The Sirens Call

February 2013



36 Works of Fiction: Short Stories, Flash & Poetry

Feature Interview with Dark Media founder Eva Layne

Comparative Flash Fiction - One Photo, Two Stories of 300 words each

Featured Artist: Rae Beth Designs ~ Aesthetic Remains

www.SirensCallPublications.com

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www.womeninhorrormonth.com

www.facebook.com/WomenInHorrorMonth

womeninhorrormonth.tumblr.com

THE MISSION

Women in Horror Recognition Month (WiHM) assists underrepresented female genre artists in gaining opportunities, exposure, and education through altruistic events, printed material, articles, interviews, and online support. WiHM seeks to expose and break down social constructs and miscommunication between female professionals while simultaneously educating the public about discrimination and how they can assist the female gender in reaching equality.

THE VISION

A world wherein all individuals are equally given the opportunity to create, share, and exploit their concept of life, pain, and freedom of expression.

IT'S THE YEAR 2013, NOT THE 1950's. IS THERE REALLY A NEED FOR WIHM?

Absolutely. Otherwise, WiHM would not exist. Women are still not offered the same pay and opportunities as their male colleagues in many industries, particularly the arts. Discrimination runs rampant in Hollywood and its very difficult for females (even well-known actresses) to get their films funded by major studios. Statistics prove that women are still not offered the same opportunities as men due to an array of reasons from discrimination to female professionals accepting less than they are worth in order to receive the same opportunities as their male colleagues.

In other parts of the world, women are still stoned to death for speaking their minds, excommunicated when they are sexually violated, and not offered proper education. Atrocities continue to happen that force the female gender to be subservient to a patriarchal system that tells them how to dress, who to marry, and what they should do with their lives. All discrimination must be exposed and obliterated for the female gender to truly achieve equality..

WiHM focuses on supporting the achievements of women who utilize the most extreme mirror available in storytelling: horror. We encourage women to explore and represent these horrors constructively, in positive environments.

WHAT ARE THE INDUSTRY'S STATISTICS?

In the 1920s there were no more than 10 women working in Hollywood in leadership positions. In 2009, the mainstream film industry's ratio was 16% women to 84% men. In 2011, women made up only 5% of directors working in Hollywood.

SO WIHM IS ALL ABOUT WOMEN. WHAT ABOUT MEN?

WiHM was created with no exclusion. Men play a vital part in the female gender reaching equality. There are many male WiHM Ambassadors and artists who choose to assist and work with professional and talented underrepresented females. Be a guiding example of a male who respects both genders equally.

WHAT CAN THE PUBLIC DO TO ASSIST WOMEN?

Personal Responsibility.

We all must take personal responsibility in our beliefs, values, and actions. Participating in positive, constructive environments that encourage and provide a safe platform for women to share and explore is vital.

Education.

Education is essential for both genders. Knowledge is power. Understanding history and where that puts us today politically and socially demonstrates how we are interpreting each other and ourselves.

Work with Women.

Finding professional females to work with in leadership positions is one of the most important actions you can take to assist the movement. Don't just work with a female because of her gender, work with her because she has a lot to bring to the table.

Banish social constrictions.

Stereotyping, judging, cattiness, competitiveness, comparing, and gossip. All of these actions hurt both men and women. We are all on our own path in life, careers, and personal relationships. Both genders are encouraged to play into these cultural expectations when they are young, which can create judgment of those who are different. Stop it.

Be a WiHM Ambassador.

Every February, WiHM Ambassadors host charity events (blood drives, film screenings, art shows), write

blogs and articles, conduct interviews, and create videos and podcasts for mass consumption. All of these events and content specifically represent and assist the underrepresented female genre artist and are for philanthropoic reasons only. No profit is made from WiHM, or the Viscera organization.

Participate.

Go to the events, read the articles, watch the videos. Be conscious of the fact that you are consuming different perspectives of a movement that is assisting a struggle that women have experienced for at least the last four thousand years: equality. We have incredible potential right now to destroy discrimination. It deserves your attention.

Donate.

Donate to WiHM. All funds go directly into the organization to improve the events, materials, and outreach. WiHM needs the support of the public.

Support other organizations.

Organizations such as CARE, Women for Women International, RAINN, and WIF. All these organizations work hard all year round to assist women in achieving equality. Visit their websites and educate yourself.

THE BOARD

The Board of Directors for WiHM is comprised of women from all facets of the horror film industry, including WiHM founder Hannah Forman, Debbie Rochon, Jovanka Vuckovic, Heidi Honeycutt, Jen and Sylvia Soska, and Shannon Lark.

THE ORGANIZATION

WiHM is a service provided by the Viscera Organization, a 501(c)3 non profit organization expanding opportunities for contemporary female genre filmmakers and artists by raising awareness about the changing roles for women in the film industry.

www.viscerafilmfestival.com



Women in Horror Month Nina D'Arcangela

Well, here we are in the midst of Women in Horror Recognition Month (WiHM) 2013. Instead of sharing my thoughts with you on why I believe there is a need for Women in Horror Month, I'm going to trust that if you are reading this eZine, you are an intelligent, creative, well-rounded individual with the vision and foresight to look past archaic prejudices' and accept that women deserve recognition for their contribution to the horror genre. All of us who work in and/or around the horror industry deserve equal respect and appreciation for what we bring to it.

I'd like to dedicate my editorial to the Board of Directors for WiHM (www.womeninhorrormonth.com), and say thank you for making this event possible. Please pay them the respect and gratitude they deserve for having the passion and the drive to make WiHM significant for all of us!

HANNAH FORMAN, Founder, Director of Operations

Hannah Neurotica Forman is creator and editor of the first critically acclaimed feminist horror print publication Ax Wound: Gender & The Horror Genre. In September 2009 she founded Women in Horror Month (WiHM) - an event that launched after publishing a blog post/ manifesto about the importance of recognizing all the women who love and contribute to the horror genre. It is now an international celebration- winning the 2010 Rondo Hatton Classic Horror Award for Best Fan Event. (www. hannahneurotica.com)

JOVANKA VUCKOVIC

Jovanka Vuckovic is an award-winning writer, artist, filmmaker and cinema historian. Her varied career began in television broadcasting, where she earned a Gemini Award for Best Visual Effects at just 25 years old. She later became a noted genre expert during her tenure as Editor-in-Chief of Rue Morgue Magazine, where she blazed a trail for women interested in horror around the globe with her fierce, honest and unapologetic approach to film journalism. Vuckovic was the only female invited to speak at Forrest J Ackermans memorial and was recently named one of the top thirteen most important women in the history of horror alongside luminaries Mary Shelley, Kathryn Bigelow and Vampira. (www.thecapturedbird.com)

DEBBIE ROCHON

Debbie Rochon is an indie actress who has been in 200 plus films, mostly horror, starting as a pre-teen in the cult punk rock classic LADIES AND GENTLEMEN- THE FABULOUS STAINS! in which she worked as an extra for three months. There began her cinematic journey. After moving to New York City in 1984, Debbie studied acting for the next decade at such acting studios as Lee Strasberg, H.B. Studios, and her favorite The Michael Chekhov Studio. She worked onstage extensively with four New York City theatre companies before starting to land small roles in genre films beginning in 1988. She worked her way up to leading lady status and continues to enjoy creating complex and off-kilter characters for the screen. (www.debbierochon.com)

HEIDI HONEYCUTT

Heidi Honeycutt is a film journalist based in Los Angeles, California. She is a new media journalist, consultant, web designer and has a Masters Degree in Journalism and Mass Communications. She has written for numerous online and print entertainment magazines like Film Threat, CFQ, Femme Fatales, Zink, Bloody-Disgusting.com, Fangoria, Dark Side, Hustler, and more. Heidi is getting old and can't remember them all. She is the co-creator and editor of film news site PlanetFury.com. She has written,

produced, and directed the short film Wretched in 2007. Heidi is the Director of Programming of the annual Viscera Film Festival, the first women's-only genre film festival in the world AND also she's the director of the Etheria Film Festival, which shows only science fiction and fantasy directed by women. (www.planetetheria.com)

JEN & SYLVIA SOSKA

Jen and Sylvia Soska took the horror world by storm with their debut feature film, Dead Hooker In A Trunk. Unhappy with the stereotypical most commonly presented to actresses, especially identical twins, they took their careers into their own hands and wrote, directed, produced, starred in, and preformed the stunts for their film. They took lessons learned from Rodriguez's book, Rebel Without A Crew, on how film making could be done on a modest budget if you have the creativity and ambition to make your film. The film so followed the spirit of El Mariachi, that the twins story reached the original El Mariachi, Carlos Gallardo, who not only gave the ladies advice but also appeared in the film in the appropriate role as God. The film has been embraced by horror fans, film festival, reviewers, and film makers becoming an underground sensation being called a hidden gem in indie film making and a cult classic in waiting. (www.twistedtwinsproductions.net)

SHANNON LARK

Shannon Lark is a writer, director, producer, actress, and film festival director. She held the 2009 Spooksmodel crown for Fangoria Entertainment and is the Founder/Chief Officer of Operations at the Viscera Organization, a 501(c)3 not-for-profit dedicated to assisting female genre filmmakers. (www.shannonlarkonline.com - www.viscerafilmfestival.com)

And please don't forget to visit my own blog, *Spreading the Writer's Word*, (ninadarc.wordpress.com) where I am featuring a different female author each day throughout February!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Nina D'Arcangela was the type of girl who, when given a doll as a child, would immediately pop its head off to see what was inside, then spend countless hours contemplating how so many fantastic and fantastical things could be in her own head while the doll's was so very vacant.

Enamored by the imaginatively woven tales of Edgar Allen Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, Ray Bradbury, H.G. Wells, Edgar Rice Burrows and Arthur C. Clark, magical worlds took form from their inspiration keeping her awake flashlight under the covers, or nesting in a closet with the door shut.



While willing to read just about anything that is well crafted, she has a soft spot for the darker side of writing in the Horror, Sci-Fi and Other World genres.

Nina can be reached through Sirens Call Publications at Nina@SirensCallPublications.com; or darc.nina@gmail.com. Please visit her on her blog "Sotet Angyal: The Dark Angel" at sotetangyal.wordpress.com; or "Spreading the Writer's Word" at ninadarc.wordpress.com; and feel free to stalk her on Twitter as @Sotet_Angyal.

Women in Horror: An Editorial Kalla Monahan

Women write horror. It's true. If you need a moment to process that tidbit, take your time. Granted the number of traditionally published female horror authors is outnumbered by their male counterparts, the Indies and small press publishers are doing what they can to even out the playing field. And that's a good thing.

Let's ask a question though: why does the number of male, or perceived as male, horror authors exceed the number of females? Personally, I think it has to do with public perception.

Throughout history male authors have appeared to be the preferred author of horror tales. Sure there have been women - Mary Shelley, Shirley Jackson, Ann Radcliffe, Christine Campbell Thomson - but from all accounts they are few and far between. The numbers have been steadily climbing as women have gained equality in different avenues.

Now there are a staggering number of Indie voices on the scene and they are definitely making themselves heard. But I have to admit, there's a trend that is beginning to trouble me.

Since the scales of equality have not yet levelled out, I've seen a number of authors do their best to disguise the fact they are female. It can be something as simple as scaling back their first name into an initial and writing a non-gender specific bio to adopting a male pseudonym.

The fact of the matter is simple – it's their right.

But it saddens me to know that women still perceive themselves as having a better chance at success if a reader or critic thinks they are a man.

How does this affect the overall view of women in horror? For starters, it propagates the belief that success in horror is an old boys club, unbreakable by the talent of women. Secondly, it undermines who you are. Being a woman is something to be proud of, not something to hide.

So what's the crux of what I'm trying to say?

Embrace who you are and be proud that you create works of horror. Don't hide behind a guise to sell your work to readers. Many of those readers don't share the antiquated view that only good horror comes from the mind of a man. And if you get passed over because you're a woman, perhaps you're better off anyway. I say feck it, and feck them! Times are changing and we need to do everything we can to propel them forward.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Kalla is the quiet one at SCP but don't let that fool you; get her started on one of our projects and she will passionately talk your ear off. And as the Publicist of SCP, it's valuable to have someone that can both listen to the tides of the publishing world and sing your praises. Her literary loves include horror, science fiction and the bizarre. While she does have a weak spot for a good Zombie storyline and will greedily devour anything in the genre, she does get titillated by works in any genre that are well crafted and full of great characters.



The Blood Mobile Killion Slade

"Hey Ollie, is this a joke?" Ruthie Anne stood cemented to the carpet in front of the television.

Ollie hollered back at her from the bedroom, "What are you going on about now? I'm trying to catch a nap."

Not daring to take her eyes off the TV, Ruthie Anne spoke out the side of her mouth. "Oh... quit yer yammering and just come look at the news for a minute. It's reporting some kind of vampire war or something. Riots breaking out everywhere."

Ollie rolled his eyes at the utter gullibility of his wife. "Ludicrous. It's just a stupid hoax. April Fools' or something." Ollie patted the bed. "C'mon in here. Lay down in here with me." She stole a glance at him just long enough to see him pat the pillows on the bed.

Ruthie Anne thought about his logic for a moment and checked the calendar for the date. The atomic wall clock displayed April 28th, 72 degrees. Long past April 1st. It's true, the CDC had played a practical joke on people about the zombie apocalypse, but that was last year. Was this someone's idea of the next big mass scare?

Ruthie Anne walked through the bedroom door. "You wouldn't think people would joke about vampires and riots after all the recent political assassinations and kidnappings. Everything is upside down. People are frightened enough as it is."

Down through Hermosa Avenue, a siren wailed a couple blocks away. Ruthie Anne turned her head towards the alarm as she clutched at the collar of her shirt worrying the fabric. She urged her husband's attention off the bed. "Ollie, please just humor me. Seriously, come take a look at this." Teasing she singsonged, "If it's a false alarm then I'll make you some of your favorite no-bake cookies... with peanut butter." Convinced that would do the trick, Ruthie Anne blew him a kiss and darted out of the bedroom. She stood again in front of the television screen, rooted to the floor like a stubborn horseradish root.

Ollie begrudgingly got up and cracked his back. He made his way into the living room muttering as he went. "I should go check on Goldie anyway. She's barking as if it is the second coming. Listen to her." Ruthie Anne smirked to herself, knowing the cookies did the trick.

Fumbling with the remote, Ruthie Anne discovered she had the wrong one - again - and couldn't find the right volume button. Ollie had four of the damn things. She could never figure out which remote did what. Why did it have to be so complicated? She remembered when they got their first colored TV before Annie was born. It was simple. Off-On. Channel Up-Channel Down. Adjust the rabbit ears, color balance from purple to green. Finally, she found the blue volume button and managed to turn up the TV.

Ollie returned and closed the kitchen door behind him. He threw his old fishing cap onto the table. "Damn dogs. What's got all the dogs so riled up? Every dog in the neighborhood is going at it like..." Ollie stopped walking and talking mid-sentence as he finally saw the TV broadcast.

The evening newscaster reported how actual vampires; super natural predators had made an International declaration of their existence and were the responsible party for the deaths and kidnappings of most of the former politicians last week.

"Watch – it's on other stations too." Ruthie Anne fumbled with the controller and changed the channel from CCNN to the Coyote News. "Every news channel has the same type of broadcast. Something about vampires being real and they killed all the politicians." Ruthie Anne's voice hinted at a panic attack. "They're showing footage of the Canadian President's assassination now!"

Still a non-believer, Ollie snatched the remote from Ruthie Anne, and sat down in his Lazy Boy. "Just relax now. Don't worry... this is just a bunch of cooked up bologna." He flipped through the channels as if his magic touch on his remote would find sanity among the networks. Every station reported the same story. Even his beloved HBO had turned off its normal zombie show to cover this late breaking news.

Their Golden Retriever never barked like this. It alarmed Ruthie Anne and heightened her confusion.

Goldie's incessant barking turned into a ghostly howl, which joined in a mournful chorus with the rest of the neighborhood dogs. Ollie's clicking didn't change the message from the newscasters. His baldhead glistened under the lamp from the ceiling fan. He threw down the remote onto the ottoman in disgust. "How are we supposed to continue living like this? Curfews, martial law, water rations, and now this madness? Vampires? Seriously?! What's next - Leprechauns coming to steal our gold? Armies to take us off to concentration camps?"

Video replays of the former Alaskan Governor brutally murdered in her sleep accompanied screen shots of the Russian President, UK Prime Minister, and Chinese General Secretary assassinations. Screen shot after screen shot of diplomatic heads of states whom had been assassinated all over the world continued to flash across the screen reminding citizens just how vulnerable they had become. Ruthie Anne shushed Ollie to listen to the newscaster. She couldn't help but wonder who could coordinate such an elaborate hoax across every network.

Ollie sat further out on the edge of his recliner and propped his elbows up on his knees. He pointed towards the television. "Vampires killed the politicians, huh? Is that what they're saying? Including the old ones... not even a tax assessor left huh?" He turned to Ruthie Anne, "Well, I'm on their side then. We needed a clean slate. Not exactly how I would have handled it, but..."

Clucking her tongue at him, she grimaced at the ridiculous joke. "C'mon now Ollie – this looks serious." She'd had enough, Ruthie Anne picked up the phone to call her daughter in San Diego. Maybe Annie could bring them out of this vampire massacre madness.

The flat screen TV went black. In place of the news station came across a live video feed of an impossibly beautiful woman. The name at the bottom of the screen read **Aisling O'Cuinn, Vampyre Ambassador to the Human Race.**

Aisling O'Cuinn addressed the human population. Her face, as white as the lily of the valley. Her voice, as deadly as the poison in its petals.

"Humans. For millennium, we have lived among you – tolerated you - and fed upon you. We have recently saved the planet from utter ruin. Since you devalue our planet so, the Vampyric Nation has claimed the known world. Humans have destroyed the Earth with their greed and filth.

We are Vampyre. We stand together and claim this global village. No longer, will we live in your shadows and hide in your closets. No longer, will we live in the bowels of your decisions. From this day forth, you will live among us and abide by our society and our decisions.

This will be your only warning. When members from our Dhampir Army come to your towns tonight, each of you will be sorted and assigned. Each human - man, woman and child will be assessed of their skills and taken to the facility which serves us most."

Ruthie Anne's hands trembled with seizure-like shakes as she pressed the number two on the touch pad. Her daughter's phone rang until finally the voicemail encouraged her to leave a message. Fear in her own voice spewed out, "Annie! We need to know if you and Jessica are all right. Is it true? Are there really vampires? Or is this a sick hoax? Please, call us as soon as you get this message. We love you! "The television networks continued to transmit the live feed of incomprehensible insanity. The camera panned off of Aisling and onto what seemed like a post-apocalyptic hell from world war III. Humans lined up in rows upon rows - reminiscent of Auschwitz during the annihilation of Jews in Europe.

The camera angle moved in on the US President's face, then returned tight on Aisling. Ruthie Anne gasped. Ollie stood up. It was evident, all could see the fatal beauty through the eyes which bore no soul. With a wave of her hand the camera panned out to the human prisoners once again. Many were dressed in heroic suits of promise and rescue: police, firemen, military, hospital, and Red Cross uniforms. In less than a heartbeat, echoes of slaughterhouse screams pierced the speakers of their surround sound stereo

system as swarms of vampire locusts fell upon our heroes and Presidents like a harvest left barren after a day of infestation.

Ollie and Ruthie Anne swallowed hard as they watched, unable to remove their eyes from the screen's horror. They watched - unable to accept, unable to comprehend, and unable to move. On screen the vampires ripped out throats of the heroes, gnashed at extremities, and sucked the life force from each body discarding their carcasses when emptied. Our soldiers, our heroes of safety - tossed around like rag dolls - hardly a defensive gesture against their captors.

"Oh Jesus, Mary, & Joseph!" Ruthie Anne's hand cupped at her mouth. Ollie reached out to her and put his arm secure around her waist. She buried her face into his chest stumbling through her words of disbelief. "Please Ollie... please tell me this is all a terrible lie."

Ollie tightened his grip around his wife. They stood statuesque as each TV station played the same video and footage over and over again in a nightmarish loop. "I'm sorry for doubting you sweetheart. I should have come sooner."

She gaped up at him and asked, "I'm confused. Did she say they were coming to get us and assign us somewhere? Tonight? How much time do we have?" Ollie swallowed hard, his eyes glossy. Her arms pulled him closer.

The Emergency Broadcast Signal took over the television shrieking out its tonal drone. Sirens all over the city blared as if they were under an alien attack. Ruthie Anne remembered the sirens in Kansas when tornados threatened to clobber everything in its path. Never had she dreamed in a hundred years the sirens would wail because of ... vampires.

Sweat poured down Ollie's face. His heart rate beat dangerously close to failsafe. Had he remembered to take his blood pressure medicine today? He looked out past the window curtains. A tractor-trailer caravan backed up into their cul-de-sac and parked in the middle of Ashford Court. "What the ...?" Ollie gapped at the fantastical view of 7ft tall men wearing black armor and crimson capes as they clamored out of vehicles. "Ruthie Anne... they're already here. Look out the back window -see if there are any trucks on Perlite Court. Maybe we can make a run for it between the houses."

Ruthie Anne ran to the back kitchen window. Her eyes grew to Anime-like saucers as she saw families at gun point loading up into livestock transport trailers on Perlite. Racks and straps hanging from the steeled rafters of the trailers as neighboring families were imprisoned within their bonds. Shadows moved outside in the backyard. Goldie's howls turned to growls. Ollie grabbed the shotgun out of the hall closet and joined her in the kitchen. "I'll get Goldie. I have an extra box of shotgun shells inside my underwear drawer.... Go get them!"

Her eyebrows knitted together as she pulled at her hair. A panic attack. It was fast coming on. Ollie had bullets in his underwear drawer? How did she not know this about him? *Stay Calm. Breathe Dammit.* Ruthie Anne couldn't think about the horrible things her mind told her, she couldn't listen to the terrible screams of neighbors and friends she heard outside. What atrocities lay in wait beyond the safety of her doors? She needed to keep it together. Ruthie Anne scrambled to the medicine cabinet for her anti-anxiety-prescription. Outside, she heard a gun blast and Goldie yelping in agony.

"Oh no – Ollie? Goldie?" The water barely got the pill past her tongue as she raced down the hallway through the kitchen and towards the back door. Ollie ran inside and ducked down behind the door kneeling on the floor. He pulled Ruthie Anne down by his side and shushed her – he knew she wasn't going to be well by this. The bitter taste of her pill caked on the back of her throat. Ollie's hands shook as he threw open the pump action of the shotgun to check for shells. He had bright red blood on his hands.

"Wh..What Happened? Where's Goldie? I heard her..." Ruthie Anne shook as if it were twenty below zero.

Ollie dropped the empty gun and cupped her cheeks in his hands. He kissed her with abandon - as if it was their last intimate moment on this planet. Fear flowed down her face tasting the salty-sweet mix of tears and maple nut goodies between them, his mouth desperate to consume her. Was this the way it ended? Of all things they endured in thirty-six years - sickness and in health, for richer and poorer - it was blood lusting vampires ending their blissful existence?

Above the sink, the kitchen window frame shattered glass and wood shards into the room. Ollie forced his hand over Ruthie's mouth silencing a hysterical wide-eyed scream. The lifeless body of their beloved golden retriever lay lifeless across their kitchen dinette table: the table where they shared morning coffee, the table where their precious daughter Annie was conceived. Salt and peppershakers scattered among the bloodstained, yellow daisy napkins strewn about on the floor. Taped to Goldie's fur was a note. Laughter echoed off the back porch like a scream against bathroom tiles.

Carpenter Assignment: Bloodmobile

The phone rang. Ruthie Anne willed the phone to stop ringing like a teenager prays the stairs to stop creaking when they sneak out at night. The sound would draw the attention of those monsters who just killed their precious Goldie. Where could they hide? The phone continued to ring six times before the answering machine picked up.

"Mom? Dad? Are you there? Are you all right? Call the cops if you see anything weird. Stay inside. We'll be there in fifteen minutes!"

Ruthie Anne wept the Lord's Prayer as Ollie thought how long fifteen minutes were at this moment. He prayed Annie and their six-year-old granddaughter Jessica would not make it to Rancho Cucamonga. He prayed his family would be kept safe from the unfathomable hell that erupted in the suburbs of his home in the past half hour. Bright lights shined in through the stained glass house numbers above the front door. Heavy footsteps neared the back door behind them. They were already surrounded. They were going to die. Ollie looked down at his beloved wife and wished she was in the middle of making those no-bake cookies as the antique glass door knob turned clockwise over their heads.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Winner of the 2012 Wicked Women Writer Award, Killion Slade is a married writing team who met in Second Life and virtually enjoys everything. In honor of Women in Horror month, Mrs. Slade holds the reigns for this short story. Members of the Horrors Writers Association and the Paranormal Romance Guild, they storyboard their characters inside Second Life as avatars unfold their stories. Killion's published short stories are found online in The Danse Macabre, Cynic Magazine, Bewildering Stories and in the anthologies Death Sparkles, Bite from the Heart, and soon to be released The Ghoul Saloon Anthology. You can connect with Killion at their website (http://www.KillionSlade.com) or on Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/killion.slade).



Sirens Call Publications

Hibiscus Hotel Faith Dincolo

"John, I know you probably don't understand why I need to do this, but I do. My thought is that, if, I go to each hotel where a murder occurred, and I stay in that room on the anniversary of the murder, it will be a great book for me. I know I can get this story published. I know it."

John had refused to come with her, "How will that look?" he asked. "This is 1972. You know those podunk town people aren't going to understand what you are doing. Hell, I don't believe you want to stay the night in a haunted hotel room. That's just creepy; I can't allow you to go."

So Kate went without him. She left him a short note. Please don't worry about me; I will call when I get to the first hotel. Then we can talk. On the phone.'

That night she was already checked into the first hotel. Kate opened the window and looked out into the parking lot. The delicate smell of white hibiscus drifted into the room with the breeze. The hotel parking lot was lined in softly scented, hibiscus shrubs. She let the desert breeze filter through the closed drapes and got into the lumpy bed. She picked up her journal.

Night one. I'm here in the room of where many ghost enthusiasts claim a young woman wanders the hotel. She was a prostitute murdered by a customer who strangled her to death on this same date in August of 1962. The room is certainly ugly, but this morning appears to be just like any other room, boring and without taste. There is a wonderful scent of Hibiscus that lingers. At midnight, I thought I heard some strange noises in the bathroom, but when I got up to check no one was there. Then in the bed, I was sleeping, and swear that it felt like someone else got in the bed. I know that was probably just a hallucination. I need a title for my book. Having a title makes the story become suddenly clear. That I've learned from others stories I've written."

The next morning, Kate packed up her bags and left them outside the door. She went down to the office, walking the narrow hibiscus lined sidewalk to the office. The smell of the flowers lightened her loneliness.

Inside the office, the old man who had checked her in, was fussing over his books. She saw the phone beside him. Oh, she thought, I forgot to call John. The old man looked up at her. She had startled him. "I'm sorry to bother you again," she said. She felt awkward and kind of stupid, after he had lectured her the night before. He wouldn't rent room 5 to her, the actual room of the murder. They had argued about it.

"Are you crazy woman? You want to stay, by yourself in a room, where a grisly murdered happened? I remember that night; I don't even want to go in that room now."

"I'm writing a story about that tragedy. It's necessary for me to get the flavor of the room, the feel, to open myself up to every detail from the smell of the Hibiscus to the blood stains on the floor."

She noticed that the old man had scratched his head a number of times. "I'll give you the room next door, room 6. That's the best I can do."

The old man continued to fuss over his books so Kate cleared her throat. She put the key on the counter. "Do I owe extra for sleeping in? There was no clock in the room and for some reason my watch stopped around midnight."

She watched as the old man slowly looked up at her. He gave her a strange look, his jaw tightened. "Look I'm all right. See? See! Nothing happened to me, I'm just a woman staying by myself in a motel. In fact, I was rather disappointed that nothing happened. Now I slept over the time so do I owe you more money?" She continued to stare at him. The man was slow, really slow reaching for the key. "Well?

The old man slowly, carefully shook his head. He turned around and put the key away. Old men, damn, I never want to be a doddering old man. Kate left the office to get her bags and move on to the next crappy little motel so she could write her book.

When she awoke, Kate was disappointed to see that nothing had changed in the room. It was sickly blend of browns and beiges. The sweet smell of hibiscus drifted into the room through the opened window. She got dressed, disappointed that again, another night had passed and no evidence of a haunting. Nothing, she thought she heard a maid knocking at a door last night then a muffled scream but then again, she doubted it. It seemed nothing was happening around her she couldn't chalk up to vivid imagination or the intense desire to make the situation happening more sinister than it was.

Kate left her bags propped outside the door. As afterthought, she put her journal on top of the bags. No need to carry that now. She went to the office, sniffing and admiring the beautiful yellow Hibiscus along the path. Inside the office, the same old man was there. .

"I'm checking out of room 5," she said. She put the key on the counter. The old man was older than ever; he seemed to have aged five years to her.

He held up her notebook, the one she had just left on her luggage. "Is this what you are looking for?" he asked hesitantly.

"That's my notebook! How did you get it?"

The old man opened the notebook to page 1. He held it up. The pages were crinkled but smoothed down. Blood splats had dried into a dark black on the page. Written in large, sloppy letters was what appeared to be a title, <u>The Hibiscus Hotel Murders.</u>

Kate stood and stared miraculously at the notebook. She had come up with a title and it was a great one. It felt authentic to her.

"Thank you! I don't know how you got this book but you've made my day, you've made my trip for me!" She grabbed the book from him and ran out of the office.

When she awoke, Kate was disappointed to see that nothing had changed in the room. It was sickly blend of browns and beiges. The sweet scent of hibiscus drifted into the room through the open window. She inhaled deeply. She got dressed, disappointed that again, another night had passed and no evidence of a haunting.

She walked the hibiscus lined sidewalk to the office. Inside she noticed the old man wasn't there, instead a young woman was busy sorting mail.

"I've come to return the key and checkout. Is my bill clear?"

The young woman looked up; she crossed her heart slowly and backed away from the counter.

"What?" Kate ducked she didn't know if something was happening behind her. She turned to look but, no one was there.

"Is my bill clear?" She asked again.

"Aye, Dios mio!" Whispered the woman.

Kate took that to mean she was free to go. Strange people who worked at the little motel she thought, and she left to get her bags. This was going to be a great writing day for her now that she had a title.

When she awoke, Kate was disappointed to see that nothing had changed in the room. The curtains were gently blowing in the breeze and the sweet smell of hibiscus flooded her nose. She inhaled deeply, she loved that smell. She saw her journal on the bed and flipped the pages. She had a title that was great; she knew what her story was, now if she could just get some paranormal activity of some kind to get her in the mood to write her story that would help. It occurred to her that she had forgotten to call

John again. First, she would go down to the office and use the phone down there, since the rooms didn't have phones, then after she talked to John, she decided to stay another day so she could start writing. If she couldn't experience any supernatural activities, then, maybe, she would have to use her imagination after all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Faith Dincolo lives in Southern California. She prowls the deserts looking for fossils and meteorites. She loves a ghost story and travels to known haunted sites. Faith writes horror and YA horror. She is happily married and has two sons and two cats.

