

February 2015 issue #19



Women in Horror Month "Whispers in the Dark'

Short Stories, Poetry, A. Flash Fiction

An Interview with Hannah Neurotica

Original Artwork by Multiple Artists

An Interview with Writer & Director Heidi Lee Douglas

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# **Contents**

# **Editorials**

**5** Women Write Horror, Damn Right They Do: An Editorial — Julianne Snow **6** Why Do I Support Women in Horror Month? An Editorial — Gloria Bobrowicz

# **Fiction**

- 8 Flytrap MontiLee Stormer
- 12 Bunnies Diane Arrelle
- **15** The League of Draven JN Marcotte
- **21** The Murder of Cassie Hartford K.Z. Morano
- **24** Voices A. F. Stewart
- 27 Where Nothing Will Grow Rivka Jacobs
- **31** Homecoming Jennifer Mccullah
- 34 Lost Gerri Leen
- 38 Put Your Lights On Catherine Connolly
- **40** Plain Wooden Boxes Elaine Pascale
- 44 Kill the Girl Anne Michaud
- **46** Not Quite Goodbye E.F. Schraeder
- **50** Whispers Allison Wade
- **56** Scarecrow Nina D'Arcangela
- **59** Tendrils of Darkness Charissa Udar
- 73 Do Not Play Donna Cuttress
- **76** Best Friends Gloria Bobrowicz
- **80** One Bad House Gwendolyn Kiste
- 85 Hold Me Tight S.J. Budd
- 89 Hunt(ed) Julianne Snow
- 90 Shuttered Casondra Brewster
- **94** A Change of Season Jess Landry
- **96** Cross Your Heart Lisa Lepovetsky
- 99 Death in the Lady's Dressing Room Charie D. La Marr
- ${f 101}$  A Conversation With the Void Lori R. Lopez
- **105** Secret Tabitha Thompson
- 106 Starlet's Web Adrienne Dellwo
- **110** The Truth in Abercrombie Alice J. Black
- 114 Blind Fear D.M. Slate
- **117** La Luna Justine Johnston Hemmestad

# **Poetry**

- **62** Pan-Demonium Lori R. Lopez
- 64 Dirge for Cthulhu A. F. Stewart
- **64** Women of the Wormwood Tiffany Morris
- 65 Don't Sameen Carter
- 67 Krisper Miracle Austin

### **Features**

69 An Interview with WiHM Founder, Hannah Neurotica 121 An Interview with Heidi Lee Douglas, Writer and Director

# **Artwork**

Jeanette Andriulli

72 Mermaid

Stephanie Knight – Knightmare Attic Studios

- **11** Bozzo
- **58** Camille
- 66 Knightmare
- 93 Creepy Dolls Lurking at the Cemetary
- 124 Zombie Baby

**Emerian Rich** 

- 30 Found
- 37 Death of the Machines
- 75 Elizabeth
- 95 Vamp Skull
- 116 Spider Lady

Cassandra Sechler

- 4 Chained
- 23 The Secret
- **61** In the Mirror
- 113 The Monster

Venus de Vilo

- 45 Crazy for You: The Sequel Part One
- 49 Crazy for You: The Sequel Part Two
- 55 Crazy for You: The Sequel Part Three

125 Credits



# Women Write Horror? Damn Right They Do!

Julianne Snow

Ensconced in a community such as this, we're often insulated from the disbelief some others hold that we (women) write horror. But take us out of that bubble and things change. At times I don't feel I have the luxury of discussing what it is I do for a living because the people who inhabit my everyday life simply don't, and won't, understand. It's a duality I don't really enjoy, but know that I must live—at least for the moment.

Why is that? It's simple really, I write horror. Those dark moments many would care to forget, would love never to see; they're fodder for my fiction. That's not to say that I'm exploitative in any way, but true horror tends to work best when there's an aspect of realism to it. That little grain of truth transforms it into something that will linger for quite some time and as a horror writer, that's what I'm looking for.

Don't get me wrong, I admit I write about things like Zombies, ghosts and other-worldly creatures, but it's the spaces between them that are filled with plausibility. It's a hard chord to strike and admittedly, I fall short sometimes, but when I hit that sweet spot of authenticity it's magic. Okay, maybe in my own mind, but that's all that counts for me. I'm a horror writer and as such, I know my reach is limited. Horror is not yet considered mainstream, though that's changing a little bit each and every day.

It's limited even more by the fact I'm a woman. At least at the moment it is. I've noticed a trend, one that's shifting, but a trend none the less. Readers will pick up books written by men or assigned male pseudonyms when looking for their horror fix. Now that's not true in all cases, but it's true in many and I think it's something that needs to be discussed. Is there a reason for it? Perhaps.

As the ubiquitous 'weaker' sex, there may be a presumption that the horror of women simply isn't strong or dark enough to satisfy the male reader. To that I say — bullshit. I have been terrified (in a good way) by many a female author. Sure, some might say it's because I'm also a woman, but conversely, some of the generally agreed upon scariest stuff out there written by men hasn't even made me flinch. It's all about perspective and until you give someone the chance to scare you, you'll never know whether they're capable or not.

So the next time you're scrolling through the horror section on Amazon, Barnes & Noble or Kobo, or if you happen to be in a brick and mortar establishment browsing the selection of paperbacks take a moment and make the choice to pick up something written by a woman. You may be surprised at what hits you in the face when you delve into the words.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Julianne Snow is the author of the *Days with the Undead* series and *Glimpses of the Undead*. She is the founder of Zombieholics Anonymous and the Publicist and Co-Founder of Sirens Call Publications. Writing in the realms of speculative fiction, Julianne has roots that go deep into horror and is a member of the Horror Writers Association. With pieces of short fiction in various publications, Julianne always has a few surprises up her sleeves. Be sure to check out *The Carnival 13*, a collaborative round-robin novella for charity which she contributed to and helped to spearhead which was released in October 2013.

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# Why Do I Support Women in Horror Month? An Editorial

Gloria Bobrowicz

Welcome to our third annual issue celebrating Women in Horror; the year has gone by quickly. I am especially excited to see the talent of our female horror writers showcased in this eZine. Why do I support Women in Horror Month? Just read the stores in this eZine and you'll see exactly why.

More and more women are entering the genre. I am seeing both men and women crossing genre lines. Women have some excellent horror ideas, parlaying them into awesome stories. I'm just very happy to see women not being afraid to put themselves out there.

True crime – most people would consider it horror in the real world – is one of my loves. Miss Anne Rule is a master of that genre. Some of her work has also made it to the big screen.

Could you be one of our greatest horror writers? You'll never know unless you get your work out there. Who knows what fame and fortune are around the corner. I would love to say that SCP has published your first story and I knew you when. I especially enjoy working with first time authors, their enthusiasm knows no bounds. Don't let yourself become jaded, keep at it.

There is so much talent out there. Are you one of the next bestselling authors? You'll never know unless you try. Write what you want and send it out. What good is a story still sitting on your computer? Don't let excuses or insecurity get in your way. Don't be afraid of rejections, it's part of the writing world. If you have a real passion for writing, you will find the time. There is nothing better or more satisfying than getting that initial idea, an inspiration for a future story.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Gloria Bobrowicz has been a huge horror fan since early childhood. She loves books related to true crime – particularly the serial killer variety. Watching the movie 'Night of the Living Dead' or some of the older horror movies such as, 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers', 'The Thing from Another World', or 'War of the Worlds' with a bowl of popcorn is her idea of relaxing. Gloria is a co-owner and the Editor-In-Chief of Sirens Call Publications.

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# Bent Metal

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

# Flytrap MontiLee Stormer

I'm hungry, said one.

I'm thirsty, said the other.

It had started again, and she'd been so careful, cautiously slipping her arms in through the loops, connecting the hooks into the eyes, adjusting the cups just so. They'd been quiet for the last few weeks and her chest only looked as though she'd just had a bad reaction to some ill-gotten shellfish, swollen and a red that looked like a deep blush. Hallucinations, both visual and auditory could be explained by mixing cheap wine with expensive scotch. She'd done it enough times, but never were the voice so specific, so demanding.

No.

It's hot in here.

I'm itchy.

Sigh.

Where are we going?

I think I'd like some ice cream.

*Ice cream* for pity's sake. Now they want ice cream. The last time, before they'd gone blessedly dormant, it was mocha coffees. Earlier it was New York Strip, rare. The horror was, they would actually eat, little mouths working, hints of lots of sharp teeth.

Maybe Neapolitan

Chocolate cherry cordial

She fed them ice cream, peeling down the cups of her bra, holding a small spoon to the round little mouths, first the right, then the left. Never the other way around. That mistake she'd only made once, and the right threw a squealing tantrum, the likes of which would have brought Child Protective Services. However, no one else ever heard them.

The little mouths on each nipple opened as wide as the areolas and slurped down the cold ice cream. She didn't know where the food went and only felt little spidery lines of cold radiating to her ribs and down her belly. In the last couple of days, the breasts themselves had grown noticeably larger. This was by design, she knew now, because it attracted prey better. As she fed them, she thought sullenly to the last date she'd had, which was the last one she'd let go further than a smooch goodnight. There was biting and blood and it was the first time she'd come to grips with the reality that the voices she'd heard from her breasts weren't just a sign of impending mental collapse.

She and this guy, even his name was disappearing behind the mental wall her brain was building block by block, enjoyed a fabulous dinner at her place. They kissed and took breaths when they could, never leaving a lip unoccupied for long, never giving it time to dry.

They'd moved from the kitchen where they'd become more comfortable with each other over rum and Cokes, to the bedroom where they'd become more comfortable with each other under their clothes. Some fumbling and a lost button later, warm hands met smooth skin, and wet mouths explored the landscape with tongues, darting and taking notes. She'd deftly removed her bra, a no frills, basic edition dime-store acquisition, with only one hand. It was a show opener that never failed to impress. She forgot, simple as that. They'd wanted eggs this morning. Maybe a little coffee. She forgot, was all...

In the blush of passion, she'd forgotten they were hungry.

Immediately his hands were drawn to her breasts like loose metal drawn to an MRI machine. Whether the lust or the libations, she'd never know if he hadn't seen the little mouths or hadn't cared. There was kneading and squeezing, an act of men that was always a mystery to her. She wasn't a loaf of bread being prepared to rise but she stayed out of his way keeping her hands in his hair, remaining pliable and flexible. It was a guy-thing, and if that's what it took to get to the good stuff, she'd endure. He'd moved from kneading the loaf to pinching the peaks.

Ouch," he tore his lips from hers and sucked in a breath of air. "Something bit me."

"You're so drunk," she said, her voice taking on that low purr she hoped sounded sexy. There was a nibbling at the back of her mind but she dismissed it and it floated away on brain cells bloated with booze.

He giggled high and sharp, a sure sign of inebriation. "Yeah, I am."

More kissing, more near asphyxiation.

"Ouch, sunnuva..." His lips drew back completely now and his giggle held a sharp edge of Really Not Funny. "Something on your boobs bit me." She saw the jerk of his shoulders, first the left, then the right, and she remembered as she heard their little voices.

Too hard

I'm hungry

"Oh, damn it," she said and it was the quiet proclamation of resignation, like discovering cat puke in a favorite potted plant. "Oh damn it all."

I taste

I taste

And then he was screaming that her tits had his hand, and unfortunately it was true. Her right breast seemed glued to his left hand.

She felt her left shoulder jerk forward and her left breast now had his right hand and he screamed louder. Any second the neighbors would start pounding on the walls and calling the cops. She had to keep him quiet and calm him down.

If she was caught, that's what she would say.

Her hands went to his mouth to shush and quiet, but the fingers went to his nose and pinched it closed. Her palm went to his jaw and sealed his lips. She watched his cheeks puff out demanding air and getting nothing but swollen lips and broken capillaries in his nose. He tugged at his hands and the teeth held tight.

He went to his knees and after many long moments his eyes showed their whites and he went limp. His lips were swollen and bruised, but the worst were his hands. The little nipple mouths had gnawed through the soft fleshy tissue joining the thumbs to the hands and she could hear the determined crunching of the teeth through the metacarpals. The left was working inward to work on the knuckle on the index finger. The right was making its way to the wrist. He stopped struggling and his eyes lost that spark she'd seen when first he'd asked her out. It was the spark that made her say yes, but the only glint now was the dulling reflection of the lamp on the nightstand as he eyes began to cloud to white.

She sat on her bedroom floor waiting for them to finish, tears streaming down her face. The angle of the arms towards the shoulders proved to be too wide for the left breast to continue up the arm, so in deference to the right, now gnawing on the denser bicep on its way to the deltoid, it was munching across the chest. It left ragged little teeth marks across the skin, through the shirt, on the bone. Ten minutes later, she looked down and saw nothing but full and bloody breasts and a dead man with no arms and a missing lower jaw on her floor.

The saddest part – really the worst part when she got right down to brass tacks – was the mouths were gone. No sharp little teeth, no begging, no complaining, not even a contented sigh and where was the gratitude, she wondered. At that, she choked back a laugh that escaped as a sob. Without thinking more about anything else, she pulled on a shirt, and with arms stronger than they were just that morning when she struggled with the mayonnaise jar, she put him into his car and drove him somewhere not near her apartment, somewhere distant and dark and full of things that flapped overhead or padded by on furry feet hardened by the elements. She wiped everything down, and didn't care if it wasn't enough. She made her way back, first by bus, and then by cab, and then bus again, paying cash and keeping her sad, braless self away from everyone as much as possible.

She cleaned up her apartment and threw everything away. She would worry about police and investigators when that time came and she didn't want to over think. He was here, they had a bite, and then he was gone. What she enjoyed most was the silence, and the fact that nothing was chewing through her shirt, or through her guests.

She was so happy, she cried. The next day, her period started, and it was heavier that she'd ever experienced. Two days in, she passed a blood clot that felt as if it were filled with broken glass.

Or bones.

She didn't peek to confirm.

A few days later, police had come and gone, tracking the poor guy's last movements through his phone records. Identification was almost impossible due to the fact that animals had removed most of the

soft tissue on his face. Sure she'd had a date, she told them. It ended well, but he was drunk. She could have kept him, but she wasn't that kind of girl, so she didn't. When he didn't call in a few days, she'd assumed he wasn't the nice guy she'd originally thought. She even cried again. It was good, the performance, the story, the cry. It felt real and the cops were nice enough to comfort her.

Things fell back into routine. Nice blouses, thin bras, it was getting easier. Life was getting manageable.

Three weeks and she almost felt like she could start dating again. Her breasts had gone back to the normal B cups and where the mouths were, there was nothing but a splash of reddish spots. Rash maybe, wearing a dirty, sweaty bra.

Still to be safe, she treated her breasts like live grenades. Carefully putting on bras and blouses and sweaters, her body was a glass temple and she didn't want to cause a crack in the serene surface. Three weeks of bliss-wrapped trepidation. And now.

A steak

A coffee

Soon there would be swelling as they fed, becoming bigger, rounder, more irresistible to keep from reaching out, caressing, touching. She knew what they were really hungry for and she changed out of her simple sensible sweater and pulled out the low scoop-neck t-shirt. She wouldn't wait for the bait to grow. A few hours and it would be done. The sooner she got this over with, the sooner she could get back to something like a normal life, for a few weeks stretch anyway. Maybe later she'd have a doctor look into it, but not every biological function needed a doctor's blessing. She had her period, grew breasts, and now her breasts had teeth. Circle of life, right?

She'd learned to plan around her period when she was younger, keeping boys at arm's length, nothing further than second base. This was just flipping the script a little.

Forget the appetizers, she thought giving the right one a surreptitious little stroke as she climbed the bus headed cross-town. Let's get you guys the main course.

In her head, she thought she could hear them cheer.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - MontiLee Stormer is a troublemaker, writing acts of mayhem and despair for her own selfish pleasure. Her interests wander from abnormal psychology to lost loves, and the storied Paradise Valley of Detroit. She's been published in strange and wonderful places like Daily Nightmares, Black Ink Horror and Murky Depths. An active member of GLAHW and Supporting Member of HWA, she lives in Metro Detroit.



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# **Bunnies** Diane Arrelle

The light streaming in the windows glittered with thousands and thousands of teeny-tiny motes of dust. Drifting slowly, dancing downward, they settled on the spotless glass windowpanes and slowly coated the surfaces of the highly waxed furniture. Soon the longer-lived particles would spiral all the way down, down into the lush, potpourri scented, oriental throw carpet and the polished and buffed parquet hardwood floors.

Prissilla screamed. Whipping an Endust treated rag out of her bathrobe pocket, she ran into the living room and beat the minuscule white specks off the coffee table and back into the air.

"Die!" she howled. "Don't darken my door with your filthy little corpses again!"

Swiping madly at the dust flying wildly about her head, Prissilla started crying.

"I'll never win," she sobbed. "I'll never get rid of the dust and she'll never let me be free. She stood amid the wildly swirling particles, blind to them as the tears fell from her face to make tiny dust-mud puddles on the floor.

The dust slowly settled back onto the coffee table but the majority found their way to the shiny floor. She knew that soon they would unite to form larger units, globs of dust that would skitter under the furniture with the slightest breeze.

"Well I quit. Yeah, I give up. I can't control them anymore, the dust bunnies can have their way," Prissilla mumbled, feeling defeated by the overwhelming task that always lay before her. No

wonder Howard couldn't take anymore.

Shoulders rounded by the weight of failure, Prissilla left the room. Her back was turned from the bunnies that shivered in her wake.

Three hours later, Prissilla struggled to relax and read a book on the spotless, freshly vacuumed sofa. She listened to whispers from under the couch, whispers of hunger, need and growing strength.

"Stay there and leave me alone." she whimpered. "I can't fight you and I'm not the one who wants to. Leave me alone."

But the inaudible voices continued to hum in her head, "Prissssilla...let us love you...Sssilla...we only want to make you happy...let us help."

Prissilla clamped stereo headphones on, turned up the volume and tried to drown out the words with music. As she adjusted her MP3 player, a frail woman with pink-tinged white hair hobbled into the living room.

Prissilla sat silently and watched.

Watched as leaning heavily on her gleaming, cold, steel walker, the old crone inched over to the bookcase.

"Tsk, tsk," the woman muttered as she struggled to pull a white cotton glove over her gnarled, arthritic hand. Then she slowly ran her fingers over the rim of the shelf and smiled.

"Just as I thought," she said smugly. "Prissy! Prissy, get up off your lazy behind and clean this room. The dust is so thick a soul could choke to death!"

*So die,* Prissilla thought. *Choke, die and leave me alone,* but she jumped off the sofa anyway and immediately starting dusting the furniture with the cloth taken from her jeans pocket.

"The glass, the glass," the old woman croaked as she lit a cigarette. "The windows are dirty too."

