded. "My mom collects these glass balls with places and things inside them—they're on the credenza downstairs. But this one was packed away. I was messing around in her closet yesterday, and found it."

"It's like a snow globe," Theresa said happily, but then abruptly jerked as if she'd had an electric shock. A noise midway between a cry and a gasp escaped her throat. "What ... what is that?" she asked, peering into the magnifier once more. "Oh no, oh no, oh shit, what is that?" She leaned closer, trying to adjust for the way the curvature refracted the light. "It's a man. I see a little man. He's ... crawling around on the grass next to the bench, he's holding up his arms and ... and ... I think he looked at me. His face is alive; his mouth is open." She abruptly bent over and put her ear to the cold glass surface. "I don't hear anything."

Carmen's eyes were wide. "I saw him too! But I wanted someone else to see him, so I know I'm not crazy. Do you think he can see us? He must be totally scared."

Theresa snapped up her head. "Who do you think he is?"

Carmen placed her fingers on either side of the wood stand and brought her face very close. "I think ... I think I've seen a regular person like him before but he keeps trying to hide when someone is looking and he's so tiny, I can't really tell. See! He's on all fours like a dog ... I think he's trying to crawl under the rose bushes." She sat up.

The two ten-year-olds stared at one another until Carmen heard Elphaba, their Doberman, barking. The front door opened, closed. She heard her mother's cheery voice, "Carmen, sweetie, I'm home!"

"Should we tell your mom?" Theresa asked under her breath.

Carmen scrambled backward off the bed, dragging the glass globe with her. "No, I don't want to. Mom is so busy and it's been hard on her since my dad disappeared. I mean, I think she's happier because they're not fighting all the time anymore, and he's not coming home drunk and throwing things, and his girlfriends stopped bothering us, too, but we don't have enough money. Mommy has to work two jobs now. Wait ... I hear her coming upstairs ... don't tell her, okay?"

Theresa nodded, made the sign of the cross, pressed her right index finger against her pursed lips.

Carmen carefully hefted the glass ball, cupping it in her palms as she walked quickly to her pink-painted chest of drawers. "Open it for me," she whispered.

Theresa slid off the comforter and skipped over, quietly pulled the middle drawer by a china knob until there was enough space to slip the globe inside.
"Good, thanks," she said. She gave Theresa a hug, pushed the drawer closed with a hip. "Poor tiny man," she whispered. "We'll come back and look at you later."

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

**Facebook:** Rivka Jacobs  
**Twitter:** @RivkaJacob

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**Archer Avenue | Darlene Holt**

"Don’t step on a crack or you’ll fall and break your back!"

The neighborhood kids chant as they leapfrog each crevice of Archer Avenue’s sidewalk, blissfully ignorant of the twelve children that had already gone missing.

But they play on, walking and singing, jumping gaps overgrown with weeds.

Until little Davey Brown thinks it’s funny to push Hannah Cole a moment before her leap.

The kids watch, horror-stricken, as the pavement rips open, revealing a grotesque tongue and deadly, pointed teeth. The mouth viciously swallows her up, then quickly reseals, muffling her screams as she’s lost to its cavernous depths.

**Summer Camp | Darlene Holt**

The first night at summer camp, we told stories around the campfire. One counselor spoke of a monster that dwelled in the camp’s lake. He said to never swim in the deep part or its tentacles would pull you under. We thought it was a scary story to get us to follow camp rules, but Bobby Schafer didn’t like rules. He dove in and swam until he couldn’t touch the bottom—dead center of the lake. When he flailed his arms and struggled to stay afloat, we all laughed. It wasn’t until the bubbles stopped surfacing that we stopped laughing.

**Dehydration | Darlene Holt**

"Pardon me, miss, but would you fancy a drink?"

The dark figure alarms the woman. Stopping mid-step, she’s chilled by the December breeze as she peers around the empty streets. She laughs. "How can we get drinks when nothing’s open?"

"I’ll show you," he hisses, and suddenly he’s standing over her, intoxicated by the familiar flash of fear in her eyes. His skeletal fingers curl around her jaw until he rips it open, the crack of breaking bones muffled by her shrieks. He inhales as her soul wisps from her throat like black smoke, slithering into his dark, abyssal mouth.

**About the Author:**
Darlene Holt is an educator, writer, and language enthusiast. Her previously published story, *Blood Moon*, appears in *The Penmen Review*, and her poetry appears in *The Scarlet Leaf Review* and *The Drabble*. She has an MA in English and Creative Writing and currently resides in San Diego, California, where she enjoys reading horror stories and spending time with her fiancé and cats.
I can't say I ever wanted to rule my people. I believe the gods decided my fate long before I was born. We never needed to unite under one banner until the invaders came. Our people had been voyagers since the time of the ancients. We used the gods' blessings to build our koa canoes and outriggers to sail across the vast oceans, guided by the stars and our skills. We settled on lands created by the temperamental goddess, Pele, fiery with her temper, who always fought with her sisters guarding the oceans.

I was born in North Kohala during a great storm of comets, and meteor showers announcing my arrival. My mother was the daughter of the village chief and named me Pai'ea. The people of my village saw this as a sign the heavens delivered a magnificent leader to them. But it was not long after I was born that the tribes from the other islands threatened our clan, forcing my mother to send me away in the dead of night for protection.

We ran to Waipio, living with my mother and father until I was five. Each day, warriors would come in secret to train me. They hid everything in games - our oral history as a people, the navigation routes of hiding and seeking to the other islands, ways to spy and sneak around. Other chiefs came to teach me the style of war we practiced and how we prayed to the gods in thanks for the bounty they gave us and the mercy in sparing our lives. I often thought and wished it was my father who could have taught me instead of them. He died when I was still a child in hiding. I didn't understand why he left, even though my mother said his spirit was guarding and guiding me with our ancestors. She still doesn't know how much I saw her weep for him night after night.

I heard of the foreigners coming to the island from my uncle, the Chief of our Island. With their large wooden ships and red, white, and blue flags, they attempted to capture our locals when they first came to our islands, demanding we serve them. My uncle and I met with their leaders and fought in a battle that killed their leader, a man they called ‘Captain James Cook’, in retaliation for their crimes. Once the invaders left our islands, we thought we were safe, so our people stayed separate, happy to continue our ways on our own portions of land formed by lava and ocean, trading with one another but not united.

My uncle passed away a year after this battle, and on his deathbed, he entrusted me as the war god Kuka'ilimoku. To his own son, he named my cousin the political heir of the island, a feat not unheard of but rare amongst the kingdom. I never asked my cousin how he felt about the split, but given our fellow warriors proclaimed I walked hand in hand with violence and death, I doubt he misunderstood why my uncle did it. As an adolescent man, training to be a warrior, they would test me like my brothers to see if I would be the one to fulfill a prophecy. Our village's holy men foretold of a man who would lift the legendary Naha stone, and in doing so, would help us break the bonds of our own strife with one another and unite our people against the invading forces. I remember approaching the horrendously large rock, too large for any one man to wrap his arms around it. I remember the gasps from the crowds as the sweat broke on my face, dripping down my chin as I cried a guttural yell to push the ground away and hoist the stone. The jagged edges scratched my back as my veins threatened to burst through my legs and my chest, but it moved up into the air. Lifting this ungodly piece of rock and my uncle's gift of the war god title gave me something I never thought I'd have - a political claim.

When my cousin left to bury my uncle's bones, the men who wished to fight and live alongside me waited and toasted my uncle's life. We held the customary ceremonies to carry the warriors and top chiefs of old into the land beyond. My cousin was supposed to come back and give the portion of land that would come with my title as a war god, but he tried to cheat me instead upon his return. Our island, the big island, became divided into a sea of broken alliances and battles. Brother fought brother as we pushed each other to garner privilege and victory. It was bloody and vicious, cementing my reputation as barbarous, unforgiving, and merciless against my enemies. It took my people four years until we finally defeated my cousin in battle, but still, his people would not relent to my authority.

Instead of resting, I set my sights outward to the other islands, attacking Maui and its chief Kahekili. I used the British foreigners who came back to help me accomplish this attack as Maui's chief had amassed the most power over the islands of O'ahu, Maui, Moloka'i, and Lana'i. I used the large foreign ships with cannons to push Maui's island into a retreat and staking my claim to the other islands. My legend spread as I expanded my family, claiming women from each tribe along the way as a wife. I would have seven by the end of the fighting, but even in
their arms, I could not forget my calling. The call of battle, for blood, for violence. I tried to quiet my mind in the
night, but the gods would not give me rest until I had fulfilled the prophecy, the destiny they had laid before me.

I sacrificed and prayed to the gods after every battle, after every victory and every defeat. It was my duty as
chief but also my only tie to the guide I needed to carve the path I started. That’s the funny part of destiny. When I
came out of hiding as a child, my mother renamed me, a sign of the evolution in my path - Kamehameha. In our
language, it translates to ‘The Lonely One’. She knew even then that being chosen means being alone. We set apart
those given a destiny from the world, divided against the many. Everyone tells you it’s there, but they cannot show
you how to get there. My people expected deliverance and a war god. I needed to fulfill that somehow, someway
with no trail to follow or guide. The seers in Kaua’i told me to sacrifice to our war god, and I did. The image it gave
me was the waves of the salty, violent sea, pushing and pulling our battle born, splintered oars back and forth.

This vision swayed my decision to continue trade with the British. I built up and supplied my army with
cannons, ships, and guns for the sandalwood they craved. My army used this devil's firepower to keep the
rebellious islands in line as I went island to island to claim my rightful throne. Those I conquered learned my
people’s way of trade and rebuilt the way of life for the villagers who were still operating in the old ways. My
interaction with the foreigners taught me alternative ways to kill, fight, and command my armies as it seemed they
were a people who understood bloodshed well. Their captains regaled me with their tales of conquest across the
seas for their chiefs.

It would be twenty years since my traitorous cousin tried to take my rightful inheritance to the time I could
claim victory over all the islands as a nation called Hawaii. This was the first time our people would unite under one
chief. About my evolution, I became their first king - King Kamehameha I. I fulfilled my destiny as a god of war for
my people, but now I needed to rule them. In honor of the vision and the gods that guided me to my rightful place,
I reinstated the Ke Kānāwai Māmalahoe, meaning the Law of the Splintered Paddle. In my conquests, I came upon
a tiny village where a fisherman struck me with the oar of his canoe, defending his family. As a warrior, I let him go
even though my men knew I could have killed him easily. Men of honor should be able to defend themselves. This
law enabled every man, woman, and child traveling in my kingdom to rest during travel along any part of the roads
without fear of attack. My army enforced this law. The defenseless and traveling would be protected at all times,
regardless of their allegiances.

The ruling would never last as long as fighting the battles. My time on the throne only lasted nine years
before I died. It’s the other side of destiny, the edge to the sword. Once you complete your task, they discard you,
left alone, as the world turns to the next chapter of change. I united my people after hundreds of generations of
inter-tribal war and strife. Now we called ourselves Hawaiians under my flag, but I would only see the glimmer. I
would only see the beginnings of the fight to reclaim our culture, our heritage. The foreigners brought more than
guns to our island. They brought diseases and religions. A god that forced ours to disappear. A god that said our
oral history through dance was obscene because of the fact our women took part. They conquered us not through
battle but with trade. My bloodline fights to reclaim our lands again, to invoke our war god once more. But he no
longer smiles upon us, abandoning us like we left him.

I’ve heard they celebrate me now, calling June eleventh a day of honor and sacrifice to me. It began with
Kamehameha the V, recognizing my sacrifice for my people. They call me a hero, an example. Each year they line
up the streets with dancers and riders escorting flowers and torchbearers to my statues. They drape strings of
colorful leis around my neck and hold parades to pass my story on to our future generations. An irony to me now
as I march with the army of the dead in the fog of the islands. The night marchers and I cannot rest. We cannot
stop. Bloodshed and vengeance guide me because I am a god of war and I still hunger for death’s call, even beyond
the grave.

About the Author:
Victory Witherkeigh is a first-time female Filipino author originally from Los Angeles, CA and now based in the Pacific
Northwest. Victory has been a finalist for Killer Nashville’s 2020 Claymore Award and Wingless Dreamer’s 2020
Overcoming Fear Short Story award.

Twitter: @witherkeigh
The Window to Your Soul | Dawn DeBraal

Mason Fuller-Vanderbilt watched the children in the park. He wasn't there for the children; he was there for one particular woman, Sarah Wout, who fit his profile to a 't'. She was blond, blue-eyed, petite, always dressed just so.

The little boy was not allowed to get dirty. Imagine that, take a child to the playground and tell him he can't be in the sandbox. Just like his mother who wiped down the swing with a sanitized wipe. She would push him exactly five times. Never four, never six. Mason was a very frustrated little boy.

Mason's father left on his fifth birthday. He had the lighter to start the candles on his cake and left to get a pack of cigarettes. They waited and waited, but Mr. Fuller never returned. He took off with their neighbor Maggie Cranston, and never came home.

Mason's mom, who had up until this point only had the job qualifications of being a wife and mother, admittedly, not very good at that, was suddenly forced into the job world to support her son who she told every day that men were scum. Funny she never thought about Mason being a male. Just a burden because she couldn't find another man to support them. No one wanted to raise her bastard child.

On Mason's eighth birthday, he tripped his mother down the stairs. A skateboard strategically placed at the top of the steps let Clara hang ten down sixteen stairs. How many times had Mason left that skateboard outside the apartment in the hall?

The emergency personnel took her to the hospital. Being only eight-years-old, it was arranged that a neighbor would stay with Mason at home.