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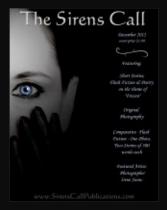












Low Orbit Thea Gregory

Captain Tony Connor floated in the middle of the room, his eyes fixed on the view screens that offered him an unparalleled view of the Earth. His space station was small, only a simple cylinder divided into three rooms—a test design for a new, larger research station. The once-polished metal walls were smeared with handprints, and a few of the lights lining the ceiling had flickered out, causing the handrails mounted onto the walls for easy zero-g navigation to cast shadows at eerie angles. Tony had trained his entire post-adolescent life for an opportunity of this magnitude, but the experience was nothing like he'd hoped it would be. Since the *incident*, he'd spent the past forty days alone, a sentinel watching over a world that no longer spoke to him. The last time he'd been in contact with mission control, he'd heard only screams, followed by the silent embrace of the dead vacuum of space. The Internet that connected his new prototype space station with the world had been severed soon after. He left the communication lines open, and he'd taken to talking to himself, often and at length. This semblance of normalcy was all that came between him and the disconcerting conclusion that he was alone. The void of space didn't care what happened to him, but maybe someone out there did. He'd even come to long for the jeers of the night controller, Sylvain, who always asked him if he was ready to be the last human left alive. Tony had made a mental note to punch that jackass as soon as he got home.

It seemed that bad joke had come true, but Tony still wanted to punch the guy right in his fat face. Earth was his only friend now, and she had changed dramatically. During every night orbit, the bright cities, monuments to humanity's greatness and tenacity, grew dimmer. Eventually, the brightest lights winked out, leaving the smaller cities and towns defiant against the engulfing darkness. In the past week, the final sets of lights in Australia had winked out one by one. When his orbit swung to the dark side of the earth, not even the faint lights of the most distant stars could quell the rumbling of his gut.

Now, the Earth had left him too. Her night-side was as barren and bereft of light as the blackest pit. Tony swallowed, hard, as his desperate eyes sought out any remaining point—any bastion of residual hope. He held a trembling finger to his mouth, and began to gnaw on his index finger. All his fingers were marked with scabs and scars—as his food supplies waned, he'd embraced any distraction to the hunger that waged war in his belly. The patchiness of hair on his scalp evidenced the terrible necessity that his slow starvation demanded—anything to fill the growling void inside.

Blood danced across his tongue, the coppery taste shooting him back to reality. His weak legs propelled him off the wall, towards the colorful computer terminal—his peripheral vision had noted a quick blip tracking across the screen. A desperate need drove him to check the radio and internet connections, even if the signals and shipments were only figments of his imagination. A sense of futility had him plucking a hair from his scalp and feeding it to his eager mouth. His water supply had grown stagnant, and the air scrubbers were almost a month overdue for changing. The food supplies hadn't fared much better, though it was easier to ration food than air or water. With every motion, his body odor wafted into his nostrils. Scrunching up his face against the smell, he plucked another hair, noting with some satisfaction that it was one of the grey ones that had been plaguing him for his entire adult life, and popped it into his mouth.

Swirling the coarse hair around his tongue, Tony brought up the familiar controls. He clamped his eyes shut and counted to ten. The hair cut into the soft flesh of his tongue, but he didn't care.

The station lurched for an instant, and Tony's eyes blinked open. It hadn't been a hallucination. Something had docked. Saliva rushed to his mouth at the thought of more ration packs. Clean water. A fresh uniform. He swallowed the hair and propelled himself towards the claustrophobic space that served as a docking bay. Its contents and stores were long depleted, leaving empty metal boxes strapped to the wall. The too-bright lights glared off of every metal surface. He laughed and spun through the air as he approached the door, for once oblivious to the room's emptiness. The sounds caught in his throat,

until a good clearing loosened them.

"You had me worried, there!" he said, relief washing over him. "I thought you'd forgotten about me. Man, I hope you guys get the lights turned on back home, it's damn depressing to look at from up here." He moved forwards, swinging and propelling himself from beam to beam to reach the airlock. The door remained shut; its passenger or cargo unable to enter the proper codes.

"Codes were a stupid idea," he said as he pressed the opening sequence into the keypad. "As if I'm going to blow my stupid ass into space." His shaking hands keyed in the wrong code, again. After a deep sigh, he held his breath, and focused on the buttons, imagining food, proper hygiene and clean water. Those simple necessities could inspire anyone.

The door rolled open and a new stench assailed his nostrils. The pungent smell of decay caused his throat to constrict and his eyes to bulge. It should be impossible, but a *person* was hunched over inside the pod.

"Sylvain?" The word barely escaped his lips before his corpulent supervisor turned to face him. His cheap polyester suit was in tatters and stiff with dried blood. He'd put on even more weight since Tony had last seen him. But, the man's face told a different story. It wasn't Sylvain—not anymore. The man's lips had curled back in a savage grimace. His face and lips were smeared with gore. His eyes stared out, but there was no recognition in them.

The thing that Sylvain had become floated in mid-air, then its arm reached to grasp at him. Tony flew back against the bulkhead, recoiling from the man's ruined fingers. The left middle finger was torn away at the second knuckle; the other fingernails were peeled back from the flesh, bent at painful and unnatural angles.

Tony froze while he stared at what remained of his boss. The creature moved with little concern for its own injuries, Sylvain had been trained in space movement, but this thing was unable to comprehend the logistics of moving in zero gravity.

Tony knew he could jettison the pod and have it tumble back to Earth. His eyes flickered across the boxes of supplies that were stacked inside. He imagined them packed full of food, clean water, maybe even a letter from his family.

A rattling snarl snapped him back into reality. A spray of weightless spittle sent him recoiling into the main room. His eyes, now wide with desperation, searched the walls and his living quarters for something—anything—that could be used as a weapon. His breathing clattered in his ears, and the musky air was made richer by Sylvain's stench. Tony blinked away the tears that blurred his vision, then his eyes focused on the single loose handrail. He pushed himself towards it with all his remaining strength, and his trembling hands closed around it. Sylvain had never sent him the glue or brackets needed to have it fixed, claiming that it was too dangerous for Tony to attempt the repair on his own.

Tony slid his hand down the familiar metal. He'd wedged an empty plastic food pack into the gap in the place of glue, to keep the bar in place when he needed to use it. A string of blood-thirsty howls drifted in from the storage area. As he shuddered in response, his fingers slipped off the plastic wedge before they could get a solid grip. He glanced to the adjoining room just as the thing drifted head over heels once again. There was still time. What if Sylvain figured out how to move in zero gravity?

Tony dried his damp fingers on his pants leg, and tried again. His broken fingernails burned against the pressure, but at last the plastic snapped free and he was able to slide the bar out of place. It was hollow lightweight aluminum, and only about a meter long. But in the absence of anything better, it would have to do.

He clenched the weapon in his trembling hand, and then he swung himself across the lab, back into the storage area. His breath came in ragged pants and his heart pounded so hard he thought it might

explode. Fear wouldn't save him, so he swallowed it back, hard, and went in to do whatever was necessary. He wasn't going to let Sylvain hold him hostage until his hunger claimed him.

Sylvain hung in the air, almost where Tony had left him. Droplets of spit hovered everywhere, and Tony shuddered. Saliva had always caused disgust to sour his stomach, and now was no exception. He forced himself to focus on Sylvain's bloated face and mangled mouth. With a cry, he propelled himself towards the man.

His approach seemed to take an eternity. He watched as the thing's arms snatched wildly at the air in front of him, and bile rose in his throat as he saw more fluid gush from hideous mouth. Sylvain took a swing with the metal bar—but the creature managed to grab it in one hand and pull Tony towards him.

In a panic, Tony snatched a nearby handlebar with his other hand, pulling back with what was left of his waning strength. Lights flashed before his eyes as a hard tug from the other end threatened to dislocate his shoulder.

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

Newton's third law passed through his mind, and his eyes widened in understanding.

An object in motion stays in motion, unless acted on by an outside force.

His face contorted into an unfamiliar grin.

Pulling back as hard as he could, he rooted his feet to the closest support—a cargo container. Another agonizing jolt ripped through his torso.

With a scream, he pushed back towards the far wall. Sylvain came with him, hissing and flailing. Letting the pole drop, Tony grabbed the next handle and pressed himself tight against the wall. Sylvain flew past, his bawling and struggling rendering him impotent. He hadn't let go of the pipe.

Sylvain collided with the wall, and crumpled against it. Rancid air gushed from the thing's lungs, and his head now hung at a sickening angle. Tony assessed the situation: his only route of escape was blocked, and now the creature had Tony's only weapon.

As Tony's mind scrambled for a plan, Sylvain managed to turn to face him, his vacant dead eyes locking onto Tony's.

Sylvain then pushed off the wall.

Tony screamed with the realization of what this meant. His heart seemed to pause for an instant before he threw himself at the supply pod's open door. If that thing had learned how to move on zero gravity, there was no hope for him.

His quivering hands jammed against the door code. Twice wrong. Sylvain was getting close—Tony could almost feel his fetid, burning breath fouling his skin, the little droplets of moisture coating him with whatever it was that turned him.

Eyes wide, he tried the code again.

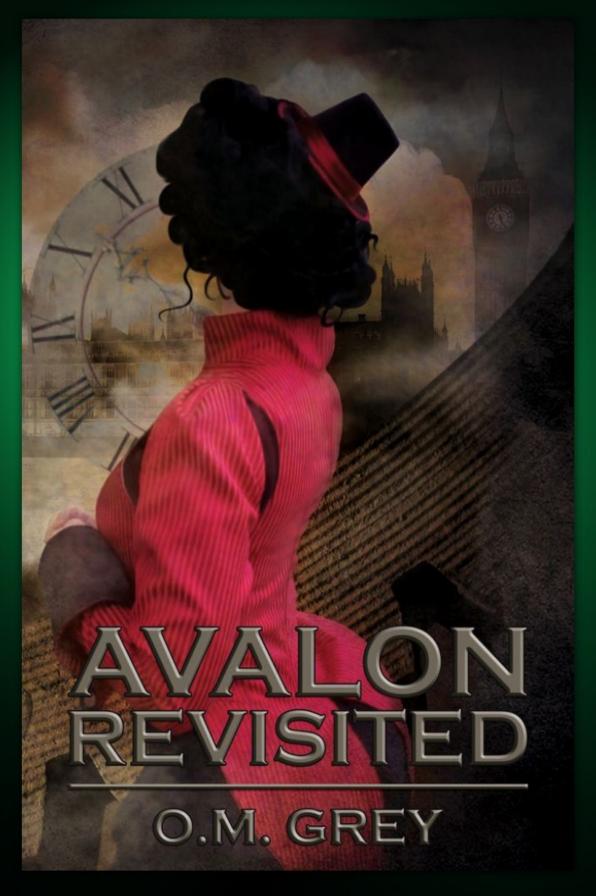
The doors slammed shut, then the dull sound of the docking clamps releasing signaled that the pod had detached.

"Good luck with being the last man alive," he whispered.

Then he gazed at the crates of supplies.

If he didn't survive re-entry, at least he wasn't going to die hungry. It was time to feast.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Thea Gregory is a farm girl from English Western Quebec, a total nerd, and she loves science fiction, zombies and physics. Between marathon cooking sessions, her clerktastic day job, and part-time studies, she manages to find time to write. Author of the ongoing Zombie Bedtime Stories, her debut sci-fi novel, The ABACUS Protocol: Sanity Vacuum released December 2012. You can find her on Facebook at ThealsisGregory or on Twitter at @theaisis.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

The Unwatched Door Claudia Blood

The lights flickered violently and then with a small pop, winked out. Asima was left in the dark, broken only by sporadic flashes of lightning. She could not see the mural she was painting in the nursery. She did not want to move and risk spilling the paint still arranged around her. The lights would come back on, they always did. So she would sit and wait in the darkness.

The darkness, why does that word stick in her head? Asima shivered. It was best not to wander in the dark her mother had always said. Her mother had disappeared into the very darkness she warned of. She dismissed the thought and focused on the art work; on the mural she was building for the small life which stirred in her womb.

Asima closed her eyes and leaned back on her hands, careful of the paint, and opened her eyes in time with the next flash.

The light revealed a gaping maw. Asima stifled a gasp, afraid now to look away lest the opening be allowed to fill with... her thoughts stuttered to a stop. She remembered her mother had left her on a night like this.

"Keep your eye on it," Her mother had whispered, "They can't come out if you watch the entrance." "Who," Asima had asked, "who can't come out?"

"I will tell you when you are older and better able to understand," Her mother had said. Asima remembered her pale skin and large eyes fastened on the wall. Her mother was always watching the walls.

But that day of understanding had never come. Asima had glanced away for a moment when she heard a sound at the window behind her. She had looked back and her mother had been gone.

Asima drew her thoughts back again to the mural. The first thing she had painted was a castle with a portcullis. All of the windows and doors had bars on them. The bars pleased her and she made sure they were in place before the end of each painting session.

Asima realized suddenly, that there was one thing which did not have bars. The tree she had just added had a cavity in it: a rotten place that some trees get when vicious winds knock off a limb and the tree survives. That one entrance did not have bars. She lifted the brush still in her hand and brought jagged lines of paint across where the trunk should be.

There was a wail and a crash behind her, but she kept her eyes glued to the place where the tree should be. With a sudden flicker, the lights came on.

The new paint looked like oozing raw cuts. Asima stood slowly, paint forgotten. A black, severed arm twitched on the floor just below the tree.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Claudia is a middle aged self-proclaimed nerd. Her vivid imagination construes closet portals where undead legions are attempting to enter if not for the house cat guardians barring their entrance. She was born in New Jersey, but managed to eventually escape captivity and fled to the paradise known as Minnesota. Claudia earned her degree in Biology, but became tired of slaughtering innocent rodents in the pursuit of science. She then began the long downward spiral into the world of computer programming, but writing has always been her passion. She is now able to juggle career, parenthood and the art of script with the support of her wonderful husband. You can find her on Facebook at http://www.facebook.com/AuthorClaudiaBlood.

Twenty Minutes O.M. Grey

Why hasn't he written? It's been over 24 hours, and a text message just takes a few moments. Isn't he thinking about me? Just yesterday he said he loved me, well, almost said it. He said he feels a great deal of love for me. That's the same thing. Right? Surely his feelings haven't changed overnight. I mean how could they?

No matter what, I'm not writing first this time. Let him miss me. That's what I'll do. Absence. Heart fonder, and all that. Sure. That's what I'll do.

Still no text. At least I waited ten minutes this time. I'll try for twenty now. What can I do for twenty minutes to pass the time? No. Not look at his picture. Not daydream about when we meet again. No! Not remember the night we shared. What else can I do for twenty minutes?

Checking email. Nothing.

Refresh. Nothing.

Refresh again. Is the Internet connected?

Visit Google Maps.

Yep. Connected.

Refresh.

Okay. Chill. Everything is okay. This is just your fear talking. Everything is okay. How could so much change after just a day? It hasn't changed. Everything is just fine.

Nothing new on Twitter. Perhaps an innocuous DM, just to see if he's okay.

No. No. No. No.

Okay. Focus. What can you do that doesn't remind you of him? Shower! Yes! I'll take a shower. That'll kill at least ten minutes, right?

Gasp! New email. Damn, spam. Not from him. You never hear from him this time of the day. No. You don't need a Xanax. You can do this. You just need to keep busy is all.

It's just been 28 hours. Nothing will have changed in that time. He's still here with you, but he won't be if you freak him out. Don't scare him away. You know this is just your fucked up brain chemicals at work. It's just the way it is.

Still no DM. I wonder what he's doing. I hope he's had a good day. Maybe he needs me! Maybe something's happened. Maybe a DM from me would cheer him up.

Go for a walk, that's what. I'll just go for a walk then shower afterward. That'll kill an hour, right? Then I can look again.

29 hours. Nothing. Perhaps he's already seen how crazy I am, and he's changed his mind. That's just ridiculous. You've been very careful to keep it to yourself. Besides, it's just like this at first, when everything is so new and uncertain. You have to find a way to gain confidence. He's crazy about you. That's obvious. You know how your brain works. It's not your fault, but it's not his responsibility to reassure you every twelve-fucking-hours either. He has a life. A job. He's got things to do rather than just think of you all day.

It wouldn't hurt to check his Twitter account. Right? Just a quick look.

He hasn't tweeted since last night! See. He's just busy is all. He's not even on Twitter. Maybe his phone died.

This is insanity. Take a chill pill. Yeah, maybe a Xanax.

No! I don't need a fucking pill to be okay. I'm fine. I can do this.

Fuck! Who the fuck is @MsSexyPants? This first time on Twitter today, and he's talking to @MsSexyPants? What the Fuck? Although it is public, but how do I know he's not DM'ing her, too? He might've been DM'ing her all day! He might've been fucking her all day! No. Her profile says she lives in Seattle and the tweet was harmless enough. Just a reply on a funny quote is all. After all, you talk to

people all day on Twitter. Flirt, even.

There's nothing to it.

Why doesn't he write?

Oh! New DM!

Fucking Spam. Block. Report Spam.

Everything is fine. Yes. Maybe a Xanax. If you need it you need it. Don't fuck this up this time. It'll be okay. People just need more space than you do. They just need more time. Okay. Xanax.

36 hours. Nothing. At least I was able to get some work done. See? Xanax helps. It's okay. If you need it, you need it. It's getting late. If I don't hear from him in the next hour, I won't today. That's okay. I'll just go to bed early. Sleeping helps. Unconscious is good.

Oh! New DM! Don't look. You know it's not from him. Just don't look and read or something. You can't keep being so available. The less attention you pay to him, the more he'll pay to you. Right?

So I looked. Sue me. It's okay because it was from him!

"Thought of you all day. Drinks?"

He thought of me all day! See! Nothing to worry about. Should I reply right away? I don't just want to be a booty call. He cares more than that, right? I'll wait like twenty minutes, then reply. What can I do for twenty minutes?

Fuck it.

"Sure!"

"Pick you up in 20."

Now I know what to do for twenty minutes! What should I wear? Oh! My hair is awful. What does he see in me?

"You look beautiful."

"Thanks. You look great, too." The butterflies are back. I should've eaten something. Oh! His lips are so soft, and his tongue. Mmmmm.

I press into him and the kiss deepens. He's delicious, and I just can't get enough.

"You know," I whisper into his mouth, "We don't have to go out at all."

"Okay."

I feel his lips pulled back into a smile as I kiss him again. Our tongues mingle and the heaviness between my legs is aching for him. Full, yet empty at the same time. His erection is pressed against my hip, and all I can think about is his cock. I need him inside me. Right. Fucking. Now.

My eager hand slides up his jeans and caresses the bulge beneath. He moans his pleasure, and I swallow the sound in another hungry kiss.

"You're so fucking hot," he says between kisses.

Now I smile. See? He's into me, after all.

Our passion mounts, and we move as one away from the front door into the living room. He lowers me down on the couch, and he lays between my legs. His strong arms prop him up over me, and he grinds his erection into my hips as he kisses me; his tongue darting around in my mouth.

Driving me wild knowing that his cock will be doing the same thing before long.

In fact. I can't wait. Pushing him off me and back onto the sofa, I reposition myself for tasting him. My hands unfasten his jeans and I chance a look up. The smile on his face tells me he knows exactly what I have in mind. I reach inside and grasp him, releasing him with one hand as the other pulls his jeans down over his hips. He helps free himself with eager hands.

Fully erect and gorgeous, I bend over and lick all around the tip while snugly grasping his shaft, and I

hear his gasp. With my tongue still touching the velvety helmet I look up at him watching me, allowing him to get this picture full in his mind before continuing. My tongue traces down the length of him and then back up again, wetting him for my love. Hungry for him, I plunge my mouth down over his cock and touch the base with my lips, then slowly pull back, flicking my tongue back and forth along the underside of his shaft as do I.

He lets me devour him in this way until his excitement has him moving with me, urging me on. And this is precisely when I stop. I slide my jeans over my full hips, and he tugs my blouse over my head. He turns to face me, and pulling my bra aside, his mouth finds my nipples, teasing them with his tongue. Sucking. Swirling. Nibbling.

I unfasten my bra and let it fall to the side, allowing him full access to my breasts. He caresses one while pleasing the other with his mouth. His other hand slides up the inside of my leg. I can feel my juices drip onto my thigh just before his fingers begin massaging my clit. Sliding along my moistness, he rubs me until I come, soaking his hand with my orgasm. This seems to make him very happy, both my nectar and my screams of delight. He spreads my lips and eases a finger inside. Then two. Fingering me slowly, then picking up speed.

I hold onto his shoulders as he brings me again, but I want more. Stepping to the side, his fingers slip out of me, but I never stop touching him. Even this far is too far apart. I move closer to him and straddle him there on the couch, easing myself onto his engorged cock. So slowly. Watching the wonder on his face and the love in his eyes as we become one.

We move together slowly at first, never breaking eye contact. Kissing and watching each other and then kissing again, but soon the movement becomes more urgent. My pace quickens, and he thrusts into me, meeting my motion with his fervent hips. He puts his arm around my waist and lifts me up, turning me over onto my back. Never removing himself from me.

He pulls his knees up close to me and holds one of my legs up as he begins to thrust deeper and faster. Each push into me more determined than the last. Faster and faster. I grab a handful of the fluffy couch and scream in ecstasy, and he doesn't relent. The sounds of my pleasure only heightening his as he plunges into me again and again and again, until he finally comes himself. And with his final force, he cries out as well.

Breathing heavy. Eyes amazed. Hands clutching.

He relaxes onto my breast, and I stroke his hair.

I can feel him still inside me, gradually shrinking.

Yet we are one.

"Wow," he breathes.

"Yeah."

"I mean. Wow."

"Yeah. That was amazing."

He pulls out of me and I feel empty without him there. Cold. I reach out to him, but he's already relaxed against the back of the couch, catching his breath. He feels too far away and I want him back inside me.

Filling me.

Completing me.

He looks at his watch.

"Oh shit," he says. "I can't believe it's already so late."

So late? We were supposed to go for drinks? We wouldn't have even been served yet. It's only been like twenty fucking minutes. Or the other way around. What does he mean so late?

"Do you have to go?" I ask, already knowing what he's going to say.

"Not yet, but soon."

I swallow hard. He feels so far away. How can he be so far away after we had just been so close? How can he talk about leaving? I want to fall asleep in his arms. I want to feel secure beside him. I want to wake up beside him and fuck him again.

"Gotta beer?"

"Um." I don't really like beer, so I don't keep any in the house. "Wine?"

"Sure."

I get up and walk to the kitchen. My heart swells, thinking of the romantic evening we'll have. If only it weren't summer, I could light the fire. Talking. Laughing. Sharing. Drinking until our passion takes us over again. When I return with the bottle and two glasses, he's already dressed.

He must've noticed the disappointment on my face.

"Everything okay?"

"Um. Of course. Wine?"

"Actually, I really should go."

"Okay. It's still rather early, no? We could still go out for that drink if you'd like."

"Maybe tomorrow. I'll call you."

"Okay." I set the glasses and bottle down on the side table and reach for my jeans.

"No," he says, taking me into his arms. "I want to remember you just like this. Beautiful and naked. Thank you for tonight. This was just amazing. Tomorrow, okay? I'll call you."

"Okay."

"You mean a lot to me. You know that, right?"

I smile and my heart swells again. "I do. And you. I --. I mean, you mean a lot to me, too."

He kisses me then.

Softly.

Gently.

Then looks deep into me and smiles.

"Tomorrow."

Why hasn't he written? It's been over twelve hours, and a text message just takes a few moments. Isn't he thinking about me? Especially after last night! Such intimacy we shared. Don't I mean anything to him?

Just twenty more minutes. What can I do for twenty minutes before I check Twitter again. Just one DM. It only takes a few moments. Aren't I worth even a few seconds?

What the fuck can I do for twenty minutes?

Alex. Yes. I'll talk to Alex! He always cheers me up. He's always there for me. Just like a good friend should be.

"Alex? Do you have a minute? I want your opinion on something. See, there's this guy. A new guy, and I really like him. And I think he really likes me too. I mean, he might even love me. The sex is great. Really fucking great, but he always leaves just right after. I mean, like almost every time. He's not just using me for sex, right? He says that I mean a great deal to him and that he feels a lot of love for me, so it's okay, right?"

"Please let me go," Alex whimpers.

"Did you hear me? What do you think? Do you think he really loves me?"

"Please. I'll do anything. I won't tell anybody and I won't leave you. Ever. I promise."

"Yeah. That's what Todd said, too. And I believed him, but then he left straight away. Much harder getting him back. How are you today, Todd?"

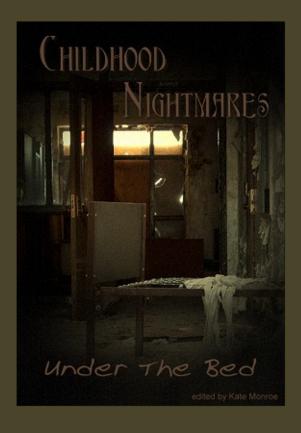
"Todd is dead you crazy bitch! Todd's been dead for a week now!"

"That was rather mean. You think I'm a bitch? But, you said you cared, too. You said you'd never leave me, and then you did. I'm just making sure you keep your word is all. Making you a man of integrity."

"Please..."

"Anyway. It's been over twelve hours, and I haven't gotten even a text message yet. But I'm not a guy, so I don't get how you all think. You're a guy, Alex. Do you think twelve hours is too long to wait after sharing such intimacy? I mean, he should want to spend every waking moment with me, right? That's what love is. Don't you think, Alex?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Nestled in the mountains of California, Olivia M. Grey lives in the cobwebbed corners of her mind writing paranormal romance with a Steampunk twist. As a writer, podcaster, and speaker, Olivia focuses her poetry and prose on alternative lifestyles and deliciously dark matters of the heart. Her work has been published in anthologies and magazines like *Stories in the Ether, SNM Horror Magazine* and *How The West Was Wicked*. Read more by O. M. Grey on her blog Caught in the Cogs, http://omgrey.wordpress.com.



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The Importance of Things Morgan Songi

Zellwood Hind wanted a bath. Back in Nashville after three weeks on the road, he needed a stiff drink and a relaxing hour in the tub. But as long as Doreen was around things couldn't be that simple. After all the times he'd told his wife to leave his things alone she'd given some away.

"I thought I'd clean out your desk drawers, Zellwood."

Her yellow-blonde had come undone from its clips and snot ran onto her upper lip.

He hit her again and the blow staggered her sideways. "What have you done with my things?"

Doreen backed away, tears running down her face. "I gave them to some boys who were collecting for a scavenger hunt. I didn't give them anything important, Zellwood. Honestly..."

Zellwood's things were important to him. Some he'd had for most of his life. Like the bright pink, neon yellow and turquoise-colored shell somebody left in the bar his parents ran in Helena after the bankruptcy sale. He'd thought it was naturally that color until he took it to school the next day. He bloodied the lip of the smart-assed kid who took one look at it, laughed, and said, "Boy, are you stupid. Must run in the retard family," just before Zellwood caught him with a sucker punch.

He reached for Doreen and pinched the skin of her upper arm. "What did you give those little bastards?"

She tried to pull away. "An old mechanical tech manual and that gag thing...the fake vomit. It's just been lying in that drawer." She gasped as his fingers pressed harder and deeper into her flesh.

Zellwood felt his nails bite through the skin. "What else?"

"Some flattened quarters and that fake shell." She sobbed.

Zellwood released his grip and shoved. Hard. Doreen stumbled backwards and slammed her head into the glass fishbowl hanging in a macramé sling. The blow stunned her and she swayed. Her knees buckled.

"What else?" Zellwood screamed.

Doreen caught the dining room table and stopped her fall. She panted. Her hair drooped in sweaty shanks over her eyes, "Nothing. Nothing of yours. I gave them a couple of my things, a book about sharks and a little jar of grape jelly. That's all, Zellwood, I swear."

Zellwood was trembling. He wanted to smash, to break, to ruin something, especially her. "No," he said out loud.

But not now. That would be too easy.

Doreen cringed as he walked past. He went to the living room where she'd hung a small collection of prints and paintings purchased in Europe the year before he met her. Her favorite was the blue and white watercolor, a view of Paris with the Eiffel Tower in a snowy and cold distance. He hesitated before it and heard her whisper, "Please, no."

He reached up and took the watercolor from the wall. He dropped it to the floor and put his foot through it, the glass crunching under the heel of his cowboy boot.

Doreen didn't move from where she'd dropped into a crouched position.

He reached for the signed painting of a country village scene. Doreen's mouth made funny twisting movements. He broke the frame, tore out the picture and ripped it into ragged squares. He threw the pieces in her face. "I'm not through with you. Not by a hell of a long way."

Zellwood poured a water glass full of Johnny Walker Red and went upstairs to the bathroom where he ran a tub of steaming hot water. He arched his back and rotated his shoulders before settling in. He tilted his head back until it rested against the cool tile, dipped his hands to bring water up to his face and slosh over his shoulders--once, twice--then turned on his side and half-floated. He enjoyed the gentle rocking motion. The sound of the water against the porcelain was a vague echo of the sea as it lapped against the pilings of a dock or the sides of a boat.

He could see the *Henry Clay* again just as it was seventeen years ago when he was stationed in Guam. God, that was one fantastic good time. It had been him, Mike, Sweeny and Chris--the ex-college boy with the fifty dollar words they'd tagged with the name *Poet*.

He remembered the night Poet won the *church warden* pipe. The four of them had been hitting the stuff hard since early afternoon and by evening they found themselves in the sleaziest joint they'd discovered on the island. The bar was empty except for a couple of skanks sitting at the bar drinking beer. One of them was smoking a beautiful brown and black pipe with a long curved stem. The damned thing was at least a foot long.

Poet saw it. He knew pipes, had a thing for them and he wanted that one. He walked up to the two barflies. "Ladies," he said. "May I offer you another round?"

"Bar keep," he hollered. "Fill 'em up over here.

"Ladies, the name's Poet, and tonight you will witness a contest of endurance such as few have ever seen. A duel, ladies. Between men. Did I say *men*? I correct myself. A battle between seafaring Gods who will engage in a Herculean struggle solely for your amusement. If only you will agree to favor the victor with a token of your appreciation."

Poet bowed and removed the cap from his head in a sweeping flourish.

The broad smoking the fantastic pipe giggled and leaned precariously off to one side of her bar stool. She fluttered half-on and half-off false eyelashes. When she spoke, her fake southern accent sounded even more grotesque than the eyelashes looked. "Why, honey," she said. "Whatever could we give you nice boys and what would ya'all be planning to do to win it anyway?"

Poet ordered shots all around. "Bottoms up, ladies," he said.

He sidled closer to the woman and began to stroke the pipe in an offhand manner. "Oh, my darling girl," Poet said. "Us men here are going to get into one he-manly-like circle. We're going to light up big old cigars and then we are going to inhale as much and as fast as we can until only one of us is left standing."

Poet took his hand from the pipe and caressed the imitation southern belle's arm. "And to that lucky man—the winner, darlin'—well, we would be hoping you will award him with one hell of a kiss and that pipe that is being so sweetly sucked between your luscious lips."

He beckoned the bartender with his left hand. "One more of the same," he said, and let the index finger of his right hand trace a zigzag line in the woman's skin-tight skirt. He started just above her knee and slowly worked his way up her thigh. She downed the one-more-of-the-same and giggled as she promised to give out the awards.

"Darlin', darlin'," Poet said.

He left the women, elbowed his way into the circle of men and all four lit up.

Zellwood turned upright in the tub. He'd been the second one down that night. He'd never—in all the times they pulled that stunt—been able to last past number three, and Poet won. He got the pipe, but he had to spend the night in the big broad's room.

Broads. He had unfinished business. He knew just where it was going to start and how it was going to end. It would be a real pleasure to show Doreen once and for all what was what.

He drained the whiskey from the glass. He flipped the drain control lever up and when the tub was half empty, ran it full once more and leaned back. He felt relaxed. He breathed in the hot steamy air and thought of Guam and the *Henry Clay*.

Zellwood woke with a start. He was afraid to open his eyes. He had the queasy feeling that someone

had been standing beside the tub. In his jaw-clenching heart-racing repeating nightmare someone stood next to his bed looking down on him while he slept. Nothing else ever happened, but it made his skin crawl to imagine someone watching him while he lay helpless to defend himself.