Prissilla ground her teeth together until they hurt. She watched the smoke curl upward and could almost see it covering the freshly washed windows with a new coating of tars and resins.

"Yes, Mother," she finally said.

The old woman hobbled over to the overstuffed chair and fell like a graceless skeleton onto the seat. "While you are at it Prissy, there are dust bunnies under the sofa you were loafing on. I

swear you are the laziest woman alive. No wonder Howard left you."

Prissilla stiffened at the mention of Howard. "Ignore her," a voice whispered so softly she wasn't sure if she heard it or it was inside her head. "No, better yet, kill her."

Prissilla shook her head, opted to ignore the old woman and sat back down to read.

"Prissy, if you don't do something about those dust bunnies, I will, even if it kills me."

Prissilla looked up for a moment, then back down. She listened to her mother struggle with the walker, trying to pull herself up out of the big, deep chair. She looked up again momentarily when she heard

the walker slip from the older woman's grip on the sleek slippery floor.

She watched her mother fall forward and lay prone on the hardwood.

"Prissy...help me." the elderly woman called in a pitiful voice. "Prissy I've fallen...fallen and I can't get up"

Prissilla sat like a statue fighting her emotions. Just as she was about to give in, her mother barked, "Prissy, stop this foolishness right now. Do something before the dust down here drowns me!"

"All right Mother, I'll do something... I'll do something right now." She got up, went to the phone and called Howard. "Honey, you can come home now. I've decided to take care of the problem."

Then Prisilla bent down and called. "I hear you. I accept you and you can stay."

The old woman looked fearful and desperately grasped the fallen walker as she tried to pull herself up.

From under the chairs and sofas dozens of little fuzzy dust bunnies crept out whispering to each other.

Prissilla smiled at the pests that had somehow become pets and pointed. "Okay guys. Dinnertime!"

A few nights later Howard sat and read the newspaper as Prissilla dusted the spotless coffee table. She hummed along to the whispered song of contentment that only she could hear as she moved about the room, swiping the cloth across everything.

Everything that is, except the gray, fluffy, sculpture of an old bent woman with a shiny, shiny walker.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Diane Arrelle, the pen name of Dina Leacock, has sold almost 200 short stories and two books including Just A Drop In The Cup, a collection of short-short stories. She recently retired from being director of a municipal senior citizen center and resides with her husband, her younger son and her cat on the edge of the Pine Barrens (home of the Jersey Devil).

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# MOST WOULD WALK AWAY, BUT REAL COMPASSION TAKES GUTS!



COMING SOON!

# The League of Draven JN Marcotte

'It's grotesque,' she decided, examining a painting of a half-naked woman, her emaciated body framed by dragonfly wings, her verdant eyes alight with mischief. She wished the guy she had followed in would hurry up. Cindy believed in playing hard to get, but her resolve was wavering under the painting's glare. She smiled at the canvas as he edged closer. Finally.

He cleared his throat beside her, gesturing toward the painting. "So. What do you think?"

She stole a small glance as he folded his arms, gazing up, and followed his eyes back to the skeletal woman. "Well... I think it's a statement about society's obsession with thinness." He turned toward her and she felt a flash of insecurity. Maybe he liked bony girls. Maybe he thought she was jealous. "I mean, it's not healthy. What's beautiful about eating disorders?" The stick-thin arms, the jutting cheekbones. It was hideous.

"You don't like it?"

"She's so... gaunt. Fragile."

"Really? You look in those eyes and see fragility?"

She glanced at his profile and back up. Green eyes burned into her, sparkling with impish delight. Those eyes, that feral smile... she looked like she might knife someone for fun. Cindy grimaced. Maybe fragile wasn't the word.

He proffered a hand. "I'm John."

"Cindy." She met his eyes for the first time and stared. The blue of robin eggs and summer sky and arsenic flames. She'd never seen eyes so blue. She blinked away toward the painting. "Honestly, I don't really like them."

"None of them?"

"Not really."

"Aw, I worked so hard."

Her eyes flared, darting back to his.

He grinned. "Don't worry. It's not the harshest review I ever had."

She flushed. "You're the-"

"Really, don't worry about it. I get that all the time." He turned back to the painting. "Just to clarify, though, it's not a social critique."

"No?"

"No." He smiled at her, eyes twinkling. "It's a fairy."

Cindy laughed. "Wow, you'd think the wings would have tipped me off."

"Dariana." She raised an eyebrow and he explained, "The painting. This is Dariana, Queen of the Summer Court, flying out to war."

She snorted on a laugh. "Fairies war?"

"Viciously. There's a story about Dariana herself being frozen by the Winter Court. They say she never recovered."

"That's some head cold."

He turned his smile to the painting. "There's hope for her yet. That's the thing about fairy tales. It just takes the right rescue."

"Any stories about that?"

His gaze lowered. "None that I've heard."

Cindy stepped closer. "You should make one up. People like a happy ending."

They smiled at one another for a moment and then he laughed, looking away. "Hey, sorry for sneaking up on you. I just like to know what people think." His smile widened. "Especially if they hate it."

"I didn't say that."

He grinned. "Right. Anyway, can I make it up to you? There's a coffee shop across the park that-"

Her eyes lit up. "No way. Mocha Joe's?"

He straightened, surprised. "You go there?"

"All the time!"

"Alright, another Joe junkie. Can I buy you a coffee?"

Cindy laughed. Better and better. She turned, starting toward the door. "Alright. But I'll warn you, my

tastes aren't cheap."

He fell into step beside her as they passed a massive canvas. She glanced over it. All women about her own age, ghostly pale, their lips tinged blue. Not quite dead, but close. Geez, his stuff was creepy. And then Cindy froze as she noticed a familiar face.

"Cindy?"

She pointed. "Is that Susan Delmar?" She'd been all over the news when she disappeared a few months before. Cindy would have recognized her anywhere.

His voice softened. "Yeah. Next to her is Bridget Petersen. That's Nancy Carroway... Leah Jones, Alexis Turner."

"All missing?"

"From all over the state, all in the last five years. Sad, isn't it?"

There were scores of them. "Why would you paint that?"

John shrugged, jamming his hands in his pockets. "I figured they should be remembered. Don't you?" He started walking again.

It was almost sweet. A memorial. Chewing her lip, she hurried after him. "But all your other stuff is fairies."

"Fairies kidnap people sometimes. All those girls... they just made me think about that, I guess."

Cindy glanced back over her shoulder. "I guess. What's it called?"

"The League of Draven."

She frowned in confusion. "Like... a mile of missing persons?"

He laughed as they cleared the gallery hall and turned toward the exit. "More like a collection."

She chuckled. "Wow. You just keep getting creepier."

John shrugged, grinning helplessly. "What can I say? Those cartoons are a joke. Real fairies-"

"Real fairies?"

He rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean. It's like the difference between Grimm fairy tales and Disney movies. Real fairies are jerks."

"But why kidnap a bunch of people?"

"For fun. For spite. For magic."

"Magic?"

"Sometimes they need human lives to fuel their spells."

She watched him for a moment, verging on laughter. "Wait, you *actually* believe in fairies?" He pushed the door open, not answering, and she laughed. "That's so cute. What about unicorns? Them, too?"

They emerged into a flawless summer night, the sky brilliant with a trillion pinpricks of light. The street was quiet as they descended the steps, a few cars passing, a sparse scattering of pedestrians. It was hushed, warm. Strangely peaceful. Cindy took a deep breath as they crossed the road and thought she smelled flowers.

A sudden thought pricked her. If a league was a collection, what was a draven?

John led her toward a set of open gates. "Quickest way's through the park." He glanced back at her. "Unless you'd rather go around?" Cindy peered past him into the wooded darkness and he raised his hands disarmingly. "I promise not to be creepy."

She smiled, arching an eyebrow playfully as she stepped closer. "I don't know. You seem pretty shady."

He chuckled. "Just when I'm painting."

She hooked her arm through his, her chin raised. "Well, if you promise to be a gentleman..."

"I promise."

They passed the gates, leaving the cars and pedestrians behind. The moon was yet to rise over the trees and it was dark along the path. Cindy tucked herself closer. "So why painting?"

"I have a low tolerance for desk work."

"You're not worried about starving?"

John chuckled. "Well, this isn't the skinniest I've ever been, so I guess I'm doing alright."

She nodded, and in that lull, Cindy heard the silence. No birds, no crickets, no omnipresent high schoolers. She couldn't even hear cars on the street. She'd never heard such perfect silence. She giggled nervously. "Geez, it's quiet."

He leaned close, his lips brushing her hair, and breathed, "Must be a predator nearby."

She tensed and he burst into laughter. Scowling, she swatted his arm. "You promised!"

"I know, but it was perfect!"

"What am I doing here?" She asked in jest, but a nervous part of her mind flared to life and asked in earnest. What was she doing in an empty park with a stranger who painted missing girls and vicious, naked women?

He felt her wariness and glanced away sheepishly. "Sorry. We can head back if you want. This place is a lot more serial killer than usual."

There was a heartbeat's hesitation and then she chuckled, squashing the skittish thoughts. "You're really blunt."

He shrugged, a bit of the goofy grin returning. "I guess it comes of being cooped up in a studio all day. It's nice to get out and talk to someone." The grin widened. "Even if she hates my art."

Cindy rolled her eyes and pushed him. "I never said I hated it! It's just creepy."

He laughed and stuffed his hands in his pockets, walking again. "It is." She held back a moment longer, and then hurried after him.

The trail split, the main fork meandering through a wide field and a smaller gravel path leading down by the lake. Cindy had walked those trails a thousand times in her youth and she turned down the lake path in the comfort of old habit. Gravel crunched underfoot as they followed it along the gentle slope.

"Last chance to turn back."

Cindy frowned, slowing. "What?"

"If you wanted to go around." His face was shadowed as he pointed through the trees. "We're almost halfway."

She stared down the path. "We're practically there."

"Clearly you take this route more than I do."

He held out his arm and she took it with a laugh. "I can tell you the number of steps to Joe's from anywhere."

The path curved through the trees, descending toward the lake. A bank of fog smothered the lowlands, twining around their ankles, and Cindy shivered. She glanced back up the hill. Maybe he was right. Maybe they should have taken the other route. Within moments, they were engulfed. How stupid would she sound if she asked to turn back after all?

John paused. "Huh. The apples are ripe."

She squinted, wondering how he saw anything through the fog. "But it's June..."

He stepped off the path and she clung to his arm like a lifeline. "They *look* ripe. See?" A gnarled tree appeared in the fog, its branches heavy with fruit. John reached up, shedding her arm like last summer's skin, and plucked off a piece. "Here."

She stared uncertainly. Its skin was pale, luminous. "I don't think that's an apple."

He laughed. "What else would it be?" He pushed it into her hand. It felt warm in her palm.

"But... look at it."

He smiled and picked another, taking a bite. "See?" He glanced down at the fruit. "Mm. It's good."

Cindy hesitated a moment longer and then took a small bite. The skin broke easily, rupturing nectar and sunshine across her tongue, and her eyes flared wide.

It was amazing.

Stunned, she stared down at the tiny tear in the skin, the soft flesh underneath, and took a larger bite. It tasted even better. More. She tore into it, cramming it greedily into her mouth, dizzy with the deliciousness of it, and was frustrated to find her hands suddenly empty. More. She wanted more.

John laughed and she looked up. A summer's glow cast the fog around him in a faint kaleidoscope of colors. How had she not noticed before? He dropped the fruit and stepped closer, his image blurring, taking a moment to catch up with him. His eyes glowed bluer than ever, and she saw a glint of something feral in

them, something like the fairy girl. Beautiful and hard. She shuddered and looked down at her empty hands. More?

"Poor Cindy," he laughed softly. He took her arm and pulled her further from the path.

She staggered after him, dazed. No more fruit? The mist danced around them as they passed shrouded trees that looked increasingly strange, crossing through an otherworldly landscape that was nothing like the park she had grown up playing in with her adoring father. Will he ever know what happened to me? a desperate part of her wondered.

The thought jarred her back into place. She looked up at John, clamped onto her arm, dragging her through the woods. She jerked her arm away and stopped, eyes wide and frightened. What was happening?

He turned back to her, smiling that disarming smile. So handsome. The image blurred again and she glimpsed pointed teeth in a too-wide grin.

She stumbled back. Struggling to keep her voice steady, she whispered, "John. I want to go back."

John laughed, a cold sound. Inhuman. "A little late for that. You have to admit, I gave you plenty of opportunities."

The world swayed, the mist swirling around them. Cindy felt sick. He moved toward her and she jerked backward, keeping away. She had to get back. Back home, or at least back to that tree. *No, not the tree*, part of her warned.

"Now, Cindy," he admonished, suddenly at her side. He took her arm, pulling her closer, and she stumbled. She looked up at him, his glamour melting off of him as she slipped further into his world. The rainbow sheen of his skin, eyes cold and hard as sapphires. His teeth sharp, predatory, his limbs surreally long and slender. She caught a flutter of gossamer behind him, moving too quickly to see, and almost laughed, a desperate bubbling of mirth.

Of course he believed in fairies.

She slumped against him, hot and dizzy. What was happening? What fruit was that?

Then the sun rose before them, and John dropped to his knees, pulling Cindy down with him. She sprawled on all four, her sweaty face brushing the grass. Dawn already? How?

"Jorith," a voice said, and it was like the cry of a wild bird at dawn, like a rush of wind or water or running feet, like everything wild and beautiful and alive. Cindy nearly wept at the voice.

"Your Grace. I brought a new Sacrifice."

Cindy's fevered thoughts tugged into the word Sacrifice. What?

"She ate the sunfruit? Willingly?" She didn't understand the eagerness in that beautiful voice.

"Yes."

Cindy felt a hot touch at her forehead, her cheeks, and lifted her face to this new man. His eyes were the brilliant green of summer, his hair blazing like golden sunshine. She knew him in an instant. The Summer King. Draven. His hot touch melted away her fears. She smiled weakly through her delirium and he smiled back.

"Perfect."

Her eyes wandered past him. There was a central dais... no. A bed. Someone slept, her pale hair and skin laced with hoarfrost and half-melted ice. She was surrounded by others, lying on pallets. Cindy squinted closer. They were pale, cold, sharing in their queen's hypothermic coma. *A mile of missing persons*... Cindy stared down at the girl beside her.

Susan Delmar, that skittish part of her brain reminded her.

Who?

The skittish part gave up and went to sleep. It didn't matter anymore.

Draven's hand slipped from her cheek and she shuddered, her head slumping.

"The fever's peaked, Your Grace."

"No. There's more."

Cindy panted shallowly, sinking forward. She realized there was already a mat underneath her. They were ready for her. How kind.

"Your Grace. Quickly."

A tendril of magic looped around her, tentative, patient. She twisted in pain, heat welling up out of

her bones, scourging through her, burning through her blood. Sweat soaked her clothes, running down onto the mat.

"Your Grace."

"Dariana," he whispered.

The magic snapped tight and white hot pain seared through Cindy's chest. She arched back with a scream of agony. Her warmth, her life, tore out of her, draining away, channeling out and into Dariana. Cindy went with it, pouring into the frozen queen, and she felt a faint spark of heat shared between them, a crack in the ice, a single joined heartbeat. Then stillness. Cindy sank into the cold with a flash of dismay, the link severed.

Fairies war?
Viciously.
And Cindy was gone, another Sacrifice lost in the ice.

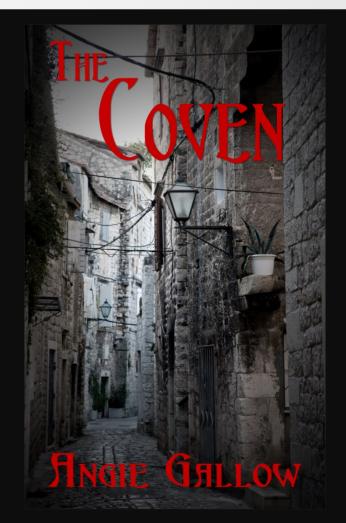
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jill Marcotte is a freelance writer from Fairbanks Alaska with publications in several online magazines. A member of the Alaska Writers Guild and the local NaNoWriMo writing group, she writes mostly horror and sci-fi, with full length novels in the fantasy and supernatural genres. Her favorite holiday is Halloween and she is, according to her husband, disturbingly fascinated by death.

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# The Murder of Cassie Hartford K.Z. Morano

Dear Journal,

Someone is trying to kill me.

If I wasn't sure of it before, I am certain of it now. For weeks they have kept a watchful eye on me, lurking in the shadows, minding my every move, revealing nothing of their identity yet never failing to make their presence known... or the power which they hold over me. More than once, I have alerted the authorities but without sufficient evidence, without clues, there is very little that they can do.

Whoever it is that's stalking me must have some knowledge of what they are doing. There are no loose ends, no false steps, and no inaccuracies on their part. Every move is deliberate, intricately planned, and perfectly executed. Devoid of fingerprints, DNA, or any unusual recordings in the security cameras installed in all entrances and exits, I might as well have imagined the whole thing.

Except that it's real. As real as the letters screaming at me from the bathroom mirror: DIE. Who wrote this and how, I'll never know. Yet here it is, the angry word scribed in lipstick, the whorish carnelian shade predicting blood.

One might ask why? Why not do it here and now? Why all this torment? Why me? But these are inanely futile questions. Does one ask a predator why it chooses its prey? Does one question the pleasure that a beast experiences during the hunt?

I am a single female living alone in a big city where every day, a thousand horrifying things occur unnoticed. I have no family and very little acquaintances. No one will miss me when I'm gone. If these aren't enough reasons for a serial killer to single me out as an easy target, I don't know what is. But above all, I believe, it is my fear that they find most irresistible. I think that it's the terror that they've instilled in me that keeps feeding them. The scent of my weakness is a heady aphrodisiac nurturing their obsession. It is my reticence and anxiety, that very same flaw in my character that keeps me from seeking help from strangers for fear that they might think that I'm crazy. Perhaps I am. I hear whispers sometimes... a sinister susurrus hissing back and forth in the dark... telling me to die.

With each passing day, I feel the assailant growing stronger. Especially now. Because right now, at this very moment, I am utterly and extremely terrified.

Cassandra Hartford

\*\*\*

Dear Journal,

Whoever it is that wanted to kill me is planning to do it soon... perhaps even tonight.

This morning, I woke up screaming. When I opened my eyes, a pair of shears had been sitting on my pillow, merely inches away from my face. Then I felt it... Hair... covering my face, my neck, my chest... clumps of hair scattered all over my pillow, crawling inside my mouth when I opened my lips to scream... tufts of black fur threatening to suffocate me.

It was a while before I realized that the hair had been my own. Someone had cut off my hair. Someone had been in my room. They could've killed me if they wanted to. They could've slit my throat while I slept. Instead, they chose to play this horrid game of cat and mouse.