Mason was watching television when the police knocked on his door. That's when he found out his mommy was dead, and he was moving into foster care. He had to let them take Herman, his cat. There was no room at the Foster's care, for a cat. Mason cried. Maybe killing his mother wasn't such a hot idea, after all. He had a decent place to live, and the love of his cat. Now he had none of those things.

The first foster family, the Deklan's, were kind enough. They lived in a small house; he shared a bedroom with Andrew, a pasty red-haired boy about the same age. Andrew cleaned out one side of the room and put a piece of tape down the middle of the floor. Mason was not allowed on Andrew's side of the room. The tape started at the door. Mason had to hug the door hinge to keep to his side. Andy was prone to fits of anger. If Mason didn't stay off the line, he would punch him in the stomach. Mason soon learned not to come near the line. He lay in his bed and missed his cat, but not his mother. Whenever the boys would fight, Mrs. Deklan sided with Andrew, of course.

His six months up, Mason was moved to another house. Marita, the was brown-eyed eldest child was cruel like his mother and changed him. Home after home added a new twist to Mason's view on life.

It was the Vanderbilt's that had the most effect on Mason. Mr. Vanderbilt was a taxidermist by trade. He showed Mason the fine art of taking a dead animal and restoring it to look alive again. Mason took to it like a duck to water. The Vanderbilt's never had children, they adopted him. Those final years of his childhood were the best for Mason, but the psychological damage had already been done. He was twenty-two when Mr. Vanderbilt died. True to some marriages, Mrs. Vanderbilt died a few short months later, leaving the house, land and a generous trust fund to Mason.

Sarah looked like his mother and Marita. There was no room in the world for the Clara-Marita's. He asked Sarah to meet him for a drink in a bar after their chat at the playground. Sarah willingly came home with him that night.

"Nice house, but all these dead things give me the creeps."

"They're dead. They can't hurt you." Mason had almost slipped up, nearly calling her Marita. Sarah fingered the drawerful of glass eyes all sizes and colors.

"These look so real!"

"Which ones are your favorite?" Mason was excited by her pick.

"These," Sarah pulled out two large brown eyes.

"Those are wonderful. You know, the eyes are the window to your soul," Mason whispered as he stepped behind her with a rag of ether clamping it over her mouth.

Removing Sarah's eyes, he expertly fitted the brown eyes Sarah loved, inserting them into the now vacant orbital openings, sewing them so that they were even, he was a professional, after all.

"Sarah, are you awake?" she moaned, putting her hands to her face feeling the bandage on her head.

"What happened to my eyes?" She sat up suddenly, a dizzying effect.

"Hush, lay down. I just gave you the brown eyes you wanted, that's all."
"Oh my God, please Mason. What have you done?" He held the rag back to her face Sarah went to sleep. Mason turned off the basement light. Sarah wouldn't need it anyway. He put a padlock on the door and went to his bedroom for the evening.

The sound of the overturning instrument tray woke Mason up. He quickly ran down to the basement. "Sarah!" she was on all fours trying to find her way around on the floor. Mason picked her up.

"I need a bathroom." She said, he helped her count the steps from the bed and left her in the bathroom. Mason went back to pick up the instruments. He would have to put them all back in the autoclave. He was foolish to leave them out for her to get to. She could have picked up a weapon and used it on him. He counted all the tools. He didn't know how many he had, but it looked right. He heard the toilet flush, and then he listened to the sink water run. She was getting acclimated. This was good, because Mason liked her. Sarah came out of the bathroom, feeling her way.

"Count your steps," he told her. Sarah counted the steps and found the bed. She lay down, exhausted. She turned over to her side and did not engage him. Mason thought perhaps it was the operation that had her down. He couldn't imagine what it was like to lose your sight, but he didn't know how he would keep her here if she could see. Once she found out how socially, ill-fitted he was for society, she would leave him. This was the only way to keep Sarah near him.

Mason trotted back upstairs after putting the lock on the door. He made Sarah a fine breakfast. She ate in silence.

Over the next week, he brought down all her meals. Having to feed her three times a day was getting tiresome. Mason wanted to take a peek at his handiwork. Sarah allowed him to remove the bandages. She felt hot today. He worried about a fever. When the dressing came off, he looked at the angry streaks radiating from her eyes, following the veins on her face. He silently cursed. His masterpiece was infected, again.

Dammit, he thought he'd taken all precautions. He had no antibiotics. Sarah was going to die. At this point, there was little he could do. She was going to be like the others, the ones who didn't survive, buried in shallow graves around the property.

Gathering the bandages, he turned his back on her. Mason felt the scalpel stab into his kidney and the blade swipe across his back. Shock, and then, pain.

"What have you done?" Mason shouted. He tried to see the damage only coming away with blood on his hand that dripped on the floor. The bitch had taken one of his blades, obviously waited for days for him to let his guard down. Sarah walked to the door. She had been practicing.

Mason fell, trying to get there. The large surgical incision not only plunged into his kidney but dragged across his spine, opening a gaping wound that might have cut some nerves to his legs. Mason tried to get up. Sarah was locking the door with the padlock feeling her way up the basement steps. Mason screamed out to her,

"Come back." Sarah found her way up the stairs, finding a phone on the wall. It still worked. Hugging the phone, Sarah stayed on the line, as the dispatcher had told her to do. They were on the way.

Mason was still alive. In her mind she pictured him stretched out on the floor as he pounded on the basement door. "Sarah, help me. Please." Mason begged for help. Sarah tried to shut his voice off by putting her hands over her ears. He called out over and over, saying her name. She shrieked into the phone.

"Please, hurry. I’m here with him, alone. He’s calling me from the basement."

"Help is on the way, please remain on the line," the operator said.

Mason stopped his pleading. Sarah hoped he bled out. She sank to the floor knowing she had killed a monster. With mixed emotions, that of relief and guilt, Sarah folded her large brown eyes into her hands and cried. Her body jerked. Convulsions. Sarah was burning with fever. She could hear sirens in the background.

"No, no, no," she thought to herself before her body gave in to the violent seizure.

"She’s dead," the medic said taking her pulse after trying to revive her. He couldn’t take his eyes off hers.

"What's with her eyes?" said the other.

"It looks like she had some kind of operation."

"Hey, the other one is down here in the basement," called out the third man. The two medics followed his voice down the stairs.

"He’s still alive!" They frantically worked on Mason to bring him back.

About the Author:
Dawn DeBraal lives in rural Wisconsin with her husband Red, two little dogs, and a cat. She has discovered that her love of telling a good story can be written. You will find many of her stories, poems, and drabbles in online magazines and anthologies.
Never-Ending Cycle | Sam Paget

I was turned before I reached twenty. An older man, tall and suave, invited me back to what he claimed was his house. He was, in fact, making use of it while the occupants were away. He must have gone out hunting, and been pleasantly surprised to come across the most perfect prey imaginable: a young, homeless girl with no family and a history of disappearing for weeks on end. I had expected to pleasure him sexually and maybe get some free drugs or alcohol out of the deal, in addition to a bed for the night. The evening culminated in his fangs sinking into my neck and draining most of my blood. He took me to a nearby park, covered my body in leaves and left me for dead. This all happened close to fifty years ago, and I never saw him again. Logic withs before emotion, and I retained a smoldering bitterness for my progenitor, despite the fact that he unwittingly gifted me decades of life. In my most calculated, emotionless moments I am able to admit that I lost almost nothing to the virus. I had nothing going for me, and came from a community of rats that pull their fellows back down by the tail whenever they strive to break free of their native squalor. My infector gifted me strength, longevity, and mercilessness. The only downside is that an hour of direct sunlight will cause my skin to blister and weep as if it had been blowtorched.

Every major city has a smattering of dispossessed vagrants, free to vanish without a fuss. My own favorite source of nourishment was always refugees, entering the country without documentation or a support network, enabling me to pick them off at my leisure then be hundreds of miles away if and when authorities take any notice. I haunted one particularly large and overpopulated migrant camp for over a year, glad for the conflict that had displaced my sustenance from their homeland. My biggest ever blunder was to drink from what I thought was another tramp in an inner city, only to discover a few days later form the papers that a famous comedian with an iconically unkempt appearance had gone missing under suspicious circumstances, disappearing on the way home one night. I hid out in the countryside for a spell, and felt the pang of guilt from depriving the world of a little bit of laughter.

A single feeding, besides providing something superior to orgasmic pleasure, will keep one of us in good health for about two weeks. If we go for a month without blood, we start to come apart at the seams, wasting away both mentally and physically. Our tenuous humanity slips even further from sight and memory, and we are reduced to the condition of a feral beast incapable of rational thought or communication. Twice I have been warped by malnutrition and lost all semblance of intelligence. Both times I regained my faculties in a state of lethargy, bloated with blood and lying next to the eviscerated remains of what had once been a person. There is nothing enjoyable about such a feeding, and I remembered nothing of the obvious carnage I had wrought. Under normal circumstances the act of feeding is like raising myself to heaven and floating there to observe the entirety of creation. It lights up every nerve and sensory organ in my body. I spend the next few days attuned to the pulse and breathing of every person I pass on the street. The patterns of color in their eyes are magnified a thousand fold. I can count every single hair on the back of a stray dog and find them all gorgeous. During the fact, when the blood is flowing down my throat, I achieve a state of ecstasy that no form of intravenously achieved intoxication could ever equal.

I have always preferred to hunt and live alone. Seeing another one of us is a sobering experience, and always seemed to highlight to my subconscious just what a ruinous form of existence it is that fate has thrust me into. I rarely meet my fellows, and converse with them more rarely still. On only one, very recent, occasion have I made love to another. He was young looking like myself, having surely been turned as an adolescent as well. We stumbled upon one another while skulking around in drug dens and crack houses. We found a pair of addicts living in a squat, and shared the two of them between us. The addicts both begged and pleaded, not for their own lives, but for each other’s. Witnessing this pathetically futile display of self-sacrifice acted as an aphrodisiac. For one brief instant of weakness I craved romantic attention as much as I craved blood. We passed them back and forth and drained the two of them, then coupled passionately in the throes of the sensory overload that proceeded, as always, the delicious ingestion. I even lay in his arms for hours afterward, listening to the silence where a pulse would be on his chest. The next day, he was gone.

The pregnancy caused nothing but pain. Agony wracked my body. I found myself hunting and feeding every couple of days, overcome with frantic thirst. I cursed my stupidity, having no idea what would happen when I gave birth. There are no mentors for devotees of my lifestyle. No friendly advice lights our depraved path. Biology took charge and ground forever onwards. My stomach swelled and the day of reckoning approached inexorably. I was morbidly curious, but it seemed inconceivable that any good would come from an undead pest such as me reproducing. If my spawn lived at all, it would not be a pleasant thing to bring into the world.

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One night I left my squalid lair, in search of someone to drain. Someone must have tracked me down, and chosen that night to strike. No sooner had I left my abode than they pounced on me. A long spear of steel transfixed my shoulder, pinning me to a wall. A squad of masked, black-garbed figures approached, and one of them slammed a hypodermic needle into my neck. Oblivion swallowed me.

The facility is better kept than it needs to be. Everything is white. Walls, chairs, beds, everything. The staff tend to treat us better than expected as well. We are spoken to like patients in a hospital, or in rehab, as if it is for our own good that we are forbidden to eat, drink, or leave our rooms.

I woke up in a hospital gown in my pristine white quarters, to which I swiftly acquainted myself. It had been furnished with a bed, table, desk, paper, pens, books, a bin and a ceiling light. Security cameras were located in every corner. I pounded on the door to no avail, then gave up and flicked through some of the books.
It was many hours later that the cell door opened, revealing a dark-haired woman in a sharp-looking suit, flanked by two men armed with what looked like electric cattle prods. Both men were muscular and wore expressions of iron. Security personnel of some sort.

“Welcome to our facility, Miss,” said the woman.

“What is this?” I asked, gesturing about vaguely.

“It is a rehabilitation center. You have, I regret to tell you, drank your last drop of blood. You will be confined here for as long as it takes for your addiction to be conquered.”

“I need blood to live. You can’t cure us.”

“Oh, you won’t survive. That is impossible. As you say, without blood you would normally be dead within a few months. It will work out differently for you, since you will be in labor before that happens.”

“Why don’t you just kill me and get it over with?” My voice trembled with a note of fear that I hadn’t experienced in my current life. For a swift, terrible moment the memory of being beaten senseless by an older girl in a foster home barged into my mind.

“It’s simple,” the woman continued grimly, like a doctor informing a patient that they had terminal cancer, “when your kind starve to death, marvelous things occur, biologically speaking. Your own bodies cannibalize themselves to a singular extent. The process takes a long time. After three months without feeding, you will have dropped down to less than a tenth of your previous bodyweight, shrunk markedly in stature, and turned almost transparent. The creature that appears thus tends to produce certain compounds from its glands that are scientifically priceless. Major pharmaceutical companies are delirious over the utility of such secretions. Thus we are able to continue funding this valuable treatment program. One that rids the streets of predators such as you.

“Of course, your own personal circumstance is different. You are pregnant, and will give birth within the month, before you will have had a chance to attain the desirable state of emaciation. The birth will kill you, beyond a shadow of a doubt. But your offspring will be valuable to us nonetheless, at least as much so as a first-generation specimen. Thus, we lose nothing much and do in fact gain an opportunity to research the rare phenomenon of vampiric reproduction. If you need anything while you are here, please do not hesitate to ask. I know that the situation is not ideal for you, but we do provide counseling for those who require it in order to cope with their approaching doom.”