Once again, he wasn't quite sure if he was awake or if he was dreaming he was awake. It was always the same. Afraid to look. Afraid not to.

But not-knowing was worse. He opened his eyes. No one there.

Then he saw the familiar red metal box on the rim of the tub. One of the things he'd stashed in the back of one of his desk drawers, it was a favorite souvenir from Guam. It was the gag box, about seven inches long and four inches wide with white painted letters that read "Bet You Can't Eat Just One."

He sat up and leaned forward. The only way it could have gotten on the ledge of the tub was if Doreen put it there. He hadn't locked the bathroom door but he wouldn't make that mistake again. What the hell had she done it for? Her brainless idea of a peace offering? Thought she'd make him laugh and maybe forget what she knew was coming? Fat chance of that. Zellwood was done screwing around. He'd teach her respect for the importance of his things in the last damned lesson he'd ever give her.

Zellwood brought both hands up, water slipping between his fingers and reached for the box. His right hand gripped and held it while the thumb of his dripping left hand pulled the lid up and back.

In the instant the paralyzing jolt of electricity surged through his body, Zellwood saw, as if magnified, the cord, the bare wires and the four little pink plastic breasts that lay in a row inside the box.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Morgan Songi's personal essays, short stories and poetry have been published in literary journals and anthologies in the US and Canada. She's won awards in Oregon Writers Colony competitions and first prize in the Kay Snow poetry competition. Her first ghost story "Oh, How Lovely is the Evening" appeared in *Ghosts on the Coast*, and a braided essay "Poisonous" is online at *Two Hawks Quarterly/Genre X*. She's a member of the Wordos professional writer's group in Eugene, OR. You can find her as Word Weaver @WordAzadi7 on Twitter but she admits she hasn't been on long and hasn't done much with it.





Fangs for Nothing Lisa Flanyak

Somewhere in the town of Transfusion, a clock struck midnight. The chime signaled the arrival of All Hallow's Eve. The sound echoed in the dark and damp basement of an old abandoned warehouse.

There, on top of a wooden pallet lay a coffin. The lid on the coffin was shut but there was movement coming from within. The coffin began to shake violently. Whoever or whatever was inside tried desperately to get out. One final blow caused the lid to break free. There was a moment of silence and then raspy gasps of breath seeped out from the small opening.

The lid slowly crept open. A pale hand with long, razor sharp fingernails extended out and gripped the side of the box. The skin appeared to be transparent and blue veins were clearly visible as they pulsed just beneath the surface.

Without warning a gust of wind rushed down the staircase, connected with the lid and caused it to slam shut onto the hand.

"Yeowwwch!" a voice cried from inside the coffin.

The lid burst open with such brutal force that the hinges buckled and snapped off. The lid soared into the air and landed on the concrete floor with a loud thud.

Inside the decrepit, lace-lined coffin the vampire sat up. His hair was long and greasy. His face an ashy gray with shades of blue. Being deprived of sunlight was a terrible thing. He lifted one arm and took a whiff of the armpit. With bloodshot eyes, he surveyed the scene. He looked at the broken lid and the damaged hinges.

"Swell, just swell. Why must I live in junk?"

Just as he muttered the words, a tooth fell out of its socket and landed on his lap. He picked it up and examined it. Another downfall to living in total darkness.

The cheap fabric of the coffin made him itch. It wasn't easy trying to fall asleep every year with that surrounding you. Even on a full stomach and after a few tokes on rich cigars sleep was difficult. It often took him days to slumber but once he did he was out like a broken light bulb.

There were two other coffins in the warehouse. Both were in much better shape than his. They were European, decades newer, made of stronger materials, and lined with satin. Both lids were open, which meant his dungeon-mates were already out and about.

"Ah, for the love of Bram, I'm going to be stuck with the leftovers."

The vampire hopped out of the coffin with such ease it almost seemed as if he glided. He sat on the edge of the pallet and picked up his weathered boots. His feet were large and gangly. The toenails were discolored and starting to curl inwards.

He slipped on his boots, walked over to the lid and kicked it. A shooting pain ran from his foot and up the leg. He bit his lip. A thin line of blood trickled down his chin and he wiped it away but left a light red smear across the bottom of his cheek.

With a slight limp, he trudged up the creaky stairs and out into the darkness. From an indeterminate location an owl hooted a hello. High above a full moon dangled in the night sky. Fallen leaves from half naked trees danced and darted all around him. A light rain had just begun to fall.

The vampire took in a deep breath, coughed and spit out dust. His stomach growled and grumbled loudly.

"Time to eat." he agreed.

He pulled his holey overcoat close to him and wandered into the blackness.

Hours later, now perched in a tall oak tree, the vampire waited patiently. This was a skill he had to master because when you're hungry, you just want the quick fix. However when stalking a prey, you can't go all willy nilly. You have to time it just right. Be silent yet swift. You don't live eternally without learning a few things.

He watched a couple pass below him with their arms entwined. They shared a kiss. So in love, so pathetic. He wanted to eat them just because they were happy and he was having a bad day. He sniffed the air.

"Spaghetti in marinara sauce with a few pieces of garlic bread. No can do."

He sighed and continued to wait. His belly roared its displeasure and he looked down at it and put a finger to his lips.

Love was another thing that dissipated with time. In fact, most feelings went by the wayside. It didn't really bother him, love was a frivolous emotion usually wasted on the wrong people.

Another vampire, in bat mode, flew up to him. His enormous wings sent out shock waves that almost caused the vampire to lose his balance. He gripped onto the tree tighter.

"What the heck, Marcel? Trying to steal my meal?" the vampire asked. Marcel didn't answer and instead circled around him a few times and then scurried on his way. The vampire scoffed. "Too good for your own wings, you rat."

Then he spotted them. Two young women dressed to the nines walked together under a pink umbrella. They chatted and giggled. Both texted with fury on their cell phones. They were the perfect victims, so unaware of their surroundings or anything else. The vampire sniffed the air.

"No garlic, check, but golly gosh that perfume!"

He gagged and pulled his grimy t-shirt up over his nose. He waited until they were directly under the tree. Just as he was about to drop, his two mates swooped down out of nowhere, plucked the girls up and carried them off into the night sky. The umbrella fell to the ground and landed tip down in the soft earth just off the sidewalk. Both cell phones followed and broke into pieces upon impact.

"Hello? Annie, are you there?" called out a voice from inside one of the phones.

The vampire let out a piercing shrill which was only audible to vamps.

"Sons of a -!"

He had no choice but to carry on. But he knew what would happen when he got back to the warehouse. He'd let those two have it and good. They'd want to drown themselves in his cheap whiskey before heading to snoozeland but he would make sure that didn't happen. He might even end up with one of their caskets after this. Amateur bloodletters!

He trudged along for what seemed like hours. He was getting weaker with each step. His feet felt like blocks of cement and his breathing labored. The vampire fell to the soft grass in a park. Had he been able to feed during the day, this place would be a prime location. Even if his cohorts fed alongside him there'd be enough to go around, even with those that managed to flee. He licked his cracked lips as he dreamt of chomping down on the flesh of men and women and drinking their blood as it flowed.

Then a noise startled him out of his nightdream. Not far ahead, something or more importantly, someone stirred. He squinted to get a better look but even his eyes were beginning to fail him. He crawled along the ground, trying his best to go unnoticed. As he got closer, he could now see what had made the sound.

There in front of him was a homeless man asleep on a bench. It was too easy but what else was there to consume? With each moment that passed, his hunger grew more fierce. Soon, his intestines would betray him and collapse. If a vampire didn't eat within hours of waking from their year long dozefest, they would die of starvation. He witnessed it in action once in Australia and it wasn't pretty.

He examined the elderly man. Based on looks alone, the vampire deducted that this man had a harder existence than he did. Was that even possible? Old paper bags were taped together for a makeshift blanket which the man barely fit under. The material was wet from the rain and beginning to tear. He was environmentally conscious at least. The vampire chuckled to himself. Of all the things to

go through his ravenous brain!

The man cuddled a half empty whiskey bottle. Or was it half full? His out of control beard was filled with bits of food; none of which contained garlic - thank the lord of darkness. Yes, this man was pathetic and killing him would be doing him a favor. Sometimes it was easier if you took out the ones who deserved to be taken out. At least thinking that made it easier.

The big toe on the man's right foot protruded out from a hole in his decaying boot. The vampire began to drool. The toe looked so juicy. He bent down and was about to bite the toe when the man stirred again and came to.

"Who's breathing on me?"

The man jumped up with such vigor that the vampire fell backwards stunned.

"What in hell do you think you're doing you sicko?"

"I, I was only admiring your feet."

The man reached down onto the bench and picked up a silver tipped cane. The vampire closed his eyes tightly. How did he miss that? Mistakes like that have wiped some of the best vampires off of the planet. The man rocked back and forth and switched the cane from hand to hand.

"Come on you long haired hippie! I may look old and beat but I'll knock you into next year."

Oh, how the vampire wished that were true. He pulled himself up with what strength he had left. He had no choice but to fight. Things were getting hazy and he was starting to lose his bearings. The vampire threw out his bony arms and tried to grab the cane. The man laughed each time he didn't succeed.

The vampire bared his fangs. He loved this part. The man's face turned whiter than his beard. The cane almost slipped out of his hand. The vampire lunged at the man and just as he was about to puncture the neck, his fangs broke off and fell out of his mouth.

"You've got to be kidding!" he cried out.

The man realized this was his chance. He stepped back, positioned the cane and with every fiber in his being he jammed the cane right into the vampire's chest.

The vampire paused for a moment and took in what just happened. He looked down at the cane sticking out of his chest. A serpent emblem on the end glared up at him. A red tongue stuck out, mocking him.

"You mean to tell me that I waited three hundred and sixty five days for this?"

He looked at the old man who simply shrugged and gave him a wink. With that, the vamp disintegrated into thin air, leaving only a puddle of ash.

"See you in hell, you undead freak!"

The man picked up his whiskey bottle, took a swig and then poured the remaining liquid onto the ash pile. He gathered his paper blanket and moved along.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Lisa Flanyak was born and raised just outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She enjoys writing screenplays of all genres and spooky short stories.



Family Suzanne Robb

Ryan raced home as fast as he could. His legs pumping like a machine. The traffic accidents, chaos, and plethora of dead bodies made it difficult. The outbreak was just beginning here, and they were just starting to rise. If he could just get home everything would be fine. He would find his wife and two girls there waiting for him.

He rounded a corner and came face to face with one of newly risen. The creature locked its eyes on Ryan and reached out with lightning fast moves. Ryan struggled with the Zombie, eventually freeing himself of its hold. He ran, it ran after him. Ryan looked over his shoulder and was terrified at how fast it was moving.

A cement road divider was coming up. Ryan took it in one jump and hoped that the Zombie would be tripped up by it. He spared a second to look back, no Zombie. He continued to run at full pace.

This was not how it was supposed to happen. They had lied to him. He was just a scientist working on a project. He studied necrotic tissue and ways to reanimate it. It started as a way to help people with leprosy. Yesterday he achieved what he had set out to do. He had successfully reanimated dead tissue.

He could barely contain his excitement. He was going to change the world. He watched in amazement as the monkeys, rats, and, mice all came back to life. He had created a miracle.

He stayed at the office late. His wife had always hated that. She told him he was missing out on life. He didn't care about that anymore, now he could create life. That stupid security guard got too close to one of the rats and got bit. It took mere seconds for the serum to make its way through his system and kill him.

Ryan found the dead body and assumed that it was collateral. Then the guard twitched and stood up. He was no longer a night watchman but a Zombie. He tried to attack Ryan. He avoided the lunge but the other security guards did not. Ryan panicked and tried to shut down the facility. He was too late.

All Ryan could do now was reach his family in time. That was his main goal. Just to get home. He saw his house and sprinted the last fifty yards. He unlocked the door with shaking hands. As soon as it was open he entered and locked the door behind him. He ran to the basement screaming for his wife.

In the back corner was a large freezer. He opened it and pulled out three bodies. First his wife, then his two kids. He injected them with the serum and breathed in relief. Finally he was going to have his family back.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Suzanne Robb is the author of *Z-Boat, Were-wolves, Apocalypses, and Genetic Mutation, Oh my!* published by Dark Continents, and *Contaminated*. She is a contributing editor at Hidden Thoughts Press, and co-edited *Read The End First* with Adrian Chamberlin. In her free time she reads, watches movies, plays with her dog, and enjoys chocolate and LEGO's. You can sometimes find her on her blog http://suzannerobb.blogspot.com.













Paradox

Bound By Blood

Paradox Series book 3

Patti Roberts

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

The Spell Stacey Turner

Jinni Mae Tremaine waded across the shallow waters of Dead Man's Creek heedless of the jagged shards and larger rocks biting into her soles. It would've been nice to have worn shoes, but that wasn't an option. For this night's journey, she needed to be grounded to nature, skin to skin. Not even the icy chill of the water offered a distraction. She couldn't allow it. Worn down by the weight of the pack she carried, she trudged up the rise. Rehearsing the upcoming ritual, she chanted the words under her breath, not daring to give them voice. This was an important night. The conditions had to be perfect.

Pushing through the last few yards, she crested the hill and came upon the fallen oak Granny had told her about. Though close to midnight, the cemetery was plenty light enough to serve her purpose. The crumbling tombstones stood sentinel in the wash of brightness given off by the full moon. A faint thrill of energy in the air buzzed in the back of her neck, causing her teeth to chatter. She shivered as a slight breath of wintry wind caressed her cheek. Soft, wet moss covered the ground beneath her feet, soothing her cuts, but chilling her to the bone. Jinni wrapped her arms around her body, wishing she'd worn more than the thin flannel gown Granny had insisted upon. Granny's instructions had to be obeyed.

The fallen oak made a perfect natural altar to practice her craft. Jinni removed the tools from her bag and placed them on the altar: two coal black tapers, an incense burner containing a charcoal brick, and finally, a lock of bright red hair taken from the intended. Four candles came from the pack to sit at the four cardinal points of the compass, a green candle marked North for the element of Earth. A yellow one went to the East to represent Air. Red, signifying Fire, went to the Southern spot. And finally, blue for Water went to the West. A quick glance around confirmed her solitude. Now she understood the rumors about this place. It nearly hummed with power. For those who knew, it was sacred. Others called it cursed.

If you believed the stories of the old wives, merely standing in this place could bring death. Considering the punishment her ma would deliver if she ever discovered this sojourn in darkness, death might pale in comparison. Her mother, a full-blown born again, snake-handling Pentecostal, had renounced the craft and everything to do with spell casting. Yet nothing would sway Jinni from her course. For this to work, her intent must be pure.

Her excursion to the graves by Dead Man's Creek had been motivated by the purest of reasons—love. And love had a name. Jimmy Joe Mason. Jimmy Joe, who this very moment was sleeping peacefully in his one bedroom trailer, snuggled beside Eva.

Jinni imagined the two of them together; Jimmy's dark tanned arm thrown over Eva's pale white stomach, the colors of their skin a study in sensual contrast. Jinni hated Eva as much as she loved Jimmy Joe. He belonged to her. They'd been a couple since the sixth grade. At least until this past summer, when Eva'd come prancing about in her shorty-shorts and thrown herself at poor Jimmy. She'd spent the season parading herself around town in front of all the men folk, that is till she set her cap for Jimmy Joe. Jinni hadn't even gotten mad. Jealous maybe, which was only natural, considering her own skinny, lanky body. But not mad, not then. She'd been confident Jimmy Joe belonged to her. And she hadn't suspected a thing until catching the two of them wrapped together at Larry's Lake. At first, she'd been devastated. Why had Jimmy Joe done this to her? He loved her. Her and only her.

Eva running round with a smirk on her face boiled Jinni's blood. It had been magick. That was the only thing that made a lick of sense. She must have seduced her unsuspecting Jimmy Joe with a glamour. How else could she have caused him to turn? But Eva had made a dire mistake. Though strong enough to cast a simple love spell, she had nowhere near the learning Jinni had when it came to witchery.

Rumor named Granny Tremaine the most powerful witch in these parts, with the people fearing and

respecting the woman in proper balance. Come one way and upside the other, everyone stood indebted to Granny. Even the mayor's scrawny wife knew who to come running to when her childrens were ailing. And despite what some new preacher might say on a given Sunday—there wasn't nobody gonna go against Granny.

On the other hand, everything had a season, and Granny, every day, was getting close to the end of hers. It wasn't as if her magick was getting weaker, no. That only grew stronger with time. But her old flesh was growing punier and wouldn't hold out much longer. Someone had to take her place.

Jinni and Eva started going out to Granny's cabin round the time Jinni turned ten and Eva, seven. No one's born knowing how to magick, they have to be learned to it. Granny had started with the simple stuff: identifying herbs, where to harvest them, and knowing their properties. She also taught them to listen with more than their ears, to connect with nature, to feel the power all around them. Jinni had learned her lessons. Eva had, too. But she'd always been restless, pestering Granny all the time for more than she wanted to give. Granny said everything had a time and place, but Eva demanded everything now. Finally, she stopped going out to Granny's at all, which pleased Jinni just fine. She loved having Granny all to herself. Looking back, she thought it kind of funny how round the same time Eva stopped coming, Granny began teaching the good stuff.

Everyone in town believed Granny would one day pass the torch to Eva. After all, Eva had the red hair and favored the looks of her ancestors, a pretty little thing could charm the pants off a preacher. Most folks never saw her other side, the fiery temper, and a mean streak to rival the Devil's. Jinni found it funny how people thought she was the evil one, and just because her hair and skin were dark and she minded her tongue. She didn't keep to herself because she was mean, she just didn't have much use for other people. 'Cept Jimmy Joe, of course. The townsfolk had called it wrong. Jinni held the power. She'd been born strong in the magick, and that, more than anything else, made her Granny's heir.

Jinni reckoned the townsfolk could count themselves mighty blessed. She'd be much more merciful when they came to her than Eva would ever be. And come they would. There'd been a magick woman in these parts as far back as anyone remembered. Jinni was gonna be next, and it all started tonight.

Ready, she raised her arms high above her head. The power of the full moon merging with that of the sacred spot was coursing through her, making her bold. But then she shivered as an icy finger of fear trailed down her spine. Conjuring with the darkness was tricky. Every witch recognized the rule of three, yet Jinni believed anything she might suffer in return was worth the revenge. Any price was worth getting Jimmy Joe back where he belonged. She couldn't escape paying for the spell, but maybe she could lessen the cost. Quick, she gathered the power of the moon and cast her circle. She invited the elements, one by one, and went to stand before her makeshift altar.

With the symbols Granny had made her memorize clear in her mind, Jinni carved the ancient runes into the black candles. Then she placed a lock of hair on the charcoal. A flame to the lock, and acrid smoke began burning her nostrils. She outlined a circle in salt, to safeguard against evil, and whispered a chant for still more protection. Her voice rang clear and true in the cold night air as the secret words flew from her lips. She invited something old and powerful, something infinitely dark. As she chanted, the sound of her words carried through the nearby woods. Night birds took to the sky with a *whoosh*, their calls an eerie cacophony. Shadows enveloped, blotting out the moon.

Trembling, she tamped down her fear, knowing soon there would be no turning back. She wavered a moment, but then Eva's laughing visage appeared in her mind, reminding Jinni of her treachery, her many crimes. Like the other day when the Perkins boy hollered at Granny when they'd gone into town. He'd called her an old hag. Eva had been there, too, standing beside and laughing as the boy shouted obscenities. If the name-calling hadn't been enough, what happened next sealed the boy's fate. A large

stone, the size of a baseball, grazed Granny's temple, knocking her off balance. She fell to the ground. Again, Eva laughed. The Perkins boy seemed right scared, but he realized his mistake too late, too late to take back the stone, and too late to say he was sorry. Three days later, they found his body out in the woods. Everybody knew no mountain lion had torn up Johnny Perkins. Everyone understood who'd called for his death. For whatever reason, Granny had refused to touch Eva, but Jinni had no such compunction. She steadied her nerves, straightened her shoulders, and reminded herself that whatever the consequences, it was worth ridding the world of Eva.

The wind rose with a howl. A draft licked her face and caressed her hair before sending dead leaves racing around the outside of her circle. The leaves whirled faster and faster as Jinni chanted, the cold, dead foliage a miniature cyclone. The awesome power the darkness brought coursed through her. She gathered the magick inside, the surge almost more than her small frame could withstand, and for a few seconds she reveled in it, the power more than anything she'd ever before experienced, strong, heady—insatiable. Granny'd warned her how seductive the dark would be. She warred within herself. Should she set the power free or hold on to it? Only Granny's face as she described the temptation saved her, was the only time she'd ever seen fear in Granny's eyes.

Decision made, she threw her arms wide and released the darkness, then collapsed in a heap. The bitter wind that had been whirling around her gathered itself and shot down the hillside toward town, the suspended leaves trailing in its wake.

Jinni lay on the ground, panting and weak. But picturing the scene in Jimmy Joe's trailer roused her. The summoned fury must have reached them by now, circling the trailer, looking for cracks to invade, then drifting over entwined bodies to seize Eva by her traitorous throat. She pictured the other girl's eyes flying open as the breath began to steal from her lips. The frantic grasping of her fingers meeting only air. She knew strangulation took a few minutes to kill and hoped Eva's last moments were filled with regret and the knowledge Jinni had beaten her at her own game.

A moment later, she found herself jerked from her musings by a wave of pain so strong she couldn't keep from screaming. Fire raced down her leg, the burn blinding in its intensity. She raised her head and saw her foot twisting to an impossible 90-degree angle. Through a haze of agony, she glimpsed a horde of hideously misshapen creatures just outside her salted circle, her screams swallowed by the peals of laughter they were braying. Mercifully, she passed out.

Jimmy Joe dropped a rose on the casket as he stood beside the grave. Jinni slipped her hand into his and tugged. She stumbled a little, still trying to get used to her new limp. The warmth of Jimmy's quick hand at her back brought a grin to her lips. She looked up, expecting one in return, but before Jimmy could summon a smile, she caught a glimpse of trepidation. Jimmy was scared of her. Well, maybe that was as it should be.

They turned to leave the cemetery and Jinni sensed Granny's eyes upon her. She glanced back; the old lady winked and briefly nodded. Jinni raised an eyebrow in return, but she hid her small, shrewd smile behind the handkerchief she'd been using to wipe away her make believe tears. Then she lifted her head high, and ignored the furtive glances cast by the townsfolk. They surrounded her on either side, but none dared to lock eyes, or give any voice to their suspicions. It didn't bother her a bit. Neither did Ma's hateful glare. Oh, yeah, Ma realized the truth of things. After Eva's death, she'd chewed Jinni up one flank and down the other.

She pushed the freshly-grayed streak of hair behind an ear; like the limp, it was a gift from her flirtation with the dark, a reminder to her and the townsfolk that she'd do anything to keep what was

hers. They'd treat her with the respect her new position demanded, or they would pay. She couldn't stop a smirk from stealing across her face.

Climbing into Jimmy Joe's pickup, she let her glance slide back to Eva's grave. A small pang of pity took her by surprise. Eva had been a thorn in her side, a whore and a backstabber, but still, she thought she'd miss her sister.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Stacey Turner lives way out in the country in West Central Illinois with her husband, son, and 4 cats. Most of her time is taken up with running Angelic Knight Press and editing, but she still finds time to review books & interview authors, write a blog about her absolutely ridiculous family, and write fiction. You can find her Author blog at www.staceyturner-authorspot.blogspot.com or follow her on twitter: @Spot_Speaks or Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/AuthorStaceyTurner. To contact her about editing, you can email her at princess.spot@gmail.com.

She enjoys editing, because she's bossy. And also because she enjoys helping an author polish their work. She has edited several anthologies, including the upcoming *No Place like Home: Tales from a Fractured Future* and *50 Shades of Decay*, as well as many novels & novellas for a variety of authors.

She has been published in several anthologies and online magazines. Her first collection of short stories will be forthcoming in 2013. When not working, she enjoys photographing cemeteries, playing "what if," and discussing the imminent zombie apocalypse. She does not enjoy scarecrows, creepy dolls, birds (of any sort), snakes, clowns or garden gnomes.



In the Library Dawn Napier

Owen loved everything about the library, but he especially loved the smell. Dust, old paper, and magic, he thought, on the rare occasions that he thought about it at all. Like most small boys, he accepted the miracles in his life as nothing out of the ordinary. The library was just there, a friendly monolith of peace and quiet.

His feet scuffed on the long plastic runner at the front entrance. The runner was bright yellow, and so was the carpet it lay across, so much yellow that Owen's eyes ached. His feet made a rubbing, froglike sound on the plastic that made him think of the brown corduroys his mom sometimes made him wear because they were a gift from Grandma and he should be grateful. But he liked this sound better.

The air was warm and close as a hug. Owen breathed the rich, papery scent of the library and smiled peacefully.

At eight, he was technically too young to explore the stacks of adult fiction by himself, but he and Mom were such frequent visitors, and Owen was so well-behaved ("He's not like most boys his age," Mrs. McElroy had once told Mom, and Mom had agreed with visible pride) that he was free to explore wherever he liked. Sometimes he chose a grown-up book to read, and sometimes he wanted a picture book. Nowhere else in his life did he have such freedom.

He turned a corner—and the boogeyman was standing in the shadows.

The boogeyman hissed, baring its fangs. Its claws were long and black.

Owen fell back, throwing both hands over his mouth as he moaned in horror. Even swarmed by terror, his mind repeated, You must not scream in the library, you must not scream in the library, you must not scream! His bladder felt loose and hot, and he thought he was going to pee himself.

"Owen?" he heard his mother call from a million miles away. "Owen, where are you?"

Owen backed away, and the boogeyman did not follow him. But it watched him, even without eyes in its black, shrouded face, it watched him. It raised its claws and hissed again. It would wait. It could wait for as long as it took.

Mom smiled when she saw him. Then she saw his pallor, his sweaty brow. "Do you feel sick? You don't look well."

Owen shook his head. It felt like a tremble that filled his whole body. "I'm just tired. Let's go home."

The problem of the boogeyman gnawed at Owen all week long. Staying away from the library never entered his mind as an option. The library was everything; it was where Owen never felt lonely or bored, or like a freak because he preferred books to toy guns and footballs. There were no bigger boys there to push him into a snowbank or steal his glasses. Everything was real and beautiful there, and nothing was off-limits. Mom had never taken a book out of his hands, the way she sometimes turned off the TV and said, "That's not appropriate for your age." Instead she said, "If you're old enough to read and understand it, you're old enough to handle it." Owen loved the library as much as his own home, and he could no more stop going than he could simply stop sleeping in his own bed, with his favorite blankets and stuffed animals.

He thought about asking his mom, but she wouldn't understand. She would think he was having bad dreams—like a baby!—and she might stop letting him read grown-up books after all. Or she might think he was sneaking scary movies on TV.

Finally he turned to his only friend at school, a chubby, freckled little girl named Marissa.

"How do you beat the boogeyman?" he asked one afternoon, as they skirted the edges of the playground to avoid the bigger boys who were throwing chunks of dirt and the teacher hadn't seen yet.

Marissa considered the question as she chewed her fingernails. They were short and raggedy, and

her fingertips were red.

Owen waited patiently as she chewed and thought. She was slow to speak up, but her ideas were usually good.

"Sunlight," she said at last.

"Sunlight?"

"Yup. Sunlight. It's the only thing that kills monsters."

"Other stuff kills monsters too. Silver bullets kill werewolves."

"That's werewolves, Owen," Marissa said contemptuously. "I'm talking about monsters. Like the boogeyman, or the thing under your bed. They hide from sunlight, 'cos it kills them."

"I think the boogeyman is the same as the thing under your bed," Owen said.

"No! Duh! The boogeyman lives in your closet, not under your bed! It's way tall, like tall as a giant. It wouldn't fit under your bed."

That confirmed what Owen had seen. The boogeyman at the library was very tall, taller than Mom. It wouldn't fit under his bed at all, even if it took out all the Legos and trains first.

But how could he make sunlight happen inside the library? There were windows, but not in that shadowy corner where the boogeyman was hiding. It was all dark. The books in that area were scary too, all about haunted houses and zombies and shadowy monsters.

Owen shivered in the warm afternoon sun. He had only flipped through one or two of those books. They weren't appropriate for his age.

Then he thought of something. "Hey Marissa, can the boogeyman be in a book?"

"We gotta quit hiding," Marissa said. "If someone sees us they'll call us kissing cousins. The boys aren't throwing dirt anymore. Let's go swing."

Owen followed her to the swing set, where miraculously, there were two empties side by side. "Well can it? Can the boogeyman be in a book? Like maybe hide in a book about the boogeyman?"

"Yeah, probably," Marissa said, plopping her heavy skirted butt onto a swing. "If it's scary enough. Give me a push to get started."

That had to be it, Owen thought. The boogeyman had come out of one of those scary books. He gave Marissa a big push, and she squealed as her skirt flapped in the breeze.

If the boogeyman could come out of a book, so could other things.

The answer stood out in Owen's mind, plain as a dandelion.

Saturday came around again, and Owen and his mom went back to the library. Mom had a big stack of books to return, and she wanted to look for this one movie that had a bunch of dead people in it. Owen told her where he was going, and she said okay. "Wait for me in the kid's area when you're done, so I don't have to come looking," she said. "I don't like it when I can't find you right away."

Owen used the computer catalog to find the book he wanted. Mrs. McElroy helped him find the right shelf, on the nonfiction side. "This is advanced reading, even for you," Mrs. McElroy said, but she didn't say he couldn't have it. Owen just said thank you, and he walked slowly back to the fiction area, to that one corner where the shadows hung together like curtains.

He rounded the stack, the book hidden behind him, his heart in his mouth and pulsing there like a toad.

The boogeyman was there, all blackness and long claws. An enormous mouth opened, revealing teeth like a trap. Owen whimpered and shook, his hands cold as an icebox gripping the book.

Slowly he brought the book around before him. The boogeyman hissed and raised its claws.

Owen moaned. Those claws, those black claws were reaching for him.

Trembling horribly, he opened the book to its center page.

The book was Our Sun: the Center of Our Solar System.

Please God, let this work, Owen thought. It was the only time in his life that he had ever prayed, or ever would again.

A solid gold beam flared out of the book, bathing the boogeyman and banishing the shadows it lived in. It hissed again, louder, and slid forward as though to attack. Owen stepped back a pace and opened the book a little wider. The boogeyman's hiss rose and became a teakettle-scream of pain. It threw its claws upward and flew into the high ceiling. The last of the shadows burst apart like dark fireworks.

The gold beam of sunlight from the center of the solar system faded and died. Owen closed the book.

Then he went to the little kid's section to wait for Mom. He wasn't in the mood for a picture book right now. But at least it was brightly lit, with big windows.

And no shadows anywhere.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR – Dawn Napier is a thirty-something married mother of three. She has been writing horror and fantasy for most of her life, as well as a few poems and science-fiction tales. Dawn takes a foolish amount of pride in having grown up in Ray Bradbury's "Green Town," Waukegan, IL. When she's not writing, Dawn works a part-time day job and home-schools her older children.



Available on
Amazon,
Barnes & Noble,
KoboBooks,
and Apple

Human Condition Dana Wright

God I fucking hated people. Even the zombies milling around on the street below were better behaved than the excuse for humanity that stood in front of me. I took one look at the blond skank dangling my dog, Jacks by the scruff of his neck above the overpass and wanted to smash her face in. She was laughing. It was a braying sound that could have come from a freaking donkey. The hungry mob of zombies began to cluster under the dog and with each panicked yip, the horde grew more violent. Their hungry moans to feed almost hid the cries from the whimpering dog as he struggled against her. His eyes bulged and his little black body writhed in torment as she lowered him a few inches closer. We had gotten separated by the horde below and somehow he had gotten himself caught.