My attacker is a man, I am sure of it. Perhaps he even molested me while I slept. Apart from cutting my hair, he had shorn my pubic hair as well. The intimacy of the act makes my skin crawl, to think that a stranger had been this close, to realize that I had been so exposed. I don't know why I hadn't realized it before... He's always deliberately leaving wet imprints on my towel. Sometimes, his breath leaves a trace of fog on the mirror. The other day, the neatly folded undergarments in my closet had been scattered and ripped to pieces. He's always secretly touching my personal belongings. I think I am now a part of some perverted sexual game.

I cannot comprehend how I had been able to sleep through all this. Perhaps, I had been drugged. Perhaps, despite the fact that I hadn't left my apartment in days and had barely drank or eaten anything, my stalker had found a way to drug me. I went to a clinic earlier, had them check if there were any drugs in my system. They all looked at me like I'm crazy. Perhaps I am. The whispers are getting louder, trying to tell me something more. I can feel them bubbling just beneath the surface, whispers struggling to swell into a scream. Sometimes, I can almost make out the words. But that's the least of my concerns. Tomorrow, I'll receive the drug test results. Tomorrow, I'll know for sure. That is, if I'm still here...

With every stroke of this pen, I feel the last shreds of my sanity seeping into nonexistence. I sense something within me. It is as though with each passing day, I am slowly fading into nothingness. Oh God, I'm going crazy. I think I'm going crazy. I cannot let them do this to me! Today, I put up hidden cameras in my bedroom. I don't know how they always manage to get past the building's security guard, the cameras by the hall, and the burglar alarm in my apartment but I plan to find out who they are once and for all. I don't know what will happen, how this confrontation will end. But one thing is for certain: This ends now.

Cassandra Hartford

\*\*\*

Eva finished reading the last journal entry, wearing an expression of sheer contempt. Then she unceremoniously flung the notebook into the fireplace. She poured herself a glass of wine. The corners of her crimson mouth curled in a smile of triumph. Cassie's right. It has ended now. Finally, after years and years of being pushed into the background, it was at last Eva's time to sparkle. Her time to live.

Eva was bold, brazen... a sensual soul who yearned for freedom and sophistication. She wanted to see, hear, taste, and touch everything in the world. Cassie was a loner, a pathetic little hermit who was perfectly content to go about her banal existence. And so very often, she had stood in Eva's way. Not anymore...

"Stupid little Cassie..." Eva sneered into the crackling fire. "Did you honestly think that you can deny my presence forever?"

\*\*\*

Eva was born when Cassie was six years old. That day, Cassie had overheard her parents fighting and though still very young, she was old enough to comprehend that the fairytale life that she had always known was about to be shattered into insignificance.

Liar... Whore... I'm going to kill you...

Her father's venomous words made her hackles rise. And then there were screams... terrible screams... her mother's screams. Cassie ran up to her parent's room, tears trickling down her cheeks, her heart beating like a tiny bird against the cage of her ribs. She stood in front of the door and rapped timidly.

"Mama..." she sobbed. "P-papa..."

When the door finally opened, the man she saw inside was her father... and yet he was not. He looked more like a beast. His eyes were big and red and strange. Blood covered his arms from wrist to elbow. Then there was the silence, her mother's silence, more horrible than the stench that wafted through the room.

The man who was and wasn't her father grabbed her. Cassie kicked and screamed. She felt herself being thrown and locked in the attic. There in the company of the unwanted and the forgotten, she stayed the entire day, whimpering in one corner. Then the sirens came. It was nearly dark before someone had found her and her new sister, Eva.

\*\*\*

Eva was the exact opposite of Cassie. No two girls could have been more different. Cassie was timid and awkward; Eva was fearless and self-assured. But with Eva's confidence came what could only be described as an evil streak. Once, she had persuaded Cassie into stealing money from Mrs. Dale of the orphanage for some ice cream. Cassie got caught and was punished. There was also that one time when Eva had goaded Cassie into engaging in a fistfight with another orphan. Mrs. Dale sent Cassie to bed without supper. From childhood to early adolescence, Eva was constantly trying to get Cassie into trouble but most of the time Cassie's kind and gentle nature would prevail.

It wasn't until Cassie entered adulthood that Eva came to loosen her grip on her. Cassie was able to live in peace and obscurity. But news of her father's release from prison inevitably brought Eva back into her life. Cassie needed Eva... her strength and indifference, just as she had needed Eva during that horrible time in the attic.

As with most cases of multiple personality disorder, the host, Cassie possessed no awareness of Eva – the alter personality that she created to shield herself from the painful childhood trauma. The little girl who came out of the attic on that awful day wasn't a grief-stricken Cassie but a blank-faced, unaffected Eva. True to dissociative identity disorder, Cassie had no recollection of what she did each time Eva took over.

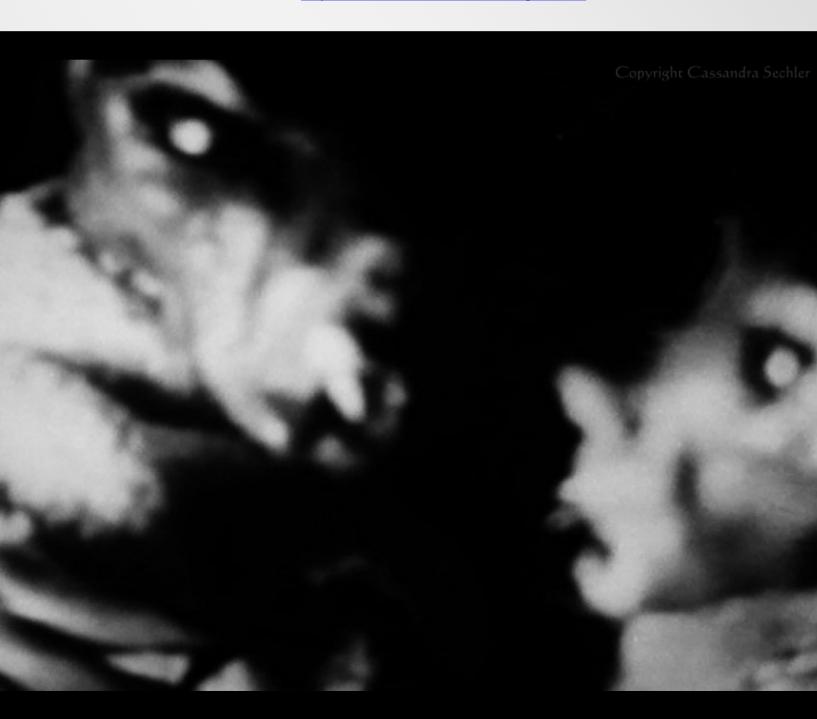
Eva, on the other hand, was deeply aware. She knew very well when she was needed. So Eva returned... with every intention of remaining.

But then there's Cleo... Cleo was born the day that the other girls locked her in the closet...

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - K.Z. Morano is a writer, a beach bum, and a chocolate addict. She is the author of 100 Nightmares-- a collection of 100 stories, each written in 100 words, with over 50 illustrations. She writes anything from romance and erotica to horror and dark fantasy. Her short stories, flash fiction, and drabbles have appeared in various anthologies, magazines and online venues.

Twitter: @kzmorano

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/100Nightmares



# Voices A. F. Stewart

"There is no hope within the darkness, but there is peace in death."

My fingers clutched the edge of my blanket, and I tugged the prickly fabric over my head. I knew it wouldn't shut out the voice, but it made me feel safer.

"There is no hope within the darkness, but there is peace in death."

I tried to breathe, in and out, nice and even, but I felt it coming. Tonight would be bad. I clamped my jaw; a useless barricade against my ascending scream. Any outburst would bring the asylum nurses and orderlies running, but I couldn't help it. The screeching racket trumpeted from my mouth as a discordant beast ripping its way to freedom.

The cacophony reverberated around my room, martyring the fabric of air, as the frenzy vented from my throat. My body thrashed, my bedclothes tangled, my back arched, my fists smashed against the wall; a mirrored and discord cadence to my wails. I heard footsteps, the jangle of keys, shouts of "hold her down," and finally the welcome prick of a needle.

As the sedative swirled in my blood and unconscious bliss claimed me, I heard the voice murmuring, just beyond the shadows.

"There is no hope within the darkness, but there is peace in death."

\*\*\*

The voice still filled my nights, but at least this past month was free of another screaming episode. The doctors adjusted my meds again, but it didn't help. It never helped.

Only one thing will end this, and I found the way this afternoon, when I stole that shard of broken glass and tucked it under my pillow before dinner.

Now I needed the guts to go through with it.

Those little scrapes, those pitiful attempts that trickled down my flesh, won't do the job. I *needed* to cut.

I placed the cold, sharp glass next to the skin on my wrist and pressed. It bit, a drop of blood welling. I closed my eyes and sliced.

The slash went deep. I sighed in relief and pain. It was harder to sever the other wrist, but I managed. Then I rested against my pillow and let death come, let my peace come...

\*\*\*

I opened my eyes, still existing. As my pupils adjusted to the darkness, I saw another patient lying in a bed. *My bed*. I remembered her. She was new, a girl named Lydia, I think. She checked in the day I checked out. Or I tried to check out.

What happened?

Shouldn't I be dead?

I felt strange, disconnected. I tried to move forward. Nothing. My feet seemed like they were mired in cement. I wiggled my fingers, flapped my arms; they worked fine.

What happened to me?

A touch brushed my cheek, and I saw him. A thin young man, with dark hair, standing in front of me. He smiled, a sad, lingering turn of his mouth.

"I'm sorry. You shouldn't have listened to me. I lied. There is no peace." He touched my cheek again. "But thank you for taking my place."

His form dissolved, flesh shifting to grey mist, and then it vanished.

I screamed.

The echo of my voice made me ill. My body quavered, and I gagged. My hand trembled, and a throbbing ache prickled along my fingers. A warning.

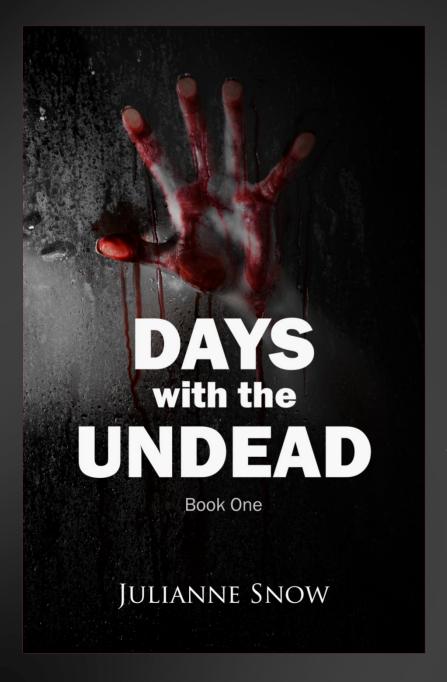
I cried out as a gyration of biting fire raced through my veins, or what was left of my veins. My spine snapped straight, my arm reached towards the girl. Compulsion scratched at the back of my throat, a festering lump scrabbling onto my tongue. I parted my lips, and heard my voice, whispering.

"There is no hope within the darkness, but there is peace in death."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - A proud sci-fi and fantasy geek, A. F. Stewart was born and raised in Nova Scotia, Canada and still calls it home. She favours the dark and deadly when writing—her genres of choice being dark fantasy and horror—but she has been known to venture into the light on occasion. She's independently published several novellas and story collections, as well as poetry compilations.

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# Where Nothing Will Grow Rivka Jacobs

The three young men had spent the last two days hiking through dead coal camps and towns, investigating the ruins of iron furnaces and loading stations, half-toppled tipples and chutes, taking pictures and entering data on smart phones with Qwerty keyboards.

Some of the places they passed barely clung to life. Others were long gone, but still had an operational railroad yard or depot. Most of the settlements and company towns had been abandoned for years, and nothing was left but moldy, crumbling stones and bricks, rotting wood and rusted, twisted metal entwined with weeds, vines, and hardwood saplings.

They moved higher into mountainous terrain, walking along gravel and dirt roads that wound around the flanks of cliffs. At noon, they camped for lunch outside Claremont and discussed where they were going next.

Jason Thayer, twenty-one years old, a student at West Virginia Wesleyan College, wanted to head to Thurmond. "From there we can take the old wagon road along the ridge, straight to Beury. The Red Ash and Fire Creek ruins are nearby." He was the more experienced hiker, and looked the part, with long spindly, strong legs. He was the only one of the trio wearing shorts. He began cleaning up his food wrappers, and utensils, and packed these away. He took another swig from his water bottle, before securing it.

Tim Gordon, also twenty-one, attended Marshall University along with the third member of this team, Brian Scarberry. Tim had grown up with Jason in Hinton, West Virginia, and they remained friendly, even though they'd ended up at different colleges. Jason was majoring in history--more precisely, the history of coal mining in West Virginia; this was his project and his journey. He'd invited his old friend to accompany him, and Tim had extended that invitation to Brian.

Jason sat down again with knees up and heavy hikers firmly set on the ground. He spread a map over his thighs and ran his finger over the paper. The sun was bright and he glanced up once, pulled the brim of his cap down for shade.

Tim leaned on his hands stretched behind him, his legs crossed at his angles. He breathed deeply, relishing the fresh, fragrant air. He listened to the flurry of bird songs that surrounded them. Bees and small flies hovered among the wild roses and blackberry bushes but didn't disturb them.

Brian was cross-legged, his blue jeans tightly stretched. He too looked up at the sky, then lowered his eyes and began turning his head back and forth, studying the grasses, ferns and shrubs around them. "Are there copperheads up here?" he asked.

Jason observed him from under his cap brim and smiled, but said nothing.

Tim laughed. "Probably," he said. "Keep your eyes peeled."

"Okay," Jason said. "I know the way. We'll hit Beury first; we should have time to check out the Fire Creek mine after that. I really want to see what's left of evil old bastard Joseph Beury's mansion." He leaped to his feet easily, grabbed his pack and slipped it on.

The other two young men imitated him. "It sounds personal," Brian Scarberry joked. "About Joseph Beury, I mean," he added, brushing off his rear end and peering carefully at the rocks and ground cover.

Jason's lips formed a straight line. "He was a robber baron bastard," he said. "He was one of the coal kings who falsely accused and executed the so-called Molly Maguires in Pennsylvania. When the Chesapeake and Ohio opened up the New River gorge in 1873, Beury moved to West Virginia where he created some of the first coal mines in the state. He was brutal and racist and elitist. He created the template for the company town and the company store. Think about it--a corporation could print their own money, and control their workers lock, stock, barrel. They hired their own police force and did what they wanted to anyone they wanted. Beury's mines were death traps, too. There were no unions back then, no way for miners to protect themselves or their families. He named the town of Beury after himself, and brought in the finest building materials, and built him and his family a mansion on the hill where he'd hold garden parties and orchestras played, while the coal miners and their families lived in dirt, squalor and poverty of Beury's own design."

Brian stood still, his mouth partially open. "Uh, okay," he said. "I don't know much about history. I thought this trip would be fun, though."

"Some of us think he was murdered in that house; he died there in 1903. The family stayed for one more generation, then the place burned to the ground; we don't even know exactly when or how."

Tim patted his old friend's shoulder. "Seriously bro, you're going to give yourself a stroke." He adjusted his pack straps and hefted the weight on his back. "Let's get going," he said.

With Jason in the lead, they tracked along the New River until they came to Thurmond, where they rested once more in the original depot building which had been almost completely restored. Outside Thurmond, they picked up the old wagon road.

It was late afternoon when they climbed toward the remains of Joseph Beury's town. There was no clearing. They found themselves immediately on the outskirts of a young forest that had engulfed the last few standing walls dotted by empty window holes and doorways like open mouths. Ahead was a mass of green, and the long rays of the western sun pierced like knives between leaves and branches.

Jason raised his cap and wiped his forehead with the back of a hand. He circled in place. "Wow," he said almost to himself. "It wasn't this overgrown the last time I was here."

"This place is creepy," Brian muttered.

"Well, if we want to get to Fire Creek, and across the river to Red Ash by sunset, we need to keep moving," Tim said hopefully, waving a palm in front of Jason's face as if to get his attention.

Jason ignored him. He inhaled and exhaled loudly. "Get out the cameras," he said. "We need to get as much documented as we can, by dark."

"We're leaving before dark, right?" Brian asked.

"Brian, camera ...," Jason said, snapping his fingers, "... get out your camera. We don't have much time."

"We don't have much time for what?"

"We're looking for the hill where the mansion stood," Jason said. "You'll know it because, nothing, not a fucking thing, will grow there."

Brian and Tim looked at one another.

"Look, Jason, bro, we only have a couple of hours of light left, okay? Let's not get hung up here, okay?"

"Sure," Jason answered. He was already clicking digital shots with his Nikon. "We need to go up in a line ... there," he pointed. "It once was a street; we have to document everything. Make sure you use the low-light setting."

Brian shrugged. "Okay, whatever," he said. "It's your adventure. I'm just tagging along."

Tim put his hands loosely on his hips. "I do remember," he said, "that you used to be obsessed with this stuff when we were in high school. Didn't you have some ancestor who worked in one of the Beury mines?"

"We all have ancestors who either worked or ran these mines," Jason answered, sidling with high steps into the outer brush of thick, tangled forest vegetation, Brian in tow.

Tim watched them move away from him into the green accompanied by the quick mechanical noises of the cameras. He felt a surge of annoyance and impatience, but didn't feel like following. It was almost hypnotic, watching them obscured by more and more plants and branches, listening to their loud, cracking advance, until he realized with a jolt they were gone and the only sound was an occasional bird trill in the distance. He straightened, took a step. "Hey!" he called. "Hey, guys, hold up, wait!" A cool breeze kicked up, making the boughs and leaves dance and flutter with an extended shush. The air appeared darker, stained; Tim scanned the sky directly above, glanced to the west. The sun had dropped behind a neighboring mountain.

Tim began to trot, pushing his way through underbrush. He came upon an unexpected pile of silver and black brick--a fireplace and chimney all of one piece, standing alone. It rested like a tombstone almost directly in his path. He forced himself around it, through a dense curtain of bramble, and almost hit a tree trunk. The shadows were lengthening. "Hey, mother fuckers!" he said loudly, his temper rising. He used his hands to guide him as he made his way among the trees.

The ground began to rise under his feet. He was ascending at a low angle. Oaks predominated; some of which seemed immense and had to be at least two-hundred years old. As he broke into an empty space, the sky overhead appeared purple-blue and luminescent. Tim reflexively checked his watch; it was close to seven. They had only an hour of daylight left. "Jason, Brian, where the fuck are you assholes?" he

yelled, walking a short way in one direction, then another. He realized that his boots were crunching on something underneath. And that the ground was level and no longer a slope.