As if to illustrate her point, a shrill scream sounded from somewhere in the distance, along the maze of corridors that I could glimpse through the doorway.

“If that is all, I shall leave you to get some rest. I hope your time here will be productive.”

She was right. My stomach bloated out a little further every day, becoming a distended mass that over-balanced my body and distorted the skin all over my torso. Hunger warped my every waking moment, but I was still essentially sentient when my water broke and the contractions set in. I had been in the facility for just shy of a month, though the passage of time was not something I remarked upon diligently.

I lay on the floor of my cell, twitching in excruciation. I screamed until blood flew out of my throat. The mind-bending agony that I experienced is impossible to approach through description, though it is certain that no living creature could be expected to remain sane after suffering it. My stomach stretched until it split, peeling open like a flower in bloom and dripping with crimson nectar. A skeletal, jet-black shape with the ridges and gnarls of a desiccated corpse rose out of the mangled remnants of my abdomen. I studied with numbed disinterest a shape that should have inspired soul-trembling terror. It had a skull-like face with empty eye-sockets and saberesque fangs. Two leathery wings were folded upon its back. Its talons clicked on the floor as it surveyed its surroundings. I saw no trace of sexual organs.

The door opened, and several figures wearing full-body suits and wielding cattle prods stepped in. My offspring emitted an ear-splitting hiss, and launched itself at the nearest figure, only to receive a violent shock from the cattle prod that sent it stumbling back. It let out an unearthly howl, and attacked once again. A net was thrown over it, tangling around its claws and wings. It collapsed into the puddle of mingled fluid that the birthing process had strewn over the floor of my room.

My strength had faded almost completely. I lay back and stared at the white ceiling. It seemed hard to accept that there could be an afterlife, waiting for me on the other side of death. For the past fifty years, I had prayed passionately for oblivion every single morning, as I lay down to sleep through the hours of brightness. If a celestial authority had influenced my journey thus far, I begged them, silently, for mercy. If they had a shred of compassion to spare for their parasitic puppet, they would cast me into annihilation.

About the Author:
Sam Paget is a previously unpublished writer of horror and dark fantasy from England UK. His work is an attempt to create allegories of the real world and the people in it, filtered through the medium of horror.

Facebook: Sam Paget
Twitter: @sampgt1
Sometimes wicked people do wicked things...

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It was an odd request for a healthy man to make. “If I should die, bury my heart in the roots of the red rose bush.”

“Bill. We don't have a red rose bush.”

“Well,” he continued, breaking into my stupor, “we do now.”

We had been married for twenty years, together for five before that. Bill had never bought me flowers—not once. His idea of a romantic evening was a candle-lit dinner at some exotic restaurant with food I couldn’t pronounce, or sometimes even eat. Not that I minded, understand. It was the thought that counts.

Now though, he was acting strange. He had gone out and bought a red rose bush, planted it in the middle of the yard—to remember him by—and all at the insistence of a charlatan card-reader. What kind of nonsense is that? Who are you, and what have you done with my husband?

“Why red?” I was hoping there was a rational explanation. Of all the roses, red was my least favorite. I loved the fragrance of whites and purples best.

“The hedgewitch said it would keep my heart alive long after I was gone. The rose will never die, either. You won’t have to worry about your lack of a green thumb,” he replied winking.

Well, so much for sane. My normal God-fearing, logical husband had turned to witches for counseling. All this talk of death. Where did that come from?

He was on his way to get coffee and pastries when a barreling semi-truck, the driver in a hurry to get home, his attention on texting his girlfriend, plowed over Bill’s pint-sized electric car, flattening it to nothing. My healthy husband was dead.

At the sympathetic policeman’s insistence, I went to the morgue to identify the pieces left of Bill. Lucky for me, they found his wallet in the wreckage, as was the most substantial part of him left was his heart. Weird, huh?

Since it was an ‘accident’, I came home with what was left of Bill in a plastic bag that evening. If he hadn’t changed his will, they would’ve never given me his heart so soon after the accident. I found myself wishing he hadn’t. It would have meant they couldn’t. However morbid though, it was his last wish.

As the sun gradually set on the worst day of my life, I buried his heart under the rose bush, then sat alone in the living room, staring at the dark walls that threatened to consume me. A card and a box of cheap chocolates—without a guide, I might add—sat on the table where he placed them early that morning for our anniversary. Christmas was just around the corner.

Time and the sun had since destroyed the outside of the card, but the center with its saying and hand-drawn roses, remained intact. A verse hand-written by Bill on a single sheet of vellum had been a beautiful saying that took on a whole different meaning after he died.

“I loved you yesterday,
I love you still;
Always remember,
My heart always will.”

I had a tough time getting over the loss of my husband, it being our anniversary and Christmas. The first anniversary after his death was a shocker. The rose bush was flourishing, as was Bill. At midnight, the beating of his heart vibrated up through the floorboards and into our bedroom, massaging my lonely heart. Each year was a repeat of the last. I’m ashamed to say I looked forward to his beating heart.

If anyone had happened by on our anniversary, they would have seen a rose bush filled with long-stemmed red roses, their thorns dripping blood. The inside of the card he gave me still sat on the table, the vellum yellowed with the sun’s rays; the chocolates in their velvet-flocked box had only one candy missing. The chocolate-covered cherry—the only one I could identify—tasted oddly like blood. I hadn’t tried another.

I lived my life in solitude, waiting for our anniversary, the only day I felt alive. As each year passed, I died a bit more as Bill’s heart took its toll on me. It wouldn’t be long before my heart joined him under the rose bush. It was my last wish, as it was his.

It took ten years for Bill’s heart to drain me of my lifeblood. The night before what would have been our anniversary, I treated myself to a ribeye steak and lobster dinner—mostly uneaten—Uber-ed in just for the occasion. The remainder of the card was now unreadable, and the chocolates petrified, but it didn't matter. This was my last year. I had been conferring with the witch, you see—his witch. I knew it was time I joined Bill.

My physical body died on our anniversary, ten years after Bill, though not in as dramatic a fashion. I just faded away. My heart, now buried under the rose bush, should have been next to his. Mysteriously, his heart wasn't there.
I stared from my resting place as my reanimated husband stood at the table in front of the window looking down at the rose bush, a disdainful look on his face. Beside him stood the witch—our witch—their hands entwined.

Looking up from under the roses dripping with my blood, I wondered. Had he been watching me all this time, as I was now watching them?

The cards she read told her he would die. This had been their plan all along, to use my heart to bring him back. Sadly, I had made no such bargain with the witch.

About the Author:
Karen B. Jones is a fantasy author living in NW Montana, via Central Florida. A retired fire chief, she has always loved the written word, cutting her teeth on authors like J.R.R. Tolkien, David Eddings, and Mercedes Lackey. In addition to writing short stories, she is currently working on her first fantasy book series.

Facebook: Karen B. Jones
Twitter: @firec3

The Raven at Bellows’ Crypt | Alyson Faye

Marcus Bellows wrapped his long grey overcoat around him. The December air nipped at his exposed face and fingers. He regretted leaving his gloves in the car, but it was a two mile hike back to his family’s historic pile.

His breath plumed out into the air, and his only living company was a bold, glossy-feathered raven, who’d landed on a gravestone and stayed, to keep watch, turning its head in that uncomfortable fashion cvids do.

It wasn’t just the raven that made him feel watched. He could swear he’d seen movement beyond the graveyard’s wall—wispy, shadowy figures which slithered and slithered in the mist. He blinked and the mist reconvened into new patterns. Marcus rubbed his eyes.

I’m tired, that’s all.

His fingers clutched the cumbersome iron key his late father’s solicitor had handed him. The legal eagle was pretty ancient himself, but sharp, with a bite to both his handshake and his wit. He’d polished his glasses, and with a pristine preciseness he’d read out the terms of the Last Will and Testament of Mordicay Jericho Bellows, to his only surviving son and heir. The same man who had spent the last two decades hiding from his father, Bellows Manor and all its memories.

Marcus stared up at the stone angel, a towering six-foot statue, which he remembered terrified him as a child. He’d believed the angel would scoop him up in her wings, if he ever took his eye off her. He’d only visited the family graveyard a handful of times for family interments, beginning with his younger brother, Malcolm, who’d passed on aged seventeen, followed by their mother, aunt, and last of all, last month, their father.

He noticed the raven was still there, stationary and silent. He waved his bare hands at it, but the bird didn’t fly away, merely cocked its head as though to say, “Piss off!”

Marcus read the epitaph on the grave to his right. ‘Here lyeth Jeremiah Bellows, born 1851- died 1912.’ Further over there was a rather pitiful undersized stone. Marcus mouthed the inscription, ‘Here rests Joanna Bellows, only daughter of Jeremiah, born 1875 died 1877- She is with the angels now.’

He knew he should feel a connection to his ancestors, even pride in the family name and legacy, but he did not. He just wished he’d been born poor and named Smith.

He shrugged his shoulders, feeling chilly despite his coat and walked towards the crypt, key in hand. C’mon man, you can do this.

A breeze touched his shoulder, and he swore he heard a whisper. “No, don’t go in.” He turned, alarmed, because he thought he’d caught a whiff of his mother’s Shaliko perfume, rich, and stomach-churning.
His mother, he acknowledged, had done her best, but was overwhelmed by her husband’s character, wealth and ego. She’d tried to protect her two sons but – resorted in her final years to the Bible and the booze. Both providing, Marcus assumed, different but complementary comforts.

_Bloody hearing things now._ He forced the key into the iron lock and cranked open the wooden door.

Stale musty air flowed out at him, making him choke. Behind him there was a rustling and the door creaked shut, plunging Marcus into darkness, except for the light on his phone. He spotted a candle sitting on his father’s tomb, left, he assumed by the caretaker. There was a box of Swan Vesta at the side, an incongruous touch in the crypt. He hastened to light the wick. Its wavering flame cheered him up.

Marcus had only come at all, because his father’s will had insisted he enter the crypt, on this day and at dusk, to receive and open a box, left by the late Mordicay. Curiosity and a remnant of familial duty had done the rest.

The crypt was compact, housing only immediate family, not too many extra branches, or surplus cousins, but fortuitously, he noted, there was still a space left for him.

“Lucky me,” he murmured.

He ran his fingertips over his brother’s box tomb, remembering the day he’d died and feeling the usual wave of guilt and pain wash over him.

“Wish it had been me, little brother,” he whispered, and his breath caused the dust to drift around.

In the shadows Marcus heard a rustling. _Rats?_ He wondered. He shivered. He was not a fan of rodents, not even cute furry gerbils.

In the glow of his phone’s beam he saw a metal box, placed dead centre, on the upper slab of his father’s box tomb. An envelope lay on top with his name inscribed on it in his father’s elegant copperplate handwriting. He extracted the thick vellum notepaper, stamped with the family firm’s insignia, a hand holding a bellows, and read, ‘Son, you are all I have left. The lesser son lived, whilst his better did not. Now is your opportunity to change that. Give of yourself and he will take you and rise up.’ Mordicay J. Bellows.

Fury ripped through Marcus. “You old bastard!” he yelled, thumping the tomb’s stone surface with his fist. “I’m bloody glad you’re dead.”

Seeing his father’s brutal opinion written down, still had the power to hurt. He stood for a few moments, lost in memories, watching the candle’s flame and the white heart of it. Then he turned to the rectangular metal box, it too bearing the Bellows’ family insignia. Swallowing, Marcus, lifted the lid.

Inside, on a layer of red satin, lay a vial containing a dark viscous liquid, a knife sheathed in soft leather and a grey smooth stone with a hole in the centre. Each was labelled; the vial with ‘Drink me’, the knife, with ‘Cut with me’ and the hagstone with ‘Look through me’.

Marcus laughed, but with a sour undertone, at the odd mix of objects. “Father, you were truly mad by the end.”

Outside the only window, guarded with a grille, a noise thudded, making Marcus jump. He glimpsed a raven flying away, in a blur of black feathers. It must have flown into the glass. _Why?_ he wondered. _Is it trying to get in?_ The rustling had got louder and seemed to be coming from the walls of the crypt.

“Well, there’s no way I’m drinking that crap or cutting myself but . . .” he picked up the hagstone, enjoying its smooth texture, and held it up to his right eye.

He jerked backwards in shock, dropping it. His fingers burned with the stone’s coldness. He grabbed his phone, turned on the camera and photographed the shadowy crypt’s walls, turning in a full circle, before he hit _playback_. He then watched one minute’s recording showing dark walls, shadows, stone, dirt and nothing else. But he knew he’d seen more than that.

He’d seen _them._

Marcus turned towards the door, and grabbed the iron ringed handle, tugging – it wouldn’t open. Panic and claustrophobia rose in his chest, and he began to hyperventilate, tugging at his throat and slumping, ending propped up against his father’s tomb.

“No way. This isn’t happening.”

His throat felt dry, his skin was sweaty, and what he’d seen through the hagstone was freaking him out. Faces.
He'd seen his late family’s faces, those he knew (his mother and father) and those he’d never met. The faces were contorted, crying, wailing, or in his father’s case, cursing. His mother had looked petrified and they were all trapped inside the walls; creating a nightmare mural.

“Brother,” he heard the whisper at his right side and a hand that was not there, touched his arm. “Help me, free me. Let me out.”

“Malcolm?” he asked. “Is that you?”

The candle’s flame flickered, but there was no breeze behind it, a shadowy figure emerged and began to stroll around the tomb, inexorably moving towards Marcus.