"Let's see if they jump for it!" she howled and wiggled the dog sharply, causing him to yowl in pain. The motley group with her was clustered around an oil drum lit on fire to warm the cool October twilight. They had propped up a makeshift spit and were roasting something on the end of it. There was a pot with the telltale smell of beans wafting out. At least they hadn't cooked the dog. *Yet.* I shuddered. It would be dark soon and I could not afford to be here. It was too dangerous with this many of the undead congregating.

Getting in the middle of this was so not on my list of how to stay alive, but she was really starting to piss me off. Meeting up with unknown groups of travelers and scavengers was a gamble, and this was one I didn't intend to lose. I dug in my backpack and sighed. Provisions were dwindling precariously low and I still had several days left before I made it back to camp. Being distracted by this rag tag bunch during my supply run was not part of the plan. I needed to make a break for it as soon as I got Jacks free. He had traveled with me for miles and I felt responsible for him being caught. *Fuck.* I also owed him. He had kept me alive more times than I could count.

"Appetizer?" I stepped from the shadows and walked slowly toward her. Holding out one of my last precious beers, I extended it toward her, hoping it would entice her to put Jacks down before things got out of hand.

She lifted him up a couple of inches, yanking him hard over the rail and he gave a loud yip.

"What the hell do you want?"

"My dog." I stared into her eyes and held my hand out with the can of beer.

She barked out a harsh laugh and eyed the beer hungrily.

"Your dog, huh?" She edged closer to me with Jacks still in hand, his eyes wild and his body straining against her.

"Hand him over and the beer is yours." My lips curved into a smile, but I was pretty sure it didn't meet my eyes. The pressure of the gun digging into my back reminded me that I had some backup, but I really didn't want to start shooting at things with a rowdy horde of zombies already beginning to congregate. I thought of the knife in my front pocket, but I would have to wait until she moved further away from the ledge. The bitch would probably pitch him over just out of spite.

"Now why would I want to do that and ruin tonight's entertainment?" She leered at me. "Unless you're volunteering for the job?"

I walked closer, holding the beer in front of me in offering, noting the group and how many of the men were slower than I would have expected given the circumstances. If anyone had wandered into camp, my posse would have had them spread eagled on the ground with a full body search. Something here was way off. I needed to get the fuck out and now. The noises from the horde below were getting louder. I wasn't sure who smelled worse, the reek of the dead or this bunch in front of me.

"Nope. Just want my dog, thanks." I had to end this. She was a few steps away from the edge and could toss Jacks over any second. The men that were lingering around the fire slowly moved in closer, sensing the tension in the air.

"A woman alone shouldn't be so demanding." A large man in overalls and a plaid button down shirt moved in. His eyes were hard and the lines around his face were caked with dirt and grime. He was fast. Before I could even react, he rushed me, throwing a punch into my stomach and left me gasping for air, struggling to stand upright. He tore the backpack from my shoulder and stalked toward the blond woman. My eyes watered and my breath came in shallow bursts. I staggered, leaning against an upended grocery cart for support.

Another man, his clothes in tatters left the fire and eyed me, letting his eyes lick across me obscenely. His face held the gaunt look of a man with nothing left to lose. He ran his hands down the front of his pants, making my stomach clench again. This time from fear and anger.

"You want the dog, take it." A reptilian smile curled his lips. "Better yet, why don't you come over here and get him, girly?"

It took every ounce of self-control I had not to vomit. This was turning ugly. No one touched me. *Ever.* I was going to have to deal with the situation. Damn J.C. for making me come out here because she needed freaking lotion and vitamins. Next time she was going herself.

Movement out of the corner of my eye made me pause and take a step backwards. The infected had climbed onto the cars and were using each other's bodies to get to the street level. The others hadn't noticed it yet. They were too busy ransacking my pack, with their backs to the railing. I looked around and frantically scanned the ground for anything I could throw. Forcing my body to move, I edged over to a pile of rubble and picked up a nice sized rock.

"Here, catch." I threw it as hard as I could toward the woman and she screeched, lurching toward the top of the overpass. Jacks yowled as she fell, half on the ledge, about to pitch over. The woman came face to face with the arms and gnashing teeth inches away from her and scrabbled to move away, dropping Jacks in the process. The men rushed her, trying to pull her back but one of the zombies was faster. Climbing over the railing, his dead eyes found the man closest to me and his mouth opened into a blackened, gaping maw of diseased and rotting flesh. His teeth sunk into Reptile man and then the sounds of tearing flesh and screams filled the air as another zombie made its way over the concrete rail. Misogynist man made it a few more feet and was overtaken.

"Damn it!" I ran forward, yanking the gun out of the back of my pants. It was a little late to worry about being quiet now. Jacks had made it to me and was barking furiously. "I know boy. Time to go in a minute." The woman had grabbed my pack and was moving back toward the railing. How dumb could she be?

"Give me your damn gun, or I throw the pack." The skank backed away from the zombies, her intent to use my gear to get me closer. The screams from the dying men quieted and all I could hear was the juicy popping sounds of flesh tearing.

"Put it down. Now." I raised my gun and aimed. "If you want to live, do it." I cocked the trigger. I needed that pack if we were going to make it back to camp without starving to death or worse.

She smiled an evil smile and began to swing her arm with the pack. I fired. One shot was all it took. It hit her in the leg, downing her just as the newly risen zombie of her traveling companion took the first chunk out of the side of her neck.

Her screams brought me out of my frozen state and I ran for the pack while the zombie eviscerated her. This had been her plan for me and for Jacks. Wasn't karma a bitch? I shook my head, shuddering at the juicy sounds of feeding zombies.

The smell was getting worse, which meant the horde was moving closer. I shot a glance at the overpass and let out a muffled curse. Jacks barked, urging me forward. More of them were crawling over the railing, supported by the writhing bodies of the undead.

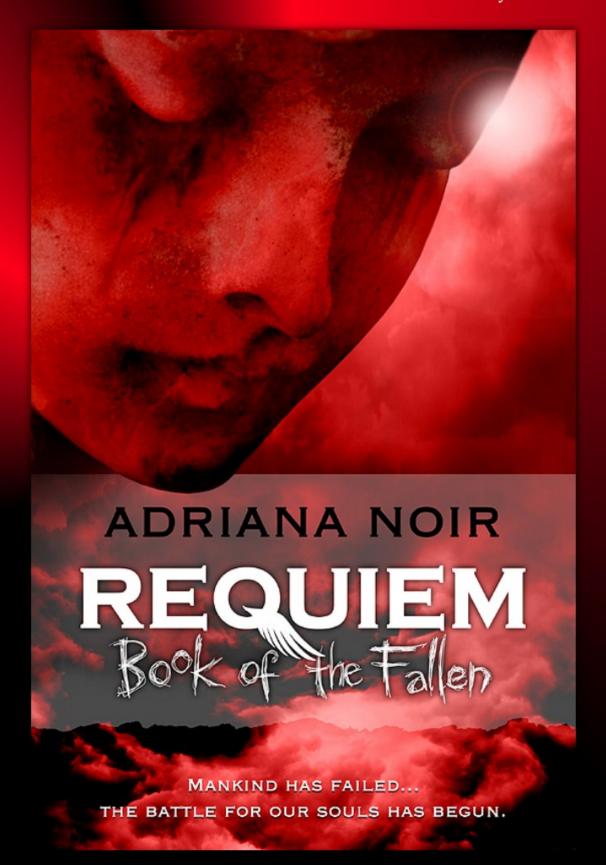
"Jacks! Come on boy!" We ran for the woods, toward the high ground and one step closer to safety as the small trickle of zombies became another river of death.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Dana Wright is a long time book fiend who used to hide in her room as a child to write odd stories and read Anne Rice novels. Her love of monsters began when she found Halloween cutouts of Dracula and his bride, and much to the worry of her parents, left them up on her bedroom wall year around. Not much has changed. If you look closely in her office, you can see monsters popping out of every bookshelf and hiding behind corners.

Most of the time, Dana can be found blogging about books and music, hanging out on Facebook, stalking Pinterest with intent to pin, reading incessantly, watching monster movies with her husband, trying to crochet and knit with varying success while writing music reviews for Muzikreviews.com, working as a retail manager, writing YA and trying her hand at an erotica story without blushing too awfully much. She lives with several children of the furry variety and her husband in Texas.



When survival is all that matters, which side would you choose?



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Denied Julianne Snow

The knife glinted in the strange half-light that shrouded her neat bedroom moments before it plunged deep into the muscle of her shoulder. The pain was intense, like the crisp burning of forehead flesh when the flat iron makes contact, but with the creepy sensation of air and metal touching areas not normally accessible.

With a sudden jerk reminiscent of a recoil, she pulled back and heard the slice of the knife inside her body, shredding muscle and tendon as it held fast, anchored by the gloved hand whose finders still grasped it.

The vice-like grip did not let up as the hand drew the blade down and around her, tracing a path of carnage across her body over her breast as she instinctively turned to flee. In a moment, a flap of muscle, fat and flesh hung limply over her breast; the strap of her tank top offering support as it hung there, blood flowing freely from the wound.

Her voice wanted to break free of her throat, but when she opened her mouth nothing came out. Scrabbling across her room, vainly trying to no avail to keep her shoulder steady, she screamed mutely. The sound echoed through her head, clouding her eyes with fear and stiffening her flailing legs.

The blade of the knife entered her body again, the burning caress running down her back this time. With all of the grace of a dancer with two left feet, she hit the ground. Hard.

The impact stunned her. Made it difficult for her to understand what was truly going on.

Why wouldn't her legs move?

Why couldn't she stand back up?

Why wouldn't her body listen to her?

With a sickening jolt and a sound similar to champagne being uncorked, she sensed him behind her, over her. His breath came hard and fast, mirroring her own in tempo and weight. She could feel the moisture of it, hot and humid across the exposed skin of her shoulders, the movement of it lighting the severed nerves on fire as they relayed between the cut edge and her brain.

Still her screams refused to be voiced, no matter how hard she tried to release them. Over her ruined shoulder she could see the edge of the knife sparkle, collecting all of the light from the darkness. Her legs wouldn't obey her and in an instant she knew; paralysis.

Not only had he stolen the subtle, but beautiful curve of her perfect shoulder, but now the grace she had once exuded in her step was gone as well. The tears flowed freely, cascading down her face, over her chin, falling silently on the powder blue of her ruined tank top.

Rolling to face him, she stared at him, challenged him with the set of her jaw and the hardness of her eyes. Her body may have shaken with shock, but she sent him a message: finish it.

With a smile and a chuckle, he rose, turned on his heel and left.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - It was while watching Romero's Night of the Living Dead at the tender age of 6 that solidified Julianne's respect of the Undead. Since that day, she has been preparing herself for the (inevitable) Zombie Apocalypse. While classically trained in all of the ways to defend herself, she took up writing in order to process the desire she now covets; to bestow a second and final death upon the Undead. As the only girl growing up in a family with four children in the Canadian countryside, Julianne needed some form of escape. Her choice was the imaginations of others which only fostered the vibrancy of her own. Days with the Undead: Book One is her first full-length book, the basis of which can be found in her popular web serial of the same name. You can find Julianne's short fiction in Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed, Women of the Living Dead, Twisted Realities: Of Myth and Monstrosity, Carnage: After the End – Volume 1 along with The Sirens Call. In the next year, she has more stories being released in anthologies, including Horrific History (Hazardous Press) and Death by Drive-In, the Coffin Hop Charity Anthology.

Reverence Nina D'Arcangela

Can you feel it? My heart? It is beating solely for you; so strong - so swift; the rapid pump pulsing ever so swiftly through me. My body pressed so close to your own; my soft fetid breath scampers across your sweet creamy skin.

I can feel your heart - I feel its quickening pace as I lean in ever closer, fingers trailing down your neck, across your throat, to the exposed cleavage you've offered me so unwittingly in your desire to please. You do wish to please me, don't you my sweet? With just a single breath you will inspire me forever; ignite my undying lust; engender my everlasting devotion.

But what will this breath cost you my love, my scrumptious little morsel? Are you willing to give me the breath I long to have, the one I will take whether you offer it or not? Yes, my darling pet - hush now, I'll have what is mine for you haven't the will or the power to stop me from taking it.

My gentle stroke continues; a light fluttery caress of my small hand across your bosom; the first scrape of my nail on your soft swelling skin. Oh - did that small wounding hurt you? Gentle thing that you are, you know not of the glorious pain I could bring to you. Please believe that I would never allow your pain to exist beyond a mere moment. Hush now, be calm - there is no need to fuss, it will only last but a gasp for you, but for me - I shall remember it for all eternity.

There, be a good dear, lean back... Yes I will lie with you. Why would I ever abandon a creature as glorious as yourself, allowing another to set their desires upon you? Did you not understand my claim of ownership? Do you honestly believe you still have a choice in the matter? Please my little pet, fret if you will, but know it only excites me more.

Yes, that is wonderful... That look of confusion, of fear - no one is coming to save you; you are mine and I will have my entire fill.

Your body now pressed prone below mine, the string of spittle still dangling from my own salivating mouth dancing around your glorious cleavage. Tentatively you look up to reassure yourself that there is no danger in this game we play. My loving caresses; my soft curvaceous body a mate to every sway and curve of your own; what a perfect fit we two. What a very perfect fit indeed.

As my long, soft hair gently strokes your sensitive skin, the sensation heightens your arousal - I can smell it. No need to look so frightened again, you are my pet, my doll, my toy - I am your Angel. I shall unfetter your heart of all the distrust and skittish fear this cruel world has stamped upon it. This beautiful, undulating, pulsating, quickening heart of yours.

Our eyes meet one final time; yours soft and gentle; as crystal clear as an azure sky; so tainted by pain, yet untouched by the depths of true malevolence. Such a perfect specimen you are. A fleeting moment of fear passes through those depthless orbs upon seeing the cold hard truth of my own; but only a moment - as I promised, I will not let you suffer...

Our eyes still locked; the exhalation of my lungs washing over you; my hand ripping through the pretty piece of fabric you've chosen to entice me with this evening. As the fabric falls away and your soft flesh begins to peel back under my ever digging claws, a look of panicked confusion crosses your face.

Ahhh... the moment begins. The moment when your fragile diminutive mind has still not recognized the danger that is quite literally upon you; the danger of the one you have called to you this night. Your poor feverish mind only now beginning to understand the situation, yet still unwilling to comprehend it; nor recognize the impulses that are telling you that your body is registering an odd sensation - an unbelievable amount of pain.

Staring into your fathomless eyes, I watch as the moment of recognition dawns there, lasting only the duration of a single heartbeat in which you realize on the most primitive level that you will not live to the end of this breath.

Yes, this is the glory, this is my desire, this is the euphoria I crave!

It's not that I wish to rip such a beautifully undulating organ from your perfectly formed body, but how else shall I experience the utterly inexplicable pleasure I feel while watching what could be the dawn of an eon for me, yet only a breath for you... How else will I glimpse it in your eyes? The look of simple fear that is now ingrained in your stare feeds me in a way I could never describe to a mind that does not understand the raw power of emotional innocence. Yes, I am ripping your heart out of your chest; and yes it is beyond your most untamed imaginings to comprehend what watching this thought enter your disbelieving mind makes me feel. My own body vibrates with the thrill of it. But it lasts only a mere instant before your eyes glaze over like polished glass - now the eyes of a doll - my doll, my beautiful expired toy.

Thank you for sating my need with your life; thank you for giving me your innocent trust; thank you for understanding how badly I needed this moment between us. The sweet taste of your blood as I take my first lick of your now gaping chest tells me of your love for me. If you did not understand, if you did not want me to have my fill, would your blood not taste bitter to my delicately lapping tongue? I believe it would, and as your juices run down my arm from your no longer beating heart, I feel the stroke of your own caress given back to me even in death.

This is how I know of your love for me.

You would sacrifice so much that I may sate myself upon you. Did you know of this sacrifice from the onset? No, you did not - but it would not have mattered, you loved me, you would have given me all that I asked of you. You sought me out; you first approached me; you pressed your body to mine in offering. You honor me with the one thing that you can now never give to another; and I shall not be wasteful of your gift, no my darling - I shall not waste what a delicious fawn such as yourself has given me.

A few more tentative licks while your blood still trickles... how I loathe to abandon this moment we have shared together; this adoration of the tender and fragile life you have given me. But our moment has passed my sweetness, and now there is but one way to keep you forever.

I wish to tell you that you will always be a part of me. I wish to explain the joy I shall feel as I sink my teeth into your delicious heart and consume it so that we may always be together. I wish you to know the pleasure that lavishing in your beautifully torn apart carcass will bring me while I lick you clean. I wish I could have eased your fear by letting you know how I shall treat your now empty body; that I shall treat it with more respect by cleaning it with my own mouth than any other creature could have treated it in this short, yet exquisite life you have just left. But I can not... nor could I have told you of these things before our euphoria, for it would have stolen the magic from the moment and ruined what we shared.

Such is the existence of a lover such as I; to find a perfectly bloomed flower only to pluck it and watch it whither... then again, who does not do such a thing - and who better to honor this tradition than the Angels themselves.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Nina D'Arcangela was the type of girl who, when given a doll as a child, would immediately pop its head off to see what was inside, then spend countless hours contemplating how so many fantastic things could be in her own head when the doll's was so very vacant. As a reader of anything from splatter matter to dark matter; Nina is a lover of all things horror and scientific.

Nina is the Social Media Coordinator and one of the co-founders of Sirens Call Publications and Pink Pepper Press. She is a member of the writing group, Pen of the Damned, and the owner of Dark Angel Photography. You can find her on twitter at @Sotet_Angyal, on Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/DarcNina, on her personal blog at sotetangyal.wordpress.com, or by email at dark.nina@gmail.com.



For Those Who Like It Dark: An Interview with Eva Layne



Recently, Sirens Call Publications had the opportunity to sit down with Eva Layne, the woman behind DarkMedia. For those of you unfamiliar with what DarkMedia is or what it delivers to the hordes of horror lovers as well as those who just appreciate the darker side of entertainment, it's dedicated to bringing you all the latest news from entertainment, music, literature, art, and all the things that go 'bump in the night'. Established in 2011, DarkMedia has worked with an incredible community of diverse, generous and talented individuals, and has seen the launch of its own online magazine, DarkMedia Magazine. In February of 2012, DarkMedia Magazine evolved into a comprehensive entertainment website, DarkMedia.com, which is home to original fiction, television recaps, book reviews, movie reviews, original articles, entertainment news, exclusive interviews and more.

Welcome Eva! Thank you for taking the time to talk with us. First off, we'd like to know. We'll start with an easy question: who is Eva Layne?

Eva Layne: I'd say I'm a person who is, and always has been, interested in the arts and their impact on both the individual and the culture. I'm also someone who is inspired by artistic diversity, which is something we try to incorporate into DarkMedia.

Sirens Call Publications: As someone who is inspired by artistic diversity, is there an art form that you yourself create within?

Eva: Thank you for asking! In addition to the editing and journalism DarkMedia requires, I am a freelance graphic designer and web developer. In fact, part of the expansion of DarkMedia in 2013 has been in developing its own design company, which we just recently launched, called DarkMedia Design (http://www.darkmediadesign.com).

SCP: It's great to see a place where all aspects of creativity can come together to form a cohesive brand. Tell us about your brainchild DarkMedia?

Eva: DarkMedia is everything the name implies; it covers a broad range of literature, entertainment and art -- all on the "darker" side of things. Beyond that, what I hope people think of when they see the name DarkMedia is all the work we've done over the last two years to support the independent arts and build a partnership with the independent communities.

In addition to the mainstream coverage we provide, such as interviews with cast members of the FX drama American Horror Story, DarkMedia publishes original short stories and poetry, independent film and book reviews, original articles, and interviews with talented artists, musicians, authors and filmmakers you may not have heard of before -- but should have. We also have several groups on Facebook, one being a book club where independent authors can share their work and talk about subjects relevant to the art of writing, and being writers themselves.

SCP: How did you come to start DarkMedia.com?

Eva: DarkMedia began as a social network, DarkMedia City, and evolved from there. From there, we had DarkMedia Magazine, which featured all the latest interviews and articles from and for members of the social network. Finally, the brand evolved to DarkMedia, and DarkMedia.com as a full website was opened in February of last year. Through it all, my goal has always been to network with talented artists, authors, musicians and people who love the darker side of the arts, first and foremost, and everything has stemmed from that.

SCP: What has been your experience in creating a community and site within the darker side of entertainment, an area that has typically been a male-dominated field?

Eva: When I began, and I'd be running the account on Twitter or other neutral places, most people naturally assumed I was a man. Over time, I've realized the lopsided nature of this field, but I honestly have felt nothing but supported -- by the independent literature and horror communities, especially. I'm honored to be a part of such incredible communities, among women who are doing really excellent work.



SCP: Given that February is Women in Horror Recognition Month, what do you feel are the challenges that women face within the Horror Industry?

Eva: I think the primary challenge has always been that women in the horror industry struggle to be taken seriously; that we know as much about the genre, and are as capable of creating art within it, as our male counterparts. It's a stereotype I know many have overcome successfully, but you still see the residue of it here and there.

SCP: What do you think are the best ways for women to break down the gender biases and stereotypes that exist within the industry?

Eva: Events like this one, WiHM, are a fantastic way for women to break down gender biases and get the word out about the truly excellent work women are doing in horror. Every year, I think we get a little closer to our goals, and I appreciate having the opportunity to talk about it this time around.

SCP: How can authors, artists, musicians, and lovers of the darker side of entertainment get involved with DarkMedia.com?

Eva: Come find us on Facebook (https://twitter.com/DarkMediaOnline) or contact us at info@darkmedia.com. We're always looking for new, talented, people to feature on the site, and we'd love to hear from them!

SCP: Now it's time for one last question before we let you go. If you could choose to interview any one person who creates art of a darker element, who would it be and why?

Eva: This is a hard question to answer, but I'd personally have to say Tim Burton. Very few directors have such a distinct style, but his is always clear, concise, while finding less conventional ways to tell a story. You can't mistake a Tim Burton film for anything else.

Thank you Eva for taking the time to answer our questions. We certainly appreciate all of the work that you do to showcase the darker side of entertainment and with the atmosphere of acceptance you have engendered. Anyone looking to find out more about DarkMedia or DarkMedia design can find out more information at www.darkmediaonline.com or www.darkmediadesign.com.





WWW.DARKMEDIA.COM WWW.DARKMEDIADESIGN.COM

The Traveler Kristi Linton

I have traveled the lonely road in the wake of all the light, till my soul was weary, my eyes got dreary, and it was time to settle down for the night.

So come on down to the carnival, where all is plain to see. The mind will wander, the people free, to be watched by demons three. Then out of the depths of sanity the walls will come crashing down, and all will be lost forevermore until someone new comes to town.

From the rubble we will be reborn, like the phoenix from the ash. And I will travel the lonely road until I find the light at last.

The Hunt Kristi Linton

In the midnight sky I fly searching for a warm heartbeat underneath they all pass by oblivious to defeat.

Soon I will find the one, the only I had in mind and I will no longer be lonely.

As I swoop, as I glide they scatter in fear in the corners they do hide quivering in fear.

Ah, but I have found the one, she will be my bride though we never have a son we shall never die!!!!!!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR – Kristi Linton is originally from Florida where she grew up immersed in books, music, and horror films. She have two beautiful children who are nearing teenage years and have recently moved to Virginia. Kristi is a huge gamer and plays a lot of role-playing games as well as LARPing. She loves going to some of the local conventions and will be at Mysticon and Ravencon this year. You can find Kristi on Facebook at https://www.facebook.com/Dementis.Lamia where her name is Kris Svärd.

Sounds of the Night Katie M John

Is it the sound of your dear heart against the pillow? Or the axe man's tread who'll kill you in your bed? Is it Death's drummer boy,
Who marches across the barren plains to take the spoils of your breath and conquer the ground of your soul?

Is it the dripping tap?
Or the droplets of blood that fall from a cold steel blade?
Is it the sound of your tears,
As they creep down your cheek,
Falling on the unforgiving chains
Screwed deep into the floor of the murderers den?

Is it the tick tock of the clock?

Or sound of the bomb he's tied to your wrist?

Is it the sound of his drumming fingers,

As he watches you, waiting for your hope to extinguish,

Before he strikes to steal the rest of you?

Is it the sound of the wild winter wind?
Or the howling cries of your abducted child?
Is it the sound of human anguish
Under the butcher's tools, as he slices you
Apart in search of an essential truth.

No, it is the dark labyrinth of the imagination. The fear of your own shadow: It is the night.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Katie M John lives in the London suburbs. Her time is divided between writing, teaching English to teenagers and being mummy to two daughters. She started writing seriously after the birth of her first daughter five years ago. She has gone on to have four of her YA novels published and numerous short horror and fantasy stories published by several press houses, including Nexus Press and Winter Goose. Her series 'The Knight Trilogy' is an Amazon.UK number one best selling Fairy Tale series and has been consistently in the top 100 of several categories. Find out more information at www.theknighttrilogy.com. In October 2012 she released her fourth novel, 'Beautiful Freaks', a gothic paranormal detective novel set in Victorian London. Find out more information at www.beautifulfreakskatiemjohn.com. She is currently working on a seven book series called the 'Pentacle Chronicles', the first of which is due for publication in the summer of 2013. All of her books are available at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Waterstones and WHSmith. You can find her hanging out on Twitter at @KnightTrilogy or on her website – www.katiemjohn.com.

Women in Horror Month Horror Host Miss Misery

Ladies of blood, mystery and gore We bring you Horror Straight to your door

We Psych you out with our beauty and Bring you pain Devouring your soul and Draining your brain

We sweat and bleed for the genre That's ours We grab your inner darkness and Twist your desires

we are sick we are twisted we are one with the night

we are classy we are beautiful with all a good fright

February is a month
Of celebration and cheer
Of scaring and caring
and bringing your fear

A month full of strength,
Talent and gore
We are the Women of Horror

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Reyna Young AKA Miss Misery has a segment on Creepy Kofy Movie Time called Web of Insanity, where she hosts 3 minute and under short horror films! You can even catch her at the end of the show dancing with Balrok, No name, and the hot Cave girls. Miss Misery hosts several events around the San Francisco, Sacramento area including Zombie Proms, Shadow casts, and Film Festivals. Be sure to check out her annual A Nightmare to Remember International Horror Film Festival in San Francisco every June. Where she gives you a nightmare to remember! (www.anightmaretoremember.com). Check out her brand new Convention called "Days of Terror" held within Sacramento, going on year two this convention is dedicated to the independent horror artist and the future of horror. With guests, music, panels and much more you don't want to miss out (www.daysofterror.com). If you think that wasn't enough Miss Misery will soon be coming out with her own line of comic books which she hosts tales of death and revenge called "Forgotten Tales" not only does she host these awesome stories but she also writes them. Get inside her head with these upcoming comic books from Comic Book Divas.

Look Into My Eyes O.M. Grey

"Look into my eyes," He would say to me. Exploring Sacred Sexuality.

"Look into my eyes,"
As our bodies danced,
Mingling of our souls,
Put me in a trance.

"Look into my eyes," As he'd thrust inside, Gazing down at me Surging with the tide.

"Look into my eyes" How I did believe, When he spoke those words, That he'd never leave.

"Look into my eyes. You can trust in me. Now release your soul; Give your heart to me."

"Look into my eyes, Don't see what's truly there. Believe these loving lies, Not that I don't care."

"Look into my eyes. Now I'm in control. Look into my eyes, While I rape your soul."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Nestled in the mountains of California, Olivia M. Grey lives in the cobwebbed corners of her mind writing paranormal romance with a Steampunk twist. As a writer, podcaster, and speaker, Olivia focuses her poetry and prose on alternative lifestyles and deliciously dark matters of the heart. Her work has been published in anthologies and magazines like *Stories in the Ether, SNM Horror Magazine* and *How The West Was Wicked*. Read more by O. M. Grey on her blog Caught in the Cogs, http://omgrey.wordpress.com.





The New YA Novel from Bestselling Author of The Amazon UK No 1. Knight Trilogy

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Fey Shaper Laura Brown

The sun goes down The lights go out...

The shadows prickle with expectation Watch the black static And see the darkness take form, See nightmares come to life...

Slither, boglin, slither,
Slink into the dark and breathe your
Mischievous rot.
Should this night find you friendly
A saucer of milk all you shall take
But should we find you cruel and mean
Just take the baby
And leave chaos in your wake.

"Say your right words," comes the whisper in the walls And boglin grows to goblin-kin.
The room is alive with crawling bodies,
Round and fat with long spindling limbs.
They scuttle and chuckle
All around the corners
Waiting for toes to snatch at and grab.

The room now holds a silent ball
Revelry has gripped the shapes in the shadows
They spin around the room
Their bodies changing
Their limbs rearranging
Their very being distorting as they morph

They dance together as some find wings
And erupt across the ceiling.
They seem to be searching for somethingA well, a cave, a box, a door, a key
A door in your mind,
A key in your soul
Under the covers, you pray they won't find it

But they'll find it They always find it.

Holes in stones are good for lost things sometimes...

(You should really stop reading and watching movies before bed)

They found the key.

You tried to deny its existence Even to yourself But that tiny flicker of belief Brought it into being, Straight into their hands. All that's left is to find the box And then find the lock.

What lies within can only be bad Your brace yourself As the shadows cluster round. You don't see it as much as *feel* it As the key turns in its rightful place...

Your fear wells up like a great tide...

Pandora's box throws itself open to the night Its contents explode across the room in a Dark star burst.

Now the shapes in the blackness are limitless Goblin Kings and Witch Queens lurk by the door Barring any escape.

Aliens and space monsters

Loom overhead in the corners

Dizzingly tall

Painted on the wall

In all their bewildering glory.

Snakes and snails crawl on the walls by your head As the boglins try to snatch the covers off the bed Twisted creatures scuttle about the edges of the room Drawing tight circles around your former sancturary. You curl up tight and make fast, silent prayers...

Demons and spirits
Whisk around the dark of the ceiling
And in the centre of the floor
Lurks the deepest of the dark
The Blackest of the Black
Him...

You think of white lights, but in the end
The safe, soft silence of the dream takes over
The safe, soft silence of the truest shadow.
You slip into a dreamless sleep
Or a sleepless dream.
You quake no longer
And when the sun comes for you, you are rested and well.

And you won't even think twice
You won't even think.
You'll read that book again
And watch more movies.
You long for more shapes in the shadows tonight.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Laura E Brown is a writer and artist from Hampshire, England. Although she has been writing since she could hold a pen, in 2012 she became a published author and has begun living the dream. In addition to writing fiction and poetry, she also writes articles for EGL Magazine under the pen name "Blackavar", and is a fantasy artist. A self-proclaimed Goth, geek, bookworm, and rabbit-lover, she is a lover of literature and the arts, and of all things strange and unusual.