"This is it," came a voice.

Tim nearly jumped a foot straight into the air. "You fuckers, what the hell?" he said, as he recognized the faces and figures of his friends approaching him from across the clearing.

"This is the house of Joseph Beury," Jason intoned. "And we brought you here for a reason."

Tim's stomach seemed to collapse on itself. "What?" he said, his voice gurgling.

"You are the descendant of Joseph Beury...." Brian said, his face completely immobile.

"Like fuck I am," Tim answered.

"You are his great-great-grandson, on your mother's side," Jason said. "I arranged everything so that we could bring you here. You will pay for the crimes of the Beury family."

"You are full of shit," Tim said. "I'd like some of the family money, too."

"The people burned down this house, and now it's cursed. Vengeance is mine...."

"Okay, you're full of crap, Jason. Go fuck yourself," Tim said.

Brian started laughing. "I'm sorry, I can't help it...."

Jason finally broke down, and also laughed, bending over almost double. "You know we had you," he gasped. "You should see the look on your face. You're about the whitest shade of white, right now!"

"Yeah, real funny," Tim said, but he felt enormous relief. It was terrifying, it was almost impossible to even consider; that his friends would, could use him and betray him like that. He suddenly wanted to cry. Like a kid.

Jason approached Tim, put one arm around his shoulder. "Ah, come on. It was a hoary old joke, bro. We love ya!"

Brian also came close and stuck out a hand. "Man, I'm sorry. No hard feelings?"

Tim was about to shake the hand, when they all heard a loud crash and what sounded like something collapse and tumble behind them. But the entire space where the mansion once stood was a bulldozed mound of charred remains. There was nothing standing. Nothing left to fall. The three young men fell silent.

"Uh, Jason, is this...?" Brian started.

"No, the joke's over," Jason said, backing away from Tim and scanning the area.

The twilight grew thick, the night began to settle like ink spreading in water.

"We'd better get going," Brian said, folding his arms tightly in front of him. "I'm cold."

Tim noted it too. There was a chill pressing down on them, oozing around their feet. He watched Jason for a sign as to what was happening, what was going on.

"Let's go," Jason said. His face was deeply shadowed; he appeared wary, uncertain.

"Good idea," Tim replied immediately, clapping Jason on a shoulder blade. "You're the wilderness expert. You do know how to get us out of here, right?"

"It's back that way...," he pointed, "... where we came in. Or was it over there...."

"Okay, you're joking now, right?" Brian asked, his voice high.

"Come on," Tim said, "let's just start moving, we'll find a way out." He turned his back on them, and took a few resolute steps eastward. "Just so long as I'm not really the great-great grandson of the robber baron bastard, I'll forgive you for all this," he called over his shoulder while keeping his eyes on the lifeless rubble under his feet. He thought he heard the melodious scraping, clinking sound of his friends behind him, their shoes slipping on broken bricks. Tim hesitated, figured they were following, and pushed forward, almost running, skidding downhill as he tried to reach the woods. But just as he approached the perimeter of the sterile and dead part of the hill, he froze.

It was as if he'd run into an invisible membrane, like something had thrown itself against him. The air around him felt solid and it was burning cold. "Uh, Jason, what the fuck?" he yelled.

No one answered.

Tim forced himself to move, and managed to slowly shift until he faced the opposite direction and scanned the blotchy darkness uphill. The scorched bricks and masonry and burnt wood fragments seemed to emit a grinding noise that filled the air like a chant, as if the entire hill was vibrating. "Guys, what's up

with this?" he asked in a loud voice. He tried to focus, to carefully inspect every square inch of the area in faced. There was no Jason or Brian.

"Jason, this is shit!" he shouted. "Where did you guys go? Brian, Jason, give me a holler, let me know which direction you took!" He heard no response, only his own rapid breathing and a pounding pulse in his ears.

Tim remained rooted, trying to get control of himself and make a decision. A low, whispering sound that could have been someone trying to speak, or the buzzing of a gnat, or the rustle of a breeze, distracted him. He was overwhelmed with the sensation that spider-webs were clinging to his skin.

He jerked and twitched, twisted to his left and right, brushing his fingers over his body, waving them in front of his face. He slid off his backpack, and rummaged for a flashlight. "Brian, Jason," he called repeatedly, hoping for a response. "There's a logical explanation for this," he said to himself as he retrieved the flashlight, switched it on, and swung it around. The beam caught flashes of terrain, the emptiness at the top of the prominence, the forest edge about twenty feet below, but nothing else. Tim was about to try an escape into the trees, when a reflection in the corner of his eye snagged his attention.

He brought the beam of light back and checked again. Caught in the illumination was a coalescing form, made of drifting white wisps of mist but clearly visible. It looked like a translucent man but it had no legs. A smudge of face hovered; it grinned. Tim wanted to leap out of his skin as his adrenaline pumped and his muscles jumped, but he couldn't move. The buzz came again, icy exhalations in his head, and the words were more distinct now. *Welcome home*, they said.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Rivka Jacobs currently lives with two Siamese cats in West Virginia. She was born in Philadelphia and grew up in South Florida. She's sold stories to such publications as *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, the *Far Frontiers* anthologies, and *Women of Darkness*. More recently she she's placed stories with *The Sirens Call* eZine, *The Literary Hatchet*, and *Riding Light Review*. Rivka has a BA in history, MAs in sociology and mental health counseling, and most recently worked as a psychiatric nurse.

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# Homecoming Jennifer Mccullah

Rachel clocked out and headed toward the exit. As usual, Olivia was there. She was not the way she'd looked in life, she stood before Rachel with charred skin, flesh hanging from bone and only a few patches of hair that clung to her red scalp. Even though Rachel was familiar with this sight, it was still jarring. Nothing could prepare a mother to see her little girl like that. Rachel walked down the hall, right through the vision of her daughter. The form dissipated but not before she asked, "How could you do this to me?"

Why did she keep asking? Rachel had explained her reasons several times. Olivia knew why. So did Tony. He was waiting in the passenger seat of the car when Rachel got to it. Tony was every bit as burned as his sister. He was angry with Rachel too but did not express it verbally. Tony had been a quiet boy and death hadn't changed this quality. He just stared. Once Rachel was buckled up and the car was moving she said, "I really wish you and your sister could move on. Isn't there a white light to follow or something?"

He did not answer.

Rachel heard a familiar, raspy whisper, "They still don't understand."

She blinked and Tony was gone. They always disappeared when the voice spoke to her. On the ride home its whispers continued, "Your children are out of control."

The voice was right. It always told Rachel the truth, even if the truth was painful to hear. When the voice whispered to her for the first time, she was just a little girl. It was a friend to an only child who lived out in the country and felt very lonely. It began as a gentle whisper, a faint sound that her tiny ears strained to hear. The more Rachel talked to it, the louder the voice grew. When she asked if it was a boy or a girl, the voice replied, "I am both and I am neither."

When she asked its name it laughed, "Dear child, you could not pronounce it."

The voice whispered thoughts and ideas, encouragement as she grew. It knew things and it helped her. The voice had been more of a parent than her actual parents ever were. Her father was always working while her mother remained in a pill induced fog for most of Rachel's childhood. When the voice told her that her home environment was bad, and that she needed to get rid of her parents, Rachel listened. It gave her instructions and she fixed the gas exactly as it commanded. Then, she waited for her father to take her to Linda's sleepover. The next morning, she expected the news. Just a little after breakfast, the police were on her friend's doorstep. Her grandmother, who came over every Saturday morning, had found Rachel's parents dead from carbon monoxide poisoning.

The voice whispered again, bringing Rachel back to the present, "What are you going to do about the children?"

"What can I do? I've explained to them that they were better off dead than growing up fatherless in a world like this. I could never find love with them still in the picture. Before the fire, I told them that no one wants to marry a single mother with two children. If their father hadn't left... This is all HIS fault. Why don't they go haunt him?"

"I know dear, but we have to find a solution. They can't just be allowed to come and go as they please. And Olivia can't be allowed to talk to you in such a manner. It's unacceptable."

It really was unacceptable! Rachel was their mother and she deserved respect. Just because they didn't understand all of her actions did not give them the right to smart off and ignore her rules. She had told them to cross over and stop haunting her. They just did not obey. Dead or alive, her children were not going to be disobedient little brats.

During dinner Rachel brainstormed on proper punishments, and how she could enforce said punishment. She ate her re-heated spaghetti and the children joined her at the table.

Olivia, being a broken record, asked, "How could you do this to me?"

"Because I love you! Children of divorce have so many problems and I needed to help you."

"Murderer! You killed us!"

"Yes, I killed you. It's my job to be your parent, not your friend. Sometimes that means doing things that might make you angry, even though they're in your best interest. I told you to cross over and stop haunting me."

"Only one way to deal with them," the voice whispered.

The children were gone. They respected the voice more than they respected her. That night she ran a bathtub full of hot water. She soaked in the calming heat and enjoyed what would be her last relaxing moment for a while. Then, she pressed the razor blade into her skin and watched as the water turned from clear to light pink and then a darker shade of red. She would go to Olivia and Tony as a spirit herself, and then they would have to obey her.

The voice's whisper echoed in her head. "Good job, take charge of your children."

Her children gathered round her and watched. They surely knew that punishment was coming. Rachel's spirit would teach them a lesson once and for all. She would make them cross over to heaven or whatever spirit world came next. Her muscles were weak, frail and she could feel herself sinking down into the water. The room became darker and her burned children changed shape. They weren't human at all, they were grotesque, demonic creatures. They had more eyes than they should have and long, sharp teeth. The one who had been Olivia, had a single horn protruding from her forehead. Rachel gasped. She realized that she'd been tricked as she drew her last breath.

In the darkness, her spirit trembled. She could see nothing but she felt hot breath on the side of her face. The familiar voice whispered to her, "Welcome home. Finally, it's just you and me."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Jennifer likes to make stuff up. She has been published in a few horror anthologies and on various websites. She also has some books on Amazon. Jennifer enjoys gaming, watching scary movies and playing with Annabelle, the coolest puppy ever.

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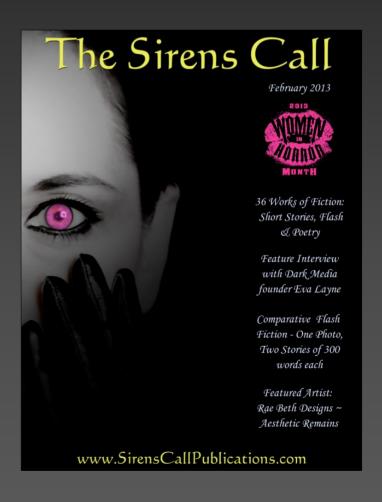
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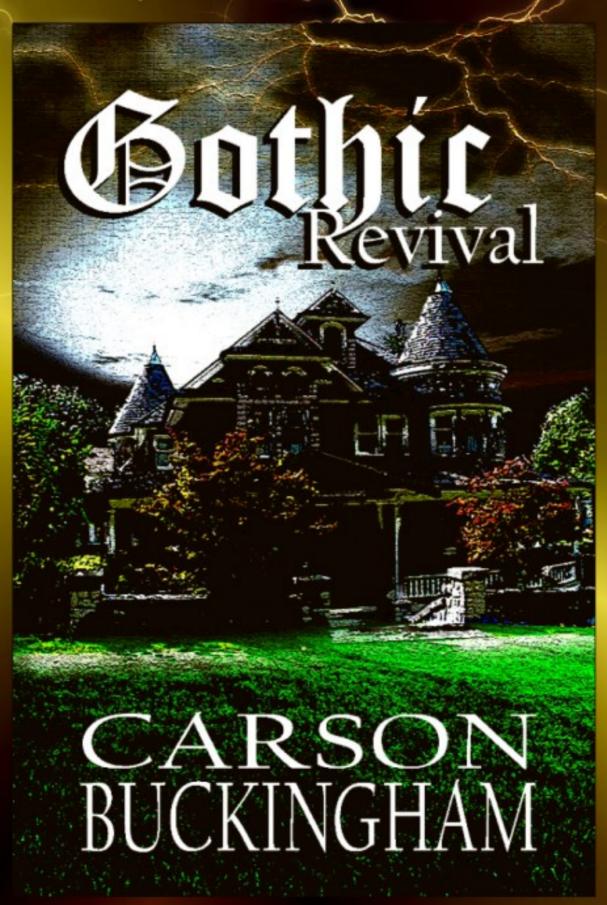
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### Lost Gerri Leen

The cave smells of wet wool, of clothes left too long in the washer, the way her basement used to every time it flooded and then only partially dried out. It's a smell that brings back the ridiculousness of trying to sweep water toward a sump pump pit built on the highest point in the basement, the smell of mold and mildew opting not to turn into a health hazard but just linger as a 'once there be water here' sign.

As much as she doesn't like the scent of the cave, she is relieved to smell it again. She was worried she would not get back after falling through the hole in the floor. A long fall through frigid darkness, whispery things that reminded her of spider webs brushing against her as she floated rather than plummeted. Moans followed what felt like touches on her shoulder. Until she landed, gently, outrageously softly, and realized she was right back where she started.

The torch on the wall sputters. There shouldn't be a torch. She took the one that was there out of the holder when she first woke in the cave and then lost it when she fell. But the torch flares brightly on the wall, adding the odor of burning wood and resin to the already pungent aromas.

Maybe there's someone in here with her who knows the way out—when they're not busy putting torches in rusty metal holders.

"Hello!" she yells, thinking the sound should echo, but it doesn't.

The torch sputters, the smell of pitch and charred wood fading as it goes out. A keening sound, sad in its emptiness, fills the blackness and she backs up until she can feel the cave wall behind her.

Liquid runs down the wall, between her neck and her shirt. Liquid that feels like it houses a thousand ants, and she skitters away from the wall, trying to shake her shirt. There can't be ants, not all of a sudden, can there?

The keening sounds again.

"Hello?" Her voice seems to echo more than it did before, the blackness amplifying the tension in her single, lonely word.

"Don't go." The sound is a whisper that rides the darkness.

"I won't," she says, the words making her feel stronger, as if she and the owner of the voice are connecting. As if they control their own fates. As if they can get out of this damned cave.

When she first woke, she took the torch and looked for an entrance. For a tunnel that might lead out. For anything. She forgot to look on the floor as she went, though, and that's how she fell.

Suddenly the ground slips away from her, and she is falling again. She braces for impact, just in case this time the landing goes differently, but she hits the ground as lightly as the first time.

It's cold down here. Cold and damp and the air feels heavy, like she's breathing water in with the oxygen. She waits for any sign of the voice, but it is silent.

"Are you here?" she asks.

No one answers her.

She is afraid to move. This time she has no torch and she worries that there will be other holes in the floor, holes that drop you hard, not treat you like a feather. She turns slowly, trying to will her eyes to adjust, but the blackness is a somber constant.

But then—there! A light. She goes toward the light, but it's just the torch; she's back in the part of the cave where she woke up.

What is this place? What purpose does this serve?

She leans against the cave wall, forgetting the ants until she feels the damp sink into her. She pulls away but the torch shows no bugs crawling down the walls. That had been in her imagination, brought on by this horrible place. "Let me out," she whispers.

The walls seem to pulse, and there is a resonant drumming as she closes her eyes.

"Don't go," the voice says.

"Who are you?"

No answer. Just the throbbing of the walls and the seeping coldness.

Cold like water in winter. Like the rocks of the well in back of the cabin.

Her father taught her how to pull water from the well; her little sister tried to horn in on that like she did everything else.

The cabin was primitive. Primitive and private. Now that she's grown, she likes to spend time there

working on her art.

Her sister paints, too—always has to copy her. Only, her sister paints better than she does.

Suddenly the cave smells like turpentine. Like linseed oil and the tang of oil paints.

"Come back," the voice says. "Don't go."

The cave changes, no longer smelling like an art studio.

She hears the sound of crows, a sound she loves, but why would there be crows in a cave? They live in trees, fly in the sunshine, not in this never-ending dankness. There are crows at the cabin; they were cawing when...

Suddenly she is falling again. This time she hits water, but it's shallow water. Cold water. The mud under her feet sucks her down and fills her shoes with gooey slime.

She waits to be taken back, to return to the main cave with the torch and the voice. She suddenly wants to be back there with all her heart.

But the voice is here now. Calling down to her. "Don't leave me."

"I'm not going anywhere. I can't go anywhere. Why won't you help me?"

She looks up—wait, is that sky? A figure stands silhouetted at the top of the...

Oh, God. At the top of the well.

"Throw a rope down," she says, and the figure does throw something down, but it's not a rope. A canvas hits the water. Then another one with a heavy frame that hits her on the head, the corner cutting deep into her forehead, blood beginning to run down from her temple into her eyes. She can smell the blood, feels dazed from the impact of the frame, and both things make her want to throw up. Then she slips and breathes in water, splashes and finally comes up sputtering, then coughing.

Another framed painting is hurled, and it hits her in the chest so hard she is knocked back against the wall, slipping from the slime at her back and under her feet. She falls to her knees in the water. The cough turns darker, more dangerous. She is coughing something up, and she can't see what it is, but she can taste it—that copper penny taste of blood.

"Why are you doing this?" she asks.

"Why wouldn't I?" The voice is right next to her.

She turns and looks, sees her sister, floating among the ruined canvases. Somehow in the dark, she can see. Her sister, hair flowing like seaweed, skin purplish and gray.

"Come up," the person at the top of the well says.

She wants to, with all her heart she wants to, and she begins to float up.

Her sister grabs her foot.

"No." She kicks out. "No. I need to go up there."

And then she is back in the cave.

There is no light. No sound of crows.

There is a smell though, the bitter tang of grapefruit, the powdery sweetness of iris root.

Perfume. Her sister's favorite. When she tried it, it went sour and made her smell like an old lady, not sophisticated like it made her sister.

Her sister did everything better.

"I did, didn't I?" The voice is all around her. "Jealousy is its own punishment."

She closes her eyes, remembering when her father said that to her.

In his hospital bed. On a respirator, his breaths rasping as he struggled for each one, unwilling to give up. She sat next to him while her sister stayed at her art show even though their father was dying.

One more reason to hate her.

One more reason to make her pay, to lure her to the well, to push—push so hard there is a satisfying smack when her hands connect with her sister's back. Then there is the scream, the sound of feet and arms scrabbling, the marvelous splash. She'd waited for more screams, for her sister to ask for help, but there was nothing.

She imagined her sister had lost consciousness when she hit. She would die not knowing she was dying. Her sister would die far more gently than she'd wanted her to.

It left a hollow feeling in her gut that she'd failed to make this the best revenge she could. "I pushed

you down the well," she says to the voice of her sister, as the scent of perfume gives way to mildew again.

"You did. Why?"

"I hate you."

"Funny—I don't think of you enough to care either way."