Memories rolled in – of him and his younger brother playing hide and seek, building dens in the woods, staying out all night, hiding from their father’s rages, racing each other in their new cars. Then the last day, the all-night party - the girls, the pills, the fight and . . . Marcus covered his face with his hands and sobbed.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have left you there, little brother. Is that you?” The shadow came nearer and Marcus held up the hagstone to his right eye again. ‘Let me see you,’ he begged.

High above him the raven beat frantically at the grilled window, its raucous caws muffled by the glass.

Marcus barely heard the bird.

Through the hole in the hagstone he saw Malcolm’s face, its surface shivering and shifting, but also glowing pearly white. The left side was whole and unharmed, but the right side was a mash-up of bone, flesh and hair. The mouth bled black liquid and the eyes were empty of life and love.

“Let me live again, Marcus.” He heard the words, but no sound came from the blue ripped lips.

Sobbing, Marcus dragged himself up the side of the box tomb, grabbed the vial, and tossed back the thick dark liquid. He recognised its coppery taste straight away, as it burned down his gullet and the fire spread though his chest. A shadowy hand pushed the knife towards him, and he felt the pressure of many pairs of dead eyes on him; waiting watching, hoping.

If he hadn’t left his brother on his own at the party, and gone off with what’s-her-name. Argued with him, when he’d begged him to stay. Then Malcolm, on his own, and trying to be cool, wouldn’t have got plastered, before showing off by climbing into his new, shiny seventeenth-year-old birthday present car, which he then crashed and from whose wreckage he’d been extracted. Dead.

The weight of the guilt had nearly broken Marcus, made him flee the family home, but now he’d been shown a way to make up for it all.

He unsheathed the knife, pressed the narrow steel blade to his neck, felt his brother’s hands guiding his own, saw his shadow hands overlaying his own flesh ones, sensed the power of his brother’s desire and need trickle into him.

“The first cut hurts the most,” he heard and, before darkness took him over, Marcus prayed it would be true.

***

He didn’t feel his body slump to the flags or the hagstone drop from his hand - or see the crowd of shadowy watchers unpeel themselves from the walls and gather around him nor Malcolm grow a new skin, a fresh unbloodied face and step out of the crypt into the December night air.

Malcolm sniffed at the scents of frost, decaying leaves, the dying of the year and smiled, a crooked broken smile, with no joy in his eyes. He was a dead man walking, with a raven hopping, dog-like, at his side. Its head cocked, eyes beady and black as pitch.

Man and bird headed towards Bellows Manor, their birthright.

About the Author:
Alyson Faye lives in the UK with her family and four rescue animals, and is often on the moor with her Borador, Roxy. She also swims, sings, tutors, edits for an indie press and watches a lot of films - horror to those from the Golden Age of Hollywood. She always wanted to dance with Fred Astaire and catch a train with Cary Grant.

Twitter: @AlysonFaye2
The story goes as this. There were four young girls. They caught the shuttle bus and took it down to the city. They reached the Port Authority and left the station. No one knows what happened next. They found their bodies a few days later. All were raped and murdered.

I didn’t need the job interview. I still made a big deal of it, and I loved when I was able to escape to the city. I enjoyed the sights and sounds. I liked riding the subway. That was a long time ago, and with everything going on, with what happened to those girls, I should not have gone especially alone. But I did. The job interview went as expected. They had more people to interview, and they would let me know in a week or two. In other words, thank you for coming, but no thank you. I was left walking almost in the dark, heading to the subway. Going to the office for the interview was nerve-racking, but I made it. Would I make it home?

“You’re not walking to the subway, are you?” A woman stopped me before I could reach the station. “It’s not safe especially now.”

“I made it here just fine,” I replied.

“You were lucky. You need to come with me.”

“Excuse me?” I looked from her to the station. I’ve seen the news. The homeless everywhere. The random attacks. Those girls. “I’ll be fine,” but the quiver in my voice gave me away.

“Where are you going? Penn or Port?”

“Port,” I said. “Why?”

“Come with me. We have a place for regular people to wait. The cops come and escort us to the stations. You can’t ride the subway.”

If I wasn’t nervous, I would have walked away from her, but she was right. The city was in chaos. Shootings. Stabbings. Rape. Even walking down the street, someone could just punch you in the head, knock you down, and they would keep walking. Still, why should I trust her?

“It’s okay.” She touched my arm. “Ask the officer over there about me. He’ll tell you that it’s safe.”

I didn’t realize that there was a police officer standing nearby. “I’ll go with you,” I said. “But don’t try anything.”

“Come on.” She led the way.

We reached an apartment building and went inside. We walked up two flights of stairs. She led me to a room, and I stepped in. She stood nearby as I stared at all the people waiting to go home.

“The cops should be here shortly,” she said.

“Why would they help us get to the station? Why would they care especially with what’s going on out there?”

“Because we have an agreement.” She checked her watch. “They should be here within an hour. Have a seat. Use the bathroom. Get yourself some coffee or tea.”

I watched her leave the room. “Wait. Where are you going?”

“To try and save more lives.” She hurried away.

It was because of what happened to those girls. It changed the city and us. Our eyes were open wide to the horrors that surrounded us, the monsters that walked free. I should not have come here.

I took a seat near the coffee table and flipped through some magazines. I looked up at the people sitting together on the couch, strangers sharing the same space because they didn’t have a choice. They wanted to go home and not be another victim on the news. The old woman at the end began to cry, and I picked up the tissue box, holding it out to her. I didn’t think she was going to take it especially with the distrust in her eyes, but her friend did, handing her the tissue.

“How long have you been waiting?”

“For the cops? Hours.” The woman’s friend looked at me. “They’re not coming. Those poor girls died for nothing.” She caught the look her friend gave her.

“They’re coming.” I hoped that I was right.

An hour passed. Then, another. It was getting late. The room was becoming more crowded. Maybe, I should have tried to make it to the subway station, but would I have made it?

A man walked over the window. We were told to stay away from the window, but he didn’t listen. He was tired of waiting. Where were the police officers that were supposed to escort us and keep us safe until we made it to the station? Did the death of those girls mean nothing to them?
Suddenly, bullets fired into the room. They pierced through the man. He fell backward onto the floor. His dead eyes looked back at me, and the room went wild. People jumped off the couch and chairs and ran out of the room. Some even stepped on the man, eager to get away as more bullets pierced through the walls.

I remained sitting where I was. I looked at the man, the bodies surrounding him. I took a breath and stared at the two old women on the couch. Their hands gripped together. Blood on their faces. They were never going back home.

I slowly stood up and glanced out the window. Whoever targeted us was gone, but more monsters were out there. The streets were not safe. The subways were not safe. No matter how much I would hate myself later for doing it, I reached into the pocketbooks and wallets nearby, taking out the cash. Fuck the cops. They were never coming. I called an Uber instead.

About the Author:
Melissa R. Mendelson is a Short Story Author. She has been published by Sirens Call Publications, Dark Helix Press and Bartleby Snopes Literary Magazine. Her short stories have been featured on Tall Tale TV, and she has a variety of writing published on the website, Medium. She spent over a year crafting her Horror novel surrounding an evil porcelain doll and hopes to finish it this year.

Author Amazon Page: Melissa R. Mendelson
Twitter: @MelissMendelson

Serving His Master | Radar DeBoard

Ableforth recited the last of the spell with gusto. He watched as a strange dust flew out of the cauldron and floated through the air towards the village below.

Soon, a horrible illness would spread to everyone in the countryside. Thousands upon thousands would die from it. Ableforth couldn’t keep from smiling as he packed up his things.

He had done well by concocting this disease. He knew that his master was going to be very pleased in the work he had done. It had been so long since death had ravaged the land, and his master missed it so.

Limited Resources | Radar DeBoard

Phillip had warned them all. He tried to convince them that resources were running low, and that they needed to act. Yet, no one listened to him. They all just ignored his pleas.

Phillip was pushed to the edge and finally realized he would have to do things himself. The choice was clear to him. He would much rather be killed at someone else’s hand then spend several weeks starving to death in agony. That’s why he gathered everyone at the townhall before he started the fire. The only way to stop their suffering, was if he killed them himself.

About the Author:
Radar DeBoard is a horror movie and novel enthusiast who resides in Wichita, Kansas. He occasionally dabbles in writing and enjoys making dark and exciting tales for people to enjoy. He has had drabbles and short stories published in various electronic magazines and anthologies.

Facebook: Writer Radar DeBoard
When Eudora was twelve, her father bought her a wormery.

"A what?" she asked.

"It's called a 'wormery,' a place you raise worms. It's like an ant farm—you know what that is. They've got one in your classroom in school. I thought it might help you get better grades in science."

Eudora was already having issues with early puberty. The last thing she wanted to worry about was worms. But her grades were poor.

"You mean like when you die?" she said.

It was her father's turn now to ask, "What?"

"You know, they eat your body. Worms, that is. When you're in the coffin—we learned about it in science. And you rot and stink—"

"That's enough, Eudora," her father said. "No, these are like fishing worms. Earthworms. Angleworms. I'll help you dig some in the yard after supper."

Eudora agreed. She was only a child. What choice did she have?

After supper she went out with him in the garden and watched as he showed her the different kinds of soil, and how to arrange them in layers between the wormery's two sheets of transparent plexiglass. Filling the thing up like it was a box. He showed her how to use layers of pebbles as well, for drainage, and how, then, to add water from the hose, but not so much that it became too soggy. And how to cover the final layer with grass clippings and dead leaves, so that the worms would have something to eat.

The best part, she thought, was digging the worms themselves, which she helped out with, dangling them first before putting them in, just before adding the pebbles and leaves.

She was into Goth culture too.

On school days she wanted to wear black skirts, and black blouses as well, until one of the teachers sent her home with a note saying she frightened the other children. So she wore black and gray plaids and black jackets over white tops. And black tights with black shoes.

When she was fifteen, she bought her first corset, with money she earned on summer vacation. Her father didn't know.

As for the worms, they did help her grades. She spent hours in her room with her home computer poring over invertebrate biology. And not just Annelida, the segmented worms, like earthworms and fishing worms, but other kinds of worms. Flukes and pinworms. Nematodes. Ribbon worms—some of which grew to be hundreds of feet long. These lived in the ocean. Tube worms that lived on the ocean's floor next to sulfur-spewing vents. Giving her Bosch-like visions of what Hell must look like when people died.

In college, she studied Dante in the original fourteenth-century Italian.

But, mostly, the worms she liked best lived in people.

***

She felt an affinity after she grew up and left her father's house. After she graduated from college. She had many boyfriends—she sponged off them, knowingly. Living with boys, she didn't pay rent.

As she—and her lovers—grew more sophisticated, she bilked them for presents. How did the song go, that 'diamonds are a girl's best friend'?

She had many men friends, some of them dying young. Tragic. Byronic. As a live-in girlfriend, in more and more states now she found herself able to inherit property.

Yet she did love them.

She dreamed about vampires, sometimes, especially on nights when the moon was nearing full. Of their preying on men, too—she liked vampire movies.


As often as not she'd go home with them too. Then, within a week, move in.

Always on the go, that was Eudora. Seductive. Beautiful. Treating Goth clubs as if they were smorgasbords. Meeting new men there as well.

So often they died young.

***

When she was little, her 'worm farming days' as she liked to think of them—often she, svelte, black-clad, fishnetted, corseted, used stories of that to intrigue men all the more—when she was young, she did not raise just earthworms. She experimented. Would earthworms eat nematodes? She'd add some to the soil. Would flatworms bore through dirt? One way to find that out.
Eventually, of course, it started to smell bad. That is, even after she cleaned out the wormery, washing its sides and its black plastic ends, and putting in new dirt.

And putting in new worms—sometimes exotic kinds she found in pet stores.

It smelled like a grave, she thought. Like a grave must smell.

She told her new man that. She'd only just met him Saturday night, after her lover of the present had had to go back home to stay with his parents. Some kind of sickness he'd managed to pick up. She didn't know what. She didn't like hospitals, though enough people she met ended up there.

She thought herself unlucky, yet in a way she was fortunate also, her loves always ending, or mostly always, before they could go stale. She told her new loves that, too.

"I'm a jinx," she said. "Beware of me—I'm bad luck. That's why I'm so grasping, because love is so short, one must take it as one can. Drink of one's life deeply.

"Some say that I'm worth it."

She had such a charming smile.

***

And, on more and more nights as time went on, she dreamed about parasites.

***

She was that herself, she knew. Like a big tick, or a tapeworm, or hookworm. But much more beautiful. Vampire-like, sucking life. She didn't understand, though it worked out for her, why life for those who loved her was so tragic. Not just men only, sometimes women loved her. So it wasn't just some kind of frail man thing, like people getting hurt when they fought over her. Though that happened sometimes too.

Vampires. Vamps—the slim, dark-eyed females in silent movies who seduced and destroyed men. Like Theda Bara. The 1920s and '30s. The terms were related, she'd learned in college. Kipling's 'The Vampire,' his 'rag and a bone and a hank of hair.' The vampire as parasite morphed into the predatory woman.

She was fascinated by worms that ate people. Like grave worms. Maggots—although these weren't true worms. She thought of herself like that sometimes as well, as worming herself into people's bodies, some part of herself, at least. Into their brains perhaps, certainly in their hearts.

Feeding on them.

Emerging winged, beautiful, not as a fly, but more as an exotic moth. A creature of the moon, dark, iridescent, flitting through the night. Gossamer wings shining.