Lullaby Berenice Wakefield

Every night beneath the Moon Rises a melancholy tune Dancing betwixt each grave and tomb It lingers there like sweet perfume

It may appear you're all alone But walk through flowers overgrown A grave- a grand piano stands Where tunes are played with ghostly hands

He plays his haunting lullaby
To soothe the deceased as they lie
To keep them in that peaceful sleep
So they will never wake and weep

Each living thing exists to taunt
Those souls who can do naught but haunt
No beauty exists in flower or stone
Residing in a world no longer your own

Now he sits left so dreadfully alone The ethereal pianist at piano of stone Always suffering that last fatal chill He plays his final prelude still

The Witching Hour Berenice Wakefield

Lying there awake you feel a terrible new pain
The kind you fear is strong enough to render you insane
Alone down in the dark you find you cannot move at all

A vague recollection of a sickness or a chill A hazy memory of being very very ill As you manage to think through that soul destroying pain You remember loved ones weeping and repeating your name

The thoughts that occupied the brain now leak out from your ears Your mind inside is sobbing though you cannot shed the tears No matter how you scream no one ever comes to see Why one they said they loved cries so in wretched agony

As nightfall comes still all alone you lie there choked with fear The dead need not be frightened of the witching hour, my dear Desperate screams of hopelessness now fill your hollow head As you lie there quiet and cold- alive inside your head

The breaking and the searing of your by now putrid flesh
That began to rot after taking your last breath
Is tearing- aching with that liquid mass inside your head
Welcome to the afterlife my dear - welcome to being dead

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Berenice Wakefield is 23 and lives in Yorkshire, she writes Childrens books and poetry for both Children and Adults. Her poetry has been featured in various anthologies and Magazines, including Gorgeous Freaks magazine and the The Spirit of Poe. In 2012 her poem 'Night and Day' was selected to be placed in a time capsule inside a wall of that Poe cottage as part of a restoration project. You can find her at http://berenicewakefield.weebly.com/.



One Photograph: Two Points of View 300 Words ~ Comparative Flash Fiction



Never Again Nina D'Arcangela

Staring upwards, I see only blackness. I hear nothing. Clawing my way out of the narrow confines of this sealed wall is no easy task; my body suffers much abuse for it. My hands mutilated and raw, the knuckles bent at unnatural angles, my shoulder dislocated and throbbing. A hip broken — to fit my body into the tight enclosure, or to fight my way out, I do not know. I only know the pain is near blinding. The cenotaph breaks free. Screeching wind now deafening as it seeks small breaches in this marble enclosure. I call to any who would listen; no one comes. As I drop to the floor below, my head smacks the icy cold stone; I lose consciousness.

I awake to ungodly pain that wracks my entire being. Head bleeding, chest heaving, legs useless other than to force a gasp of desperate agony from my lips. One crippled arm trapped beneath me, I use the other to drag my protesting body to the slab sealing my fate; fighting my way to the open slit near the floor, I hold on for dear life.

Having made my intentions clear, I've no doubt where I am; the details of my arrival unknown to me, my circumstance all too apparent. Reaching for the chain that should be hanging around my neck, I am barely able to draw breath while bringing its prize to my lips. It rings an odd pitch – crushed in my fall. A natural interment, the whistle my only adornment, my last breath was not to be the one already taken.

One detail missed; no watchman. Blood caked fingers reaching through the opening, I watch with sadness as the clouds move swiftly past the moon as I stare longingly at a night sky I will never see again.

The Escape Kalla Monahan

I felt the howl in my blood before I heard it with my ears. My eyes adjusted to the inky darkness, broken only by the silver threads of the moon shining through the canopy overhead.

My heart beat wildly in my chest in reaction. I could hear the thunderous sound my feet made on the tramped down surface of the dirt path. I hoped I was the only one that could hear it. Even as I gave birth to the thought, I knew he was coming for me.

I raced harder, the sound of my feet reverberating up through my body in time with the beat of my heart. I could barely make out where I was going, but I managed to miss most of the sliver thin fingers of branches snaking out on to the rough trail I followed.

I slowed for a moment, resting my body against the pocked bark of a tall tree, its cool exterior welcome against the flush of my cheeks. I knew I shouldn't stop, but my heart was close to explosion and the tension in my body was making it cramp. Pretty soon my body would betray me; it was only a matter of time.

Pushing off, I propelled myself forward again. I had no idea where he was, only that I had to try to get away. My skin crawled as I stumbled head first through a spider's web stretched across the trail, seeing the telltale glint of glistening threads too late to avoid them. My only hope was that my fear of spiders would not outweigh my fear of him.

His howl came at me through the darkness, closer this time. Too close.

Thin fingers curled about my neck. Spider? Or him?

Now frozen, a scream builds in my tightening throat.

Payback Casey Murphy

"Where is he?" Zak muttered to himself. "She said he would be here by now."

The wind bit through Zak's light breakaway jacket. If he had known he would be waiting this long he would have worn something a little warmer. The cottage in the woods was dark and quiet. He wasn't even sure if anyone lived in it any more. Zak was about to give up when he heard someone stumbling through the underbrush in the distance. He held his breath, his heartbeat racing wildly with excitement.

Through the darkness, an old man stumbled up to the wooden gate that surrounded the old cottage. He waited until the old man stumbled into the house, swinging the door closed behind him, before taking a step forward. Zak's limbs were shaky and his breath uneven. His pace began to quicken with anticipation. He didn't even bother to knock on the front door before opening it.

The stench of whisky lingered in the air. The old man was sitting at a small wooden table, his face flat against the surface, surrounded by dirty dishes and left over food. For a second, Zak was afraid he had already expired, but then a loud roar escaped the man's throat. Zak took a seat opposite the man. He let him sleep about ten minutes before slamming his fist down, shaking the table and making the dishes clatter, waking the man with a jolt.

"Wha's happ'n'in?" he mumbled, almost falling out of his seat as he spun wildly in his chair. When his eyes finally focused on Zak, he stared dumbfounded with his mouth hanging open for a minute before saying, "Who're you?"

"That's not important," Zak said. "What's important is that you shut up and listen to me." He took a breath. "You're going to die." The man's eyes bulged at the words. "In fact, I'm going to kill you."

"Wha' for? I dun nothin' to ya."

"Oh yeah?" Pulling up his shirt, Zak revealed four long white scars that ran from his right shoulder to the left side of his torso. "You should be a little more careful with what you do on the night of the full moon."

The man's eyes quickly drew away from the scars and focused back on Zak's face. "Now look here—"
"No!" Zak shouted, slamming his hand back down on the table. "You did this to me! I hunted you for
five years, you bastard, and now you're going to pay for ruining my life."

"I dun none of the sort. What I gave you's a gift."

Zak couldn't hold back the laughter that erupted from him. "Gift? Try curse."

Silence spread around them. The old man's eyes continued to jump quickly from Zak to different parts of the room, mainly the front door, while Zak's eyes remained trained on his target.

Buying time, the old man asked, "Wha's it to ya if I die? What'll it give ya, huh? Besides the guilt of murderin' a man."

Zak smiled. "That's the best part. I know for a fact that if I kill you I will no longer be forced to howl at the full moon."

"Who told ya that?" the old man scoffed. "Sounds like a load of bull if I ever heard it."

"See, that's the funny part of this whole situation. The woman who let me in on that little secret is the same woman who helped me find you and the same woman you married 40-some odd years ago before almost tearing out her throat."

The man blanched, "Belinda..."

"Seems she wants you dead even more than I do."

The news seemed to sober the old man up. "Listen, kid, I wouldn't take her seriously. She's crazy, that woman is. Doesn't know what she's talkin' about—"

"That's none of your concern. Whether she's telling the truth or not, she helped me find you, so now I have to pay her back with your life." Zak reached his hand into his jacket pocket and pulled out a pistol, which he cocked and aimed at the man's head. "See you in hell."

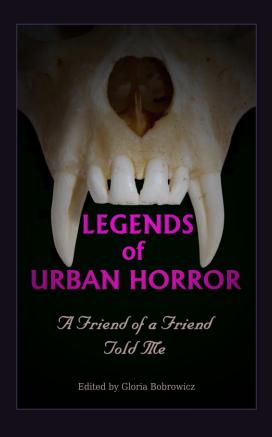
However, when he pulled the trigger, the man threw himself off the chair, knocking the table over in the process, and onto the floor where he continued to army crawl across the room. But not fast enough. Zak was on him in an instant. Pinning him to the ground, Zak pressed the pistol to the center of the man's forehead. The old man began to wheeze and cry.

"Please don't. Please. I'm sorry. I never meant to. It was an accident. I swear!" The words came falling out of the man's mouth, as if he was trying to find the right password that would allow him to live. But Zak had no more sympathy for him. A loud BANG cut off the man's final words.

Pocketing the pistol, Zak left the man in the middle of the floor, blood and brains decorating the area surrounding him. As he began his trek back to Belinda he glanced up at the sky. It would be another three days before he knew whether the woman's words were true.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Casey Murphy has been writing fiction since the fifth grade. She currently has 9 short stories and 1 creative non-fiction piece published in several different literary magazines and e-zines. Feel free to visit her at simplydelete.wordpress.com.

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, KoboBooks, and Apple



Rhythm Eden Royce

With the slow beating of the tanbou, David drew Ezili Danto to his fire. He sensed the spirit lurking close, not yet ready to allow him to see her. Tangy salt air sagged under the weight of her presence. The scent of vetiver accompanied her, crisp with wild grasses and smoky with ash. His bare toes itched where they curled into the dry dirt of the Haitian mountainside. Drumbeats thudded against the darkening sky and echoed off the dilapidated buildings clinging to the cliffs. The promise of rain hung just out of reach.

He felt born to this land and its pulsing, eerie music. It swelled within him, growing, feeding.

No stage performance had given him the feeling of pride he felt from learning the intricate tempos native to the tanbou. He'd played the bongos in Cuba and the djembe in West Africa without the surge of power that surrounded him tonight. On the plane, he'd questioned the wisdom of coming here in the midst of the country's devastation and his own inner turmoil. The books and the movies didn't do it justice. Magic lived on this island, thriving like a rare species not seen anywhere else in the world.

In a small shop, David pointed to a drum where it sat on the dusty floor, wrapped with rough rope. Reaching almost to his waist, the instrument looked as though hands had shaped it on a potter's wheel: large round body atop a tapered base. Strips of bright cloth, a scattering of blue and yellow and green, coiled around its entire length. "How about this one?"

"Ah, good choice," the shop owner said, his wrinkled hands patting it to send a hollow echo through the tiny store. "Hand made of softwood from the—"

"Petwo nation. I know." At the shop owner's raised eyebrow, he explained. "I study things I'm interested in. Mwen pale kreyòl."

The man laughed at David's pronunciation. "Good try. You a scholar? That why you come to Port au Prince?"

"I'm here to learn, but I'm no scholar."

He peered at David with sun-weary eyes. "I know you. You come with other *blans* to rebuild schools and clean wells."

"Hello, I'm black." He lifted a wooly dreadlock.

"You not from Haiti, so you *blan* no matter what color you is." He lifted his shoulders in an elaborate shrug, hands out, pale white palms contrasting with espresso-tinted skin.

"How much?" David asked.

"Half price. A souvenir for helping my country."

"I'll pay full price if it comes with lessons."

The Haitian's eyes went wide. "You want to play tanbou? Why?"

"I want to call a spirit."

The man turned and spat on the floor. "You playing, right? You play with Vodou? I do not help you make such jokes."

"No, I respect the ways of Vodou. That's why I'm here. To ask for guidance."

"Which one?"

"Will you teach me?"

Indecipherable Haitian Creole accompanied the shop owner's noncommittal shrug as he turned to go back to his counter.

"Danto."

"What you know about Danto?" The man glanced around as though the ancestral *misté* could hear him. "Your problem not money. Love, maybe? You need Ezili Freda. She will help your heart."

"No, it has to be Danto."

"Ah, I see." He snorted laughter and stuck a toothpick from his shirt pocket between his teeth. "You a

fool. She will not come to you."

"A fool willing to pay for your time."

The shopkeeper considered. "I don't sit circle with you."

"Then I'll sit alone."

Alone in a clearing with the colorful drum between his thighs, David pounded out a beat to bring the spirit to his fire. His arms ached and his back throbbed. When he shifted position his legs stung like they were pierced with fire-tipped needles.

She came closer, dancing with the writhing flames as they lapped at her midnight skin. Moonlight kissed oiled flesh. Impossibly long arms flapped like sailcloth in an ocean breeze. Powerful thigh muscles bunched when she leapt into the air. The spirit's chosen form leaked sweat as she danced to the primal call of the tanbou. Ezili's face, painted chalk-white, bore no expression, but a red, angry scar blazed on her right cheek.

Her full breasts were bare to the night and they swayed to the tempo of his hands. David was unable to look away from her hips as they jerked back and forth as if in orgasm, giving glimpses of round buttocks swathed in the short dried grass skirt. He felt himself grow hard, his erection pressing against the side of the drum.

Ezili Danto circled the fire like a jungle beast: unafraid of man, secure in her superiority.

The ground beneath David pulsed and sweat crawled down his back. He called out, praising her as the shopkeeper had instructed. "Come to my fire, Danto, whose eyes bring the storms. Feel the music of my hands and counsel me."

David thumped the hides, alternating palms, thumbs, and fingers. The scent of sweet sap and resin teased his nose as the nimble creature swayed to the primal beats. His vision wavered in the heat and smoke. She seemed an illusion, her form a quivering mirage in this devastated tropical desert.

He rocked back and forth without realizing it, caught between his world and hers. Ezili's broad feet stomped, creating a whirlwind of dust and gravel, as her dancing outpaced him.

His little finger caught the edge of the rope holding the drum together. He heard a crack and cried out in pain, clutching his injured digit.

The fire blazed up with a sharp hiss, then vanished as if blown out, leaving him in darkness.

Morning rose as David entered the shop, already drenched in frustration.

"So. Your circle was good?" Amusement danced around the man's eyes and he scratched at his coarse salt and pepper beard.

"Not exactly. She disappeared when I stopped playing."

The rheumy gaze jabbed at him like a stick. "If you want her, nothing can make you stop."

"I broke my finger on that piece of shit drum."

"That why you stop? A finger?" The man sucked at his teeth in disgust.

"You don't understand. My hands are my life."

"I understand you not ready for Danto. It take a lifetime to make the tanbou speak like the voice of *mistés*. Without that, there is no Vodou."

"I've been drumming since I was eight years old, man. I got her attention once and I can do it again."

A gust of sea air blew open the frail shop door like an angry customer. David shivered and pulled the shirt away from his damp back with quick, sharp jerks.

The Haitian ambled over to the door and glanced outside before closing it. "Make for her a path. Maybe she use it, maybe she don't. But there is danger, drummer."

"Has anyone you know ever seen her?"

"Oh, yes. But none see the same Danto."

"What's that mean?"

"Some say she like a mother protecting her child. Some say she like a new lover, sweet and hot." The old man pulled the drum to him. "Some say nothing."

"What do you say?"

"I say she come in the way you need." He pocketed David's money and sat on an overturned barrel. "Listen." His gnarled hands were stark against the ivory colored drumhead as he gave his final lesson. "No food, you play. No rest, you play." His eyes closed and his head tilted, as if he were listening to someone whispering in his ear. "Give her your everything."

David's gaze slid away. "My everything is already gone."

He told Connie he wanted to help with the relief efforts. "Do you want to come with me? We could do a lot."

"To Haiti? Are you crazy?"

"Connie, you're a nurse, you could help more than I can. You don't have to stay long. A week, maybe. I could stay a little longer."

She twisted the ring on her left hand. "I don't think so. But you go. It would be great publicity for a member of the band to be seen over there."

"I know you think this is just another trip to keep us apart. But when I get back, we'll go somewhere together." He hugged her close. "Once we make the big time, it'll all be worth it."

Connie pulled away first. "I know. I'll be fine. There's plenty for me to do here."

"Don't forget I'm getting my vaccinations after work today. Did you know I have to get close to ten shots for this visit?"

She smiled. "Better you than me."

David built the fire twice as large this time. He bound his fingers with tape like a boxer before a match and began to play. Gentle winds shushed the slums into silence. Rickety doors remained shut tight against the ancestral spirits.

No one stirred.

Both of David's hands caressed the tanbou and the sound rolled off the taut goatskin in aching waves. Faster now, short smacks of open palm mixed with thumps of closed fist. Divergent, each hand marked a necessary dissonance to appease the quick, demanding spirit. He created an image of Connie's face in his mind, lips parted in ecstasy, and used it like a lens to focus his pain and draw the vengeful Danto's attention.

His thumb slid over the goatskin, leaving a weary moan on the night air. He squeezed his eyes shut against the tears pricking his lids. The wail of the drum joined his heart's cry for justice.

When he opened his eyes again, Ezili sat across the fire from him. Still as stone, she waited, her red eyes reflecting the dancing flames. The scar on her cheek bled freely now. Tendrils of fear coiled around his heart. Her voice ground its way into his head.

Tell me.

Connie's iPod was in the speaker when he got home, its volume turned close to maximum. The player blared electrified noise into his skull and a headache had started by the time he reached the kitchen.

"Hey, babe," he yelled. "The doc changed my appointment to tomorrow. They got really busy this afternoon." He realized the uselessness of yelling over the music and went to look for his fiancée.

He found her in the den. She lay back on the leather couch, legs wide, with her mouth open. Her long hair curled along the arm of the sofa as she bucked under the enthusiastic pumping of a burly, tattooed man.

The sight of her, splayed open, welcoming the brute into her was more than he could stand. His head pounded, too tight for his brain. Breath came in great gulping heaves as fury burned a hole in his chest big enough for his heart to fall through.

Not again.

He backed out of the room, unable to yank his gaze from their entwined bodies, until the door closed behind him, Connie's moans the soundtrack for his plans.

Ezili's shadowy form slipped through the half-light of the fire. Chalky paint made her face look as rough as coconut skin. She swiveled her elongated head toward him.

David's shoulders began to slump, but he jerked himself upright. His back protested with loud, painful pops and his eyes burned with fatigue and grit. The spirit slunk closer, drawn by the tortured music. Her essence surrounded him, pressed in on his body and his soul.

Balmy wind amplified the whispered words, bringing her promise to him again and again with each passing breeze. On hands and knees, she crept closer until all David could see were her eyes. In those almond-shaped orbs, red and white swirled together. His breath slowed as he stared into their depths.

Under her marbled gaze, his heartbeat shifted to mimic the one coming from his hands. Ezili ran her hands down his shoulders and over his chest in a caress, the tips of her fingers disappearing inside his skin. She trailed her fingers over his lap and his penis responded, straining like a divining rod. Although her face didn't change, he could feel her pleased laughter in his mind.

Stupid girl.

David shuddered as she enfolded him in her long arms, surrounding him with fierce protection. Through the steamy air, coldness pierced him like a velvet blade as the ancient spirit's will displaced his own. All that was David cowered in her presence.

The young man trembled in shock and fear while Ezili pressed in, smothering him like an overbearing mother. She filled him like boiling oil, searing his soul with flashing quickness. His hands spasmed on the drumhead, playing an unintentional beat, sharp with the tang of acidic sweat. He was full, near to bursting, and he panted with the effort of speech. "What...are you going...to do?"

Silans, she soothed. I fix for you.

"But how?"

Set koud kouto, set koud pwenyad. Even with his limited knowledge of the language, her words and intent were clear.

Seven stabs of the knife, seven stabs of the sword.

Two days later, David sauntered into the shop and browsed the plentiful knick-knacks and wooden carvings while the owner sold bottles of mango soda to a group of sweating relief workers. He picked up a wide-eyed doll, its face round and shiny black, and ran his fingers over the rough cotton dress and headscarf. He snorted as he read the tag attached to it.

"Ah, you have returned, drummer."

"I wanted to say good-bye. I leave today."

"Your problem is no more?"

"I'll take care of it as soon as I get back. Thank you for your help."

"It is nothing."

David's pupil and iris swirled together within the white of his eye. He turned the doll over, his calloused fingers snagging the cloth as he switched to fluid Haitian. "Jean-Pierre. Is this what my people think I look like?"

The old man shrugged his narrow shoulders. "It makes them feel less afraid."

"Even so, it is good to be without this for a while." David stroked his right cheek, unmarked under a light growth of stubble.

"You are always beautiful to me," Jean-Pierre said.

"Thank you for this one. Much time has passed since a *blan* has come to me." David loosened the rope around the tanbon and unwound bands of blue and yellow cloth. "He says he does not wish her death, but in time, he will see my way." A wedge of wood from the drum's side had been removed and whittled sharp, its point already dark with blood. It fit flush into the shallow cavity, undetectable when he re-wrapped the drum.

"Forever, I am your servant, Danto."

David smiled. "I will return soon, you know I cannot stay away for long."

He left the old Haitian standing in the doorway, staring after him as he walked the dusty path to the airport, drum slung over his shoulder, his fingers tapping a divine rhythm.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Eden Royce is a native Charlestonian now living in Charlotte, North Carolina. Her dark fantasy stories have appeared in anthologies by Pill Hill Press, Blood Bound Books, and Wicked East Press. Besides writing, her passions include roller-skating and listening to thunderstorms. She lurks around darkgeisha.wordpress.com.



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Danse Macabre Dorothy Davies

The silent figure on the gurney twitched, moved, sat up and looked around. The tag on her toe said JANE DOE which annoyed her very much. *I'm not a Jane Doe, I'm Lydia ... Lydia ...* The rest of her name escaped her, much as her memory seemed to have done.

Why am I on a gurney with a tag on my toe? Why am I cold and my veins look blue and stark and my flesh look like marble? I am NOT dead!

But – one chilled hand at her throat said otherwise. There was no pulse, no heartbeat, no warm blood rushing around a body that was beginning to sag. That annoyed her too. *My boobs never sagged! Now look...*

Look. She looked around, this dead Lydia, and saw she was in a morgue. A cold lonely desolate morgue that held no comforts for anyone, least of all those who were delivered there on a gurney and left overnight because the staff had gone home and not bothered with yet another stiff.

She swung her legs over the side and stood up. Well, I can still do that. Now, can I walk?

She could. Dead Lydia staggered across the room, round the dissecting table and got to the cabinets.

I need company! She pulled and tugged and reluctantly the first drawer slid open. The man inside, elderly, lined, haggard and half starved, blinked and looked up at her.

Is it time to get up?

If you want.

I do. It's boring lying here like that. Nothing to look at.

I need the company.

The man sat up and pushed himself off the tray which had been holding him.

That's a good idea. Let's find some more people.

With two of them tugging at the handles, the drawers came open a good deal easier. The young girl, anorexic and pathetic, clawed at their arms as they lifted her up. Look at me, look at me, aren't I elegant and slim and beautiful?

The truthful answer was no, but they did not say it. *You are, you are!* She beamed and spun round, her flimsy hospital gown billowing around her. *I can dance!*

We all can but right now we want company!

Lydia pulled at another drawer with the help of the old man and the anorexic. A dark handsome youth smiled with shockingly white teeth as he sat up. *Thank you! I thought I would be stuck in there forever!* One easy movement and he got up too, swaying to an unheard rhythm. *Is it time to dance?*

Let's get everyone out first. Lydia was in charge and didn't know how she had become in charge, it had just – happened. She liked it though, she had never been in charge of anything. Always the underdog, always the low paid worker following orders. Now she was issuing orders and these people were obeying her. It was a miracle and she was not about to let go of the good feelings it was generating.

I'm naked! The shock ran through her but no one had said anything, no one had ogled her, no one had touched her. Maybe, but it isn't right! She went back to the gurney and took up the sheet lying there, wrapped it around her body and tucked the end in securely under one arm. That felt better.

Oh, elegant, the old man observed, without a trace of sarcasm. You wear it well, dear lady. Swan-like, I would say. What's your name?

Lydia.

Now if I remember my Greek mythology, there was a swan who went to Leda, which is close enough to your name, dear lady. I want to change that. You are a swan, wrapped in white as you are, as elegant as you are and as thoughtful as you are. Let's call you Leda instead of Lydia. It sounds so much more romantic.

Leda. Lydia. She turned the names over in her mind. Leda will do fine, she said eventually, with a big

smile. Thank you. No one has ever said anything that nice to me in my whole life.

Well, they should have done. I mean, there you are, you had every chance to walk right out the door and leave, instead you opened drawers and let us out.

Well, it was because I wanted company, she confessed, rather than take credit for something that was not right.

He shook his head. Maybe, maybe, but you had your chance and you chose to stay. Now, let's get everyone else out, shall we?

Combined effort, they all worked at it, opening the drawers, releasing a white cheeked old lady with sharply knowing eyes and a loving smile, a middle-aged man still looking for his pens and papers, the reason for his existence, the little girl who had collided with a bus or a bus had collided with her, either way she was not pretty any more but no one said a word, they took her hands and they all danced round the dissecting table and laughed a great hollow laugh that no one else could hear but them.

The dark man told them jokes at which they all roared with laughter, the old lady told them of her children which brought tears to their eyes, the old man spoke of sunny days on a river bank fishing with grandchildren and some of them grew nostalgic. Then they danced again to refresh their senses and their spirits and their energies and told one another this was the best night they had ever had in their entire existence.

Dawn touched the sky with pink fingers. One by one, without saying a word why they were doing it, they climbed back into their drawers and one by one Leda, still in her white robe which made her look like a swan, closed the drawers with a supreme effort.

When they were all sleeping again, she gracefully danced a solitary dance around the room, remembering the feel of rhythm making the feet move, the thrill of a tune running through the head, the sway of arms and hands. Then she grew tired, it had been a long night and an exhausting one, but oh what fun she had experienced!

She climbed back onto the gurney, laid the sheet out and stared up at the ceiling, remembering how it felt to dance.

Just before she fell asleep forever, she wondered what the mortuary attendant would think when he found her tag on the floor.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Dorothy Davies lives and works on the Isle of Wight, a small island off the south coast of England. It is reputed to be the most haunted place in the UK, which could account for the strange stories she writes and the fact she became a medium after she moved there...

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Don't Be Fooled Katie M John

'Lunacy is just a state of mind'. Maud laughs at the playfulness of the words and meaning. Not the polite internal laugh of an erudite wit, but the loud cackle of a crazy woman. Everybody on the bus turns to look at her, but she does not care. She eyeballs them back with one grey, unruly eyebrow raised, as if it is she who disapproves. When the passengers have all returned to their own little worlds, she takes the opportunity to take a peek inside the metal tin she carries in her lap. The lid is snug – designed to be practically airtight. She is sure the unfortunate creature that she placed in it earlier is now dead. How could it be anything other? Just after the last stop, there had been a sweet, intoxicating moment when she had felt the little rodent fight against the metal sides, believing it still had a chance. The resulting thrill that ran up her spine was the first feeling of physical pleasure she'd experienced in years – aside from ... well, never mind that now. You have to take your fun where you can when you reach the grand old age of eighty.

The woman sat next to her had shown a momentary interest in the tin, until her phone went off and she was lost to the world of social networking. Not much social about it in Maud's opinion, but then again, maybe that was its appeal. You could keep people at a safe distance. They're there with you in your home, but there's no opportunity for them to need the bathroom and take a snoop around – like last time. Maud thinks back to last week when a 'friend' she had met at church dropped by unannounced with her special-recipe-carrot cake. Maud hates cake almost as much as she hates that bitch back at ...

She shakes her thoughts away. She does not want to over excite herself and risk getting picked up by the pigs again. That happened to her last year; some idiot spotty adolescent in a uniform offering her cake, tea and fake sympathy. You see it always comes back to bloody cake.

Maud has conducted this trip as a little experiment. Just to be sure that she's capable of it — murder that is. To her delight, she has discovered she is. Why on the bus you may ask? Because she wants to know that when it comes down to it, she can carry on fooling the world that she's just some quaint, little old lady with a slightly eccentric hair-do whilst carrying a blood coated knife behind her back.

Now back to that cake-baking bitch tied up in the garage...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Katie M John lives in the London suburbs. Her time is divided between writing, teaching English to teenagers and being mummy to two daughters. She started writing seriously after the birth of her first daughter five years ago. She has gone on to have four of her YA novels published and numerous short horror and fantasy stories published by several press houses, including Nexus Press and Winter Goose. Her series 'The Knight Trilogy' is an Amazon.UK number one best selling Fairy Tale series and has been consistently in the top 100 of several categories. Find out more information at www.theknighttrilogy.com. In October 2012 she released her fourth novel, 'Beautiful Freaks', a gothic paranormal detective novel set in Victorian London. Find out more information at www.beautifulfreakskatiemjohn.com. She is currently working on a seven book series called the 'Pentacle Chronicles', the first of which is due for publication in the summer of 2013. All of her books are available at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Waterstones and WHSmith. You can find her hanging out on Twitter at @KnightTrilogy or on her website – www.katiemjohn.com.

Twenty Things To Do Diane Arrelle

Sheila put down the cards and looked out the window. She'd done three readings already and all predicted sadness, regret, terror and the world ending in a flash of brilliant light.

She shuffled the cards again wondering how and when the world would end. She wasn't ready to die, her children definitely weren't ready and the human race would never be ready. Why ... why ... why ... echoed through her head and she struggled to understand what she had seen through the tarot cards. It wasn't that the cards actually told her things, she never learned how to read them. Rather the cards gave her images to decipher and she was rarely wrong when she interpreted them.

A shiver ran down her back, like the dead walking on your grave her mother, another woman in her family plagued with being psychic, was fond of saying.

Sheila rubbed her eyes wishing her mother were alive, but the burden had been too great for her mom, the gift of second sight viewed as a curse. Sheila shuddered again as she remembered the day her cards told her that life was about to change forever and that she would suffer a hole where once there had been love. When the police came by that day and told her about the accident, Sheila knew that it hadn't been an accident at all. Poor Mom couldn't live with the knowledge of things to come.

She wiped at new tears as she remembered Randi stopping by for coffee and a reading just an hour earlier. Randi, her best friend, stopped by every morning for caffeine, gossip and her horrorscope as she liked to call it, and every day Sheila read the cards and told her what to expect. But the vision that had burned into Sheila's head this morning was cataclysmic. Nothing specific, just a bombardment of anger, grief and horror. She had shut her eyes but that didn't stop the onslaught. When it finally subsided, she said, "Be careful today and oh yeah, be sure to avoid the midnight beach killer."

Randi smiled and shrugged, "Not possible, I'm never up past eleven-thirty, he hasn't killed anyone in over a year and anyway he likes 'em in their teens. Your powers are slipping."

Sheila smiled back, forcing her lips into an upturned curve.

After Randi went home, Sheila called her sister, Brenda. She dealt the cards as they talked. Again she read sadness, regret and unbelievable fear.

"Sheila," Brenda blubbered as soon as she picked up the phone. "I'm scared. Something terrible is going to happen, I can feel it. Can you? I don't want to die! I don't want anyone in my world to die!"

"Shhhh," Sheila soothed. "Maybe it's not what we think at all." She wished they didn't live five states apart, that they still shared a room. "Tell you what, let's both go out and do twenty things totally fun and totally out of character. Then we'll touch base tonight and laugh about it."

Half an hour later she read her own cards again and her fate was sealed, mankind's fate was sealed. Visions of darkness and pain, such unbearable pain, and primal fear that felt like it was turning her stomach inside out. Staring out the window at the cloudless blue sky, she listened to the birds chirping in the trees outside her kitchen and thought, so little time, should I take the kids out of school, make Rob come home so we can make love?

She emptied the coffee pot into a cup, no need to worry about too much caffeine now and drank the bitter, hot liquid as she tried to gather her thoughts. Taking the kids out of their classes would only upset them, no they were better off not knowing, and so was Rob. She wondered how many others knew what was coming besides Brenda and herself.

She picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hi Honey, when you come home from work tonight don't forget to get gas in my car and oh yeah, you know I love you right? Fine, now tell me you love me too. It doesn't matter why, just humor me."

She dumped the dregs of the coffee into the sink, started to wash the cup and began laughing. No, she wasn't planning to waste her last hours on routine housework. Instead, she grabbed a beach chair and walked the twelve blocks to the beach. Trudging up the ramp and crossing the wide boardwalk she

walked down the stairs onto the beach. She glanced back at the darkness behind her and shuddered. Funny, she thought, I loved playing under the boardwalk when I was a kid, but then she remembered how her mother had lectured her long and hard about the dangers of dark, scary places and things little girls should never do.

Now she lectured her own children the same way.