"Liar. You're here. Stuck."

"Are you so sure?" There is a breeze on her cheek, an air kiss, the insincere kind. "Do you even know where you are?"

And just like that, she is back in the well.

"Don't go." Another voice. Male. Desperate. A voice she knows. A voice she's heard as their bodies joined, as he thrust over and over, saying she was his, his, his.

Her boyfriend. Her boyfriend who she'd been leaving.

News that had not been taken well. Not when she was his—why didn't she know that? Why couldn't she understand how much he loved her?

She tripped, running away from the cabin, from him. She fell into the well, knocking her head on the stone wall. Heard him yell that he'd save her.

Then she hit the water and everything went black.

"He left me there."

There is no answer from her sister.

"Where are you?"

Nothing.

The torch is gone. The cave smells like slimy stone, like water that's sat too long, like a place that harbors mushrooms and salamanders, not a person—or not a living one, anyway. But bodies—her sister's body brushes against her and she realizes she will not die quickly like her sister, that unlike her sister, she has awakened only half drowned.

She panics and claws at the wall, feeling nails tearing away. The slime coats her skin, and she can find no footholds or handholds, no way to get out.

The water is higher than she thought. And cold. So very cold.

"Hello?" she whispers as the chill begins to seep into her skin, and then further, to her bones, to her heart—what little she has left.

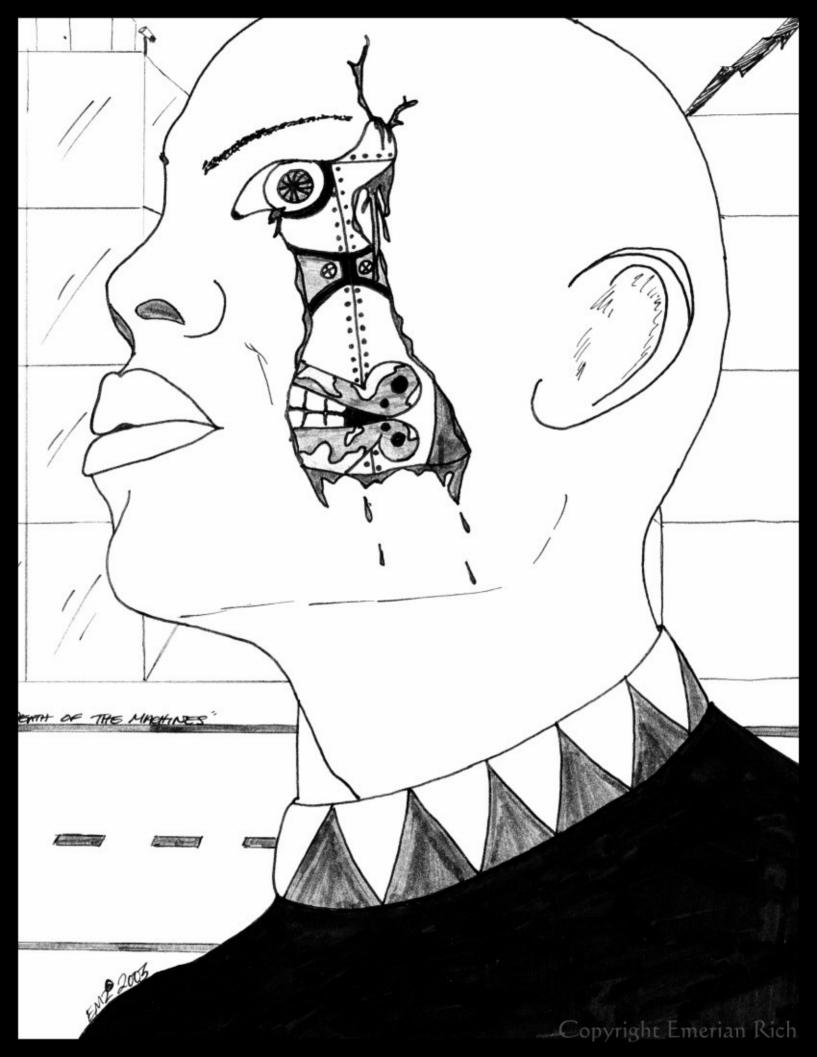
"Don't leave me." Her voice carries, filling the well with sound, like an organ reaching crescendo, then dying slowly, leaving nothing but the cold water, the unforgiving stone, and her, drowning in the unrelenting darkness.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Gerri Leen lives in Northern Virginia and originally hails from Seattle. She has stories and poems published or accepted in: *Escape Pod, Grimdark, Sword and Sorceress XXIII, Spinetinglers, She Nailed a Stake Through His Head: Tales of Biblical Terror* and others. She is editing an anthology, *A Quiet Shelter There,* which will benefit homeless animals and is due out in 2015 from Hadley Rille Books.

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# Put Your Lights On Catherine Connolly

Put your lights on. Kit hears the words; knows what they mean. It is time now, more than, to take the steps to ensure their safety. The little ones race to light the wick; to set flame ablaze. They think it a game; too young yet to understand what it means to sing their song; what lies waiting, beyond, in the darkness. Kit has learned to fear the shadows; what they may hide amongst them. She has heard the stories – words whispered only during daylight and then only in passing.

They have all suffered losses. Disappearances were many before it became apparent what was happening. Before the darkness living within those it had captured surfaced, again and again, to feed for its self-serving purpose — to ravage those whom the vessels remaining had once loved and now lost completely, having succumbed.

Their numbers are legion. Kit refuses to consider it, to confront the thought head on. Not with the darkness surrounding them; not now, tonight. Instead lets the light shine, bright and steady. Focuses on it, to pass through the night.

They all have their tricks; tried and tested. Some sing the song, defiant. Their prayer in a world where bravado is what is left when daylight fades and the community huddles in corners, keeping those left close about them through the twilight hours. Until they emerge from lamp light, blinking, to see who is still with them. How many are left? To mark the losses.

No matter how they try, there are always the missing, though the lights glow, night after night. They ignore that too – focus on the safe; fight off the fear. Leave the words unspoken. The doubt which is the lesser darkness within them all, though they are the sane amongst those who have fallen to the greater, ever looming one. The one from which there is no returning. It won't help any of them when all of their attempts to combat it have proven ineffective. They try, too, not to scare the children; to remind them of the monsters they live among now that the world is changed and life is lived differently. They are closeted and cossetted enough when the lights go out.

Others pray to the gods of the world they have left behind. Any of them. All of them. Kit has seen the signs on venturing out to scavenge, daubed on brickwork, beyond their walls. Seeking salvation for the sinners, for themselves; believing what has happened is a punishment. She is unsure what exactly for, given all are being dealt the same hand, failings great or small alike. She suspects they don't either, though they search for meaning buried beneath the madness which is their day to day. Perhaps the quest acts as distraction, perhaps it serves as comfort. Whatever works, as they serve their time out, to get them through both day and night.

Occasionally it is possible to hear the refrain from beyond their own walls, as souls seek solace to drown out the silence. Put your lights on. Sometimes it echoes through the surrounding darkness, as others join the chorus, add soprano, treble, bass or alto to the tune. Occasionally, some can even sing. Still, that isn't what matters. The words speak for themselves; hold their own strength. They help them keep their nerve. Remind them they are not alone, in amongst the darkness, for what it is worth. Some nights, it is all there is. On those nights, it is everything.

Still, Kit wonders how they will fare when they run out of candles, run low on oil. Better not to think of it, not now; to think of the light, rather than the darkness which will follow, when the light fades away.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Catherine Connolly resides in the North West of England amidst increasing numbers of books and story ideas. She is a member of The Poised Pen writing group and runs with the #FlashDogs pack. Her work has been published by Paper Swans Press, the Opening Line Literary 'Zine and in J.A.Mes Press's "In Creeps The Night".

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# Plain Wooden Boxes Elaine Pascale

I had traveled in that elevator years ago, when she had been alive. The darkened number seven that refused to light had been my solace, a place for me to keep my eyes, away from tears. I used to concentrate on that number seven on my way to and from my mother's room. I held fast to the image of that number so that I couldn't see her, so that I wouldn't watch her die.

I had used that elevator to sneak her 'real' food and books. I had used that elevator to sneak myself in, directly following the 'Hail Mary' mastectomy. I hadn't wanted to see. As I imagined faithful (but impotent) number seven, she lifted her gown to show me the staples running through her chest like train tracks: now smooth and nipple-free.

I had been in that elevator when my father half wheeled/half carried her out of the hospital so that her final month could be spent at home. The nurses had insisted on the wheel chair; my mother insisted on her husband's arms. He was accustomed to being the savior, to being the knight in silky ties. This was the same woman, after all, who insisted he sit by her side as she devoured horror novels. She claimed that his presence was the only thing that stood between her and definite doom at the hands of a machete wielding bogey man.

Years later, I was the sole passenger in that elevator when it died, somewhere between the sixth and seventh floors. Trusty number seven was still powerless and there was no one to deflect any predatory bogey men for me. ('The leak' had become the cultural replacement for bogey men). The rhythmic clanging that had lulled me into a stupor had stopped suddenly; the lights had gone out. The emergency lights shared a work ethic with number seven, and they flickered and sputtered and cast me into darkness. The doors pulled open, much in the way a bug draws in its legs at death, and I was given a glimpse of the bottom of the seventh floor, at least a foot above my head. That was the last thing I saw before the emergency lights gave up the ghost for good.

The darkness was heavy inside the wooden box (not THE wooden box) and I began to dig through my purse, hunting for a lighter. Those of us who survived 'the leak' had no fear of cigarettes. My mind was so absorbed in my search that I barely heard the first noise.

It had come from below, far below.

Bracing the door with my arms, I peered down between the elevator and the wall. I could see nothing so I returned to my game of hide-and-seek with my lighter. My hand made contact with every item in the purse save the one I sought. I turned the purse on its head, spilling its innards onto the elevator floor. I heard something skid across the tiling and over the side and I prayed that it wasn't the lighter.

Prayer was no longer familiar. I had given it up long before my mother's illness. As a child, I had prayed to Jesus, and Santa Claus, my dead grandparents and the beautiful Mary Magdalene from the stained glass window in church. Prayers were like songs, like poems. I used to visualize a loving audience for my prayers: one that would answer them and make wishes come true.

Then there was 'the leak.' We had been warned not to drink from the water fountains in school. Especially the girls; especially if we ever wanted to have normal children with the standard number of appendages. The adults joked about fish with extra eyes and bulls with extra balls—all the result of the infected water.

And the lace-covered air.

A cloud had gone into the sky with 'the leak.' Not a mushroom cloud, like the protestors had painted on their poster boards. This cloud was a thin, spidery layer that camouflaged my prayers, until I had no voice left to pray and the angels had no ears left to hear.

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Then, there was a second, soft noise. Its pitch was a combination of high and low, of faint and deep. Nothing comparable came to my mind: it was unidentifiable. I got onto my knees and tactically scanned the floor for the lighter which seemed to have abandoned me.

As my hopes had abandoned me following 'the leak' into the doily covered sky.

My hand found the now familiar wood paneling of the wall and my mind went to places outside of the elevator. I was reminded of another dark place, scented with cedar chips. It was her closet, after all of her clothing and wigs had been donated. The only remainder was the small jewelry box she had retained from childhood. A box, not THE box. I had stationed myself on those cedar chips, trying to block them from

doing their job, from erasing her smell from the house. I had been in other houses, others affected by 'the leak,' and knew it was all too simple to wipe away a life, to sterilize a home against grief.

I had watched as the dark pairs of shoes had marched single file from my station in the closet. They called to me to join them, but I wouldn't move. I saw my father bend and pick up THE plain wooden box. He lifted it cautiously, but once it was in his arms, he cradled it.

The third sound from below brought me back to the elevator. It didn't have the qualities of a mechanical noise, it was a sound emitted from a living thing. The sound was soon repeated from all angles at the bottom of the shaft, a chorus of voices.

An ensemble of creatures.

What lives at the bottom of elevator shafts?

The noises' fourth attempt at communication was accompanied by a jostling of the cables. The casket-like box that was holding me prisoner began to vibrate as if its motor were working. I knew; however, that the elevator was stationary because the lights were still out. It was the somethings at the bottom that were causing this motion, causing it by scaling the wires. I sunk further onto the floor, my nose inches from the carpet, and groped aimlessly for the lighter.

The elevator began to sway. If the elevator fell, I calculated, I could possibly survive. Do people survive a six story fall? I know that people survive a leak; mostly by boarding trains, trains that run on tracks like stitches.

I wrapped my arms around my knees and held myself. Like my father had held my mother, so that I could change her sheets, when she had been confined to her sick bed. Like my father had held THE box.

I heard new noises, incessant whispers in assorted tones. Some came in fast paced shrills, others took on a slower resonance. The only common factor between the sounds was that they now sounded closer.

They were no longer on the bottom of the shaft.

In some ways, the sounds were like those made by babies. But I had not seen a baby in many years. Those born after 'the leak' had been troublesome at best; gruesome at worst. Then, babies stopped being born. 'The leak' was blamed with causing sterility and most counted that as a blessing.

Those who they had suspected of being fertile--those with wide hips and soft bellies--were sterilized preventatively. The scar that transverses my groin, etched like shimmery railroad tracks, mimics the one my mother bore after her mastectomy.

Railroad tracks took others' children away, and prevented mine from arriving.

The elevator had picked up a quicker tempo. The items from my purse were sliding across the carpeting, sweeping up clumps of dirt and dust on their travels. I pictured my mascara dancing freely with my keys, and I wondered if my lighter was still inside the possessed crate.

The whirling wooden box, reminded me of the box cars that had been packed up following 'the leak. 'They had been packed with the personal items of the workers and those who had died immediately. Some parents had even squeezed their children on board, hoping to send them to a place that was free of the cloud awning. A place where water was healthy. My parents had thought that everyone was overreacting. They had smirked at the doomsday broadcasters. And they had been right.

For a few years.

The box began to shake with increasing violence, and I slid into the back wall. The sounds heightened into a foreign chant, an alien cheer. All the while growing closer, the somethings were climbing the cables to my elevator. I was beginning to grow light headed and claustrophobic as their incoherent ravings filled my ears.

The elevator began to buck wildly; the motion making me nauseous. I clung to the wall, trying to cease the vibrations, but I was only plunged into further whirling and spinning. I knew that, soon, the somethings from the bottom would reach their destination.

The voices were coming at a higher and higher pitch. My ears stung, as the sound penetrated into my body, into my brain. Their song reached an ear shattering timbre, and then stopped. The elevator returned to its initial, peaceful state.

This sudden silence alarmed me more than their cries had. I tried to regain my bearings. My back was to the rear wall of the elevator, and my legs were spread out in front of me. Some object was causing a crevice in my skirt. I cautiously put my hand out and grasped my lighter. Somehow, during the storm, it had found its way into my welcoming lap.

I held the lighter in front of my face as I began to feel a motion around me, a quivering. Whatever the somethings were, they had moved from the cables. They were inside the elevator with me.

Griping the lighter tightly, I rolled my finger over the wheel.

The light threw odd shadows inside the plain wooden box. I began to make out shapes, forms. The odd chanting started again, as these phantom beings danced around me, shimmering and writhing in an almost liquid state. They smelled sour, and it was difficult to concentrate on them, as they were in a constant state of flux. They bonded, and grew, and divided, until I was completely surrounded.

I held the lighter in front of me to ward them off. The fire did not frighten them. I ran the flame through one of them, sawing the something in half. Its jelly innards making a squeaking sound like sneakers on a waxed floor. The fire only defeated the purpose, as that one something became two. A something landed on my arm. In an instant, it was gone, disappearing into my flesh. My skin felt wet, where the something had disappeared: wet and cold. Another something seeped through my skirt, seeping next through my leg. The somethings were enveloping me, and there was nothing I could do but surrender.

I felt myself going under, breathing in frothy water and ashes. My mouth tasted salty. The somethings' gritty edges were abrasive to my skin, leaving me numb. I felt as if I were being licked all over by a thousand cats. The floor and the air around me began to hurt me, to make me ache. Just as the bed had made my mother ache. The somethings covered me, like a lacy cloud; they clung to me like wet cotton. Their liquid tongues whispered into my pores, kissing me in improper ways, kissing me in improper places. I was all that existed, I was the only name they knew, and when they kissed my brain, I fainted.

In that state, I heard the whistle of a train. I heard the box cars that had left me behind. I heard 'the leak' laughing from the sky. I heard my prayers returned: recipient unavailable.

When I came to, the light behind trusty number seven was shining. The doors were slamming against my purse, trying to close. Once I moved it, the elevator climbed up to the seventh floor.

I grabbed at the wall and pulled myself to my feet. A tidal wave crashed across my forehead, signaling that my blood was indeed flowing. It was difficult coming off my sea legs, but I managed to step off the elevator without stumbling.

I was just barely able to remember why I had boarded the elevator in the first place. I walked down the hall to the waiting room. The tense-lipped receptionist—the one who wore her hair in such a tight knot that it made my head ache just to look at her—glanced up casually as I walked in the door.

"You can go right in," she said, hurriedly but without emotion, "the doctor has been waiting for you." When I passed her desk, she added, "I thought maybe you were cancelling. You are always so early."

I didn't answer her. I walked into the plain wooden examining room, that had once been part of a pediatric center, back when there had been children, when there had been schools and daycare centers, too. I dropped into a chair, as the doctor sorted through x-rays, lifting them to the light. He was shaking his head in what appeared to be confusion. Finally, his eyes met mine. Instead of looking at me, he looked through me, as if matching the x-rays to my interior. He frowned and began a speech that had apparently been practiced.

"I am so sorry," he said, "the radiation has not been working." He scratched his chin, allowing for a dramatic pause. "The cancer is so aggressive." I pictured the somethings dividing and multiplying. I pictured my lighter replicating them instead of detonating them. I pictured the somethings coming from the lace-covered sky and taking residence in the elevator. They had ambushed me prior, when I had ridden the elevator before. They were the reason I had to continue riding the elevator, the reason I had to keep climbing back into that confining wooden box.

"And, there is something else." He now found my eyes and his own bore into them. "The blood work we had done, you know we test for everything..."

I nodded and wished I were still holding my lighter; I wanted to fidget with something.

"We test for everything," he repeated, and I nodded again, wishing he did not have such a flair for

the dramatic.

"I wouldn't have thought it was possible... but you're pregnant."

Somewhere, a train whistle blew, mimicking both the scream I swallowed and the voices of the somethings that had violated me.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - The air that Elaine Pascale lives under is laced with snow, and all of the elevator lights in her life are of working order.

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# Are you an Artist looking to gain some extra exposure for your work?

Spaces are filling up fast for upcoming issues of *The Sirens Call* eZine.