As she shone also, dancing to jazz beats, to drums, to timpani, in a new lover's arms. Black dress tight on her breasts, raven braids swinging. She thought of herself as a computer virus, scurrying through wires—her home computer, on which she first learned about worm-born diseases, of elephantiasis, river blindness. One of her boyfriends had lost his sight when she was nineteen. Guinea worm disease. Filariasis. Poor people's diseases.

Although she herself, of course, preyed on the more rich.

Coursing through wires with electrons, infecting them. Wasn't that how computer worms harmed their hosts? When she was fifteen, her hard disk had crashed. Her father had bought her a new computer.

She learned about men that way.

***

"My name isn't really 'Carmilla,'" she said as he took her up to his furnished loft. "It's Eudora, from a Greek word that means 'generous.'"

"It's a nice name," he said. "Beautiful, like you." She nodded and nuzzled him.

Later that night, as they lay side by side, naked, wrapped in each other's arms in his bed, she kissed him full on the mouth. Thrusting her tongue in. She felt her own mouth fill—his questing tongue's answer. The familiar tingle. Not knowing as worms coursed up, white, as thin as pencil-leads, mixed in saliva out of her throat to his. She who, at sixteen, had fallen deathly ill—adding, at that time, to her skin's natural pallor, so much now part of her charm—and, in recovery, became herself immune.

To whatever it was they bore.

And he, responding, rolled between her thighs. Tangled and sweaty, they made love again, then both went back to sleep.

***

She dreamed about vampires.

About the Author:
James Dorr's latest is a novel-in-stories from Elder Signs Press, Tombs: A Chronicle of Latter-Day Times of Earth, while his The Tears of Isis was a 2013 Bram Stoker Award® finalist for Fiction Collection. At times a technical writer, an editor on a regional magazine, a full time non-fiction freelancer, and a semi-professional musician, Dorr currently harbors a Goth cat named Triana.

Author Blog: James Dorr Writer
Facebook: James Dorr
“Get away from there, Mishka,” called Brad, tugging on the leash.

The dog lifted her snout from the tiny hole in the ground and stared at her master with what could have passed for both frustration and concern. Mishka, affectionately known as The Bear by everyone in the neighbourhood, was a three-year-old Alaskan Malamute, and was extremely large for her age and breed. During daily walks along the same route, she was forever fascinated by the many burrows in the fields, as if every time they were a new discovery. Now, she waited patiently for her master to catch up as he took care over the uneven, frozen soil.

“It’s only a rabbit hole,” he said, glancing down at the uninviting darkness. “It was here yesterday and it’ll still be here tomorrow.”

Mishka looked up at him, then barked at the hole, taking Brad a little by surprise. “What’s with you?” He knelt down and ruffled the dog’s thick coat, sending a dozen loose hairs drifting up into the air, watching as they were whisked away by the crisp January breeze. “Come on, it’s too cold to be standing around, girl.”

They moved along at a brisk pace through the farmer’s field, following the faint trail as they did every single day, come rain or shine. Brad had been out drinking with old workmates the previous night and had stumbled in during the early hours of the morning. It was only a few hours later that he and Mishka started their morning walk, his senses still dull, numbing him from the full bite of the icy wind.

Brad loved this particular route that he and Mishka took; not for the peacefulness or sheer beauty of the area that came with the warmer months, but for the simple fact that very few people ventured up here. It had always baffled him why such a great walking trail was seldom used, but considering how Mishka barked and pulled on the lead at the very sight of other animals—whether it be dog, rabbit, squirrel or bird—he didn’t complain.

Continuing at a steady pace, Brad paused for a moment to remove his woolly hat. It may have been cold, but the quick pace and many layers he had on were making him warm. He wiped at his sweaty brow and watched the leash extend out as Mishka continued on, stopping about fifteen feet ahead to investigate some thorny bushes, sniffing at them eagerly as if her life depended on it.

“Someone left their marker for you, eh?” Brad replaced his hat, feeling the beginnings of a hangover start to throb in his temples. He looked out into the distance where a dense silvery fog cloud was sweeping across the land like the drawing of a curtain, erasing the woodland from view. The sight brought a deep chill to his spine. Just as he was about to move on, he was tripped by a sturdy root, grounding him. He cursed as he picked himself up. Mishka remained by the bush, seemingly unaware of Brad's fall.

He half-turned at the sharp crack of a twig behind him, expecting to see perhaps a rabbit or pheasant, yet there was nothing there. Carrying on, his boot caught under another sturdy root. He stumbled, but kept his balance this time. Cursing once again, he turned and stared hard at what resembled a tangled mess of brown snakes on the ground. He frowned, knowing that he would have to tread carefully when they returned this way.

Something moved to his right, caught in his peripheral vision, his head snapping to the side. He remained still, waiting to see if the hidden animal would make a move. It had to be something tiny as he couldn’t see anything amongst the frost covered foliage. His eyes scanned the area.

Nothing.

Mishka tugged on the leash, wanting to keep moving. Surely if an animal was indeed close by then Mishka would have reacted? After a few seconds, he decided that there was nothing to see, continuing with his walk, now more aware of where he placed his feet, determined to avoid a third trip.

Mishka moved nimbly over the lumpy earth, keeping her nose low to the ground, dragging Brad along. Now less than a hundred feet from the woods and the white death shroud that snaked along, she stopped to investigate another burrow. This one was much larger than the previous one that had grabbed her attention. White bird feathers littered the entrance, which Mishka sniffed at curiously.

Brad looked at the remains, noticing several tiny chunks of bloody flesh. “There’s nothing left for you,” he said to the dog, ambling on, letting the leash extend. Mishka looked up at him, then sniffed at the entryway some more. Without looking back, he said, “Come on, girl, let’s check out this fog.”

He felt the leash tighten as it stretched out to its limit, waiting for Mishka to catch up. His eyes were fixed on the trees that peeked out from the haunting white veil. The high-pitched voice of a robin cried out from somewhere in the woods. Brad was about to respond with his own call when panicked whines filled the air.
“What's wrong with—” He broke off, shocked at what he saw as he turned.

Mishka had what looked like a thick piece of rope tied around her muzzle, preventing her from barking. Brad stood still for a moment, a glazed look across his face as he tried to comprehend just what he was looking at. His eyes grew large with fear and disbelief as another piece of rope shot out of the burrow with lightning fast speed—only it wasn’t ropes that were attacking his dog. They were roots, just like the ones that he tripped him earlier on.

“No! Mishka!” He dropped the leash on the ground and ran to her aid. He managed only three strides before he was yanked off his feet, landing on his front, his hands taking the brunt of the fall. His chin bounced off the ground hard enough to chip his front two teeth, sending a sharp jolt of pain down his entire body. Sprawled out on the ground in a daze, he watched as his dog tried in desperation to retreat, her claws scraping along the hardened earth as she was pulled towards the hole and whatever was dwelling within.

With a groan, he pushed himself up; glancing back to see what had grounded him. His ankles were bound together by a single root that trailed away into a batch of monstrous thistles, making him think back to a rodeo show he had witnessed one time in America, where the riders would lasso the horses to restrain them. Unfortunately, he now had an idea of how that experience felt, although he didn’t fancy experiencing the roots around his neck. He pulled at the mud-covered root, snapping it with relative ease, allowing him to scramble back to his feet.

Mishka was still trying in vain to escape, but now her entire head had disappeared into the burrow, her legs shaking with tension. Brad tried to wedge his hands into the hole but there was no room to manœuvre. He grabbed a firm hold of the dog’s waist and pulled, only using half of his strength, not wanting her face to be torn off. As Mishka’s face reappeared, he could see that the roots had wrapped themselves around her neck in an attempt to strangle the poor animal, who was now gasping for air. Brad released his hold on her and lunged at the hole, grabbing the roots and snapping them as quickly as he could. Turning over onto his back, he worked at unwinding the ice-cold roots from around the dog’s muzzle, his numb fingers screaming at him. The distress in the dog’s eyes was clear to him, spurring him on.

His brain was struggling to accept the situation he found himself in. Perhaps this was an hallucination brought on by some drunken haze, or even an extremely vivid nightmare, although he doubted that any dream could manifest the pain he currently felt in his hands.

Mishka barked at the first chance she could, which as far as Brad was concerned was her way of saying thanks. Physically, she appeared fine, except for the dirt that now covered most of her face, which she began to lick off the end of her nose.

“You’re okay, girl, you’re fine now.” He rose to his knees, staring down at the roots before him. They looked just like the kind he found when digging up the vegetable patch in his garden, except these were thicker and, of course, seemed to possess a killer instinct. Where did they come from? The woods? The fog? He honestly couldn’t care less, wanting nothing more than to get out of there and report it—but who would believe such a far-fetched story? He could barely believe it himself. That was a concern for another time; his problem now was making it home while avoiding any further attacks.

Movement behind him. The sound of something being dragged way down in the burrow. Brad shot to his feet. He flexed his fingers which were bitterly cold and painful, anticipating another assault. The noise from the dark void increased. His heartbeat quickened, his mind filling with all manner of disturbing thoughts. He wiped away the beads of sweat above his upper lip, then spat in disgust at the burrow. Unclasping the leash from Mishka’s collar, he pointed in the direction they had come, but before he could even utter a syllable, a dozen thick roots lashed around his face and neck, yanking him down to the earth with brute force.

Now flat on his back, his face completely covered, he clawed at the roots, aware that he only had a limited amount of time before he would suffocate. He could feel himself being dragged along the cold, uneven earth.

Where the hell will I end up? Is this how I’m gonna meet my end, suffocated by a bunch of roots in a field? Had he been able to laugh then he would have, but the roots prevented him not only from laughing, but from breathing. It felt as though his eyes were going to pop as the roots tightened against his closed eyelids. He managed to open his mouth a little in order to try and catch a breath, but the roots prevented him from doing so. It felt as though his eyes would close for the second time and he would suffocate. He could feel himself being dragged along the cold, uneven earth.

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Mishka howled, watching on helplessly as her master was dragged away to his doom. More roots appeared from all sides, covering his face with mud and roots. She instinctively bit through it, killing the small threat. She barked once more, a look of sadness looming in her eyes, turned and fled the area, running non-stop until she was clear of the danger.

About the Author:
John D. Ashton is the author of Crystal Castle and Hunter. One newspaper review read 'he could be the next Stephen King', releasing Highden Manor, a paranormal horror story, in 2019.
He has many short stories published in physical and online platforms, and in 2020 released Figures in the Fog, consisting of twenty-two short stories. He likes to write – obviously – and spends a lot of his spare time travelling.

Facebook: John D. Ashton
Twitter: @johndashton
Through Clouded Eyes

A zombie's point of view

Sirens Call Publications

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes
The Anniversary | Jeremy Zentner

Ella is on her third libation. Richard has already consumed four glasses of whiskey. He’s enjoying the vertigo of his drink and then remembers what day it is before suddenly being snapped back into that sullen state.

Ella is just staring, trying not to cry. They are on their porch, trying to feel the warmth, trying to feel any ray of sunshine from the dying day.

“She could have been married by now. Had kids of her own, working for the zoo,” Richard says.

“She loved animals,” Ella says, sipping on her wine. She then muses, “Probably more than the idea of having kids.”

“Hah! Yeah, probably. Probably.”

Richard gets his phone out and starts to scroll. His profile page reminds him that fifteen years ago today he made a post about their missing girl, Maisy. Richard scoffs at his timeline’s cruel memory and throws the device against the lower embankment of their screened in porch. Heat swells against his face as Richard begins to cry.

He’s the first one to do so today. It gives Ella the courage to allow tears to trickle out, being thankful that she was not the first to let out the agonizing pain on this anniversary day.

The two feel a few kids slowly pass by in reluctant gaze. Richard and Ella do their very best to hide the waterworks from the strolling bystanders.

When the children leave, Richard makes a boisterous sigh, “Boy… Even with moving all the way out here, it only takes my damn phone to remind me all about her…”

Ella takes another sip, draining her glass bare.

The phone on the ground starts to ring and Richard slowly gets up. Collecting the device, he turns it over from its face-down position and sees something that makes him gasp.

The caller-ID reads, “Maisy.”

“What is it?” Ella asks.

He shows her what he sees just a second before the ringing dies.

“Are you playing one of your jokes again?” Ella demands. “Because it’s not funny!”

“I didn’t program this,” Richard says. “Someone else must have bought her cell number.”

“Well, why the hell are they calling here?”

“How the hell—”

And the old Beverly Hills song erupts again in a fury of rock as the name ‘Maisy’ is displayed.

“Richard, stop it!”

“I’m not pulling a prank. Come on, how sick would I be?”

“Just tell them it’s the wrong number, then!”

Richard answers the call, “Hello?”

“Dad?”

“I’m sorry, you have the wrong number,” he starts to end the call before being interrupted by the caller.

“This is Maisy.”

His eyes widen as do Ella’s, hearing the voice from the phone. Richard puts the phone back to his ear,

“Now, just who the hell do you think you are? You think this is funny?”

“Daddy... I promise it’s me.”

“I’m going to call the police!” Richard says. His empty threat makes Ella straighten a little in apprehension.

“Maisy died fifteen years ago. She was fifteen years old. You are not Maisy.”

“Fifteen years under the ground will do a lot to your voice.”

Richard disconnects the call.

Ella is staring at him with eyes protruding with anxiety. Red lining the white.

“Some goddamn creeper’s idea of a sick joke.”

“You should change your phone number. We’ll go to the store tomorrow.”