Plopping her chair at the water's edge, Sheila sat and watched the ocean, listening to the sounds that had always been a comfort. She loved the waves crashing, the gulls crying to one another. She reached into the pocket in back of her chair and pulled out a tattered book. She opened it to the bookmarked page about halfway though then decided it just didn't matter. She pushed the pages forward and read the last chapter.

Finished, she wondered what to do next. She ran into the ocean feeling more alive than she ever had as the cold water made every nerve sing. When she couldn't bear the chilled surf anymore, she went back to her things and reached for the sunscreen. The sun was shining so brightly but she realized she probably wouldn't need the protection anymore. After a short time on the warm beach, she walked up to the boardwalk and watched the roller coaster. "Why not?" she muttered and because the pier was just opening, got a front seat. The chains clanked and with each chink of the cars being pulled to the apex her stomach tightened. She gripped the bar in front of her like her life depended on it and then the torturous climb ended. Like the best sex, like the moment she saw her children for the very first time, like the very highlight of her existence, the car hovered momentarily at the peak and then plummeted down turning her world upside down, causing vertigo and euphoria. She laughed breathing in the joy of death defying speed and then it was over.

"Well, if it's all going to end today, at least I'm on number three already. That leaves only 17 things to do before the end of the world."

Sheila wandered the boardwalk eating pizza and ice cream and fudge and even bought a pound of salt water taffy. Holding the box, she ate all the chocolate and lemon pieces and threw the rest away.

Finally, she felt exhausted and returned to her chair on the now crowded beach. Crying again, tears on her cheeks and the sun in her eyes, she began to mourn. She'd had her denial, but the truth was sinking in, the world was going to end in a flash of light. She squinted through her tears and looked directly at the sun. Had it already happened and we don't know it yet, she wondered, or will it just explode and that would be that instantaneously. Wiping her eyes, she looked down at the book she'd been reading before and thought, there are three more books in the series.

Sheila got up again, trotted to the bookstore two blocks away and bought all three at full price and a bit more. It didn't matter. Returning to her chair, she saw the sun directly overhead and decided that if the world didn't end by 2:00, she'd go home to make the kids their favorite treats, then take them back to the boardwalk for the rest of their lives. Maybe she'd even call Rob and ask him to meet her. The cards hadn't given her a timeframe and being psychic wasn't an exact science.

Grimacing, she thought bitterly about the irony of it all, how she'd waited for her last day to finally starting enjoying life again. "I swear that I for some reason the cards are wrong, I swear that I will live like this every day."

And Please, she added praying silently, please let the cards be wrong, let my family live.

She turned to each book and read the last 30 pages. The story was never meant to end, it was an ongoing cash cow for the publisher and the author, but it was coming to an end anyway. She really was reading the last chapter.

Finally putting the reading down, she looked at the endless waves and the glistening white sand and thought how she'd always figured that the world would go on long after the human race had finished

ruining the environment. All the beauty would be lost forever, all the other living beings, the animals, the plants would be gone and all she could do about it was live until it ended.

Sighing, she decided she needed to get home right away. She got up and left the beach taking the shortcut under the boardwalk. She frowned at the dark that smelled of stale urine and hurried to get through to the other side.

Funny neither the dark, the smells, or the windblown trash had bothered her when she snuck under the boards at dusk to make-out with her boyfriend, fifteen years ago. But now she looked around with discomfort when she saw movement to the side. *Rats*, she thought just before the pain ripped through her head.

Waking, awash in nausea, she realized she was still under the boardwalk, deep to the side beneath the pier. The sunlight, glittering like painful lasers on each side of the darkness, created small stripes of luminescence shining down between the slats above. The slivers of light danced to the rhythm of footfalls as people walked overhead.

She screamed but the rides overhead made it impossible to hear her own voice.

What was going on, she thought with panic, then the man came into view. She struggled to rise, tried to push herself off the cold, clammy sand, but a fist seemed to come out of nowhere and slammed her back in a shower of star-filled agony. Terror filled her, pain enveloped her. Sheila sobbed as a tiny portion of her brain was dumping random thoughts faster than she could recognize them:

I want to go home!

The killer is back!

My children!

Doesn't he know the world is going to end?

Why is he doing this?

She couldn't see his face; only his form against the distant wash of golden light at the sides of the pier. Agony. He never spoke a word as he hit her again and again, each blow stealing her strength. *Explode*,

damn it, she prayed, make this agony end. Someone, something help me!

She desperately tried to command her body to move, her muscles to respond. She had to get to her knees and crawl to the light. She had to get away and spend the final moments with her family. Let Rob and the kids fill up all the rest of her 20 things to do list with her.

Nothing happened; her body was paralyzed by the pain and the terror. She wept, the tears running from the corners of her eyes and soaking softly into the sand.

Laughter, throaty, sinister laughter and then he grabbed her by the hair. Surprised that she could react all, she gasped in pain. Oh Mom, if you saw this happening why didn't you warn me?

He snapped her head back, raised his arm and Sheila saw the blade flash brilliantly in a slit of golden light from above. "Oh my God!" she croaked as she realized in that last fraction of a second that the cards had been right, but she had been wrong. It really was the end of the world, but only her world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Diane Arrelle, the pen name of South Jersey writer Dina Leacock, has been writing for more than 20 years and has sold over 150 short stories and has had two published books, Just A Drop In The Cup, a collection of short-short stories and Elements Of The Short Story, How to Write a Selling Story. She was one of the founding members as well as the second president of the Garden State Horror Writers and is also a past president of the Philadelphia Writers' Conference. When not writing, she is a director of a municipal senior citizen center. She is married with one son in college in England and she lives with her other son, her husband and her cat at home on the edge of the Pine Barrens in Southern New Jersey (home of the Jersey Devil). You can visit her at dinaleacock.com.



Finding Mr. Wright Suzie Lockhart

Ominous clouds are moving rapidly across a darkening sky as I head towards my bus stop. I check my watch. I am late getting off work; I'm not going to make it in time.

Which means I'll have to wait another hour for the next bus.

A flash of lightening in the distance prompts my decision to take a shortcut. I dart into the alleyway behind the University's parking garage.

I usually avoid this shortcut, as the alley is always dark and deserted. The tall buildings surrounding it loom menacingly above me, blocking out a good portion of the remaining twilight. I'm sure it's my imagination when I hear taunting whispers in the wind that tunnels down the narrow passage.

I pick up my pace when I hear footsteps approaching from behind me. My heart is racing with fear. I second guess my decision. After all, the police never did find whoever killed those students during my senior year. It had been horrible; their bodies turning up in dumpsters all around the city...

What if the killer is behind me, right now?

I reach into my purse, searching with one hand for my container of mace, when a familiar voice reaches my ears.

"Ginger, is that you?"

The chill that runs up my spine has nothing to do with the approaching cold front. I whirl around to find Professor Joshua Wright standing a few feet away, grinning at me. I'd had an enormous crush on him during my time at college.

I probably wasn't the only one, either. He is so incredibly hot, with those piercing green eyes and that mass of coppery waves.

"Professor Wright!" The squeaky enthusiasm I hear in my voice makes heat crawl up my neck, so I'm thankful that my face is already stained red from the bitter February winds.

Chuckling, he suggests, "Why don't you call me Josh now, Ginger. You're not my student anymore." His voice takes on a husky tone, making me wonder. Could feelings be mutual?

"Well, this is unexpected." My Inner Voice exclaims, and moves her eyebrows up and down in a suggestive manner.

I frown unintentionally.

"I'm sorry, did I startle you?" he asks.

I quickly turn up the corners of my lips, forcing a smile. "A little. I thought someone was following me."

"You can never be too careful." The skyscrapers are now blocking out what little light remains. I shiver as he asks, "What brings you to the campus?"

"I was on my way home from work. I was afraid I might miss my bus." Uncomfortable under the scrutiny of his penetrating gaze, I wrap my arms tightly around my torso, tugging at the sleeves of my jacket.

"So, you're working in the area, Ginger?"

I blush a little again. "I snagged an internship at the city paper; guess they got tired of my pestering."

"You always could be quite persistent, if memory serves." His pale green eyes hold an odd expression that I can't decipher.

We walk side by side towards the front, where a small coffee shop sits next to a book store.

"May I buy you a cup?" Josh nods towards the quaint building.

I had already missed the 5:45 bus, and there wouldn't be another for fifty minutes.

"Sure." I reply, sounding a little too breathless. My Inner Voice lets out an exasperated sigh. I want to stick my tongue out at her.

He pushes the door, holding it open for me. We enter the cozy little shop, the rich aroma of coffee

filling my nostrils. Josh asks me what I'd like, so I order a tall vanilla latte.

"Try not to sound overeager."

"Quiet," I mutter under my breath as Josh's long fingers wrap around our steaming cups.

"What was that?" he asks me as he turns around.

"Nothing." Beaming up at him, I try to hide my irritation. I am wishing Inner Voice would shut the hell up.

We take a seat at one of the small, intimate tables, next to a fireplace with a mahogany mantle. The image of the blazing logs adds to the ambiance, but I gain no warmth from it.

I like that he pulls a chair out for me. When I'd been in his class, I often felt there might be a vibe between us. I didn't *think* it had all been in my head. One particular day; he'd petitioned me to stay after class. We were discussing an assignment when he'd covered my hand with his; assuring me I had a promising future in journalism.

After that, it seemed like he avoided me. I'd hoped it was because he was a consummate professional, and not due to any lack of interest. Besides, at that point, everyone was distracted by those campus murders.

Miss Inner Voice was going on about something, but I choose to ignore her as I hung on Josh's every word.

We talk for quite a while, and before I realize it, I miss the later bus. I glance nervously at my watch. Josh notices. "Why don't you let me drive you home?"

"Really, I..."

A lightning bolt streaks through the dismal nightfall, illuminating the jutting towers of the church across the street. This silences my protests. Besides, what am I going to do? Walk home in the midst of a storm?

"A ride could be good." I couldn't dispute the obvious.

As we head back towards the garage, he grabs my hand. The contact sends little electric sparks through me.

We step inside the elevator, and it groans as it makes its way to the top floor. My heart is thumping wildly at the close proximity. He smells of pine and ice; it is a heady combination.

He keeps hold of my hand as we walk over to his small black sports car.

Instead of opening the door, he unexpectedly wraps his strong arms around my waist, pulling me tightly against him.

"I may be out of line, Ginger, but I've thought about doing this ever since I first laid eyes on you."

"If he only knew what we've been thinking...."

I ignore my Inner Voice as Josh's lips descend on mine. When we pull apart, we are both breathing hard.

The air between us is filled with the type of tension resulting from long harbored feelings, and the ride to the West End seemed to take an eternity.

"Would you like to come up for a nightcap?" I ask when he stops in front of my modest apartment building. I feel a yearning radiating from deep within.

A sharp intake of his breath was all the answer I...we... needed.

I fumble with my keys before his long fingers envelope mine and easily slide the key into the lock.

For an instance, it's as if those sexy hands transform into claws, causing me to shudder.

"You're cold," he breathes into my ear. "I'll have to warm you up."

I am a ball of nerves as Inner Voice whispers, "He could be the one."

"What?"

"Inside," Josh commands. "You're freezing."

Apparently, he's a little bossy. I'm not sure how I feel about this new revelation. He was never like that in class. I am confused by what Inner Voice has said. What does she mean? The one to marry? Could she mean...could he be the campus killer? What did she mean?

I am thrilled and terrified all at once.

Josh pushes me down on my sofa, slipping his hands eagerly under my t-shirt. The seductress inside me is busy doing a happy dance when my Inner Voice splashes cold water in my face.

And suddenly I realize that the three girls and one boy that had been murdered had all been Professor Wright's students at some point.

I push him away. He looks at me, puzzled. My mouth turns dry.

Flustered, I offer, "Would you like some wine?"

"Uh, sure," he answers.

"The knife."

I nod my understanding as I stumble into the kitchen. I begin rummaging through the fridge. I have an unopened bottle in there somewhere.

Before going back into the living room, I slip a knife out of my butcher's block and wrap it in a clean kitchen towel. I add a little something extra to his glass, just in case. Inner Voice nods in agreement.

I leave the towel on the coffee table as Josh takes the glass of wine I offer. He doesn't appear to have noticed my concealed weapon.

"I'm sorry, am I moving too fast?"

I offer a small smile as I slide next to him. "A little." He drapes an arm over my shoulder as he sips the wine. His eyes take on a glassy look.

"He's ready."

"Can't it wait?" I ask.

"But we've waited so long already, baby." His words slur slightly. I reach for the towel, feeling for the handle of the knife.

"Yes, Professor, it has been a long time." I agree.

"Now!" Inner voice demands.

I look into those green eyes one last time before I plunge the knife into his chest. His blood spurts all over me.

"Yes, Professor, you never can be too careful." I feel sad as I watch the life drain out of him. I really did like him.

"Well done, Ginger." Inner Voice manifests in front of me, smiling with satisfaction. She looks like a darker, shadowy version of me. "I'll help you clean up this mess, and then we'll get rid of the body. Just like the others."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - After high school, Suzie Lockhart attended The Art Institute of Pittsburgh, but the gnawing urge to write remained with her. She often partners with her son, Bruce, and their joint efforts have produced several short stories, including one in Sirens Call's upcoming Mental Ward, Tales From the Asylum anthology. Suzie's first publication, Instinct, was in DMD's Frightmares, A Fistful of Flash Fiction Horror. Be Careful What You Wish For can be found in Dark Moon Digest, issue #10. She also has a flash fiction story in the October issue of Sirens Call eZine, entitled The Last Temptation. Suzie is delighted to be selected as one of the female horror writer's in the upcoming Mistresses of the Macabre anthology. She can be reached via e-mail at aspiringauthors2@gmail.com, on Facebook at Suzie Wargo Lockhart, and on Twitter at @suzieartist.

The Button Jar Rebecca Snow

When I was small, everybody's grandmother had a button jar. I'd asked Gran why, and she'd told me that she never knew when she'd need a button. The origin of each button was a mystery, but that didn't stop me from choosing a favorite, an opalescent blue one that sparkled like water rippling in the sunlight. I always shook the jar to find it when I'd visit.

Near my seventeenth birthday, Gran died. She rose like everyone else: cold, confused, and rotting. My father was away, dispatching several dead coworkers after a bus accident. I was the only one at home with send-off training. Gran's neighbors called and told me they'd seen her banging on the parlor window.

"She's green," Mrs. Harmon said as if she were whispering about a surprise party.

I patted my holster and jogged out the door.

Traversing Gran's manicured front lawn, I lifted the flowerpot next to the mat. I'd tried to get her to move her spare key, but she claimed that she'd forget where she'd moved it. Before unlocking the door, I slid to the window and peered into the dim interior. The furniture was askew, and the rugs had shifted. I knew if Gran had been in her right mind, the room could have been a museum exhibit. Then, I heard banging from the back of the house. I crouched around the rhododendrons and found her with her face smashed up against the kitchen window. I wasn't sure how she'd climbed upon the counter, but there she was, knees in the sink, mouth wide open, spittle sliding down the pane.

I trudged back to the front porch and slipped the key into the lock. I turned the knob and let gravity and the bad hinge open the door. Stepping into the room, I shut out the world and called out as I'd done for years.

"Gran? It's me, Charlotte."

I heard shuffling in the kitchen. Chambering a round, I strode inside aiming for movement. Gran had disappeared. As I passed the curio cabinet I saw her fluffy, pink slippers disappear into her bedroom.

"Gran?" I said.

A grunt echoed through the hall. I peered around the doorframe. She was trying to pry open the button jar with her dead, uncoordinated hands. Looking up with her clouded eyes, Gran held the jar towards me like she used to do with the peanut butter jar on her arthritic days.

I lowered my gun and reached for the collection. She'd died before putting her teeth in so the dead smile she flashed was toothless. She mumbled something before dropping to her bed.

"What, Gran?" I asked as I rolled the jar in my hands.

I could have sworn she said, "You need a button."

Looking down at my shirt, I saw that I did.

"Thanks, Gran."

I lifted my pistol and let her rest.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Rebecca Snow lives in Virginia with a collection of inherited geriatricats. Her short fiction has been published in a number of small press anthologies. You can find her online at cemeteryflower.blog.com and on Twitter @cemeteryflower. On Facebook, look for the bloody hand.



Q Peggy Christie

The San Antonio heat made George feel as if his knees would buckle under its oppressive weight. The concrete sidewalk radiated with the same fierceness that threatened to melt him from his boat shoes all the way up to his comb-over. George felt hot, tired, hungry, and homesick for the cool lakeshore breezes of Chicago.

George and Karen approached a four-story white building on the south side of the city. The Fairview, the oldest hotel in San Antonio, made history in 1986 when the entire structure was moved five blocks from its original location to its present address.

"Apparently, the city board wanted to tear it down," George explained to his wife, "but the historical society raised funds to have it moved."

"The whole building?"

"Yep. And here it sits, just as popular as ever. Plus it's got this exclusive restaurant in it."

"'Q'. That's a funny name for a restaurant. What's it stand for?"

George shrugged.

"Beats me. All I know is that the locals rave about it, and you know that's why Dave booked it. Authenticity."

As he held the door for Karen, a blast of cold air washed over George. He shivered, despite the one hundred and four degree heat outside. He never could get used to the constant fluxuations in temperatures as he entered and exited any structure here. Once inside, the hostess approached them.

"Good evening. Are you here with the Physics Board, too?"

"How'd you know?"

The hostess looked him up and down, her dark eyes flashing with mischief and something else – desire? George pushed his glasses up on his nose, a nervous habit whenever he was near a beautiful woman. She reached out her hand and George could already fell his skin tingling.

"This."

The woman pointed at the 2011 Physics conference badge still hanging around George's neck. He laughed and pushed at his glasses again.

"Ah, right. Of course. Good eye."

She smiled and held out her arm.

"Right this way."

George smiled then turned to his wife to indicate she proceed him. Her right eyebrow arched and the corner of her mouth lifted up in a half-smirk. George cleared his throat.

"What?"

"Smooth, genius," she said before following the hostess.

He hung his head and sighed. Mentally he chided himself for being such a dork, especially in front of his wife, and then moved through the restaurant. All of the tables sat empty, except for the ten-top at the back where his coworkers and their wives had already gathered. The only other patrons were two people sitting at the bar, leaned toward each other in a private conversation.

The vacant tables prickled the hairs on his arms though George couldn't figure out why. It was the middle of the week, and eight o'clock at night. No reason the restaurant should be bustling with activity. But something about the lack of ambient noises — talking, the clank of silverware against china, servers hurrying in and out of the kitchen — set George's teeth on edge.

When he arrived at the table, all the men were talking about free space impedance and the wives were henpecking the hostess who, at this point, had returned to the podium at the front of the restaurant. George tuned out both conversations and stared back at her, losing himself in a reverie of fantasy.

A sudden tap on his shoulder made him jump.

"Wh-what?"

Karen gave him the arched-eyebrow look again.

"What do you want to order? You know, for dinner?"

George looked up to see a thin, dark-eyed man standing over him with an order pad. The sneer on the waiter's face told George he'd known exactly whom George was staring at, possibly even the fantasies running through his mind. He hadn't heard the man taking orders.

"Oh, I, uh-"

"He'll have the fish," Karen told the waiter.

"Very good. I'll be right back with your drinks."

The waiter smirked at George again. He felt his face flush with heat as he looked at Karen.

"Thanks. I was totally out of it, I guess."

"Uh, huh. I'm going to the ladies' room."

Karen gave him a warm smile then walked away through the restaurant. The restrooms were downstairs just to the left of the hostess station.

By the time the waiter served the drinks and appetizers, Karen hadn't returned. George looked at his watch but since he didn't know what time she'd left he had no idea how long she'd been gone. He leaned forward to get Laurie's attention, one of the physicists' wives.

"Hey, Laurie? Can you go down to the restroom and see if Karen is still there? She's been gone a while now."

"Really?"

Laurie looked at her watch then her eyes widened.

"Wow, she's been gone for about twenty minutes. I'll go check it out."

"Thanks."

She patted George's hand then excused herself from the table. None of the others seemed to notice as they scarfed appetizers and guzzled their drinks. George studied his coworkers and wives. They were all laughing and pushing at each other, slopping their drinks down their shirts or onto the table. Joe and Dave shoveled handfuls of crusted bread soaked in herbed olive oil onto each other's faces, the oil dribbling down their chins, the masticated food rolling around in their open mouths. Robert was building a miniature fort out of the roasted asparagus.

What the hell was wrong with them? Were they drunk already? George could only see one glass in front of each person so either they were all serious lightweights in the drinking department or his logical mathematical brain was telling him something was wrong.

George picked up his glass of water and held it under his nose. He couldn't smell anything at first and almost put the glass down. But instinct told him to sniff again and when he did, the odor of something antiseptic mixed with campfire smoke stung his nostrils. Something else lay under those odors as well. If he had to guess, he's say dirt and blood.

While his friends slobbered all over each other, the remaining wives had fallen asleep. Sheila snored in a pile of risotto; Rose had leaned back, her head tilted at what looked like a painful angle over the back of her chair, and smacked her lips between breaths.

George pushed back his chair and eased himself up. He felt if he didn't disturb this surreal dinner scene, maybe he could escape unharmed.

Escape? Why had that word popped into his head? He didn't know but every cell in his body told him he had to find Karen and get out of here before it was too late.

George backed away from the table as slowly as his panicked brain would allow. When he felt he'd

reached a safe distance, he turned around. He almost bumped into another table and as he maneuvered around it, it finally dawned on him why the empty restaurant had so disturbed him. Though no one sat at this table in front of him, a tan sport coat hung on the back of one chair. A folded napkin, smeared with tomato sauce, sat next to a half-eaten serving of lasagna. The smell of a flowery perfume lingered over the full glass of wine with a bright red lip print on the edge.

To George, it looked like the people who had been here simply got up in the middle of their meals and never returned. He looked around at the other tables: full or half-eaten entrées, tall glasses of water beading condensation onto white tablecloths; sweaters, jackets, purses, wraps, and scarves hung from empty chairs; steaming cups of coffee and tea, aperitifs, melted ice cream and cold fondues sat untasted at every table.

Panic surged in his chest again as he thought of Karen. George ran toward the hostess station. The dark-haired beauty sat behind the podium, filing her nails, and looked up at him. The cruel smile on her lips and the hatred burning in her eyes startled him enough to stop running and stand before her. She laughed a deep contemptuous sound.

"Is there something wrong, sir?"

"Where's my wife?"

She tapped the file to her lips and batted her eyes.

"Your wife? Hmm...I know she was around here somewhere."

Her eyes, no longer brown but deep black, shifted in the direction of the stairs that led to the restrooms. George ran to them, leaping down two at a time, until he reached an open seating area. The bright red carpet, which had been probably been plush and perfect at some point, looked worn and matted. Dark blotchy stains marred the fibers, mostly along the edges at the walls. The overstuffed furniture matched the carpet's dinginess, making the whole room appear haggard.

George scanned the room and the only marked doors he saw were "Staff Only", "Conference Room", and "Custodian". The floor in front of the janitor's door seemed to have the largest and darkest stains. Combining that with the strange behavior of his colleagues, the missing patrons, as well as the odd demeanor of the hostess, George feared the worst for his wife.

He almost went back upstairs when he noticed a small printed sign — 'Restroom' — with an arrow pointing to the right. Frowning, George looked at the wall but saw no opening. He took two steps forward and his change in perspective showed a small narrow corridor. It was as if someone had painted the walls in order to camouflage the hallway. But why?

George moved down the hallway to the only door which lay at the far end. A single word was painted on it: ENTER. As there were no other doors, he assumed it was one of those unisex bathrooms you see in those high powered lawyer shows on TV. Even if it wasn't, George had to find out if Karen was in there.

Before he could open the door, George heard a soft giggle and turned to see the hostess standing two feet behind him. He'd never heard her approach and his heart tripped with fear.

"Where is she? Wh-where's my wife?"

The woman only smiled as her gaze shifted to the door then back to George.

"You took her, didn't you? Karen and all the others. Why?"

"Because Qingu commands it."

She reached for the knob and pulled the door open. What looked like a swirling vortex of blood churned just beyond the opening. A raging wind blew out from the center, its roar deafening, almost bringing George to his knees. A long black tendril of energy snaked out and wrapped itself around George's body. A flurry of images and sounds enveloped him.

He watched as a bloody raging battle played out before his eyes. A multitude of gods fought against

one another, the image of a beautiful goddess hovering over them. The earth itself formed from their collective corpses; the stars and heavens sparkled into existence along the shining shafts of flung arrows; the beasts of the world stumbled their first steps out of the pools of sweat and tears of the fallen deities.

And the final battle, between Qingu and Marduk, played out as each god fought for their beautiful queen. As Qingu lay dying and defeated, his blood was taken to create the human race and his body was sent to the black abyss, to rule over the land of the demons.

"Do you see?" the hostess shouted, bringing George back to the present. "Qingu was betrayed and his blood stolen. We are only returning what is rightfully his!"

As George tried to grab her, the dark energy pulled him into its swirling maw. His screams lasted only a moment before she slammed the door closed. The sudden silence disoriented her for a moment before she shook her head, smoothed her hands over her dark tresses, and then made her way back upstairs to the dining room and the remaining sacrifices.

The following afternoon, the hostess stood before the open door. The vortex was gone but what looked like the flat surface of a blood-filled sea lay in its place. She bowed her head and spoke.

"What do you command, Lord Qingu?"

The deep rumbling timbre of her god's voice washed over her.

"Return...my...blood..."

"As you wish."

She closed the door then leaned on it until she heard the latch snap into place. Making her way upstairs, she called out to one of the waiters.

"Aiemapt, how are the reservations coming?"

"We are only half full tonight, Samira," he answered as he stared down at this shoes.

She backhanded him and he stumbled.

"Would you prefer to be the one to satiate the Lord's desires? If not, I suggest you hustle outside and drum up some business before you end up on Qingu's table."

The waiter nodded then scurried away. Samira smirked. She wasn't worried. Perhaps a thousand years ago they may have lacked a sufficient population. But today, just like in New York, Detroit, Boston, Chicago, and dozens of other cities before this one, she and the other faithful disciples would never want for an ample supply of sacrifices for Lord Qingu.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Peggy Christie has been writing horror fiction since 1999. Her work has appeared in several websites, magazines, and anthologies, including *Necrotic Tissue*, *Code Z: An Undead Hospital Anthology*, *Black Ink Horror*, *Elements of Horror*, and *Vicious Verses and Reanimated Rhymes*. Her short story, "Why Be Normal?", opened the anthology *Reckless Abandon* from Catalyst Press which premiered at the Horrorfind Convention in 2002. Peggy is also the Secretary of the Great Lakes Association of Horror Writers. She even has her own webpage. Check it out at themonkeyisin.com. Peggy loves survival horror video games and chocolate (not necessarily in that order) and lives in Michigan with her husband, Robert, and their dogs, Roscoe P. Coltrane and Dozer. You can find her on Twitter at @PMonkey or on Facebook at Peggy Christie.



Short Stories



Lisamarie Lamb

Page Turner Donna Cuttress

She was bored, she had completed all her work and didn't want to be given anymore or she would have been stuck at the office until late.

'Go for a walk' she thought. She picked up some papers and began walking around the office as though she was doing something important. Wandering from desk to desk, chatting with some and avoiding others, she stopped at Jenny's desk.

"Where's Jenny then? Still off sick?"

No one answered her, so she had a look at the photos on Jenny's desk. There was Jenny and her niece, Jenny and her dog, Jenny and her friends. Next to them were some magazines and an old paperback gathering dust. Quickly, she slipped the magazines under her important papers. She could sneak a read at her desk then put them back at five; a nice time waster.

The celebrity magazines just waffled on. Weddings, divorces and who has cellulite or hair coming out of their nose. Awful, but addictive. She finished them within the hour, such was the content, 'they should be called picture books', she thought 'because that's all anyone really looked at.'

At five to five, she packed her bag and took the magazines back to Jenny's desk. She looked at the front of a paperback. There was a gaudy coloured photo of a woman being chased down stairs by a shadow-like assassin. The woman was crying and had blood coming from her nose. It was called 'Page Turner'. She threw it into her bag and vowed to return it to Jenny on Monday; she needed something decent to read over the weekend.

It was the usual Friday evening, visit the parents on the way home, and then get some shopping in for the weekend. She double locked the door to her flat when she came in and kicked her shoes off down the hallway.

"Goal!" she shouted, as they flew through the air.

She took her shopping bags into the kitchen, placed her items into the fridge and took a packet of biscuits from the cupboard. She went into her lounge, switched on the TV and settled on the couch. She watched a game show, and then an episode of her favourite soap. She turned the TV to another channel when the news came on.

"Not interested." she said, as the empty biscuit packet rattled into the bin. She carried on watching other soaps, comedies, and a film that was more sex than plot.

'I'll go to bed' she thought.

It was this time of night she felt lonely and often thought about getting a flatmate, then changed her mind within a few seconds. She wiped away her makeup, brushed her teeth and changed into her pyjamas. As she got into bed, and was about to switch off the bedside lamp, when she noticed a book next to it, it was 'Page Turner'. She picked it up,

"Don't remember putting you there."

Turning it over, she read the blurb on the back.

The story started two weeks ago, a man is reading a book he picked up, it had been left on an empty bus seat...

"How exciting..."

She turns the book over to look at the author's name. There was none. She flicked through the first few pages and began reading and stopped when she is too tired to turn the pages anymore.

It is the story of a middle aged man reading a book on a train. He is tired. He has not had much sleep, but he carries on reading his book. On the train his face and neck become red as he turns the pages. He becomes scared. He feels sick and needs to get off the train; he pushes people out of the way and gets off two stops before his workplace. He runs down an escalator, turning around, looking everywhere, and begins to cry. He is breathing very heavily as he has not run this fast since he was a child. Nobody can see

what he is running from or toward. He turns a corner and is on a different platform; he feels the warm breeze of an approaching train on his face. Nobody stops him as he runs toward the tracks and smacks his body against the 8:15am train. There are screams; the loudest from the driver of the 8:15am, who sees the sweaty face, explode against the safety glass.

She wakes up with the book still open on her chest, after a restless night she is groggy yet the bedclothes are not disturbed. Her muscles ache like she has been running.

Saturday is spent like every other, wasting time. Watching more TV, taking a bus ride into the city and buying clothes that she does not really need. She meets up with a friend and they have lunch together. When she gets home she looks at what she has bought and puts them back into the plastic carrier bags they came in. All day she has been thinking about what would make someone jump in front of a train.

'Why would he do that? Who was he running from?' She thought as she looked forward to reading the rest of the book later.

Her Saturday night was spent mostly on the phone, voting for her favourites on the talent shows, then phoning her friends to talk about who they had voted for, until one of them mentioned, "Before you go, it was sad about Jenny, wasn't it?"

"What was?"

"You know Jenny? From Admin Section? Fell down the stairs in her block of flats. Fell five flights. She broke her neck. They're trying to find out how she fell. Her bag and her shoes were dropped outside her front door. Didn't you see it on the news?"

She was sure her heart had just stopped.

"I have her book."

"She won't need it now." Her friend was laughing as she pressed the disconnect button.

She tries to watch the late film but was preoccupied thinking about Jenny and the man on the train. Looking through the free newspaper that she picked up on the bus and brought home with her, she reads an account of a man who threw himself under a train which caused chaos with delays. After throwing the newspaper into the bin, she goes to bed. She picks up 'Page Turner', and begins to read. The book seems thicker tonight, she starts the next chapter.