If you're interested, please send a few samples of your work to Submissions@SirensCallPublications.com

#### Kill the Girl Anne Michaud

Still, as she faced her home. Its familiar cured lot and neat flowerbeds splashing with warm colors, something didn't feel right. Nothing moved, no one was around. Everything was silent but the beating of her heart, a drum in her ears. The car sat in the paved driveway, ceiling light switched on.

"Strange." She approached the vehicle and closed the opened door with a thud. Right after lunch and no light shone from the office window, above the garage.

An ice shower woke her up: the front door had been left ajar a couple of inches. Quick race, feet sinking in the ground like sand. Too much to see, her gaze ran from the broken vase on the entrance tiles to the smashed antique console.

"I'm calling the police!" She wanted to scream, but her voice plumed out of her like a dying breath. "Final warning!" Stronger, but still too weak for anyone to believe her as a threat, for intruders to back off at her challenge.

Brushing the walls, she reached for the phone by the kitchen and slipped on something red and bright marking the floor. Impossible, usually spotless granite tops and dust-free white cabinets. But right there, in the sunlit room, the crimson drips dragged into darker puddles.

Blood, everywhere. Hand-prints and gore on the walls and door thickly scared the floor as if a body had been bleeding while fighting.

A drip, a shift, a wail. She followed the bloody mess to the dining room, tracks of wrestling bodies so easy to spot on the plush white carpet. There, trapped behind the buffet, a broken body laid in awkward angles.

She rushed to her but stopped an inch from the limp arms and glazed eyes. The air in the room vanished, bile traveled up her throat, her mind froze. Eyes blinking away shocked tears, she spotted the bullet holes, still leaking warm fluid on her pretty blouse.

"Riley..." called a voice thin as a specter. She turned around slowly, a form spread on the dining room table. A torso like an abstract painting, all red and black.

She touched the shoulder, trying so hard not to look at the gashes on the chest or listen to the weaving breath, each inhale a struggle to remain alive. "No..." she said. He stared at her with terrified eyes, not really seeing her, whispering something over and over. So soft in the quiet, she had to bend down to hear him say, "They're coming for you."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Anne Michaud lives in an old house with her cats, dog and a dungeon full of ghosts. Her debut novel Hunter's Trap is quite scary, as her short stories collections Girls & Monsters and Girls & Ghosts.

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# Not Quite Goodbye E.F. Schraeder

Corbin stood in the parlor, legs trembling and breathless as distant cousins and friends streamed through the doors, dressed in dark hues offering useless platitudes. The phrases "Sorry for your loss" and "She was a special person" rang in his ears until his head ached.

Corbin watched Maya's coworkers huddled in a semi-circle in the back room sipping coffee and telling stories. Their voices rose and fell in predictable waves, and the occasional laughter stung his ears. He glanced at them briefly, wishing he could greet them, shake hands, make polite small talk about things they'd all remember. Anything to dispel the excruciating loss that bit into his brain with seizing waves of pressure.

Instead, he froze staring at them, watching the men straighten their neckties and flirt, shifting on the soles of their dress shoes and leaning into each other. Disgusting. A funeral was such a great opportunity to show how sensitive and caring you were. Bastards. One of the women, Katie, was shameless. Maya told him all about her office romance escapades. Corbin shook his head remembering how ridiculous she'd sounded. Katie was touching the elbow of one of them gently, comforting him. At least Jose, the cute one, ignored her.

Corbin despised them all quite suddenly for having the audacity to socialize at Maya's funeral. For living. A deep scowl wrinkled onto his face. Rage seethed in his veins. He stared at Katie with absolute contempt as she flipped her brunette hair over her shoulder and smiled at him. *Useless*. The sour smell of decaying flowers drenched the warm air, and he felt intensely queasy.

Corbin staggered toward the gleaming mahogany casket. He braced himself, clutching the stainless handle in his right hand. Slowly, he leaned in and allowed his other hand to stroke Maya's hair. Her cheek. She was worse than cold. Stiff. Gone.

Open caskets had always given Corbin the creeps as a kid. But Maya insisted. He stood over his wife's lifeless form. Was she still there, trapped inside that cold, stiff form? He imagined her gasping for breath, coming back to him. Opening those dark eyes. He couldn't restrain the crushing sobs as tears flooded his face. He was the only one gasping for breath. He shot a quick glance around the room. No one else seemed to notice.

Corbin placed his heart in Maya's hands fifteen years ago when they'd married. Where was it now? Did it even matter? Living without it seemed beyond impossible.

As her impending absence swelled between them over Maya's eight month bout with stomach cancer, he'd felt his insides eaten away too. As Maya shed pounds from her already slender frame, he noticed his appetite loss. They'd always prepared meals together. He couldn't bring himself to stand at the kitchen island doing something as mundane as chopping carrots while Maya wilted into nothing in the bedroom down the hall. Hospice nurses encouraged him to establish new routines, but all he managed to do was hate them for the suggestion.

How many nights had he sat with her, his fingers numb from delicately placing ice chips in her mouth? One after another, he'd feed them to her like tiny sacraments, hoping each one would save her, give her one more day. What was he supposed to do without her? He needed her. A hollow shadow of a heart was all that was left now.

Corbin felt the depth of their entire marriage soak through him in those few strange moments standing above her. He forced himself to concentrate on happier memories of her airy laugh, the way her eyes twinkled when she looked at him, their vows. Every instant of happiness they shared that he recalled was now tinged with the freshness of loss, burning away at the edges threatening to devour what remained of that joy in a burst.

The murmur of voices snapped Corbin from his despair and he slowly pushed himself away from the casket. He tapped the edge a few times as if sending a secret message beyond the grave. *If only.* 

Corbin pressed his eyelids closed as he stood there, alone as he would be for the duration of his life. His face had grown sallow, darker in the past few sleepless days. He looked pale, translucent as a ghost as he stood still at the casket, waiting to be transformed into something, anything other than the grieving husband. The widower.

\*\*\*

Maya's firm hand gripped Corbin's forearm. Her fingers cool, pressing into his skin until it went deep pink. "I'm here," she whispered.  $_{46}$ 

Corbin let out a shallow gasp, and kept his eyes shut. "Maya," he whispered. No one near him seemed to notice, engrossed as they were with chattering small talk. Corbin's heart thudding a fugue, every pump throbbed in his chest until he felt the whole of his being swirled into the circulatory miasma of blood rushing through his veins. Short of breath, he could barely hold up his head as he entered the thick memories of the life he shared with her, the past becoming present.

Maya's voice reminded him of her unending love, "Forever." Her deep brown eyes promised an eternity. Her smooth hand clutching Corbin at the wrist. "We are together," she said. "Listen to me, beside you."

Corbin's ear itched, and his neck tingled as her voice teased him. From where he didn't know, and he didn't dare guess. His heart pounded wildly, caught up in the space between panic and grief. It couldn't be real, yet he craved it. To give in couldn't hurt anyone. It was surely a delusion, but did it matter? Not anymore. He needed her, ached for her. Wherever she was, he'd go to her, no matter what it did to him.

"I'm here," her voice hinted again. Corbin tightened his grip on the casket.

"We're together, you know," she said.

The heater hissed forced air into the room and her voice permeated the thick air. She was everywhere. His limbs felt numb. "My heart in your hands." he choked out the words, grief eating at his will to make sense of the experience. His ears rung, throbbing in his head.

Corbin's breath became heavy, his hands clenching on the side of the casket. He focused his attention on the chimera of his wife's fading voice. His mind flashed with memories of their life, how he'd fallen asleep each night, even in her illness, clutching her hand in his. "Together, always," he said. How many nights had he fluttered to sleep after delivering a single kiss to the inside of her wrist. He couldn't imagine sleep without that palm pressed to his own.

"Keep me," Maya closed her hand around his, clinging.

"I do," Corbin muttered aloud, unable to resist the seduction of her presence. He felt the fingers around his arm pulling him forward, if he allowed himself to let go he'd tumble into the daydream with Maya. Imagined or real, he'd swallow the hallucination whole if it filled the void she left. He allowed his left hand to find her face, stroke that soft curl of hair at her brow.

Ignoring the rippling sound filling his ears, Corbin's fingers gently caressed what remained. A crack severed between life and death, the world opened into a beautiful chimera where Maya remained with him. His body became a tremor, splitting and blinking between the physical and translucent spaces of her world and his.

Could he really stand at the bridge of two realities? In both worlds, his touch found Maya's cheek, slid down that slender shoulder, and eventually found Maya's resting hand.

"Don't let go," he heard her say. Or he said to her. He could not quite discern. The words and years between them fused into an indecipherable mass of sentiments and moments. To unclasp one singular moment in time unraveled his weakening senses. Without her, who wanted reality? A wave of nausea built in Corbin's stomach as he rocked over her, his thumb kneading her lifeless, upturned wrist raw.

A ripping sound jolted Corbin into opening his eyes. As he focused, he saw not his thumb, but a small rough toothed knife. His lips were dry, throat crackling. How'd it gotten there? He stifled a cough, trying to remain calm. The horror of Maya's absence too real, he stared blankly at the mess in front of him: rippled white silk inside the casket, the severed extremity in the grip of his quivering fingers. How long had I stood here? Holding her hand? Removing it?

Quickly, Corbin stuffed the detached member into the deep pocket of his dark jacket. He tugged down the pocket flap and straightened his coat. He tucked the saw beneath the body and arranged the silk to rest over Maya's waist, pushing her forearms neatly between the pulled cloth. No one would notice, no one was even paying attention. He glanced around the room, spotting no one among the crowd who'd noticed what had transpired. What have I done?

Corbin's breath clogged with the heavy smoldering aroma of flowers too close to the heating vent. The air too warm and thick with sickening, sour stench of formaldehyde blended with sweet, fragrant purple hydrangea and chrysanthemum blooms. Who'd sent those damned stinking flowers? He pressed his eyes closed tightly until it felt like his head would burst then opened them, hoping for a different result.

Unevenly, Corbin stepped back from the casket, legs weak and wobbling. He headed for the back of the room and removed his dark raincoat from the rack. Mindlessly slipping it on, he listened as the slick fabric hid his secret. He buttoned the coat and glanced at the exit. He'd stood there. The prayers had been offered. Only the burial remained, and he doubted anyone expected him to last much longer. Or cared if he'd stay. He was alone, especially here. He stared around the room at Maya's friends, each group caught in a meaningless conversation about Maya, their memories of her, as if that mattered. Maya belonged to him.

Corbin quietly snuck out and inhaled the fresh air deeply. Free. He reached down, felt the lump of her hand in his pocket, and smiled.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - E.F. Schraeder's creative work has appeared or is forthcoming in journals and anthologies including Voluted Tales, Dark Gothic Resurrected, Between the Cracks, Flashes in the Dark, Sirens Call, Carnival of the Damned, Babes & Beasts, The Kennedy Curse, and other places. Schraeder studied the humanities in graduate school, and also authored a poetry chapbook, The Hunger Tree.

## **Submission Call - Mental Ward: Experiments**



The elevator doors open, the lights are flickering, the gurney is wheeled into a dank, dimly-lit hallway well below ground. Does the Doctor have the patient's best interests at heart, or is something more nefarious going on? How does the staff figure out what treatments are most effective and which are not?

In our other two Mental Ward collections, we asked you to tell us what happened above ground in the institute itself; what memories of the past were trapped in the abandoned hallways; now we're asking you to tell us what goes on behind closed doors. The secret experiments that are feared

and whispered about among the patients. Tell us what unthinkable things greed, the corruption of power, and the desire to be remembered will drive a Doctor to do to the unfortunate patients left in their care.

Tell your tale from whoever's perspective you'd like, just make sure the story you tell is a depraved one.

Note: This is a reopened anthology. Your story must contain the following three elements to be considered:

- Your story must take place in a Mental Asylum or Institution.
- Your story must involve individuals from the Asylum: doctors, nurses, patients, maintenance staff, etc.
- Your story must contain what would be considered an inhumane experiment that is physically performed.

Submission Deadline: March 1, 2015

Word Count: minimum 4,000 words; maximum: 8,000 words.

**Payment:** \$25 per story selected for inclusion.

**Copyright:** First time worldwide copyright for a period of one year after publication.

Reprints will NOT be considered.

Full guidelines can be found on our website:

www.SirensCallPublications.com



# Whispers Allison Wade

A heavy breath echoes in the abandoned warehouse.

An old man is sitting on a wooden box. His legs are shaking so much he could not stand. He stares into nothingness and has a big camping knife in his hand. It's stained with red.

A ray of moonlight penetrates through the small window, at the top to the wall, shining on something that emerges from the shadows. A woman's arm; she lies on the floor in a sticky puddle.

Her belly is ripped open and emanates a pungent, almost sweet, smell.

Footsteps are approaching.

The man looks up, pleading at the figure coming out from the shadows. "Is it *you*? Are you finally showing yourself to me?"

The moon reveals a woman. Short dark hair, obsidian eyes. She's dressed in black. "I'm not who you think," her voice is cold.

The man wavers, his entire body trembling. He looks at his victim, torn apart on the floor. For the first time, he seems to realize what he has done. In a flash of lucidity, he feels the burden of the guilt. "I... it wasn't me. It was him! The voice! He haunts me, whispers to me abominable things. He forced me..."

"I know," says the woman, and pulls out the gun, pointing at the man's forehead.

He's scared, yet doesn't run away, immobilized on the spot, crushed by something stronger than him. He starts crying. "I didn't mean... It was the voice... My god, am I crazy? Please, have mercy on me... I need help, a doctor..." He outstretches his hands, and the knife falls to the ground with a loud clink.

"You're not crazy," she says. "But you're weak. You have crossed the line, and now there's nothing that can be done for you." She chambers a round.

"Please... there must be a way..."

"There's only one way."

Her index finger pulls the trigger. The shot resounds in the silence. A hole explodes in the old man's forehead.

His body collapses on the box.

"Now you can no longer do harm."

She sheathes her gun, and walks away silently, plunging again into the darkness.

\*\*\*

It's a gray morning, dense with smog and traffic noises. A man crosses the street with a briefcase under his arm. He's tall, around thirty, well-groomed hair and a brown suit with a matching tie. He hurries and jumps on the bus, right before it leaves. He sits in the front row, panting, and smirks at an old lady sitting next to him.

He doesn't notice the ghostly woman a few rows back, with short dark hair and obsidian eyes. But she's watching him.

When he arrives at his stop, the woman, too, gets off and follows him on the street, among the crowd; she becomes his shadow to the entrance of the office building.

When he gets inside, the woman stops, continuing to stare at him. It's just then that the man feels a shudder. He turns, meets her eyes, and disappears inside.

"Hi Mike," says the guard; he nods in response.

Elevator, hallway, office. The large window shows the gray buildings of the city.

Mike is restless. He's been this way for days.

He turns on his computer, checks the new emails, and makes a few phone calls. He's uncomfortable in his chair. His back aches as if he had a weight permanently attached.

He gets up for a glass of water, he's sweaty. As he heads back to his desk, he comes across a colleague who hands him a folder, more work to do.

"Opportunist prick."

Mike looks around. Yes, it's true, he thought that, but who said it? Who made that comment?

It was like a whisper. It penetrated directly into his mind. Maybe he just imagined it.

A young woman passes nearby, the folders in her hands fall. She bends forward, showing her round butt.

"Spank her," says the voice.

Mike looks away embarrassed; she gathers her documents and walks away, like nothing happened.

He puts a hand to his head. A strong migraine suddenly strikes him.

The phone on his desk starts ringing; Mike rushes to answer. The meeting with his boss has been postponed, now he can't make it for dinner. Sandra will be furious.

"All because of that lazy bastard," he hisses between his teeth after hanging up the phone.

"Crazy bastard," answers the whisper.

Mike jumps up and rolls his eyes around the room. "Is this a joke?" he asks to no one. No one answers.

"I'm working too much," he sighs.

\*\*\*

When he gets out of the office, it's already dark. Mike takes out his mobile phone while walking briskly toward the bus stop. Sandra doesn't answer. She always does that.

He gets on the bus and sits down, without looking around. It's the last ride, there are just a few people, the black-haired woman sitting in the rear, staring at him.

He doesn't notice. He's trying to call his girlfriend again.

"Hi, I'm Sandra. Please leave a message."

He can feel the anger growing.

That spoiled little bitch.

Was it a thought or a whisper?

Mike feels like he's closed in a bubble. He's tired, stressed, and furious. He lacks some air, as if he had a tight noose around his neck.

The bus slows down and stops. It's not his stop, but he feels oppressed and must get off. Walking will do him good.

The woman sitting in the rear follows him.

Mike drags his feet feeling out of breath. He stops, leaning against a lamppost.

He calls Sandra again.

"Answer, damn it!" he shouts.

Self-centered bitch.

Bitch whore die whore die bitch die kill kill her with your hands kill kill kill

Mike looks around bewildered, dazed by the whisper that has made its way covering the sounds of the city.

"Who said that? Who the fuck said that?"

No one answers.

The woman observes him. She's coming closer and seems willing to approach him.

Mike turns around and sees her black eyes and the face of a ghost. He's about to ask, are you the one who whispers these words?

But she disappears among the people and into the shadows.

Mike shakes his head to clear his thoughts. He just needs to sleep. Yes, sleeping will make everything right. He walks back home.

\*\*\*

Night. Silence, finally.

Mike rolls about his bed. The weight on his chest takes his breath away, like hands that grip his throat. In his sleep, everything is dark. There is something, a presence, which whispers spooky, illogical words, sentences without meaning.

Feel blood move death pain blade knife kill blood bleed get soaked take her death kill her tear apart maim her

He wakes up with a flinch.

He grabs the phone and stares at it, quietly. She's not going to answer. It's three in the morning. She's sleeping for sure. Or maybe she's pissed, and she's clinging to her bed sheets.

Sheets noose suffocate

The whisper is back.

Mike gets up. He's not tired anymore. He has to clear his head; the night air will do him good. What if he'd go to her?

He gets dressed and gets out.

\*\*\*

The city at night seems to have finally fallen asleep. The noises are slower and irregular, the lights less dazzling. It's easy to slip into a sea of darkness and oblivion.

Her body is curled up in a fetal position. Breathing is difficult as always. Her dreams are black and gloomy.

She trembles. The shivers creep under her skin, and she feels it.

She feels the touch of its sharp nails, scratching her back. They're like needles that caress her through a thin membrane. That's all it can do; it can't cross that threshold. But it's enough to give her torment.

It walks over her like a cat. It squeezes its skeletal hands around her neck, resting on her lips to drain the breath of life of which it's devoid.

She opens her eyes wide and her mouth to inhale a breath of fresh air in a gasp. She curls up even more, panting, as she was about to drown. She reaches for her throat, marked by burning scratches.

It will never end. Every day, every night, it will always be the same, it will always be there until I breathe my last breath.