A chime buzzes on the cell, “Jesus Christ.” Richard looks at the touch screen and sees a text message. It was a photo sent, so he swipes the display open. The cell shows what looks like a pothole in the middle of a parking lot. Upon closer scrutiny, he sees that it is a dug up hole in the middle of a parking lot. Chunks of concrete and clay and dirt orbiting the deep cavity.
“What is it?” Ella asks.
Richard looks at her with twitching lips.
“Tell me!”
He gives her the phone and she blusters, “Is that our old bar?”
Another text follows, “The new owners were not pleased with the mess.” Ella shows Richard the following text and he swiftly clutches the phone to start a factory reset. He then stumbles into the house and gets out a pan. Placing the device on the pan, he turns on the stove and starts melting the phone. When the thing is a pile of liquid plastic and alloys steaming in the pan, the smoke detector goes off.
He looks to Ella who’s crying tears of terror, “She couldn’t have possibly survived under there.”
“It’s some psycho,” Richard says. “Maybe the owners were remodeling and found her body in there.”
“Why the hell would they do that?” Without Richard having a chance to respond, Ella’s phone chimes with a text. She takes it out of her rear pocket and reads, I remember the song on the radio before we left. After you had that party. Beverly Hills. It kept me comfort all those years.
She shows him the text and he says, “This is madness. That can’t be her.”
“It’s her, Richard.”
“It can’t be, we killed her, Ella! We killed her, and she’s never coming back!”
A sudden pounding explodes from the front door. The married couple slowly peer towards the entrance. It pounds again, with a deafening ferocity.
Ella’s phone chimes again and she reflexively throws it to the ground.
The rapping intensifies. They could feel the bloody knuckles against the door rapping.
Together they stand, wondering what Maisy wants.

About the Author:
Jeremy Zentner has published short stories in science fiction, horror, and supernatural fiction. He has also been the recipient of the Lois C. Bruner award in creative nonfiction. He lives in rural Illinois, USA.

Author Blog: Intergalactic Pub
Twitter: @GeekArtZentner

Winter Solstice, long cycle | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

This time of greatest tilt of north-pole from sun—these longest hours of darkness—the pagan eve has come.
Huddled around pentagons of blued light, in umbral sanctuaries, the faithful perform ancient rituals—to little avail.
The Yule-Wheel stalls, yoked to the east-horizon.
The new solar-child is weak. Once-in-a-thousand-years this happens.
Goddess Luna wanes. Protective, wiccan winds die-down.
Evil permeates the landscape.
Extracting power from humans, wolves howl beyond edges of declining fires.
Space captures time—the start of day, irrevocably, postponed a year.
To escape jaws-of-wolves, enter now the maw of this growing warp-of-night—and vanish, for a millennium.

About the Author:
Will H. Blackwell, Jr. is a retired professor (biology) living in Tuscaloosa, Alabama where he continues research on freshwater-fungi. He has fiction in The Drabble, Shelter of Daylight, 365 Tomorrows, and Trembling with Fear—and poetry in Aphelion, The Fifth Di..., and Scifaikuest.
The following are entries from the field journal of Dr. Ethan R. Engels, historian in association with the Virginia Historical Society.

April 15th, 1952
The Historical Society finally agreed to fund my expedition to what has been known as the Nameless Village. Nestled between the forest and the sea on Virginia’s most eastern landmass, the village was only discovered recently after a pair of lost hikers returned with claims of a deserted ruin. How this hadn’t been discovered more recently is well beyond me, but I am very intrigued by the possibility of uncovering something truly once-in-a-lifetime, despite the Historical Society’s insistence that the hikers were lying.

I have assembled a band of hardy adventurers and historical enthusiasts such as myself. Henry Peterson will help us map the village and determine its exact location. James Carthage is a respected wilderness guide. Kameron Reed is an expert on both architecture and linguistics and is hoping to have a chance at identifying the former inhabitants of this so-called Nameless Village. Last is Daniel Jerdon, who has vowed to be the first in our company to set foot in an unexplored, abandoned settlement. His enthusiasm is encouraging, albeit somewhat tiresome. Our journey begins in three days.

April 18th, 1952
We have made good time, despite a handful of challenges. We had to leave our vehicle behind some time ago and went through a great deal of trouble notifying the local authorities of our situation to ensure we would not have it towed. We continued on foot for many miles, but the going has been slow. Thankfully, James is more than capable of keeping us heading in the right direction. It truly is a bizarre sensation being in the heart of the woods, but the air is heavy with the smell of the sea. I imagine there are not many on the east coast these days who truly appreciate the experience. We have made camp in a small clearing and have tapped into our provision supply for the night. We plan to rise with the dawn tomorrow and hopefully find the Nameless Village.

April 19th, 1952
To stand where we are now must be a rare occurrence indeed in this modern age. Several hours after we broke camp, we found what we were seeking. The village rested on a small hill on the beach. Words could not describe my excitement when my eyes fell upon the weather-beaten stone walls. Two structures in particular arrested the whole of my attention: first was what appeared to be a sizeable church with a great stone spire stretching into the heavens. From our vantage point at the forest’s edge, we could barely see a dark window at the peak of the tower. The second was what appeared to be a ruined lighthouse. I can’t help but wonder how many years have passed since its fire cast its light out to sea.

We entered the village without delay but found most of the smaller buildings were crumbling beyond recognition. In truth, it seemed only the church and the lighthouse truly withstood the ages, and even they were worse for the wear. Despite my excitement, I felt an odd sense of dread as we passed the corroded iron gate in the village’s outer wall. I attribute it to the decrepit and sad aura that surrounds this mysterious wonder.

I must admit that I’m astonished by the number of crows that seem to have made their home here. Almost everywhere we look, one of those blackbirds is prancing about or taking flight. Perhaps my earlier unease can be attributed to their presence. Ever since we entered the village, they seem to have been very curious about our activities. Despite their number, their cries seem to occur infrequently. James says it is somewhat odd, but I only assume they are too concerned with observing us.

We have set up our base camp around the well in the center of the village. Dusk is setting in, and we will wait until tomorrow morning to begin our exploration of the ruined village. I am not sure I will be able to sleep out of excitement!

April 20th, 1952
I had the most peculiar dream last night. I dreamt a crow was carrying me across the sea. When I asked it where it was taking me, it said, “Into the abyss,” and dropped me into the water. It felt like an eternity before I
finally woke up. I assume it was from a combination of the crows scattered about and the salt in the air. It appears I am not alone in my uneasy slumber the night before, however. Daniel swears he heard a cry in the night but seems to have been the only one. Surely the isolation from civilization is playing tricks on his head.

Our exploration of the ruins has not yielded much information. Not a shred of paper of any kind can be found, even in the church. Any wooden signs throughout the village seem to have had the writing upon them washed away over the years. I must confess my frustration. Trying to determine the origin or history of this Nameless Village is proving quite challenging. We will continue tomorrow.

April 21st, 1952
Kameron awoke us in the middle of the night, screaming. He appeared to be having a night terror of some kind. When he finally snapped out of it, he sat awake for the remainder of the night, apparently too afraid to sleep. Ever since, he has been exceedingly nervous. His eyes dart around as if he fears every shadow. If we were nearer to a town, I would suggest sending the poor man home to recover. The isolation seems to be getting to him.

The crows are unusually active today. Their cries are occurring far more frequently. James believes Kameron’s cries the night before had angered them. Odd for a simple bird to hold a grudge, but I suppose this is their land. Our search is still proving fruitless, but we haven’t given up yet.

April 22nd, 1952
Daniel disappeared last night. Kameron says he saw Daniel rise from his bedroll and go into the church. He called for him to stay, but Daniel seemed not to hear him. We have been searching frantically, but there has been no sign of Daniel. The dread I felt when we first came here has returned, but I must keep my head clear. Hopefully, Daniel’s enthusiasm got the better of him and he decided to play a distasteful joke. When I find him, I may just slap him.

April 23rd, 1952
Kameron screamed again last night. Whatever has him so terrified of the village seems to be getting worse. He has taken to muttering to himself about shadows moving under their own power and a light flickering in the church tower. The shadows must be his imagination running away with him, but perhaps Daniel found his way into the church tower? From what we could tell, the only door in has been barred from the inside. I think James means to break it down if Daniel doesn’t turn up.

Unfortunately, I was not mistaken in my assessment of James’s intentions. The rest of us followed James up the spiral staircase until we reached the top of the tower, but there was no Daniel. All we found were a large set of bells with spectacular engravings. Kameron seems afraid of them, but I must try to convince him to decipher the drawings. Truly this is a remarkable discovery.

April 24th, 1952
We awoke this morning to find Kameron dead, his hair turned entirely white and his eyes bulging from the sockets. Henry suggested we leave, but after Kameron’s death, I feel a greater sense of urgency in finding Daniel. What killed Kameron? Did it already get Daniel? What is going on here?

As dusk fell, James attacked us without warning. Henry and I barely managed to subdue him by smashing a brick across his skull. What the devil is happening here? James had seemed irritable all day, but there was no indication he had suddenly developed a need to harm us. We have stowed his and Kameron’s bodies in the church. Still no sign of Daniel. Henry thinks we should leave tomorrow morning whether we find him or not. I must admit that despite my fear for Daniel’s fate, I must agree.

April 25th, 1952
It is not yet dawn. Henry awoke screaming about eyes in the dark. Ever since, I have been unable to sleep. I feel like something is out there watching us. Perhaps it is merely the crows? Their cries are getting worse. I almost feel as though they are mocking us. God, help us.

I have no idea when I fell asleep, but I awoke that morning to find Henry gone. The bodies of Kameron and James are missing as well. I have never been so terrified in my life. The crows seem to be screaming at me now.
Sometimes I swear I hear words in their cries, but it must be my feverish imagination. First Daniel disappears, now Henry, and I dare not dwell too long on Kameron and James's fates. We never should have come here.

I have been searching frantically for Daniel or Henry, but they are nowhere to be found. I had thought I was afraid before, but now my hand shakes as I write this. Whatever my fate, this journal is now my only companion, and I feel compelled to recount all that I witness.

Unknown Day

They can hear me breathing! I've locked myself in the lighthouse, but they can hear me! The ravens tell them what I write! They are not crows, they are ravens! Death is here, and Death is what took Henry and Daniel! Oh sweet merciful God, have mercy on us all! My heart only beats faster! Slow down or they'll hear! They are knocking! I see their faces! GOD HELP ME!

About the Author:
Patrick Luther is an aspiring author, active member and supporter of the haunted attraction industry, and an avid horror fan in all mediums. He lives in northern Indiana with his wife and son and enjoys fencing, martial arts, and PC games in his free time.

Facebook: Patrick Luther: Horror/Dark Fantasy Writer
Author Website: Patrick Luther Writer

The Doll House | Sara J. Bernhardt

The door was closed. I cannot tell you when I first realized she was there, standing silent and dormant. Though her face appeared tranquil I could tell there was something dour behind her eyes. Her lingering silence was becoming almost distressing. Something was going on in her mind, something that was trying to mold bleak expressions into her features, though she refused to let it. I was terrified of what she was going to say to me, but her silence was worse, forcing me to create scenarios in my head. Perhaps what she was thinking was only half as bad as what I was fearing. Or perhaps I had no idea of how irritated she may be. Perhaps...perhaps I was mad the entire time, perhaps I had only imagined it all.

"Why did you come?"

Soft words. No anger, no fear. Slow, almost kind sounding words. I was taken off guard, unsure how to respond.

"I don't know."

She sighed and lowered her head, her soft hair falling loosely over her shoulders.

"I don't need this," she said sadly. "Not from you."

"Not from me?" I asked. "Don't say that, Mona, I know you."

"You don't know me. You never have."

I didn't respond. I tried to grasp her arm, but she pulled away harshly. She stormed out. I watched as she walked away, concentrating on the movement of her auburn hair. I knew she'd be back; she always came back. She was meant to be mine the very second, I decided it, the very second I saw her in that little bookstore across the street. Her sweet, beautiful face with the large round eyes and pale, untainted skin, she was perfect. I wanted her to be mine.

I waited all night, until the clock began taunting me. 4:42, 4:43, 4:44. Before I knew it, it was six o clock in the morning and I was still awake, sitting in the rocking chair by the window watching the sun come up, waiting for her to come back. She didn't come back though. Not that day and not the next. I thought about going back to her work again, but didn't want to make her angry. She seemed afraid of me. Oh, if she only knew how much I loved her. I was going to make her immortal, just like all the others.
I tried to clear my mind of Mona, just for one day and brought myself to the top floor of my home to visit my beautiful Jessica. She was my first love. I stared at her as she stood by her nightstand. Her face was just as perfect and ageless as it was the day I met her all those years ago. She wouldn’t look at me—she never looked at me. She just stood there.

“Ah,” I whispered, running my hands through her dark hair, “I’ve missed you my love.”

I fingered the yellowed lace at the cuff of her white dress. “Your dress is getting tarnished darling. May I suggest a new one?”

She didn’t answer—she never answered.

I fumbled through her closet and found a red silk gown that would bell out at the base of her feet and highlight the auburn shine in her eyes. Perfect. I unzipped the white dress slowly, admiring the feel of my flesh against hers as the fabric slipped down around her ankles. She didn’t move to help me, but nor to stop me. I kissed her softly and that’s when my mind haunted me with thoughts of Mona.

“I missed you, Mai Ling,” I said, “How have you been my little china doll?”

She didn’t need to answer. I was sure she missed me. The guilt was almost unbearable. “Please don’t be sad,” I pleaded, my own eyes almost filled with unshed tears. “I have not forgotten you. I never forget my loves.”