It begins with a woman in a lift. Someone is banging against the closed doors, to be let in. A young woman is breathless; she had just made it into the lift away from whoever was crashing against the doors. The lift moves slowly upward to the floor she lives on. She takes her front door keys from her bag, ready to run to her flat and lock herself inside as quickly as possible. The lift stops, the doors open. Silence. Running to her door, she tries to get the key into the lock. Her dog is whimpering on the other side of the door. She kicks off her shoes, drops her bag, aware she is not getting the door open quickly enough. She dashes to the door marked 'Stairs' pushes it open and runs. She slips like she has been pushed, and is thrown like a rag doll over the banister. She falls, floor after floor, down the centre of the stairwell. Banging her body against the marble stairs, the final smack cracking her neck. She watches the face look at her over the banister. Closing her eyes, she feels the warmth of blood pouring out of her head and down her back. Her thoughts stop like a TV being switched off. A book she was reading falls out of her bag as it tips to one side. Her dog starts barking. The keys are still swinging in the lock.

She opens her eyes slowly the next morning. The church bell is ringing in the distance, calling the devout to worship. She notices the book on the floor. She doesn't want to touch it, but she does. She

puts it on the bedside table and goes to the window.

'That must have been a dream last night. The book described what happened to Jenny. I must have dreamed it,' she thought.

She grabs the book to check. Finding the last page, she reads out loud, "The keys are swinging in the lock."

She is relieved, but notices that there are more pages now. She turns them over.

'Chapter Three'

"Slowly she opened her eyes, as the church bells rang out in the distance..."

She throws the book across the room. All she thinks is, 'How? How can that be?'

She goes into the bathroom, takes a shower and washes her hair, all the time thinking about the book. She dries herself, gets dressed and goes out. She wants to walk and never stop.

'Had Jenny read that book? Had the man on the train?'

She thinks of things she can do to waste time until she has to go home. She visits a relative, has a coffee, and rides a bus. When she gets back, the flat is dark; she switches on lights, all of them, and puts on the TV turning the volume up loud. A neighbour knocks against the wall. She cannot stop herself as she sits on the side of the bed and picks up 'Page Turner'. She scans the newly printed pages, reading out load.

"Shower...walking in the park..."

As she speaks, her bedroom door opens and she becomes aware that despite the noise and light, she may as well be in the dark. She is not alone.

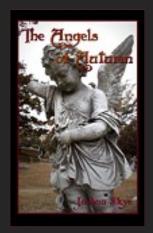
"Sister's house...coffee was bitter...change for the bus fare...her neighbour called the police."

As she looks up, she sees the bedroom window slowly lift further up, her blinds move with the breeze, a shadow pushes its way through them. Her hands are shaking as she tries to read the book.

"Please let this be a happy ending," she whispers.

She looks down at the book. The final page is blank.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Donna Cuttress is from Liverpool, U.K. and has written Horror and Historical Fiction since she gained her BA in English from Edge Hill University. She was recently published in 'Fear, A Modern Anthology 2' and is finishing a novella about a soon to retire female serial killer, whilst writing her first fantasy horror novel. You can find her on Twitter at @hederah.



Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, KoboBooks, and Apple

A Dark Place Called Murder Candy Burke

Red soaked the stark, white bedspread. Her head laid back, eyes unmoving, locked on some distant spot, lips forever frozen in a wide, round O. Her body was dotted with deep, weeping slits and freshly manicured nails sprawled aside her head.

The hilt of the knife felt welcome in his hand. He stared at the curved, jagged blade, then glanced at the masterpiece it had created. Adrenaline surged through his veins. His heart thundered against his ribs. It was his best work yet.

A faint whimper reached his ears. He slowly spun around. The small girl huddled in the corner, her body trembling. So perfect, her dirty, tear stained face. He'd never had an audience. A thrill ran down his spine.

He turned back to his canvas. Almost complete. The knife rose above his head and split the air with broad, looping slashes. A wash of color splattered his naked skin. Head thrown back, he sighed and faced the girl. He moved to close the distance.

"Please."

His steps faltered. Her small voice was not unlike that of his own child. He cocked his head. If he spared her, she would be a testament to his work.

He laid the knife on the nightstand. No. Too great a risk. Pity.

He turned and pain fired through his abdomen. He lowered his gaze. Her hand was wrapped around the knife. She twisted it and he fell to his knees. Darkness closed in. He slumped to the floor.

A smile curved her lips.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Candy Burke resides in North Carolina with her husband, three dogs, a cat and a pet goat. She writes in the romance, paranormal, and horror genres, and recently discovered the challenge of flash fiction. A Dark Place Called Murder is her first published flash fiction work. You can find Candy on Facebook at www.facebook.com/realcandyburke or on Twitter at @TheCandyBurke.



Morose Eternal Ting Swain

Jonah Matthers engaged in his daily walk down the long dusty country road as he had done for what felt like an eternity. The fires in Mexico had been burning for weeks now and Texas was reaping the effects. For at least a week, the sun had been smothered by haze, unable to cast a warm smile on any small town in south Texas. He pocketed this as a precursor, an indication that no light would ever enter into his mind again. It was three in the afternoon but the day's reflection cast a feeling of dusk. He knew there were countless weeks ahead like this. The banality of it all was going to drive him madder than he already was. There was something to be declared about isolation, it gives you the option to exercise the mind.

It was simple for him to drift into the crevices of memories past. Even though these walks were to elude his reality, the sounding boards of his basic existence could not be unheeded. Vacant fields to his right reflected his vast emptiness he carried like a worn out backpack. Up ahead, the sparse gathering of pine trees revisited the times he wanted to hide from others but could still be found between the spaces of inconsequential objects. Once he passed the pond to his left, he hit his landmark to turn around and head home. It was a fitting representation of being in utero where the murky fluids envelope and comfort, even if just for a moment. The tread back was always worse, it played out just like his life; he was born, tried to hide and isolate himself and once he pushed everyone away he received what he subconsciously craved, utter nothingness for miles and miles; ages and ages. He was all of 32 years old.

The house had been passed down from his grandparents and it smelled like it too. After living there for 5 years, there was no way to get the geriatric bouquet from the drywall pores. None the less, he was relieved to be home. The thunderclap and stale sweet smell in the air had been the only thing that made sense to him, ultimately a reason for the darkness. Timing was his constant element. As he set foot on the front porch, the tremble of rain began. The swing was inviting him to sit as he took a load off. The muffled hushes on the grass became thuds as the raindrops pierced the earth. The dank earthy smell is what he related to the most. As the pings became louder on the tin roof, he decided to go inside and finish the days' work. He only had a few more things to do and when the time came, the evening would offer the perfect provisions.

The oxidized screen door groaned as it swung and snapped firmly back into place as Jonah entered his lair. What was a castle without its guard? That answer came around the corner with a feverish yip and greeted his master as if he had not seen him in ages. The love of a dog was all that Jonah needed and it was all that Jonah had.

Jonah picked up Happy and let him know he was longed for while he carried him to his crate in the corner of the master bedroom. Once locked up, Jonah shut the door behind him and walked to the spare bedroom. The floor boards creaked as his haste took over with anticipation. The brass knob on the door hesitated then scraped metal on metal. He meditated for an instant about the symphony that the house already seemed to have on its own. Every surface had its own instrumental sound of age to contribute to the sheet music of the homes antiquity. The rain pings on the roof amplified as he approached the bed.

His customary habit was to pull the glider to the end of the mattress for the finest seat in the house. He would sit for hours observing how the plasma separated and surged from a deep crimson into a clear tinged muddle. A fluid color spectrum that grew beneath the weight of the former acquaintance always demanded his attention first. He used white sheets, the preferred canvas of his creations. Her name was Hope; at least this is what he baptized her. Renaming them for his mental method had been one of the most important parts of his process. As time escaped, he would look into the eyes of Hope and relive her memories. Recollections that he wished were his own. This projection practice took the longest but when the evaluation was finished, Jonah had space in his heart filled knowing that he just

got closer to Hope than anyone else had ever dreamed.

There were a few minutes where he wished she would just sit up and start a conversation just to validate that his predictions about her life and situations were spot on, but this never happened. The room would always be silent and still, he wouldn't dare speak aloud to the dead; actions like that would be the indicator that his sanity abandoned him. He knew they were gone and he knew they would not verbally reciprocate; he made sure of that by severing the jugular. It seemed to make the most color and with his placid life, he could always use a bit more of that.

Hope had happened into Jonah's life with her thumb up and ass out and would leave her life face down on a bed of white sheets. It amazed him that people still hitchhike in this day and time. This one was so easy it was almost felt like a trap. It was easy to see why she would trust to get into his truck. He had the chiseled face of an angel but what no one saw was that he had the mind of a fallen angel. A trip to the dark side that offered no signs of return and it grew darker by the moment. He never offered false charm or a polished smile, he didn't have to, his boyish face was flawless and his wide eyed tactic of innocence was the bait that hooked the gullet of anyone of his choosing.

As the rain decelerated, Jonah recognized there were tasks at hand. He turned Hope over so he could look at her face one last time. This would be the final time anyone would gaze into her eyes. She seemed more attractive to him in this state of ultimate surrender, he could not resist touching her exposed wound. He never took souvenirs; he had no attachment to the objects of his crime. It was enough to have their blood on him. This was a brand that he wore as long as he could before the shower absolved him of his deeds. His cleansing would come later, when blood was mingled with dirt, it would be mud tonight.

The room was void of decoration or furniture other than the bed and glider. As he sat and stared at the corpse, he accepted his signal. The moonlight peeked through the window and landed on her face. The illumination brought tears to his eyes. Lonely once again, he gathered the edges of his sheets and swaddled them around her. His lean arms scooped under neck and knee, lifting her with care. The weight shifted close to his chest for easy transport as he slowly walked her through the house for her final exit.

Once at the makeshift cemetery, he searched for her appropriate place to be earthed. He decided she would be put between Joy and Destiny. The land was getting full and he knew he would have to stop; he could not have them any further away than a walking distance so choosing another field was out of the question. His shovel tore at the ground furiously as he dug deeper and deeper. The sound of mud splatting off the shovel onto the ground behind him was reminiscent of conversation. This was the closest he had come to dialogue in days. He wanted to scream at the shovel for expediting this outing. It was time to get rid of Hope forever. With mud on her face, seeming farther and farther away from him, Jonah began to wail. That was another perk of isolation; no one can hear your cries. It was a desolate walk back home as the rain returned and pounded so hard on his head that it stung.

Once inside and dry, it was feeding time. Jonah would not eat but Happy would eat like a king. A dog was truly man's best friend and Jonah would attest to that. That dog was the only thing that was significant to him. It was a shame that Happy would be alone in a matter of hours. Jonah hoped that someone would find him soon. Just in case, he put three cans of wet dog food in the stainless steel bowl. He would not cage him tonight, the idea of this dog soiling near his food if it took a week or so made him cringe. Happy was a small dog, only three pounds so he knew the food he put down was ample. After eye contact full of mental goodbyes, he took his final walk up the stair with his phone in hand. A call to Jenna with one ring, he hung up. Lying upon the blood stained bed; he knew he would have to make a scene to end all scenes. He would have to create a rainbow like he has never created

before. The warm sting started with both of his Achilles tendons, left wrist, then right but before unconsciousness the last slash hurt the worst. A myriad of thoughts whirred in his mind as his neck began to pour. He didn't realize how much this hurt and began to sob for his girls. The last thought before he faded was that he hoped Melody was not on the other side of the closed door when Jenna made the discovery. The last sound he recalled was the ticking of paws on the linoleum floor.

The missed call was returned two days later and as the phone rang, a dog barked outside of his master's death room. The guttural howl that came from the fawn colored Chihuahua would have broken the heart of any man that could hear it.

Heartbroken, Jenna sobbed downstairs as the paramedics removed the body; it brought back the sorrow of having to identify her parents. She scooped Melody and Happy in her arms as she walked to her car. So much to do, how does one clean up a mess like this? The funeral would be uncomfortable to plan, but she had practice already. The part which brought her to tears, as she gazed at her daughter, was the notion that she would have to erase all memories of Melody's uncle from her existence. No one should have to explain violence such as this and she had no intention of doing that. She knew as she propelled down the dirt road, she would never travel this path again. Never witness the house again and never have to set eyes on the barren unearthed field next door. Good riddance.

Jonah Matthers engaged in his daily walk down the long dusty country road as he had done for what felt like eternity. The urging tugs in his gut alluded to deja vu but Jonah shrugged off most feelings that tried to perch and nest into subconscious.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Tina Swain is a native Texan and a graduate from the University of Houston with a degree in Psychology. She recently carved out time in her life to become a stay at home mom for her two beautiful daughters and enjoys creating hand carved candles, crafting pottery and writing. She is a lifelong fan of horror and is currently working on a collection of short stories.





The Cruel Sting Rachel Hoover

"Nothing."

"You can't have done nothing all day!" Cassie insisted.

"For claiming to be a friend of mine, you think you would know how capable I am of doing nothing." Beth tucked her cell phone between her left ear and shoulder while chopping an apple on the cutting board in her family's kitchen.

"Come on, you at least went to work right? So how was that?" Cassie asked.

"It was... boring. It was work. People asked for information, I got said information for them. Then, I stabbed myself in the eye with a pencil. Rinse and repeat." Beth replied, getting more aggressive with her chopping as she complained.

"Then why do you stay there?"

"The real question you should be asking me is why I don't shove office supplies into my ears too, so that I have the excuse of not being able to hear when people ask me for things." The truth was, Beth really needed the money, and she had no other job prospects after graduating high school the year before.

"You know you could have gone to college, Beth. You could be on summer break with me right now!" "I'd still have to work. I'd just be working to pay for tuition instead of saving to get myself out of this house. Besides, I'm sure I would have found a way to flunk out by now." Beth slammed the bowl full of lettuce she'd set out for herself on the counter and began throwing handfuls of apple over it.

"That's not true, you're smarter than you--" Cassie stopped, a loud crash on her end of the line interrupting her train of thought. "What the..."

"What was that?" Beth asked.

"I don't know, it sounds like it was from upstairs."

"Is it your brother?"

"No," Cassie replied. "Everyone's gone, they went up to Wisconsin for the weekend, remember?"

"Sure he didn't stay behind to try and scare you?" Beth suggested, thinking of all the times over the years Owen had terrified or pranked the two girls. They had known each other since first grade and he had been making Cassie's life miserable since the day he was born. He was too clever for his own good.

"No way, I saw him and my parents leave with my own eyes. He'd have to be Houdini to pull that one off. Do you think you could--" Cassie paused again. Beth heard her muffled yell, as if she was facing away from the tiny receiver in her phone. "Hey, what are y-"

The call cut in and out, then several thumps sounded on Cassie's end of the line, as if the phone had been dropped. Beth's phone beeped to indicate the call had been ended, and she stared at the screen. Her mind buzzed, racing from one horrible outcome to another. She shook her head and tried calling Cassie back. The phone rang and rang, but with no answer.

I'll go over there, maybe everything is okay, Beth thought. Maybe it was Owen, or maybe they forgot something and turned around on their way out of town. She didn't want to panic and embarrass Cassie with the police on her doorstep just for a simple prank or accident. Beth grabbed her house keys and locked the front door, then broke into a jog as she hurried to her friend's house.

When she hit the Meier's driveway she could already see that the front door was open a few inches. Beth took the porch stairs slowly, peering inside. There was no sign of Cassie or anyone else. She stepped back and took out her phone again to dial 911. Before she hit the second '1,' a trap door opened beneath her feet. Beth's arms flew up as she fell and her left hand banged itself on the edge of the doorway, knocking the phone out of her grasp. She yelped at the pain in her wrist, then again when her feet hit solid dirt. Beth winced, cradling her wrist for a brief moment, then touched her right ankle, which felt like it was sprained. The trap door above was shut again and the space she had fallen into was

dark. A few rays of the setting summer sun strained through the porch's wooden planks. When her eyes adjusted, she saw there was a crawlspace straight ahead, leading underneath the house.

"Holy shit," she hissed. Her heart battered the inside of her chest. What was a trap door doing in the Meier's porch?

Beth crept forward in the dry dirt, trying to avoid bumping her head on the beams above her yet keep her weight off her ankle. The small tunnel made a sharp left towards the other side of the house and led to a dead end. Beth faced the wall that she guessed was shared with the basement rec room and ran her hands over it. Towards the ground she found a latch. When she pulled on it, the wall swung out into the basement with a creak.

Beth tried to steady her breath despite the growing tension. She couldn't believe that in all the time she had spent at Cassie's house, they had never discovered this secret. The basement was even darker than the tunnel she had just been in. She felt exposed and vulnerable as she limped over to the staircase. While passing by some dusty exercise equipment hidden underneath the stairs, Beth felt an odd sensation across her shins that only made sense once a sharp pain flared in her right thigh. She cried out and looked for the source, a small arrow protruding from her leg. She had hit a tripwire. Tears sprung to her eyes, and on instinct she ripped the arrow from her flesh before wondering whether that might make it worse. The pain was intense, making movement even more difficult in conjunction with her swollen ankle. Blood from the wound began to soak her jeans. A sound from above caught her attention, the creaking of footsteps on the main floor of the house. They were headed up to the second level, she recognized the sound of each stair like notes of a childhood melody.

Beth gathered her strength and took careful steps to the staircase. She focused on sharpening her senses to avoid more traps. The ascent to the main floor was slow and strained, but Beth made it without further incident. She opened the door at the top of the stairs as slow as she could manage, turning the doorknob a centimeter at a time. Her eyes clenched shut as the latch gave way and the wooden door rubbed against the frame. It was a slight noise, but could be enough to give her away in the silent house.

Even with the curtains and blinds shut, the first floor was better lit than the basement. The door came out near the foyer, with the living room to the right, the dining room left and the kitchen behind. The creaking stairs she had heard earlier were next to her.

The front door was right there. Beth wanted to bolt through it and run away screaming. But her incident in the basement made her more cautious, and she looked around for signs of another trap. Her heart dropped when she saw the wire underneath the threshold. If she had been stupid enough to walk right into the house she might already be dead.

Beth tried to think. She couldn't believe Owen would do something like this. He might have been irresponsible but he wasn't a sociopath. The only other possibility was that some psychotic stranger had gotten into the house. But why would they target the Meiers? Or were they so deranged that they had picked a random victim?

Beth limped back towards the kitchen, hoping to find a weapon there. Before crossing over onto the tile she heard a click and froze. She had stepped on a panel in the floorboards. Nothing had happened yet, but it would if she moved. Panic rose in her throat, looking from side to side for a hint of what was to come. She decided to try to move back, perhaps avoiding the result of the trap. It would mean taking a step on her bad leg, but if she pushed off her good leg she could take most of the weight on a second step back with that foot instead. Beth took a deep breath, braced the ball of her right foot behind her and took a sort of backwards skip that landed hard back on her left foot again. The trap had still been triggered, and a heavy metal bucket swung down from above the doorway to the kitchen, heading

straight for Beth.

Before she could get to one side, the bucket smashed into her chest. She heard the crunch of ribs breaking before the momentum of the swing sent her flying back onto the floor. The pain made her see stars. The footsteps from above came towards her. Beth tried to roll to one side, coughing and crying out in pain from the movement. The intruder continued down the stairs, then stopped behind her. She turned back to see a figure clad in thick black body armor, their face almost entirely obscured by a black knit mask except for their eyes and mouth. The curve of their hip told her it was a woman.

"The cops will be here any minute," Beth lied to the intruder. "I called them before I came in through the basement. Where's my friend, where's Cassie?"

The slight, brief turn of the woman's head towards the upstairs spurred Beth on.

"She's upstairs, isn't she? Cassie! Are you okay? Answer me!" She called out to her friend, attempting once again to roll onto her side in order to stand back up.

The intruder pulled out a dagger sheathed on her hip and pointed it at Beth, who froze. From a pocket in her armor she produced Beth's cell phone. She already knew Beth hadn't called the police.

"That doesn't matter," Beth said, her voice wavered in panic. "My parents will be looking for me soon, they'll know that something is wrong. This is the first place they'll look. You're screwed either way."

The intruder pocketed the phone again, then kicked Beth hard in the stomach. She choked and groaned, disabled further by the blow. The intruder crouched by her head, pulled her shoulders up off the floor and gripped her under the arms, dragging her over to a walnut armchair in the living room. As the woman bent to pick some rope off of the floor Beth tried to bolt out of the chair, but the intruder planted her hand dead center of her chest and shoved her back. Her wrists were tied to the arms of the chair, her ankles to the legs and finally, her torso to the slatted back. The rope was taut against her broken ribs, drawing out her pain.

"Why are you doing this?" Beth said through gritted teeth.

The intruder approached her, dagger in hand. Beth's heart hammered with panic. The woman grabbed her by the throat and held her against the back of the chair. Beth choked and tried to turn her head as the dagger approached her face. The woman grabbed her by the chin to keep her from moving, then made a slow, firm cut into her cheek.

"No, stop!" Beth screamed.

The intruder finished her deliberate cut. Tears streamed down Beth's face, which made the wound flare with pain. The woman continued making slow, agonizing slices into her arms, legs and stomach, cutting right through her clothes. By the time she stopped, Beth's blood was dripping all over her body, onto the chair and stained the cream-colored carpet below.

"Please, let me go..." Beth wailed, crying through the torture. She felt woozy, yet her nerves were on fire from the pain of the cuts covering her body. Still her torturer remained silent. In her haze, Beth wondered if she would ever leave this house again. When the intruder planted her feet in front of her and held the dagger high above her head, point down, she knew she would not.

Beth leaned her head against the back of the chair and looked into her murderer's face. Her breathing was labored, her eyelids fluttered as the last of her strength flowed out of her body. She choked out one final sob and closed her eyes.

The intruder brought the dagger down hard, straight into the right side of Beth's neck, severing her carotid. Beth's eyes flew wide open. The intruder slid the dagger out of her flesh and watched as her blood gushed out. The last minute of Beth's life ran down, and then she was still.

The woman cleaned the dagger's blade on Beth's clothing, then called out to the second floor, "It's done."

An old man emerged from one of the rooms, his cane thudding along the hallway as he limped towards the stairs and down into the living room.

"Excellent," he said, looking over the gory scene. "You did just as I asked. Well done, Cassie."

Cassie removed her mask and ran a hand through her boyish, cropped blond locks, and turned to look over Beth's body with the man. She handed him the dagger, which he stored inside his suit jacket.

"May I ask you something?"

"What is it?" The man responded without looking at her.

"What did you have against this girl?"

The man turned and glared at Cassie, his perpetual frown twisted in rage.

"How dare you," he spat at her. "Didn't your parents train you and your brother properly? I don't answer to you, you do as I say! You either perform the task as assigned or you don't get paid. I have half a mind to gut you myself for such insubordination!"

Cassie reddened with embarrassment at the reprimand. "I apologize. Yes sir, of course they trained me well. It won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't," he hissed. "Now tie up the loose ends, grab your things and get to Wisconsin with the rest of your family before you screw yourself out of five million dollars."

"Yes, sir." Cassie hurried out of the room to clear out the rest of her traps.

As soon as she left, the old man removed a corked vial from his trouser pocket and limped over to Beth's body. He uncorked the vial and grunted as he bent over, holding the vial under blood that was still dripping from her severed artery. When the vial was full, he straightened and groaned at a twinge in his back. He waved his hand over the vial, eyes closed, and murmured a few words. The vial was sealed again, and placed back in his pocket.

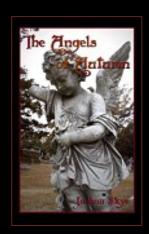
The man took one last look at Beth, and chuckled to himself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Rachel Hoover is a librarian and aspiring writer from the Chicago area. Her ever-growing reading list often contains fantasy, horror and graphic novels. Rachel's non-literary joys in life include gaming, horror films, 90's music and gag reels. Visit http://libofthedead.blogspot.com to see more from her.

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Bare Minimum Lindsey Beth Goddard

He didn't have a name. He had a number, and he was addressed as such. Most communication came through the crackling sound waves of the intercom system. "Number 253, housekeeping has arrived. Please stand and exit the room." He wanted to defy the mechanical voice that directed his daily routine. He wanted to take his white metal chair and slam it across the white intercom system that echoed through his white, sterile room. But that would only cost him privileges.

With a rattling of gears, a metal door creaked open. Number 253 obeyed the emotionless voice, stepping into his bathing chamber. A second speaker instructed, "Remove your clothes and step into the shower. Hot water will be dispensed for three minutes." The door closed behind him. The hydraulic locks clicked into place. Housekeeping would dust his table, change his linens while he showered. The intercom would prompt him: "Brush your teeth". "Shave your face". Then the locks would disengage; the door would swing open, and there would be his bed, clean sheets, and vacant room. It was a solitary life... but all he knew.

He came into this world as a natural birth, but he never felt his mother's embrace. Whisked away by the white coats, his crying fell on deaf ears, nothing there to soothe him but the buzzing of fluorescents. He was administered enough formula to sustain him. Diapers were changed on a schedule. He was routinely checked by a doctor, who donned a mask, a cold and faceless visitor. No one hugged him. No one kissed him. No one held him through the night. He played and crawled; banged on the walls, always alone.

Project Bare Minimum is a life-long sentence, an experiment beginning at birth. Large sums of money are awarded to mothers willing to surrender their newborn's custody. These infants are blank slates, lumps of clay, grown into men without opinions or beliefs. They're so grateful to taste freedom, once we finally allow it, that they'd go to any lengths to keep us happy. Perfect soldiers.

For many years, I overlooked the pain in their eyes, certain each nameless boy had a purpose. As time passed, I lost faith in the project. That's when I started sending him things.

It began with a cookie, hidden under a napkin, on a tray served through 253's slot. I watched his eyelids flutter, on the surveillance monitor, as he savored each flavorful bite. Accustomed to bland oatmeal and lukewarm broth, he didn't take my gift for granted. The next day, I sent a small cut of steak, watching again as he gratefully chewed. I wished I could give him so much more...

So, next time, I sent him a knife.

I didn't coax him into murder or plant the idea. I merely presented the option. He'd been given the bare minimum of what he needed in life, trapped in a colorless cell. So when the doctor arrived for his monthly physical, Number 253--having been raised in a white room--decided it was time to paint the walls. In streaks of red.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Lindsey Beth Goddard is a dark fiction author living in the suburbs of St. Louis, MO. Most recently, her short stories have been published in the anthologies: Night Terrors (Kayelle Press), Welcome To Hell (E-volve Books), and Mistresses Of The Macabre (Dark Moon Books) and online in e-zines such as Hogglepot, Dark Fire Fiction, and Yellow Mama. When not writing, she enjoys interviewing fellow authors, playing with her three children, and watching horror movies. For more information, you can visit her website at http://www.lindseybethgoddard.com.

Displaced Rivka Jacobs

The little girl stumbled and slid as she struggled to run in the snow. Her auburn curls were wet and stringy and her blue coat with the fuzzy knit collar was caked with icy mud. She frantically glanced behind her, and clutched her Maisy doll more tightly.

Her older brother, his eyes narrowed and his mouth twisted by exertion and rage, stomped after her. He wore an older boy's brown pea-jacket that was too big, and striped hand-knit mittens with a matching toboggan cap. "I'm going to get that stupid doll and kill her too," he hollered at his six-year-old sister.

"No, Ronnie, no," she begged, her chest jumping and her eyes and nose flowing. Her galoshes didn't fit right and she couldn't feel her toes any longer. Her stockings were torn and bloody at both knees. They were just outside of town, and ahead was the Thurmond, West Virginia post-office, closed this Sunday morning. Across from the ash-colored vertical siding of the post-office building were two matching track beds of the C&O Railroad. And on the other side of the rails and ties lay the banks of the New River.

"Pearl, stop now and I'll go easy on you," Ronnie called, looking up at her from under his brows as he leaned over with his palms on his thighs. He gulped air, coughed several times.

She halted, twisted around, her legs shaking. She was a couple of yards from the tracks. "Don't come any nearer, or I'll scream," she cried in a broken, high-pitched voice. She wrapped both her arms around Maisy and hugged the doll against her coat, wiping her cheeks on the yellow molded head and golden mohair braids. As Pearl's body trembled, Maisy's blue eyes rolled up and down.

Ronnie straightened. "Aw, you know no one can hear you if you do. There's hardly anyone left in this two-bit hick coal town. And Momma is working in the boarding house over yonder," he swept his arm vaguely to the north. "She don't care what we do, anymore. No one cares about you, Pearl."

"Daddy cares about me, Daddy can hear me," Pearl answered, her words slurred by her chattering teeth.

"Daddy's in the Philippines with General MacArthur, fighting the Japs."

"Daddy sent me Maisy for Christmas and made me promise to take care of her."

"You and your stupid dolls," Ronnie said and spat on the dirty snow. "I killed your Jeannie Walker first. Weren't too far from here, either," he said with wide grin. "Once it was over, there weren't nothing left of that baby but a pile of dust." He took a step towards her and crouched as if getting ready to start a race.

A screech -- high and shrill -- shot out of her mouth without her willing it. She tried to back away from Ronnie's sudden leap in her direction, but in her panic and despair and because of the coldness that stiffened her muscles, she fell on her rear.

She felt nothing. Ronnie was on top of her in an instant, yanking at Maisy, pulling off the small, white shoes with the pink lacings, tearing the socks off the compact composite feet, ripping the diminutive lace and tulle smock. Pearl held on with all the strength she had left, and the brother and sister flailed in the slush and freezing muck with the doll between them.

Ronnie had his legs on top of Pearl's shins and he pinned her left wrist to the ground with his right hand while he tugged Maisy's legs with his left. He suddenly let go of the doll, and reared back, his knuckles closing tightly as he raised his arm high in the air. Pearl tried to avert her face but Ronnie brought the fist down hard into the side of her head.

He leaped off of his sister, standing in triumph, waving the doll by one sculptured, jointed arm. "Got 'er," he cackled. He whooped and jumped in place.

She felt a throbbing, stinging pain as she lolled her sight to the left and right, her arms akimbo, her legs refusing to move. She heard the distant sound of the train whistle -- like the braying of a great beast

trailing off at the edges of perception. She pushed herself, rolled onto her stomach. She tasted blood, and couldn't see out of one eye. "Maisy," she cried. "Please, Ronnie, please don't hurt her," she pleaded.

Ronnie was dancing close to the tracks now. With exaggerated movements he knelt, and placed the doll so that her head lay on the rail closest to them, her rose-bud mouth facing the overcast sky, her sleep-eyes closed. One small arm was rotated upward, almost as if pointing at Ronnie. "The Allegheny is coming, it's the biggest, heaviest steam engine in history," he bellowed at his battered sister, laughing as he saw the look of horror on her face.

Pearl raised herself on her arms, tried to drag herself forward. "My dolly, my Maisy," she whispered. Ronnie stamped one of his heavy shoes, the pants cuff above it unfolding. "Don't you come any closer or I'll kick your teeth in," he yelled. He wiped one of his muddy coat sleeves across his forehead, smearing the dirt already there. He removed his mittens and tossed them on a mound of snow as they were sodden and refreezing into filthy stiffness. The ground was beginning to vibrate. Another blast from the train whistle seized their attention. It was close now, and loud.

Pearl stopped moving. She lay flat, her chin in the snow, her dark eyes staring ahead, her red mittens outstretched in front of her, beseeching her brother to change his mind, to listen. The sounds of the clicking and clacking and metal-on-metal squealing and the creaking and moaning of the cars and the pressured ties underneath, overwhelmed her.

Ronnie raised his bare fingers, splayed them in triumph high over his head as he stood in the middle of the tracks and watched the massive Alleghany engine bear down towards him from around a bend. He gathered himself like a coil, ready to leap away in seconds....

Pearl gasped; Ronnie's feet flew out from under him. His shocked eyes locked on hers as he landed across the rails, his jaw cracking and then jerking back as it collided with cold metal. His ear was right next to Maisy's, he on his belly, the doll on its back. He dug at the snow-slick gravel with the toe of one shoe, trying to give himself traction.