She searches for the lighter in the dark. What time is it? When did she fall asleep?

She goes to the window and grabs the binoculars. Mike's house is quiet and dark. The bedroom curtain is pulled, so she can't see inside. That's not good. She must keep an eye on him.

She thought it was too soon to approach him, but maybe she was wrong. Maybe it's already too late.

She goes down to the street and reaches his house.

The door is open, no one's there.

\*\*\*

He walked for almost a mile. He doesn't feel more alert, just breathless. Oppressed.

He's at Sandra's door. She gave him her keys two months ago, when she wanted to move in together. She didn't understand that a man needs his space.

The door unlocks with a click. She hasn't pulled the sliding lock.

Stupid reckless.

You just made everything easier.

The whisper becomes a chuckle inside of him.

What is he doing?

Mike hesitates for a moment, while he walks to the bedroom.

His headache returns, like a nail entering through his neck and sticking out from his forehead. The darkness suffocates him. He turns on the light.

She's in her bed, sleeping peacefully. That bitch.

Now she wakes up, rubs her eyes, and looks around stunned. "What?"

She sees him there, standing on the doorway, with a sinister grin on his face.

"Mike, what are you doing here?"

"You didn't answer the phone."

Sandra looks at her alarm clock. "It's the middle of the night! Are you insane? How did you get in?"

He shakes the keys. "You're a little spoiled bitch," he starts. "The little princess has to be picky. Who cares if I work ten hours a day to buy her pretty things and pay for expensive restaurants?"

"Mike, what are you talking about?" She presses the sheets to her chest.

Mike throws the keys to the ground in anger. "I'll show you what I'm talking about." He walks closer to the bed.

She tries to run away, but he grabs her ankle and pulls. She finds herself face down on the mattress and starts kicking.

He climbs on top of her, turns her around, and immobilizes her body between his knees, grabbing her wrists.

"Now we do as Mike wants," he says with a crazy, angry look.

Kill her choke her hit her maim her kill her kill

The whispers in his head are louder than anything, even than Sandra's cries. He chokes her tightening his hands around her neck, hoping that will stop the whispers.

She struggles and stares at him with huge eyes, almost as inhuman as the sounds coming from her strangled throat.

Mike squeezes. Chills run through his body, and his knuckles are white with the effort.

He distinctly feels the presence that oppresses him; he feels its hunger for death and its motion of joy.

Sandra's eyes roll back. The capillaries explode in red dots. Her face is cyanotic, and her body tenses and stiffens while she opposes the last futile resistance.

He doesn't let go.

And finally, the resistance pulls out. The body relaxes, and the heart stops. She is just a piece of dead flesh between his fingers.

Something inside him shouts; something else breaks.

For a moment, a flash of lucidity comes back to him. Mike lets go and turns away.

What have I done?

He's shocked and confused. He can't believe what just happened, and he only follows the primal instinct to flee.

\*\*\*

The woman runs in the night, with heavy breath. It's like having a bag of bricks on her shoulders.

She meets him on a deserted road.

Mike sees her and stops. He, too, is out of breath. His hair disheveled, and his eyes wide open, flickering like crazy. He opens and clenches his fists in nervous contractions.

And she knows it's already too late.

"I... what happened to me?" he asks, confused.

"What have you done, Mike?" her tone is cold and nervous. She strokes her holster.

"I did... didn't want that, is not my fault... It's the voice! That voice in my head! What happened to me?" he begs and his eyes are veiled in tears. He starts to feel the burden of the guilt.

"It's the parasite you're carrying. He controls you."

"What... parasite?"

"Someone calls them 'incubi'."

"Am I dreaming?" He laughed hysterically.

She shakes her head slowly. "It's real. It infected you. It lives on your mind. It breathes your breath. It clings to your body like a burden you can't get rid of."

"How do you know all these things? Who are you?"

"I'm somebody who had the same fate."

"Please, set me free from this thing...."

"You can't be set free." She releases the security strap and grabs the gun handle.

Mike's mind is struggling. He feels the fear of that being; he feels its fingernails clawing his shoulders. "You said that you too... you had this parasite too. How did you get rid of it?"

"I didn't." She pulls out the gun, chambers a bullet, and points it at him.

"What...?" Mike raises his hands and steps back.

"When the parasite's host can't endure its presence, he becomes delirious. He's guided by it, and he does what it wants. It wants to absorb the life that falls outside the body. When the host is not strong enough to resist, inevitably he will cross a line from which there is no way back."

"I didn't... it was a mistake, I swear. I won't do that again. I can control myself. Please take this thing away from me..." He kneels on the ground, grabbing his hair.

She follows him with the barrel of the gun. Her eyes fixed on the iron sights. "There's only one way to stop this."

He looks up hopeful, but those obsidian eyes freeze him.

In a split second, he understands everything, just in the time it takes her to pull the trigger.

The shot explodes, lacerating the night. A third black eye opens at the center of Mike's forehead. His body collapses on the pavement, face down.

The creature's cry is atrocious and painful; it's writhing in the flames of hell, dissolving into nothingness. No parasite survives its host.

Would it have made a difference if I had come earlier? she asks to herself, sheathing her gun.

Her incubus tightens around her waist, oppressing her and scratching through the membrane of the unreal.

And what about me? How much longer will I resist before giving in to the madness?

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Allison Wade lives in Italy, but her mind belongs to the world. That's why she made English her second language. She loves horror and fantasy, and she's interested in everything related to myth and ancient history. Her first loves were Edgar Allan Poe and Stephen King, and her dream is to become a real writer someday.

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## Scarecrow Nina D'Arcangela

The burning wood crackled and groaned all around him as beams buckled and floorboards popped. Every fire had a voice of its own, this one was no different. It roared vile obscenities at Denny, declaring its ownership of the home he and three of his fellow firemen were doing their best to salvage. But it was too late, the place was gone. Being part of the squad for just over a year now, Denny had developed a keen sense for which ones could be saved and which couldn't. With the occupants already outside, he heard three long blows of the horn signaling the men to evacuate – the chief must have deemed it unsafe for them to stay any longer. Now it was time to tame this beast from the outside and keep the flames from leaping to the surrounding houses.

As he turned to make his way toward the door, he heard a faint groan; more of a weak plea or gasp of terror. 'Please, help me. Please. Don't leave me here to die.' The call was soft but desperate, he could just hear it above the roaring din – it was coming from the rear of the house. Turning to head back down the hall, he felt a hard tap on his shoulder. It was JT. He shouted from behind his mask and signaled for Denny to follow him thinking the man hadn't heard the triple blast of the air horn; his partner was saying it was time to pull out, but Denny couldn't ignore the call for help. He began to gesture with his axe, motioning that he was headed further in while trying to tell JT there was still someone inside, but JT was already in mid-stride toward the exit. He watched the man's retreating back for a brief second, then made the decision to go it alone. If there was a chance of pulling one more person out of this burning hell, he'd take it.

Hunkered down into his coat as much as he could manage, he began making his way further into the home. The almost crooning sound of another feeble cry seemed to spur him into near panic. He knew if he didn't hurry, both he and the owner of the voice would be lost. When he came to a junction off the kitchen, he was forced to pause. Looking left, then right, then left again, Denny didn't know which way to go. And then he saw it, fleeting as it was; a set of spindly fingers that reached out from under a doorway. Relief washed over him, whoever it was knew enough to stay close to the floor. The voice had dulled to a bare whisper, but he could still make out another breathy cry for help. He started down the hall just as the walls surrounding him began to melt. For a moment, he thought he heard a faint giggle. These masks weren't rated for this kind of heat; he was starting to take in the carbon dioxide and monoxide the fire was giving off – plus the damn thing had started to fog up, his visibility was limited. He heard the skitter of a mocking sing-song 'Help me! Help me! Won't you please help me!' run though his mind as he began to hyperventilate. He was trained for this, damn it, but he couldn't tell up from down. Just on the verge of passing out, he felt a hand grab each of his shoulders, this time they forcefully grasped a handful of his coat, yanked him off his feet and began dragging him backward. It was JT. Denny tried to pull away, to go back for the person whose fingers he could still see, whose pleas he could still hear, but JT was too big a man, too seasoned a fire fighter to be shaken off. Both men continued to struggle until JT's strength and experience overcame Denny's will.

Once outside at a safe distance, JT threw Denny to the ground. He pulled his helmet and mask off, and stood staring at the younger man. After Denny removed his own helmet and mask, JT ordered him to sit the rest of this one out. Denny tried to explain that someone was still in there, but JT jammed his finger into the collapsed man's chest and growled at him to shut up and not speak another word. JT went back to the trucks leaving Denny sitting in the street. As he watched, Denny could see the side walls start to buckle as the roof began its downward tumble into the burning debris. Stunned, he sat in silence as it all crumbled, his head dropped into his own hands as he began to weep while the night echoed a final wisp of please...

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About seven hours later, back at the station, the men were hanging their gear and checking their equipment for damage. JT quietly approached Denny, told him to keep his mouth shut and led him to an empty bay.

Lifting his arms as if to say 'what the hell was that', JT stared at Denny waiting for him to answer the unspoken question.

With tears in his eyes, Denny told JT about the person who didn't make it. He began recounting how he was mere feet from the door when he was hauled out, and how he could still see the little fingers reaching for help. Then he broke down sobbing, apologizing for not being fast enough as he dropped to his knees.

JT laid a much gentler hand on him this time. He knelt beside Denny and, shushing the younger man with only a look, he told him the story of the 'crow.

"The 'crow got its nickname from that movie, The Wizard of Oz, you know – 'How bout a little fire, Scarecrow'," JT laughed as he lit a cigarette, but noticed Denny wasn't amused.

"Okay look, the 'crow, or Scarecrow if you really need to know, is a demon that lives in the flames. It tries to pull all of us in at one point or another. The trick is never to acknowledge it. Don't listen to the subtle whispers under the flame's voice. Man, you've been doing this long enough to know the fire talks, so don't look at me that way. Ignore it – that's what the rest of us do. We don't talk about it, Denny, not ever, not even to each other. Hell, I've seen other guys, harder guys than you or me, walk out of a burning building as pale as my lily-white ass. They always come out in bad shape, fucked up in the head," JT tapped the side of his head and took another drag. "I'm telling you, if you talk, it only gets worse."

He was met with dead silence and a 'you're bull-shitting me' stare.

"Look, it's said that any man who sees the 'crow is marked and that the 'crow never forgets. It's only a matter of time before that man and his squad go down because of it. You're not supposed to see the 'crow and walk away. All the others who say they've heard it murmuring; they all quit the force and disappeared to live haunted lives. Once you've seen it, you'll always see it, and you'll never be able to walk into the flames again without seeing it. They say it always calls to you. I'm serious, Denny; don't lose your shit over this, okay? And don't tell anyone else you saw it."

"But didn't you see it tonight? Plus, I just told you, aren't you in danger now too?"

Not answering Denny's question, JT reached for a handkerchief to blow his nose. "You know, no matter how good those masks get, some of that crap still gets into your sinuses, doesn't really matter what they do." With a smack on the back, and a nod of his head, he sent Denny back to the locker room to get himself cleaned up. Left alone in the dark, a small flicker of white gleamed as he smiled, then for the briefest of moments, a second flicker of orange flashed through his eyes.

"Damn, I liked that boy, too." Gathering from the darker recesses, it coalesced and began to cling to his lower leg, it purred as he reached down to stroke its misshapen head. "Take care of him tonight, he's a good kid; I don't want him to suffer."

The breathy whisper answered, "It'll be quick. Maybe a slip in the shower once he gets home?" JT agreed, the shower would do just fine. As it dispersed back into the blackness, he began making his way to the office to fill out the paperwork for Denny's resignation.

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

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#### Tendrils of Darkness Charissa Udar

His icy hands pressed into her neck and forced her against the tree so tightly she could feel her consciousness and her will to fight leave her body in waves. They were in the middle of the silent, darkened park where she had gone to think things through. No one ever came here after dark, and she needed to be alone. Now, she wasn't so sure she quite regretted it, but it was no longer her choice. When she passed out entirely, he threw her over his shoulder and carried her into the vast woods beyond the park.

He'd never been violent until he discovered his best friend with his best girl one wild night. While drunkenly roaming the woods, he'd found the cave by accident. Raging in his desire to murder them, he tricked them into meeting their destiny. The opening was tiny. The entry went deep. It opened into a room-sized cavern. If you were brave, you could follow the left-rear tunnel on your hands and knees until you found the gaping chasm that had no end. If you took the right tunnel, you could fall into the underground stream whose currents could sweep you into the netherworld. If you'd been brought there unconscious—like this girl—and woke up, all three openings would look exactly the same, but he had strategically placed traps all along the entry tunnel to provide brave victims a few nasty surprises. No place could be more perfect. He kept only a locket of hair from the first two, but his souvenirs lining the cave wall from the others were far more extensive.

Tendrils of darkness clutched her mind as she awoke in the cavern. The three torches provided a dancing orange glow as his croons from a more shadowy place crept across her. The things he whispered in gravelly tones and the names he called her would have made any woman retch, and so she did as she tried to sit like a drunken sailor on a rolling sea. This enraged him. Its stench would ruin the smell of her blood.

He was done with her. How could she ruin such a special time for him? He threw a bucket of water on her—his drinking water. As she sputtered, he stood over her. Yes, he was bored with her.

He howled like a wolf as his already muscular features distorted and grew. His eyes drew together. His ears pulled into his head. His face elongated and became armor plated and full of teeth. A crocodile's tail grew from his back. He stood ten feet tall now on a man's legs with a man's chest and arms, but covered in green-black scales. His clothes lay in tatters at his feet.

He got down on his haunches, tail swinging side to side, staring into her coffee brown eyes, feeding on her fear. He grabbed her by the throat once again, this time with both hands, the thumbs digging deep into her larynx to silence her and stopper her nasty spewing forever. Her hands gripped his wrists, trying to pull him from her. She was too weak. Her eyes closed involuntarily as her pulse slowed. He let her go and laid her back on the cold cave floor, willing her to recover just a little. Her smooth black hair had fallen across her face, and she drew it back as she opened her eyes and tried to sit up again. He bit her arm in a crocodilian death grip and flipped her over onto her back again. Air escaped her like a ghost, but her eyes stayed fluttering open.

He grew angrier as he noticed her blood had sprayed across his souvenirs. He just needed to end her. He was ready to bite her about the waist and shake her until the life ran screaming from her destroyed body when something odd struck him. Her eyes had changed.

The coffee color and the whites were gone entirely. Now her eyes looked like rubies with obsidian centers. The deep red was faceted, and they caught the light as if they were really jewels. Her hair was changing, too. It had become like the hood of a king cobra, black and sleek. Her face stretched and pulled into a snake creature. Her hands and arms became like those of a lizard, thin and black with sharp talons on the fingertips. She coiled with length after length, raising her head even higher than he now stood, staring at him with cold, glittering eyes.

She hissed.

He couldn't move as the creature's scales rasped against the cavern floor, closer and closer. Her eyes said death. Her forked tongue flicked out, tasting his essence just feet away. Sparks shot from her talons as they scraped the rocky floor. Forgotten was the woman. The wind slipped in through the entry tunnel and whispered for him to surrender as it blew out one of the torches.

He couldn't blink, couldn't turn away. She struck him across the chest with her steely talons and his blood mixed with that of his victims. It burned as if he had just downed whiskey—or poison. But he was no weakling.

He jerked his eyes away from her enchantment and lunged at her, jaws snapping. He got one of

those scaly arms. It broke with a violent, 'CRACK!' Thick black blood oozed from his jaws.

The snake-creature's tail whipped his feet from under him, and he would have hit the floor but for his own tail. He bounced back with it and turned, punching the creature in the face with a satisfying thud.

She returned with lightning speed, whipping around him as he staggered and dealing a death bite to the back of his neck. But his armor was thickest back there. The creature broke the tip of one of her fangs in the attempt and thrashed from the pain. She zoomed across the cave and coiled, swaying in a mesmerizing death dance, venom dripping from the broken fang.

Breathing heavily now, he pondered what once was his prey.

For the first time since he began his new life after drinking the waters of the great dark deep of the cave, he was excited. Here was a creature as dark as himself. She swayed and tempted him to fall into her trap just as he stalked women in the parks and woods. He appreciated her more than he ever had any woman since his best girl.

He allowed his head to return to human form as she kept her distance.

"We could make quite a team, you and I."

She said nothing, only staring and willing him to keep his eyes trained on hers.

"When did you drink the waters?"

She looked toward the right back tunnel. Then she whirled back around.

"Ye-ah. I'm right, aren't I? You drank the water, just like me. We're just alike, you and I, evil in our cores. I just never realized anyone else had found this place." He stepped closer.

Her ruby eyes blazed like the fire of a trapped soul.

"No, that's not it, is it?"

She pulled her head back slightly.

"Someone tricked you. Didn't they?"

Her scales rasped against each other. The sounds echoed against the walls.

"You just need to find your purpose, Dear, like me. Just look at these hands. They've squeezed the life out of many, and the chasm has swallowed their bodies whole. Like you. Like a snake. We'd make a great team."

She seemed closer somehow, though he hadn't seen her move. The whisper of her scales soothed him now.

He never saw her final strike coming until it hit him in the throat. Venom streamed through his veins, burning him. He fell to the floor, writhing in agony. Never returning to human form, he became a molten blob of green-black pus, distorting, growing until he exploded. Steam rose up from the drops and in the puddle where he once stood.

She uncoiled herself, finally able to relax. She undulated down the right tunnel. She dipped her head into the rushing water and drank deeply. She could feel her arm straightening and healing with each swallow. Her broken fang mended itself, stronger than ever. When she felt whole again, she returned to the main cavern and regained her human form. She calmly replaced her clothes she had slithered out of not so long ago.

She looked toward the left tunnel, that dark endless chasm where he had thrown her weeks ago. He had hit her like a linebacker when he caught her that time, bashing in her face as he slammed her into the oak tree. She'd been conscious enough to feel his terrible crocodile bites once he had gotten her to the cave. She remembered falling for what felt like an eternity in the chasm.

Now she silently thanked the tendrils that had shot out through the darkness, had caught her, had brought her almost lifeless body to the waters. She thanked them for glowing and showing her his traps through the entry tunnel. She knew now that the tendrils whispering through the darkness had led her back to the oak tree. And why. She despised her snake creature form, but she understood its punishing purpose. She was an avenging angel. She glanced back down at what used to be the despicable man as he soaked into the cave floor. She kicked dust on what was left of him and crawled back out of the tunnel into the now bright sunshine, ready to take on the next challenge.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Charissa Udar is a former technical writer/editor and curriculum writer who hails from the greater Atlanta area. She enjoys reading and watching classic/innovative works from many genres. She has recently begun writing horror stories and other bits fiction.