She didn’t say a word, she didn’t move. Just like all the others. The years had not been as kind to me as they had to my partners, and I feared she no longer found me charming. I just looked into her eyes, waiting for the expression of passion she once showed. There was nothing. Her eyes were empty. I kissed her lips softly, but she didn’t return it.

Mona crowded my mind again. The others were losing affection for me. It saddened me more than I could tell. I had to see Mona again.

I walked into the bookstore and she immediately walked toward me.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she spat. Her green eyes were full and angry.

“I wanted to see you,” I said. “Please, Mona. I want to see you tonight.”

She sighed, “We can’t do this.”

“Just give me tonight,” I pleaded. “Just let me show you what I can give you, just once.”

She sighed again and looked away for a moment. “Fine,” she grumbled, “I get off at seven.”

I smiled and nodded, “Thank you.”

I went home to immediately start dinner. I wanted Mona more than I could ever put into words. More than Jessica, more than Caroline and more than my little china doll, Mai Ling. I slaved for hours to make the perfect dinner for my little auburn-haired partner. I knew she would let me keep her after tonight. She was going to fall for me as I had fallen for her.

When she arrived, she looked more stunning than she ever had before. She gazed at the table noticing the candles and the beautiful china I had broken out just for her.
“It’s lovely.”
She was the only one who spoke to me; she was the only one who looked at me. The others must have grown bored. I was not as appealing as I was in my younger days. Mona was the only one who didn’t seem to mind. We ate in silence. I watched her closely as she delicately nibbled at her food. I loved the way she moved.
She finished her dinner, but didn’t yet look at me.
“Mona?”
She finally made eye contact.
“I want to show you what you mean to me.”
She stared into my eyes but didn’t yet respond. “I want you,” she said, “but I don’t know if it can be.”
I stood up from the table and offered her my hand. She grasped my fingers gently and stood to her feet.
Her yellow dress accentuated the delicate curves of her perfect body.
“Dance with me,” I whispered.
“Now?”
“Now.”
“There’s no music.”
I smiled, “Of course there is,” I said, “just close your eyes.”
She leaned against me with her eyes closed and we danced. The music was silent but we both heard it. It was the symphony of her heart and her body. Oh, how I wanted her then. I leaned in and kissed her passionately. She parted her lips in acceptance and I deepened our kiss. I want to make you immortal, I thought. I had to keep her forever. She was the one.
So, the night ended, and Mona sat comfortably on the edge of the bed in her silk night dress where I could see her in all her beauty. I kissed her once more.
“Thank you,” I said to her, “I love you all, but you, my darling are the one I adore the most. You are perfect, my love.”
She must have been tired because she didn’t look at me.
“I will let you rest,” I told her softly. “Good night, my love.”
I went to my room and for the first time slept soundly and dreamlessly. As the months passed Mona’s affections began to wane and it made me sad to see her rejecting my adoration. She was like the others now. She never returned my touch or looked longingly into my eyes. I sighed as I went to her room. I kissed her on the forehead.
“I have made you immortal,” I said. “I have made you all immortal and I receive no thanks.”
I wiped a tear from my eye and ventured out that night. Ventured out for the one girl who deserved immortality. A girl who would never lose affections. Until then, my other loves waited for me at home—all of them—as they always have been and always will be—unchanging, not aging—perfect and youthful forever.

About the Author:
Sara J. Bernhardt is a published author, poet, and professional editor. Her published works include, In Gray, The Hunters Trilogy and the Behind Blue Eyes Saga. She has been writing since a very young age and is the winner of countless poetry and short story contests since before she was a teenager, frequently winning publication. Her greatest inspirations are Edgar Allen Poe, Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker and Anne Rice.

Author Blog: Stories to Take You Away
Facebook: Sara J. Bernhardt
I curl up next to the fireplace, rest my head against the surround. A goblet of heavy merlot in my hand; heavy for its body or heavy for my longing, I cannot say. As I stare into the crackling blaze, my mind wanders. So many memories from years gone by, so much love shared here, in this very room. My soul shrieks with grief as I collapse into a ball, sobbing.

The fire now a blur through wet eyes, my head lolls and I glance toward the tree with its twinkling lights, glittering balls and brightly wrapped packages tucked neatly below. You always were such a perfectionist. My eyes flutter shut as the day you dressed the tree itself forces itself upon my mind. You were so happy, so blissful to pick the tallest on the lot. I recall joking that one of us would have to move out so the tree could move in. You kissed me with icy cold lips and a bright red nose. Little did I know how soon I would long to feel that frigid touch once more. Your enthusiasm knowing no bounds, you spent the next week arranging everything just so; making sure the colorful glass baubles were placed with precision, everything to an exacting measure. I recall jokingly moving a strand of tinsel when you weren’t watching, only to reenter the room moments later to find it placed back in its original position. The gifts. Oh, how you tortured me over the gifts long before the season began. A sad smile steals across my lips as I think of the hours you spent fretting over the perfect surprise for each of our friends. As I sip from my glass, a slight chuckle escapes me only to end in a sob as I recall your distress over wrapping each gift in the appropriately colored foil. God, how you loved this day.

I think back upon the last evening I saw you. I was standing at the island between this room and the kitchen when you remembered one final detail that you couldn’t do without. I kissed you as you bounded past me, told you not to be long and that I loved you. You grabbed your coat from the hook and turned to me, purse in hand, golden locks bouncing and smiled before replying as you always did – not nearly the way I love you. I smiled back; you left. Two hours later, a knock sounded on the door. I wasn’t worried, you often became infatuated with something or other and lost track of the time, or left the apartment without your keys. As I moved to open the front door, I noticed the bare flicker of red and blue light drifting in through the balcony doors. Seeing the officers standing upon the threshold, I walked to the glass, placed my palms and forehead to it, and knew in that moment… you were gone. My legs gave way and I nearly collapsed as a wave of pain crashed through me. The officers helped me to the couch and explained that there was an accident at the corner – our corner, and a young woman had been hit by a car that ran the red light. You were that young woman.

My eyes crack open seeking a red light on the tree, your tree – our tree. But instead, my sight finds the red fairy lights you used to decorate the balcony. Barely able to stand, I stumble to the sliding doors. As I fumble to open them through my tears, the merlot in my glass pours onto the white carpet. My addled mind tells me how angry you’ll be if I don’t clean the deep burgundy spill right away, but what a silly thought, you’ll never feel or say anything again. Finally managing the lock, I step through onto the bitterly cold veranda. Standing at the rail, I’m cocooned in a halo of red light, my long chestnut mane whipping in the wind. Another balcony, one belonging to our neighbor, is adorned in blue twinkling lights. I wonder why I’d not noticed it before. The blue and red lights blend as my inebriated mind struggles to adjust. Five stories below, more lights twinkle, cars rush past; the ground wears a fresh blanket of snow. I’m so tired, and the blanket seems so inviting. Please, don’t go without me – words I should have spoken that night. Letting myself lean forward, the blur of reds and blue swirl around me. Just before I pitch too far, I grasp the railing, sink to my knees and crawl back inside. Too much a coward to follow you; too devoted to allow your memory to die.

About the Author:
Nina D’Arcangela is a quirky horror writer who likes to spin soul rending snippets of despair and dread. She reads anything from splatter matter to dark matter, and is an UrbEx adventurer who loves to photograph abandoned places, bits of decay, and old grave yards. Nina runs a monthly picture-prompt blog series featuring twenty to thirty women who write for The Ladies of Horror on Spreading the Writer’s Word; she is a co-owner of Sirens Call Publications and Phrenic Press; a co-founder of the horror writer’s group Pen of the Damned; and the owner and resident anarchist of Dark Angel Photography.

Author Blog: Sotet Angyal
Instagram: @darcnina
I knelt before his body, the divine man we all once worshiped. He remained exposed; no one bothered preparing a grave in honor. My hands tightened into fists. The rage of their vile act upon the Master seethed in my blood. How could they betray their faith?

I’d become a stray sheep among wolves.

Looking up at the night, I prayed for answers. The sky returned my grief with thudding tears. I welcomed the sorrow of rain as it drowned my lament and washed the blood from my clothes. I laid my hands upon his rotting flesh, hoping to feel some remnant of warmth. But nothing radiated from his lifeless heart. Death had exhaled its cold breath upon his soul.

I remembered the first thing he said to me. I’d asked him why God allows bad things to happen to good people—the question everyone asks.

“God gave humankind free will,” he told me. “If He intervened in our affairs, that free will would be invalid. It would cease to exist. By giving us the power of choice, He disempowered himself of meddling.”

Those words changed me, molded me into his disciple with the hands of a savant artist. Not long after, we gathered a flock the savior himself would have been proud of. Each Sunday we convened in an old barn at the edge of my property. The handmade pews would be seated by familiar faces, those of friends and family. They awaited his words with great anticipation in desperate eyes. All sought salvation, but all had turned on Master in the end.

I put my head against his chest and remembered his gospel.

“The Lord gave us the gift of suffering so we would know what it means to truly be alive, so we would know light from dark, good from evil. Joy is the antithesis of that endowment, the betrayer of clarity. So I ask you, take hold of your pain, know it, bond with it. For only that can put you in the good grace of our Lord.”

They followed his words. They mourned lost loves, loathed their own vices and those of others, reveled in the toil of daily life. But a small town, a peaceful hamlet not prone to crime or violence, has only so much to suffer.

It wasn’t enough.

“Give thy pain to thy neighbor,” he’d said. “Offer up your tribulation so that those with none can truly see what it means to believe. Allow them to feel the love of our Lord’s blessing.”

After that, the town of Angleton became something else.

Those who followed took his message and spread suffering like a plague. Violence became desired, harm welcomed. There were no victims during the time of awakening. Only loyal servants. They gave themselves to the cause, some even came begging. Master gave it willingly. The barn became a house of torment, howls of agony its chorus. They lined up waiting to feel the hand of Master scar their flesh.

They wore those marks with pride. Hung blood-stained clothes on walls, glorified shrines to Master. They honored the Lord, loved Him, more than they loved themselves. But now those offerings burned in a pile of despised memories, still glowing within the remnants of my barn, the church we all once shared. And the wounds for which they pleaded were covered by clean, fresh laundry—an affront to Master’s gifts.

I tried to make them see. But the mob came, torches aflame. I stood between them and our house of worship. The Master never left, didn’t try to run. He welcomed their blasphemous deed, laughed with arms raised as they set the fire. They stood and watched it burn, Master still inside. I wanted to dash into the blaze and die with him. But I couldn’t perish yet. I had to avenge the greatest man who ever lived. My fate was to spread the gospel of Edgar. He told me so himself.

I was then a wolf among sheep, bringer of redemption. Attempts to rekindle their faith futile, pain only closed their eyes. They could not be forgiven. They were not absolved

It crawls along my ivory frame, skitters from limb to limb. The clicking is maddening. I’ve seen the lump as it moves; it has even come to meet my hand. Where it hides from prying doctors, I doubt I’d like to know. So on it goes, on it travels. It has explored all of me. I’ve looked upon the kitchen block and considered removing it myself. Every day, every hour, that option is increasingly appealing. But so far as I know, no harm has come to me, no illness or ailment have I suffered except for the horrible click-clack of its tiny feet upon my bones. For a moment, I consider that it and I might live in relative peace. Then a second clicking begins.
Dreams of a Clean Death | Lee Andrew Forman

White painted cages. One animal for each. Shaved, stripped, washed, re-clothed. They brought us clean into a den of filth. Irony could be willfully cruel. I wondered the reason; why not let us die? But I remembered people had a knack for keeping alive what should be dead.

We would have perished by choice but they made us live. Willful starvation wasn’t an option—refusal would be penetrated by a clear plastic tube.

We dreamed of death, and it of us. It suffered along, wishing to enter, but the walls of this place, too thick for even it to intrude. On occasion a finger slipped in, on long nights when no one was looking. Most hoped to be chosen, at least those of mind.

Those in the shallow, unmarked soil were the luckiest. The field barely visible, we knew it was there. The quiet place, land without screams; absent of cruelty and electric pain. The lack of names on stone was irrelevant, for all here had already been forgotten.

Others lost their souls, bodies still lingered. Where spirit went, I could only imagine. Maybe they occupied dreams, out of focus objects wailing in distortion behind fluttering eyes. Most would call that a haunting; for us—absolute communion.

Insemination | Lee Andrew Forman

Nicolette rubbed her hands along her naked belly and knew her barren insides held no place for new souls. Her eyes peered into the mirror. Not to view her meager shell, but to converse with the only soul her body would hold: her own. There existed a question she must both ask and answer. Something dubious and unknown. Possibly dangerous. The doctor who gave her the news explained there was a way, though she may not like it.

As time fell short she realized the debate was only an illusion. Only one choice existed. She’d do what her doctor suggested. Nicolette never believed in alternative medicine, but her want for motherhood not only sent her heart to dark places, but her body as well.

The crumpled address in her pocket led her to an old brick structure, what might have been a factory back when they were a thriving industry. Doubt sunk into heavy feet as she approached a steel door. Her body wanted to hesitate as she reached for the handle, but she knew she’d go through with it anyway.

Beyond sat a makeshift operating table in an otherwise dark open space. A few stand-up curtains lined the back side of it. A construction lamp lit the area. One man stood in the light, both hands at his sides, unmoving, waiting. Nicolette held her breath as she approached. The man motioned his hands toward the workspace without a word.

Her body supine on the metal table, she focused on the dark above. She projected herself into it, a void where there was no pain, no fear, no sorrow.