The Allegheny's whistle howled now, so close that it was deafening. The ground shook. Pearl heard a horrible squeaking — the locomotive was attempting to brake. "Ronnie, Maisy...." she wailed, and then threw her face into the snow in front of her and covered her head with both her arms. She felt hot wind and stinging sparks as the engine surged by, unable to stop the momentum. The piercing, metallic shriek was endless.

The engineer, the brakeman, and the fireman jumped to the frosty ground beside the enormous wheels, rods, and pistons, amidst billows of steam; the coal train's engine had come to a stop several hundred feet south, almost reaching the Thurmond depot. An acrid odor permeated the crisp air. "I soaked 'er, I soaked 'er as best I could," the engineer said as the men began to run, one after the other, up the tracks, their heavy shoes making thudding, sloshing sounds.

They saw the little girl lying face down in the snow. They bounded to her, halted, surrounded her. The engineer, an older man with a gray mustache, knelt on one knee and gingerly touched the child's shoulder, "Sweetheart, are you okay?" he asked. He glanced to the tracks, noticed that trickles of rust-red were meandering towards them from the embankment, and scattered near the rails directly ahead of them were pieces of something throbbing and jelly-like that oozed yellowish pink.

The brakeman and fireman saw where the older man was looking. The brakeman took a few steps closer, paused, and rubbed his grizzled chin. "I think we hit one of 'em," he said calmly, his breath a haze in front of his face. "Who's the law in these parts?"

"This is Fayette County, West Virginia ... we need to get the county sheriff," the engineer answered, returning his attention to the figure lying so still in front of him. "Sweetie," he said again, "little girl,

what's your name? Where's your mommy? Can you tell us who was on the tracks?"

She stirred; they heard a groan. The brakeman squatted down on the other side of the prone child and both he and the engineer carefully supported her and partially lifted her so they could see her face. The fireman, still standing, who was a younger man with young children of his own, let out a whistle when he got a glimpse of the little girl's features. "What a beautiful child," he said. "I hope she's okay."

The three men watched her, staring at her perfect rose-bud mouth and round, rosy cheeks as her eyelids twitched and opened fully, revealing brilliant blue eyes framed by a thick fringe of blonde lashes. "Honey," the engineer said, "are you all right? Can you tell us what happened?"

The engineer and brakeman helped the little girl to a sitting position, and she looked up at the three men, one at a time, in turn. She brushed aside her long, golden braids and breathed deeply.

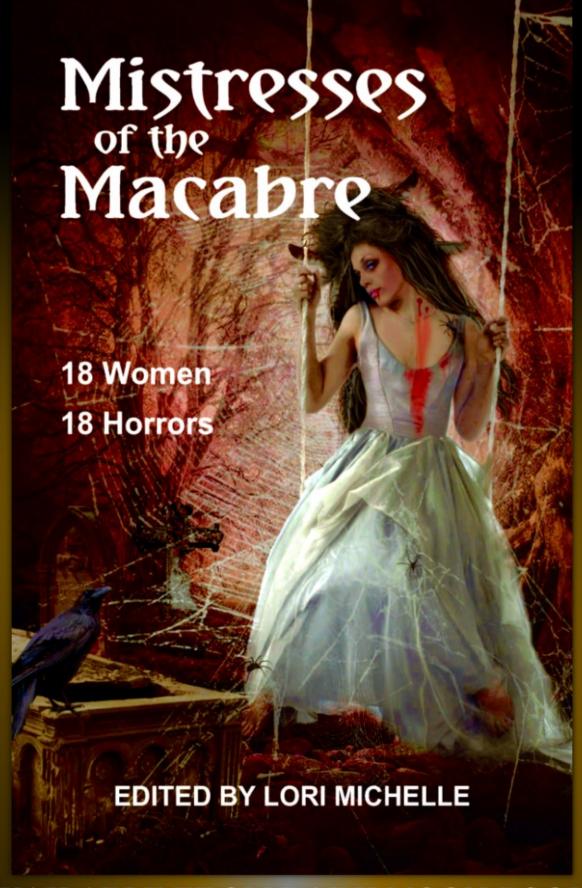
"Honey, what's your name?" the engineer asked again, cupping her head with one of his hands.

She made a motion with both hands as if straightening her skirt and brushing it off at once, her legs stretched out straight in front of her. "My name is Maisy," she said. "What's yours?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Rivka Jacobs grew up in Miami, Florida, and has lived in West Virginia for thirty-five years. She has a master's degree in sociology and another in mental health counseling. Rivka went back to school in her fifties to earn her BSN. She is currently an RN specializing in psychiatric nursing with one grown son, who lives in Philadelphia. Rivka published several stories in the 1980s, then stopped writing for a number of years. She says it feels good to be writing again — mostly horror, science fiction, and crime fiction and that it's never too late to get back on track, and try to make your dreams come true! You can find her on Twitter at @RivkaJacobs and on Facebook at http://www.facebook.com/rivka.jacobs.

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June Reyes Stone

June washed the blood off her hands. She took more joy then she had anticipated. June looked back at Jack.

"You know, I would have expected your fiancé to be a little more aggressive," she said. "I guess that's hard to do when you're chained and being butchered.

"June...please I'm...begging..." he said weakly.

"Now, now there's no need for that. Just relax."

June filled a bowl with water and grabbed a washcloth. She moved a chair, set it in front of him and sat down.

"I have something much more different planned for you," she said.

"For ten years we were together," she said as she wiped the blood off his face. "In those ten years I did everything I possibly could to make you happy. I cooked, I cleaned, I did your laundry. I took care of you when you whenever you got sick," her blood began to boil as she thought back. "And one night you just decided to leave," she was beginning to get frustrated.

June dumped the bowl of water over his head. "You embarrassed me. Humiliated me. Took me for granted and played me for a fool," she said "And here you are a year and a half later engaged. How the hell do you think that makes me feel? I was with you for ten years and this bitch gets what I earned."

"June...I never...meant..." he said.

"To hurt me, is that what you were going to say. Oh, Jack you don't know what that word means so don't use it," she said angrily. "If you did, we wouldn't be in this situation, now would we." June took the bowl and towel back to the sink. "You didn't care then but I guarantee you, I'll be all you will think about now," she kissed him and place a piece of tape over his mouth.

"Now, I'm going to make some dinner," she said. "I don't know about you but I'm starving."

June headed upstairs. She had been planning this for a year and a half. It never crossed her mind that she might actually have the opportunity to go through with it.

June cooked dinner; she even made enough for Jack. When dinner was done she ate, then went downstairs to the basement.

"Are we hungry?" she said.

Jack lifted his head. She noticed tears running down his face.

"Oh, have you been crying?" she asked. "I know it looks bad but don't worry I'll clean up later."

She sat down and removed his tape. She tried feeding him. She could tell he wasn't going to eat.

"Not hungry. How about thirsty?" she asked.

He didn't answer.

"I'm not going to poison you. If that's what you're worried about," she said. "Like I said, I have something else in store for you."

"Drink," he finally said.

June held up a glass with a straw. She knew that Jack would be a little suspicious about the food so she slipped a little something in his drink, just to help him sleep.

When he was asleep. June checked his locks and began cleaning her basement. She had placed plastic and painting cloth to cover the area in which she would work. She wrapped the body. June knew if she left the house, she'd risk the chance of someone seeing her.

For the past six months, she had been remodeling her house. It would be the perfect cover. She could get rid of the body, no one would see her but more importantly no one would ever find the body.

She wrapped the body and threw it in a hole behind Jack. Part of her remodeling was cementing her basement floor.

June threw the body in covered it with enough dirt then dumped the cement.

It took her a few hours. By the time she was done her basement floor looked perfect. She checked Jack one last time and up went to bed.

June woke up early she had complete confident in the sleeping pills she slipped Jack. She still had a lot to do. She was moving at the end of the week. And still had a few rooms to pack. June got dress and headed downstairs.

June made breakfast before checking on Jack.

"Good morning, sleepy head," she said heading downstairs. "You know even in a chair you're still a heavy sleeper." She noticed he looked around the room. "I told you I'd clean up. Don't worry they won't find her body. Yours is a different story. Would you like some breakfast?" June sat down and took off the tape. "I made your favorite, scrambled eggs, bacon, toast and coffee just the way you like it."

He didn't say anything.

"That fact that you're awake should be proof enough that I'm not poisoning you," she said.

"Coffee, please."

"After breakfast how about we take a bath?"

"Why?" he asked. "If you're going to kill me, why should I be clean?"

"You're right. Why should you?" she feed him breakfast. He wasn't as hesitant as the night before. "Because there's something you or rather we're going to do one last time before you die."

"What's that?" he asked.

"Sex," she answered.

He shook his head, "No."

"Honey, you don't have a choice," she said.

"I can control my body," he said. "I won't stand for you."

"Oh, yes you will," she said. "See I put a little help in your coffee. By the time I get you upstairs and give you a bath. You'll be ready to perform."

June knew after seeing what she was capable of doing Jack wouldn't try anything stupid.

After breakfast she took him upstairs. Her plan was simple; she would seduce him until he popped. June gave him a bath and chained him to her bed. She undressed and noticed he was ready.

To make sure there would be no trace of their romantic encounter she placed a thin layer of plastic around his penis. Then a condom with the tip cut off. She climbed on top and got to work.

She had always wanted children. Having Jack's children was always a dream but then again so was being his wife.

Little by little throughout their relationship June had planned their wedding. She'd found the perfect place for their wedding reception. The perfect dress, the flowers, the dinner and even the guest list. Especially, where they would have their honeymoon. She had it all planned. All she needed, all she wanted was for him to propose. Which he never did.

She knew it was a long shot. One night wouldn't always do it but it was the chance she was willing to take.

She noticed how much Jack was trying not to enjoy it.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "You can't tell me you're not enjoying this. I know you are."

"No," he said struggling.

"I don't know about your fiancé but I know what spots to hit."

June took him deeper and rode him hard until she exploded. Then rode him harder until she felt him explode inside of her.

She laid next to him. "See that wasn't so bad," she said heavily. "Think about it, at least you had sex one last time before you die."

She left him tied to her bed and took a shower. Even she had to admit that it felt good. Being able to be with him one last time like that was great.

Although Jack was not the best boyfriend wasn't considerate, wasn't romantic; however, when it came to the bedroom he was incredible.

She gave Jack another bath before returning him to the basement.

"Can I have something to drink," he asked as she went to tape his mouth.

"Sure. What would you like?"

"Water," he answered.

She walked over to the sink and got him his water.

June was going against her better judgment but as long as he was there she might as well make him a little comfortable. "Would you like to watch TV?"

"That would be nice. Thank you," he said sweetly.

June knew he was putting on the charm. Probably hoping to persuade June away from her plan. Distract her enough; maybe sweet-talk his way out of it. June caught on to his agenda quickly. Although she knew what he was doing June figured she'd play along.

"Tell you what, if you promise to be good. I won't tape your mouth," she said. "That means no yelling or screaming of any kind, got it."

"Yes, thank you."

June left him watching TV while she cleaned and packed. She was moving at the end of the week.

Although her plan was extremely thought out, there was always the small possibility she wouldn't get away it. That she might get caught and would have to pay for what she's done. It was a very small possibility but it was there. But for the rest of the week, she would do as she planned.

June cooked dinner as she packed her kitchen.

"Dinners ready," she said as she came down to the basement. She held a glass with a straw so he could drink.

"Thank you," Jack said.

"Now you know I'm not a bad person but you brought this on yourself."

He shook his head, "How?"

"How? If you would have talked to me, told me you weren't happy, instead of going behind my back, dating and sleeping with other women, then I wouldn't be so bitter." June could tell he was considering what she had said. She sat down, "ready?"

"Yes."

She feed him dinner and they watched TV when he was done she went upstairs.

When she came back down she was surprised at what she heard.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"What?"

"I'm sorry, you were right," he said. "I should have spoken to you. You were very good to me and I completely disregarded your feelings. Showed you no respect and embarrassed you. For that I am sorry."

Jack was really turning on the charm; June wondered just how far he was willing to go.

"I've never heard you say those words," she said. "I didn't believe you knew them let alone their meaning."

For the next few days her head pounded with confusion. So far he had kept his word he made no noise and spoke to her calmly and when he needed something he would whistle.

She finished packing; now all that was left was to move.

Before she went to bed, she went down to the basement.

"Jack, I've been having a hard time trying to decide on what to do," she sat down. "I see you've changed or at least that's what I think but you were always a charming man when you wanted something."

"Being here reminded me of how you are," he said. "Your good heart, I did take you for granted and you were right, my ex never treated or took care of me the way you have."

"I promise if you would give me another chance I'd treat you the way you deserve to be treated." Jack had gone farther then she thought. He was asking for a second chance.

"Are you trying to trick me? she said "For me to just let you go forgive and forget."

"No, I'm not trying to trick you," he said.

"Well see," she said as she left.

June was no fool, not anymore. She knew that he had been nice and charming in hopes that she would let him go.

She went to bed with the final day in her head. With so much to do the week went by slowly. June laid in bed. It was moving day. She'd finally finished packing. All the furniture and boxes were packed in the van ready to go. She just had a few loose ends to tie up like the one in her basement. Then she'd be on her way. In a few hours she'd be a good distance away from the place that brought her so much heartache and pain.

June got out of bed and headed into the bathroom. She knew there might not be an answer yet but decided to take it anyway. June opened the box and took out the pregnancy test. She took the test and in three minutes would know her answer.

June got dressed as she waited for the results.

She walked back into the bathroom, her breath caught in her chest as she read the results.

"Ok," she said.

She headed downstairs with confusion in her head and love in her heart. She knew what she had to do but now wasn't sure if she could go through with it.

June saw that Jack was already awake and waiting. She saw his eyes went from her face down to her hands. In her right was a knife, in her left the keys to the locks.

"I love you," he said

She let his words enter but she knew by his tone what she was going to do.

"I love you, too," she said as walked toward him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR – Reyes Stone is 29 and grew up in the Bronx, NY. She has an Associate's degree in Computerized Office Technology and a Bachelor's degree in Business Management from Monroe College in NY. Reyes also has a diploma from Long Ridge Writer's Group Breaking Into Print. She currently lives in Georgia with her boyfriend and their 1 1/2 year old daughter.



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An Interview With Creatrix Rae Beth

Sirens Call Publications would like to welcome Rae Beth, from Rae Beth Designs, as our featured artist of the month. Rae Beth, please introduce yourself to our readers and give them a little background about you and your design company.

Rae Beth: Hello all, I am Rae Beth, the creatrix behind Rae Beth Designs wearable and displayable art creations. In my work I often utilize animal remains, insects and many other interesting, unique objects. In addition to my creations I also style fashion shows and photo shoots which is a great way for me to bring many different ideas to life. I have been adorning people, places and things with interesting and beautiful accoutrements since I was a young girl. It's as if it was engrained in me to do so. I cannot imagine a day going by without creating something, I have been doing so for the better part of 20 years. I am blessed to be able to do what I love as my living.

Sirens Call Publications: Did you begin your craft as a standard jewelry and/or accessory designer? What inspired you to begin including macabre pieces such as skeletal parts and preserved insects into wearable art?



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Rae Beth: I began my craft in middle school creating incredibly elaborate friendship bracelets that I quickly began receiving special requests for. This led me to making jewelry, then hair pieces and costuming. My creating quickly took on a life of its own, eventually becoming my career. I have always been fond of the macabre, drawn to the dark & interesting aspects of fashion, relationships....life. I love the idea of a confident woman who can wear an amazing outfit with an edge, adding her own spin that embraces her individuality. I started my "Aesthetic Remains" line some years ago to pay homage to remains through aesthetics, while ensuring the aesthetic remains - giving life to the lifeless, embracing beauty beyond breath.

In my Aesthetic Remains collection, I use skulls, bones, fur, and many parts of an animal so that even after death, these beautiful creatures will not go to waste. The insects were simply an interest of mine that I started to use in my own personal pieces, but as with the friendship bracelets, and much to my delight, these pieces started to generate interest and orders. They are without question very unique items and have become quite sought after.

SCP: Having seen quite a few of your pieces, we see a little Steampunk mixed with classic Victorian elegance. What era or style would you classify them as?

Rae Beth: Steampunk is a whole other topic for me... Steampunk is a meld of worlds; it is a collective of looks that is actually morphing into something even quite different than its original intent. So for me, that is a very loose term these days. The standard base plate Steampunk idea is a lovely one, and I am glad that you feel my pieces convey well in that realm. It is my intention to make people aware that they

can wear any of my pieces with any look they choose, or within any realm, and still have it convey unique beauty. I love that you mention Victorian elegance because I am a huge advocate of elegance and class. I feel it is a woman's duty to always remain a lady. THAT is how a powerful woman displays her confidence, poise and grace.

SCP: What would you say your clientele prefer: the skeletal pieces, or the insect enhanced ones?

Rae Beth: My clients prefer the skeletal pieces over the insect pieces. The insect lovers flip-out over the insects and adore them like no other. They sell amazingly well and I receive many custom orders involving the insects....but there is still a general squeamish factor about insects for many people. Insects bad...animal carcass good....lol

SCP: Do you take requests for custom designs? Or have you created a custom piece that you found particularly challenging in the past?

Rae Beth: Most of my work is custom these days. I love customizing pieces for people. Getting your hands on a unique item, created just for you, is really awesome. I cannot recall being stumped by any particular piece, although I often get people who order what they think they want, and then change their minds after a bit of creative guidance; which is why I create up to five mock-ups to show them as options before finalizing a piece. Nine times out of ten, they will not chose what they THOUGHT they wanted, but rather something similar to what they actually asked for. Things that 'sound good' or 'dream up well' often won't wear as hoped or just don't come together realistically. So I really like showing people options... I'm actually all about options.

SCP: Do you have a favorite piece? And if so, what makes it special to you?

Rae Beth: I don't actually have a favorite piece per se. Although I have a few that I have kept for myself. And I will admit that the pieces I create for my own costuming purposes are often dear to me because they represent the event I was attending, each piece holds the memory from that time and place in my life. I do love when a piece I create is perfect for someone. I suppose that one becomes my favorite... until the next perfect fit comes along!

SCP: If you wouldn't mind, tell us about the other facets of your business that don't necessarily fit into the wearable accessory realm.

Rae Beth: Facets about my business that are not based on art itself....hmmm well, I work A LOT – I love it but am micro managed and scheduled beyond explanation more often than not, which is really the environment where I thrive best.

I would also like to share that I cherish the overwhelming number of women, many of whom are quite young, who have approach me with thanks for the inspiration to follow their own seemingly unconventional dreams on a less than secure path. It is hard to commit to art for a living... the outcome is so uncertain. It gives me a great deal of pride to be seen by others as a success.

It has been a windy road for sure, but so exciting, and what a ride! I am ever grateful for all the

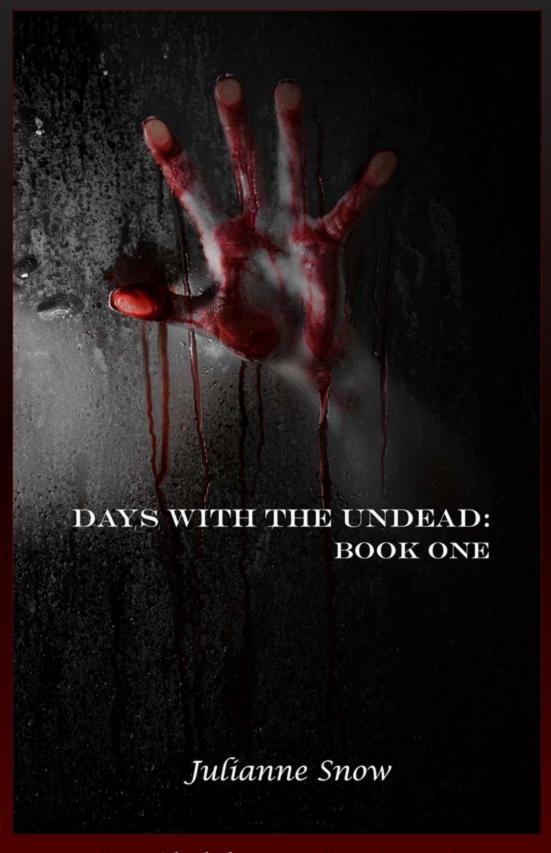
wonderful people I have encountered and all that I have learned along the way. My life is nothing short of spectacular and I am aware and thankful for that fact every second of every day.

SCP: Rae Beth, your pieces are absolutely beautiful. Thank you for taking the time to share your thoughts with us, and allowing us to showcase your gorgeous work in our Women in Horror tribute issue! We wish you the greatest success with your endeavors, and eagerly await what you have in store for us in the future.

Rae Beth: Thank you so very much for including me and for making me relevant – even if for a moment.

If you'd like to get in touch with Rae Beth, you can visit her on Facebook at: https://www.facebook.com/raebethdesigns, or email her directly with inquiries at: raebethdesigns@hotmail.com





Available on Amazon

An Excerpt from Days with the Undead: Book One Julianne Snow

Day 5...

The perimeter alarm was triggered by a singular Undead last night. Max thinks it might have been tracking slowly behind us all day as the Undead sometimes do waiting for the living to stop for a reprieve before inconveniently catching up. Its unexpected arrival was met with a swift and final second death but the fear of more of the Undead, especially in the semi-darkness, put every last nerve on edge.

No one got any rest last night which probably contributed to the accident that occurred today. Not that you can call it an accident. Accidents in this new world are anomalies. All we have now are certainties – if we do not take heed, we will not survive. It's just that simple.

We had decided as a group to scope out a somewhat larger urban area closer to the border separating Canada from the United States that had not reported any incidences of the Undead as of yet. We were short of certain necessary supplies that we would need to purchase and knew that at some point we had to restock. Our hope was that we could resupply and then get into the United States without too much incident. Under the current circumstances, the sooner, the better.

After observing the city for about an hour, we were amazed to see that things looked calm and orderly; like nothing apocalyptic was happening only kilometers away. There were no Undead in sight which was promising, and no one appeared to be in any kind of panicked state.

The infection did not look like it had spread this far southwest yet and we could probably get in and get through the city without much of a problem. I have to say that it was a little weird. We had not really managed to travel all that far and the reports on the news must have gotten the people into some kind of an agitated state.

I cannot simply believe that all of the news reports and the like hadn't affected these people. There was no way that I was prepared to believe the Canadian adage of "don't ask, don't tell" was so deeply entrenched in this town.

They had to know what was going on.

Regardless, the absence of the Undead meant that we were going to go into town and exploit their resources before they even realized they needed them. Get in, get out. Easy as pie right? We will never make such an assumption again.

As we walked into town we saw that our first and only stop was right on the relative outskirts. One of those big box-stores where you can buy everything from toilet paper to electronics to ammunition. We stocked up with what we needed and I'm sure that we must have looked somewhat crazy to the people working in the store.

We had decided to split up and leave most of our gear outside with the dirtiest of us. Anyone that had blood on their clothing was out of the question. We were going into this store to purchase ammunition, so making it look like we were stocking up for our next homicidal rampage wasn't going to help us get any service. The fewer questions we had to answer, the better.

We knew that we had to keep everything light and portable; each of us were already carrying a small

pack of supplies and adding ammunition, though needed, would only weigh each of us down more.

There was a point where putting more on our back became counterproductive. The heavier our packs were, the slower we could walk. It would also affect our ability to fight off the Undead if we happened to come across more of them in our travels.

Most of the time, we didn't have that moment to shed our packs so it was all about being able to engage in combat if needed with the pack on your back. It was a fine line to dance but each of us had practiced a little. Not a huge lot, mind you; it would have looked awfully weird for us to have taken so much stuff on a hiking trip, not to mention carrying our firearms with us.

You have to remember that while we were subtly preparing before all of this, the last thing we wanted to do was draw attention to ourselves. Too many curious eyes can lead to many more curious questions.

My husband Steve was a member of law enforcement and in a way I was as well, but to have to answer unwanted questions wasn't something that any of us wanted. Not for fear of being ridiculed or laughed at. Those thoughts were actually far from our minds. It was the fact that the political and law enforcement climates had changed so much since 9/11. We didn't want to be labeled as home-grown terrorists when what we were doing had absolutely no connection. Besides, it wouldn't have served a purpose for us to have been detained, trying to explain it all away. Even I can see how crazy and potentially dangerous we could have appeared to be.

In the store, we still got strange looks. Three very dirty and disheveled people wanting to purchase ammunition wasn't something that they were used to seeing on a daily basis. But no one asked us any questions, so we didn't have to lie.

Once we left the store with our meager but important purchases, we were still surprised by how calm the town was. It was so different from the panic that we had been experiencing for the past few days. Maybe the advance of the Undead had been stopped. Anything was, after all, completely possible.

We should have just backtracked out of town the way that we had come. Instead we decided to take local transit and cut straight through town. The idea was supposed to save us time, supposed to give us a break.

We got on the bus, and everything looked fine. People seemed happy if not a bit wary of the five of us with our guns, gear and gore-pocked clothes.

Then I heard the scream of pure fear.

It was a sound that I had heard before. I had even screamed a scream like that myself only a few days ago. It was the kind of scream that imprints on your soul and chills the marrow flowing through your bones. You hear a scream like that and there is no coming back. You know something is terrifyingly wrong and a part of your mind wants to ignore it; what you can't see can't hurt you. But then your subconscious comes to your rescue and you're able to think about your next steps.

It happened in a heartbeat. One minute he was alive, although he had looked a little under the weather at first glance; the next, he was Undead.23.5

He had been sitting by himself toward the back of the bus, sort of slumped over himself in the seat. There was a bandage on his forearm but to be honest, I didn't think too much of that; not everyone sporting a bandage is infected.

Barbara was the first of us to react, mainly because she was the closest to the disturbance occurring toward the rear of the bus. Knowing that firing a gun in such close quarters and with the number of people now trying to get as far away from the newly but ravenous Undead was dangerous and careless, she drew a short spear she had fashioned from a fallen maple branch.

She lunged at the thing that was once a middle-aged man as the bus took an inopportune moment to hit a pothole nestled in the road. The bus floor lurched and threw Barbara off-balance, allowing newly dead hands to clasp tightly onto her shoulders.

Before any of us had a chance to react those Undead arms were pulling Barbara ever closer.

Closer to the open mouth of certain death.

Its lips settled into the crook of her neck like those of a lover initiating an intimate interlude. Its teeth could be heard biting into her flesh in the comparative silence of that moment. The head jerked back and a surge of crimson burst forth.

Barbara screamed; in panic, in terror, in realization of what she would likely become. Her face turned to us, disbelief fairly evident but the control was still there. She was prepared to do whatever she could to save many more

The hole in Barbara's neck looked massive, a chasm of crimson on an alabaster background. While you could see the panic in her eyes and hear the panic from the other riders, she kept its attention focused solely on her. In an attempt to what I can only assume was to save her own life, she tried to get her hands up to help staunch the blood but it had too great of a hold on her. Giving up, she clung to the Undead man as it turned its attention to the rest of the riders.

The bus driver pulled over to the curb, opening the doors as he did. Everyone with the ability to exit did so, leaving their belongings behind in their haste. A few people were trapped in the back of the bus, unable for various reasons to pass by the carnage unfolding before them. Everything but their eyes was frozen in horror.

In the space of a moment, the Undead dropped Barbara. She had lost a lot of blood, that fact was apparent from the map of it on her clothing, conquering new ground each second in its quest for freedom.

The shock in her countenance was plain to see. Shock from the attack as well as shock from blood loss. She wasn't dead yet but soon she would be. There was no way Ben would have been able to repair the damage done to her neck. No way that we could have undone the damage that bite had done to her blood as well.

There was no saving Barbara; we knew and so did she.

The Undead turned and came at us, its speed still slightly quicker than most of its kind mainly from the

fact that it still had some oxygen in its blood to help feed the dying muscles.

Bob's rage in that moment was palpable. Barbara lay dying and now it was coming for more of us. He pulled out his hunting knife and with a swift and powerful arc he sliced through its neck almost completely. His aim was kissed by pure chance, or maybe it was a little skill.

Its head hung on for the briefest of moments only by the strength of a few tendons but as the body went limp the last remaining vestiges tore free. The severed head, still clasping the morsel of Barbara's flesh in its teeth, tumbled toward the rear of the bus, startling a response from the frozen passengers. It was as if that was the signal for them to leave and quickly, they fled from the carnage in their wake.

Our attention immediately turned to Barbara. She had slid down the support pole bolted in the middle of the bus and was now slumped forward. Her face was so pale in comparison to the pool of blood growing around her. She was bleeding out; the Undead had punctured her carotid artery in its haste to taste her flesh.

We knew that it wouldn't be long before she was dead. And now her blood, her body was infected. One of our biggest fears had befallen us. We would again be charged with killing someone who we cared about. We knew it and Barbara knew it. She quickly told us that she was sorry and then ordered everyone but Bob to leave. She had clearly chosen him to put an end to what she was going to become.

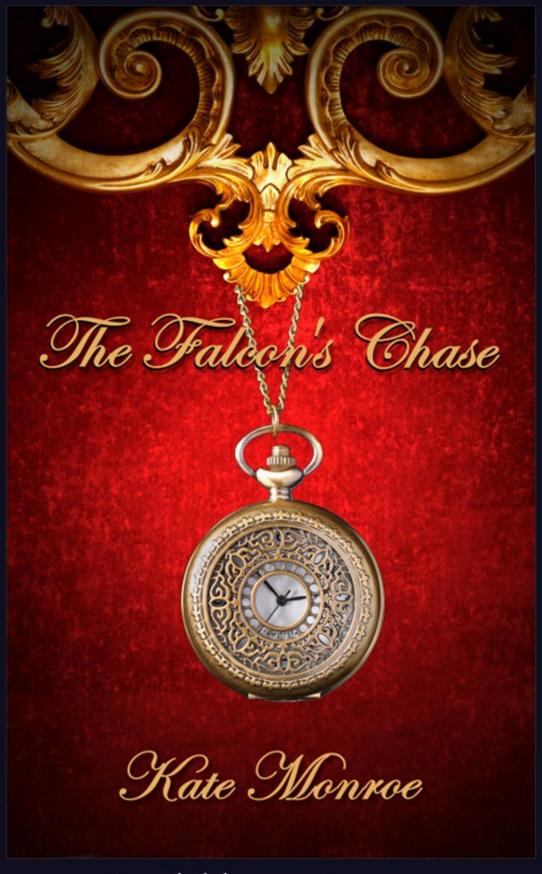
She had nominated him to extend to her the final dignity that every living thing deserves. Death.

We knew the moment of her death. It was marked by the cry of soul shattering grief that exited the bus. The single shot of Bob's firearm ended her reawakening.

Upon exiting the bus Bob looked at no one, only turning to head back out of town. We gathered our supplies and silently fell in behind him. Bystanders tried to engage us, screaming in their demand to know what was going on. We had no answers, only warnings.

Get out. They're coming.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - It was while watching Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* at the tender age of 6 that solidified Julianne's respect of the Undead. Since that day, she has been preparing herself for the (inevitable) Zombie Apocalypse. While classically trained in all of the ways to defend herself, she took up writing in order to process the desire she now covets; to bestow a second and final death upon the Undead. As the only girl growing up in a family with four children in the Canadian countryside, Julianne needed some form of escape. Her choice was the imaginations of others which only fostered the vibrancy of her own. *Days with the Undead: Book One* is her first full-length book, the basis of which can be found in her popular web serial of the same name. You can find Julianne's short fiction in *Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed, Women of the Living Dead, Twisted Realities: Of Myth and Monstrosity, Carnage: After the End – Volume 1* along with *The Sirens Call*. In the next year, she has more stories being released in anthologies, including *Horrific History* (Hazardous Press) and *Death by Drive-In*, the Coffin Hop Charity Anthology.



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