The procedure felt like nothing more than a moment; a strange dream shrouded in fogged sounds and colors. When she sat upright she watched the doctor remove his gloves. They were covered in inky, black fluid. He tossed them into a waste bin and took leave into the darkness of the old factory.

Nicolette did the only thing she could. She went home.

When she looked into the mirror by the light of the morning sun, her once empty place grew and writhed with life. Nicolette rubbed her hands along her naked belly and knew by the three fingered hand pressed against hers, that what lived there wasn’t human.

About the Author:
Lee Andrew Forman is a writer, editor, and publisher from the Hudson Valley, NY. His fascination with the macabre began in childhood, watching old movies and reading everything he could get his hands on. His love of horror spans three generations, starting with his grandfather who was a fan of the classic Hollywood Monsters.

Author Blog: Lee Andrew Forman
Instagram: @leeandrewforman
Our elders say that we once wrote on paper made from the beaten pulp of trees. The precious trees. Imagine these three-dimensional beings reduced to two-dimensional sheets; of less value than the words written on them. That was then, before the symbionts evolved and forbade such desecration.

Legends tell that the trees created the symbionts. The leaves closed their stomata, the air grew foul, people sickened, died. At first, people believed that the trees were diseased, but the first symbionts told them that the forests were declaring war.

After the first great suffocation, a whispered rumour spread like a mist – infants offered to the trees would be spared. Desperate mothers flocked to lay their babies in sacred groves. Most died. Those who survived had a mutation which allowed them to communicate in the wordless language of the trees. Slowly, the forests advanced across the face of the earth, thriving in the care of their symbionts who, in turn, thrived on the clean air and sweet fruit gifted to them by their trees. Within four generations, the trees and their guardians became the dominant species.

Now the exploitation of trees is a crime. The symbionts are fierce enforcers, combining as they do the patient strength of the forest and the inventive cruelty of mankind.

I am old enough to remember my mother reading to me and my younger brother, Peter. The words were like flames, roaring through my imagination, igniting my feelings, burning away my ignorance. I yearned for more, but even then, books were a rare and dangerous commodity. I have only a few volumes left now; a precious collection snatched at random from the terror of the purge.

The purge.

How innocent my forebears were to think that the slow, natural evolution of the symbionts would enable us to co-exist. How little they understood the force of vengeance that the forests would bring to bear.

That night, my mother woke me from a deep sleep. She had already bundled Peter, my younger brother, into our rickety handcart. The bottom of the cart was lined with lumpy shapes, covered by a thin blanket.

“We have to go!” my mother had whispered. “Take the handle and push, we have to get to the city.”

Back then, the city was surrounded by an unbroken ring of concrete, a barrier to the implacable spread of the trees. Within its walls, a thousand unchanged humans tended gardens, grew crops, all prohibited activities now.

In the gloom we saw hundreds of families desperate to reach the sanctuary of the city. As we dodged between the encircling trees, the moonlight seemed to bathe the landscape with fear. A terrible dread flowed over me. I lifted Peter from the cart, we could move faster without it, but my mother hissed, “No! You have to take the books.”

I grabbed a few volumes and pushed them into my coat; Peter grabbed his favourite picture book. My mother scrabbled to push the cart. I begged her to leave it, but she was unwilling to let the books go. We scuttled forward, my mother whimpering in terror.

“Why are we doing this?” I asked her, but she did not have the breath to answer.

Around us, the whispering of the wind was replaced with a harsh rasping as the fleeing people gasped for breath. Ahead of us, the moon-bleached city walls were suddenly alive with the pallid forms of the symbionts.

“Go back!” my mother wheezed, collapsing against the cart, her old lungs struggling with the sudden withdrawal of oxygen.

I grabbed Peter’s hand and ran back through the trees; we would be safe there as long as the symbionts were intent on their ambush. Behind us, screams echoed through the night as the symbionts began the ritual that would bond the unchanged humans to the forest. I recognised my mother’s voice, babbling poetry until the agony of her torture overcame her wits.

The following morning, Peter and I looked down at the city. Saplings were rising through the streets as the symbionts moved through, planting a new forest whose roots would crumble the city’s walls. Bearing the life-force of their trees, symbionts were almost impossible to resist, the city was soon purged of its humans.

The symbionts did not pursue us. I believe that they allowed the remaining scraps and tatters of humanity to live, knowing that we would soon fade away.

Peter and I joined a loose band of survivors, though we cannot risk settling together while the symbionts remain vigilant. We move between abandoned homes, carrying our books, precious relics of our dwindling civilisation.

The symbionts do not need books. The forest is one with them - sharing their thoughts without words; their history is written in the tree rings. They cannot hear our thoughts, so they believe us to be dumb, deaf, inferior. We scratch a living, existing only on that which we can forage illicitly from remote hedgerows. We cannot sow or reap – our days of taking are over.
I would give in and die of despair and starvation, as many did when the symbionts came to power. But I, and a few others, still have words to inspire us, though we dare not speak or write openly. We meet when we can, gathering in barren places to read a priceless book. We take just one book at a time—it is all we can afford to lose if we are exposed.

We are now staying in a fine old house full of antique oak furniture. I try not to imagine how the owners might have suffered when the symbionts found this place furnished with the death of trees. The kitchen is well-equipped, and the cellar holds a treasure—jars of home-made preserves which will keep us nourished for many months. I sink into an armchair and wrap myself in a rusty blanket, allowing myself a moment of peace.

A knock disturbs my reverie. When I open the door, there is no one there, but a tiny vial of indigo ink sits on the doorstep. We lack the symbionts’ innate telepathy, but we are cunning and have found another way to communicate without words.

Peter emerges from his own armchair, nods, and goes out to the back yard, taking a shovel with him. Our books are buried deep, but it is our turn to take one to tonight’s gathering. We have chosen a volume by a man named Oscar Wilde. We know nothing of his history, but I remember how my soul rocked to the cadence of his words as my mother read to me.

I take the vial, marvelling again at the complexity of its formulation. The scientists who escaped the purge discovered a way to control the patterns that form when the ink is dripped into water. Their dedication is remarkable. Each batch is unique and coded to deliver a single message. I do not know who they are or where they are based—the unknown cannot be betrayed. What I do know is how to read the patterns.

I let ten drops fall into the glass, the ink swirls, the message clear—midnight at the South Beach. It is a good place; the rhythmic beat of the waves will drown our whispered reading. Although it is midwinter and the trees are dormant, the wind-scoured sand will be bare of their oppressive presence. The message dissipates as the ink mixes with the water. Of necessity, the message is short-lived, the consequences of discovery are terrible and fill my bones with fear.

Suddenly, the front door crashes open. Three symbionts stride into the room, their eyes filled with horror as they look at the blue-stained water. Attuned as they are to the plants that surround us, they know that we have snatched and murdered many berries to make this ink.

I grab the glass and run out of the back door, but it is too late. Peter is already staked out on the ground, ready for the ritual of bonding. He screams and screams as a symbiont carefully cuts a slit in his belly and plants a cherry sapling, gently spreading the roots under the skin. The warmth of Peter’s body will sustain the tree as it slowly consumes him. The symbionts care tenderly for those involved in the ritual, if he is lucky, Peter will die within a few weeks, but it may be longer.

“Drink!” Peter shouts as he sees the glass in my hand.

I take a mournful and swallow quickly before running to him, throwing as much of the liquid into his pleading mouth as I can. He licks his lips greedily, desperate to catch the liquid streaming over his face. His limbs convulse against their bonds as the poison takes hold—the fragile cherry tree topples, ripping his skin as it falls, but Peter is past caring.

The purple-black Belladonna berries that we use to make our ink are deadly. Too many of us were caught; too many suffered before we learnt the necessity of a swift death.

The symbionts are gathered around the stricken cherry sapling, distracted.

I run into the forest, wondering whether I can escape, but my legs suddenly fold beneath me.

I lie on a dense carpet of fallen leaves. Delirious, the bare branches far above me become scribbled words in the crystal sky. I feel my life ebbing away. This is a beautiful death—the words were worth it.

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: [Ideal Reader Blog](#)
Twitter: [@Indigodreamers](#)
Tiny Tracks Lead to Big Bites

My preference for flash fiction stems from decades of existence with undiagnosed ADHD. As a child I struggled to keep my attention steady on the longer stories and novels. Because of this, I often found myself rereading the same line or paragraph several times because it simply wouldn’t stick. I would unintentionally skip lines, missing out on parts of the story, only to end up terribly confused and not have any idea as to why. On the adverse side, if I didn’t have trouble staying on track, I would inhale the work with inhuman speed but fail to remember anything about it.

When I’d discovered flash fiction, a new door opened, and I was able to escape into another world. One where I could actually read and take in everything without the bizarre memory loss. I was able to slow down my brain so I could finally devour universes.

It wasn’t just a struggle that impacted my reading, but also my writing. I couldn’t focus my mind to create a cohesive story. Paragraphs, sentences, even massive plot points fell chaotically onto the pages. The worst problem about it? I couldn’t always see it. I think I still struggle with that today, but I’m able to manage it a bit more. Having a smaller word count to work with, I learned how to get my thoughts on paper, and cut out all the clutter. I’ve been able to tighten my writing and find pleasure in what I work on, rather than feeling the need to run.

The stories in Itty Bitty Horror Bites are pieces that I’ve written during my struggle to hone my skill and find my own way of storytelling. As I got my inner demons out, they became more intense, and it seemed like I would even be able to tackle much larger word counts. Each piece carrying an itty piece of me, and a bitty slice of my madness.

Follow the journey through my mind, take a chance on what might be waiting for you behind the door. Everyone loves a good scare, and sometimes even a good cry—but are fictional creatures more terrifying than the emotions that drive them?

About the Author:
Lydia Prime hails from the bowels of New Jersey—shudder. She’s that creepy creature lurking under your bed, just waiting for you to sick a limb out from beneath the covers. Some of Lydia’s work can be found for free on Pen of the Damned, as well as in Nina D’Arcangela’s, The Ladies of Horror Picture-prompt Challenge, on Spreading the Writer’s Word. In addition to recently releasing her collection of horror and dark fiction pieces, Itty Bitty Horror Bites, she has had several pieces published in issues of The Sirens Call eZine throughout the years. To date, she’s been lucky enough to have been included in two anthologies from Kandisha Press: Under Her Black Wings: A 2020 Women of Horror Anthology, and Graveyard Smash: Women of Horror Anthology Volume 2.

To stay up to date on Lydia’s projects, stalk her on:
Amazon Author Page: Lydia Prime
Facebook: @AuthorLydiaPrime
Twitter: @LydiaPrime
Instagram: @Helminthophobia
Blog: Lapsed Reality
Itty Bitty
HORROR
Bites

Lydia Prime
Markings

I was unsure of how long I’d been walking, nothing looked familiar. The trees had strange markings on them, each increasingly concerning; monstrous creatures eating each other, fighting – some even appeared to be staring. *What are these?* I questioned and pressed on.

Though alone, I could not escape the feeling of being watched. I quickly moved through the clearing only to happen upon tracks that sat seemingly forgotten. The entire scape was blanketed in dust, as if untouched by the elements. The stillness was unnerving to say the least; nevertheless, I was drawn to the enigmatic scene. Peering at the rusted train cars, I noticed how silent the area had been.

I hesitated, but my desire to know forced my feet forward. I stepped into a paint chipped car and immediately felt the gravity of my mistake. A horned creature materialized in front of me, its stench and putrid flesh were utterly repulsive. Every instinct was screaming *‘RUN’*, but I could not move. As it drove yellowed claws through my chest, my final thought was of the trees. A guttural voice scoffed in my mind, *‘You shouldn’t have dismissed them.’*

Here Comes the Sun

The heavy pattering of rain against the plastic roof stopped. Emerging from her pink and yellow playhouse ready to run, her shadow hesitated but quickly raced after her. As she lurked along the edge of the verdure, gleeful squeals and light splashing caught her ear. Her shadow swiftly moved through the tall grass, leading her closer.

A small boy sat on his tiny red tricycle, his feet stomped through puddles as he giggled. Her shadow appeared in front of him, unphased, he continued. The five-year-old girl nodded and crept silently behind him. Her loose curls and pastel colored dress crusty with brown stains; her petite pale face coated in flaky red blotches. The boy shivered and looked back; a wide smile parted her lips revealing a mouth full of pointed teeth. He cried and screeched for his mother. Without missing a beat, she clamped her shark-like jaws tightly around his neck while her shadow held him down. Devouring his tender meat, she left nothing but bones.

His copper infused juice swirled into murky puddles. Her shadow guided her back into the field. Before disappearing into the weedy cover, she licked her lips and whispered, “More.”

Some Carnivores Have Roots...

Agile movements by a tongue so sharp and sleek, blackened teeth stretch wide to distort the mighty jaw. Concealed by delicate beauty, secrets lie inside their florescent warning. A field springs up with no gardener in sight and onlookers are drawn to the mysterious plants. Mobility is unnecessary for the ravenous blossoms the Reaper keeps.

Those misguided admirers lean too near the center for a closer peek, before a second thought is had, flesh and bone are devoured while blood and soul slurp down their immaculate throats. The first crimson droplets soak the yellow petals of the rooted beasts; the golden plot now scarlet after the grotesque feast.

Gurgling sounds echo from the rows of flowery plumage while his grimness emerges from the dark. Satisfied by quick collection, the lemon color returns.

*Itty Bitty Horror Bites* is available now on [Kindle](https://kindle.amazon.com) and in [Paperback](https://paperback.amazon.com) on Amazon!