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## Pan-Demonium Lori R. Lopez

The mind can play parlor tricks at the latest stroke Unprotected by sleep, ill-prepared for a milieu Of beasties and goblins that prowl the deep shadows

Untouched by any sun, white as Elmer's Glue

It was the hush of solitude in the quietest hour ... When silence and darkness waltz without feet Twirling and gliding, spinning to no band Unsettling the day's dust for a muted heartbeat

I was tossing a salad and turning the screws To unhinge a trap's jaws that had once been my brain

Now mixed in a blender by the commotion of travails

It would shrug off oblivion to dwell on the pain

Of living at an age where I am closer to dying And boundless tribulations will agitate my breast So I flung aside the covers, hopped into bunny slippers

And abandoned all hope for a single wink of rest

The kitchen lay shrouded neath a twilight mantle I was not the type who craved a lonely midnight snack

Yet stole like a robber through a tombful obscurity To pillage the cupboards and feed my aching lack

A rain of crumbs descended from cookies to floor Bunny ears awobble, I shuffled off to bed ... Now a dreadful thirst arose to wring my tongue dry And compel me to stir; along the same route it led

But before I returned, I discerned a stark clamor Of cabinet doors banging, the ring of clanging pots And kettle lids applauding the gongs of metal skillets

The kitchen's temper frothed with dinful counterplots

It struck me, an iron griddle cast in the pandemonium —

The house had been possessed by an uncorked meanie

Through tenebrous halls I raced, chased by cutlery in flight

That imbedded my chamber door, aimed by a genie

Cowering behind the mattress, trembling and frail I was exhausted from emotions while huddled in the gloom

Wishing it were a dream that could all at once be over

Then heard a whispery voice invade the seal of my doom ...

"I know you're in there hiding, I smell your fear. It oozes

From every pore. Expect three wishes? I curse you instead!

I shall haunt these walls, your very threshold and hearth.

I'll inhabit your slumber, and you'll wish you were dead."

As I shuddered, afraid I might never be rid of the wretch

A desperate plan formed to locate the spirit's jar Then summon him home and plug the urn tight — Unless it was a lamp, the kind you rubbed from a bazaar

Testing a blue bottle, I cried "Away with you, demon!"

Which had zero effect, so I next tried a green jug Its neck sucked him in; a pickled genie would bellow "Clean up your mess!" for crumbs had conjured the thug.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Lori R. Lopez wears hats. Under the hats lurk secret unsavory furtive things that go bump in the night and slither beneath your toenails as you sleep. Titles include ODDS AND ENDS: A DARK COLLECTION, THE MACABRE MIND OF LORI R. LOPEZ, JUGULAR, MONSTROSITIES, AN ILL WIND BLOWS, CHOCOLATE-COVERED EYES, and POETIC REFLECTIONS: THE QUEEN OF HATS. She designs her own peculiar covers and illustrations.

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In a world once ravaged by a terrible war, Katra is a hunter...



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# **Dirge For Cthulhu**

A. F. Stewart

Buried within sodden penumbra, beneath the world in eon's slumber dormant, ageless leviathans dream for days devoured, amid nightmare's scream

Ever, they keen a voiceless lament, thrashing against abiding descent Silent songs by a fallen regime for days devoured, amid nightmare's scream

Whispers escape their corpulent lips pulsating prayers, existent eclipse They wait, in languor, their hopes agleam for days devoured amid nightmare's scream

They yearn for ruin, annihilation they are cataclysm and damnation A kingdom lost, a thirst to redeem those days devoured, amid nightmare's scream

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - A proud sci-fi and fantasy geek, A. F. Stewart was born and raised in Nova Scotia, Canada and still calls it home. She favours the dark and deadly when writing—her genres of choice being dark fantasy and horror—but she has been known to venture into the light on occasion. She's independently published several novellas and story collections, as well as poetry compilations.

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# Women of the Wormwood

Tiffany Morris

Cut the apple clockwise, skin it like rabbit fur from bone.

Hold three fingers above an open flame.

Walk backward down the steps of your cellar, mirror in hand.

Summon Persephone.

We trail winter with our footsteps, livid with the beckoning snow.

Build our home upon fallow fields and fallout, sink honey bourbon into our tired bones.

We make you threadbare with longing, dare you to blink, as we whisper our devotion beneath your bed frame.

We leave asphodel beside your pillow, infesting your dreams with our voices with our love.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Tiffany Morris is an emerging writer from Nova Scotia. Her poetry and creative nonfiction has appeared in anthologies from Radar Productions and Red Claw Press, in addition to Spittoon Magazine, Yellow Medicine Review, The Blind Hem, and Red River Review, among others. A sci-fi and horror film enthusiast, she has also written reviews and articles for PaperDroids.com and Seroword.com.

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# Don't Sameen Carter

"Don't you want me?"
Eyes pop open
Darkness surrounds
Until daybreak arrives
Drowning out the sound...

"Don't you want me?"
"Don't you miss me?"
Grabbing the keys
I drive until
I'm far away.

"Don't you want me?"
"Don't you miss me?"
"I know you're hurting...
I can make it go away."

Ignoring the whispers
I try to fill the day
Until night returns
And the voice beckons...

"Don't you want me?"
"Don't you miss me?"
"I know you're hurting...
I'll make it go away."

Shaking, itching Hurting, cold... Now I'm driving Somewhere familiar that I know. "I knew you wanted me, Was sure you'd miss me." "I know you're hurting... I'll make it go away."

So long I've yearned For the comfort I'd find As the needle pricks my skin Liquid gold divine.

"I knew you'd want me, Was sure you'd miss me." "I know you've been hurting... Time for all that pain to go away."

The words echo as I close my eyes.
I'm so sorry, my friends.
I really did try.

"Do you want me?"
"Does pain dominate your day?"
"I know you're hurting—
I promise...
I'll make it go away."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR-**Finding difficulty verbalizing feelings and ideas through speech, Sameen Carter is an author who prefers using her work to speak *for her*. Always encouraged to write throughout her life, the first time she sat down at a computer, the feeling inside could only be described as explosive. She has used her talents editing and writing short stories under another name, but has always yearned to write poetry.

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# Krisper Miracle Austin

Someone told me this campfire story last weekend.

There is a hidden and forgotten wooded area in Texarkana called Whispering Bend.

Many believed that place was haunted by a turbulent spirit, by the name of the Krisper.

They said, "Don't say its name out loud...even a whisper would be too loud and your life would be nevermore," if you were ever near Whispering Bend.

A group of high school seniors decided to test it out last October, after *Homecoming*.

Some were too scared to go down the steep hill to *Whispering Bend* and drove off leaving a tornado dust cloud behind, while the rest pulled out their fearless vests and non-believers sunglasses.

Once they climbed down and found Whispering Bend, they began to chant out her name,

"Krisper...Krisper..."

They waited for awhile, almost an hour.

**Nothing** 

They repeated the chant two more times.

More disappointment painted their faces.

They started back up the hill one by one.

A high wind from the East slapped each of them down really hard, temporarily numbing their limbs. Before anyone could scream out, a deformed 7.5 foot creature with breasts and curvy, sharp blades for hands stood over them.

Freshly burnt human body parts decorated its body, like clothing...

The odor of death settled over them, like a heavy fog.

The creature opened its mouth, which resembled a mini, conveyor belt of razor teeth, some longer than others.

It roared out a choppy, dreadful laugh that caused the weak branches and leaves from the trees to rain down onto its new victims.

One girl closed her eyes tight and hoped that she was having a bad dream and whispered under her breath, "Please, please make it go away..."

The *Krisper* kneeled down to her and said, "You should have stayed with your wise friends up there. Now, you'll believe and others will never forget me, after tonight..."

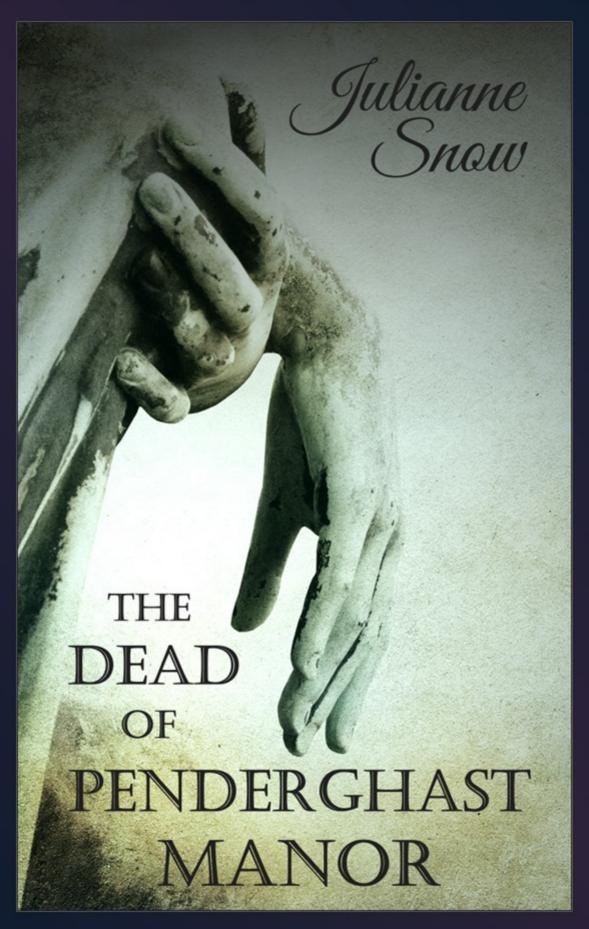
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Miracle Austin has been writing ever since first hearing *Drive* by the *Cars* in junior high. She's a YA/NA, cross-genre (horror/suspense being her favs) author who enjoys writing diverse, short stories. She completed her first eclectic collection, "Boundless," and awaiting a future publishing date. Currently, she's working on her first fictional novel with supernatural/comedic elements, "Lonestar Unordinary Girl." Texas is her home with her family.

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# What would you do if you knew the Dead could talk?



Available on Amazon

# An Interview with WiHM Founder, Hannah Neurotica

Women in Horror Recognition Month (WiHM) assists female genre artists in gaining opportunities, exposure, and education through altruistic events, printed material, articles, interviews, and online support. The vision is a world wherein all individuals are equally given the opportunity to create, share, and exploit their concept of life, pain, and freedom of expression.

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.

Every February, WiHM supporters host events (blood drives, film screenings, art shows), write blogs and articles, conduct interviews, and create videos and podcasts for mass consumption.

This year, we were able to sit down with founder Hannah Neurotica to talk about WiHM and all of the exciting projects she's got going on. Welcome Hannah, why don't you take a moment to introduce yourself?

Hannah Neurotica: I am still trying to figure myself out! ;)

Sirens Call Publications: Why Horror? What is it about the genre as a whole that attracts you and keeps you coming back for more?

**HN:** My wonderful brilliant dad Michael Forman (who passed away five years ago) was my horror-movie-watching buddy and he introduced me to the genre when I was very young. As a kid I got scared really easily but kept wanting to watch! Why do I keep coming back though? Horror deals with common human experiences that are often not talked about openly. We don't like to confront the concept of death, pain, or suffering but we can conquer/explore/be entertained by these heavy parts of life: natural disasters, death and disease, fears and phobias, social upheaval and war through this genre filter. Horror allows us as creators and consumers to explore our torment/unrest in a way that can bring catharsis as well as awesome entertainment!

SCP: Why Women in Horror Recognition Month? What started as a blog post is now a global phenomenon—is there anything you wish you'd done differently from the start?

**HN:** I think it's taken six years to hit me how big Women in Horror Month has grown among genre fans. There is no denying that one person can make an impact and I say that so others will not shy away from talking about issues that are most sacred and important to them too.

There have been many bumps over the past six years but it would be odd if there hadn't been. When something in our society needs to change its messy and you've got to find comfort in trial and error. I wouldn't do anything differently, I learn from my mistakes and that is something I value.



#### SCP: Since starting WiHM, have you seen any improvement within the genre?

HN: Absolutely! When I started Ax Wound (pre-Women in Horror Month) it was partly because nothing, nothing, nothing, existed that had even the slightest of anything to do with women and horror (as creators and as fans). At the time (2004?), I was so desperate to have a conversation with those who identified as feminist AND loved the genre too in all its transgressive glory. However going online (even with the whole huge wide span of cyberspace) there were no sites, blogs, forums, anything having to do with horror fans and being a woman. I truly wanted to have conversations with someone who had read Men, Women, and Chainsaws by Carol Clover (I had just discovered it) but it was like echo-echo-echo! When I would go on horror message boards and propose this subject for discussion I was just virtually assaulted by "fanboys" calling me a cunt, feminazi and all that great stuff. So, even though we have so much more work to do we have come very far since then. The fact that a girl who is the age I was then can go online and find endless links and resources that highlight women in horror (writers, filmmakers, fans, arts, etc) brings tears to my eyes when I really think about it. Back then I was searching for people like me and was just so isolated (WITH the internet!)- it's wonderful to know that girls don't need to look as far anymore to make these networking connections.

#### SCP: What else can we be doing as women to help raise awareness?

**HN:** I think media literacy is so important. I really encourage people to take note of what the press (mainstream and indie) are talking about, who they are talking about, and what assumptions are being made by the story. For example, If a list of top 10 best horror fiction writers comes out and its filled with white men it would be a huge opportunity to speak out and start a conversation, regardless of blowback, about why this is problematic. However, this is just one tiny example. I encourage everyone to seek out new artists and also share the work of underrepresented artists on your own pages and websites. I think many people have this fear that if they showcase another writer/filmmaker/artist it somehow steels there spotlight. Or, people get so wrapped up in their own projects they don't stop to build that community. There is room for everyone and it is this support of each other that will make the biggest impact. I mean, if you are spending February doing nothing but promoting your own work then you are missing the point. So highlight good work by other people and also always question/challenge what you read/watch in the media (& that includes your friend's blog).

SCP: WiHM first came about to help support women in the horror film industry in gaining opportunities and exposure but has quickly grown to include authors, publishers and many other creative sectors. How does it make you feel to know WiHM has become an event promoted and celebrated in all the creative outlets?

**HN:** Women in Horror Month was always about more than just film however it is definitely very heavily focused on that. With Ax Wound (our blog) we try to highlight women who work in different mediums as much as possible. For example we had a director, then a screenwriter, and then a composer. We also have recently spoken with a self-published writer and a make-up artist. It's hard when there are so many amazingly talented people to fit them into 28 days which is why WiHM is going to be around hardcore all year long.

It's a wonderful thing to see all these different communities coming together for the same cause.

#### SCP: Tell us about Ax Wound? When do you expect it to make its triumphant return?

HN: You have great timing with this question. Ax Wound has \*just\* relaunched as the official blog (and soon to be publication) of Women in Horror Month. We don't have any money right now but we hope people will dig the digital version of the magazine and help us grow into a "real" mag you can go to the store and pick up next to Fangoria, Rue Morgue, etc. The digital version will be a sample to show our vision. For those who don't know, Ax Wound it began and always was a cut n' paste photocopied zine. Super DIY. I refuse to believe that print isn't possible again (however the audience then was ten times smaller than it is now and sadly just completely unaffordable to do it that way now without funding) regardless of if it is or not that is my goal and my dream. Print will only stay alive if we use it but it's a fucking dying industry. We NEED to support books and magazines. It terrifies and depressing me when I see mags fold. Either way, Ax Wound is back and after February it will be ALOT different then it looks right now. We wanted to not overwhelm ourselves (and everyone's Newsfeed) by launched everything at once. So once March hits you can expect to see a lot of growth with Ax Wound and I am very excited about it.

SCP: There are men who don't support WiHM, in fact there are women who don't support it as well. What would you like to say to those individuals?

**HN:** That those feeling of dissent and anger (which can be pretty intense) are manifestations of why we need Women in Horror Month in the first place.

SCP: At times, I liken the whole WiHM movement in a similar light as the Suffragist movement; we're fighting for equality through the recognition of a flawed system as well as attempting to pave the way for the women who will come after us. Do you think we'll ever reach a point of true equality?

**HN:** Wow! That is quite a comparison! But I get what you mean- it's like Riot Grrrl- it's like any successful movement - something that has momentum behind it that creates change. Women were never handed over the right to vote. They fought hard and were even tortured in prisons for speaking out about being a human being with a brain capable of decision making. So few people realize that. So, if we want to see change for women we need to be the ones to fight for the change regardless of the blowback and "haters." If you don't have haters you're not doing something correctly. And to actually answer your question I believe we will continue to see progress but no, I do not see a light at the end of the tunnel for "true equality" in my lifetime.

SCP: What is the most insane thing someone has said to you about WiHM?

**HN:** "Why do you have it in February? It's so cold!"

Thank you Hannah! Be sure to visit <u>www.womeninhorrormonth.com</u> for a list of events and more information!





#### Do Not Play Donna Cuttress

She squinted at the small print of the insert within the scratched plastic cassette box, then tossed it back into the basket that brimmed with the discarded music no one wanted to listen to or could play anymore. She rifled through more, not really expecting to find anything really good, nothing she could add to her collection. Until she found one that had no case. A naked cassette. The title had been obscured by splodges of white Tippex splashed across Side A and Side B. Someone had scrawled dementedly, over and over, in black biro, 'DO NOT PLAY'.

She flipped the cassette over in her hands a couple of times and checked the actual tape was not cut or snapped. It was still playable, so she checked that the lady behind the counter of the charity shop was still too busy with her magazine to notice her slip the cassette tape up the sleeve of her jacket. She changed her attention to a water damaged cardboard box full of old vinyl and began flipping between the ragged covers.

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She put new batteries in her Walkman rip-off, and cleaned some of the ingrained wax and dirt from the rotting blue sponge on the headphones. The floor was covered in music. Vinyl; singles and long players, cassettes, CDs and even some 8-tracks, were splayed out on the floor. It was her dust covered, rodent infested, library of sound. She took the cassette from her pocket and lay back on the couch, reading the scrawl again, "Why tell someone not to listen to it?"

She put on the headphones, and lay her head into the greasy indent of the cushion. She reached for the tape player that rested on her stomach and pressed 'PLAY'. As the tape wound onto the spools she closed her eyes and waited.

The tape hissed, long enough for her to think it was blank, that someone had recorded over whatever had been on it. Then, she heard someone gently tapping what would have been a microphone. Someone blew on it. This was what she and her sister used to do. Sing into the spindly little microphone as though they were pop stars, murdering whatever song was most popular. A scared voice whispered, "OK…you pressed 'PLAY' so I'm going to sing now. Just a short song. You might know it. Don't sing along with me whatever you do. Just listen, please."

She sighed, "Well get on with it then."

Nervous hands played a few notes on an untuned guitar; the strings creaked and pulled against tight fingers. They stopped, then began again, trying to make the sound more tuneful. She turned up the volume, the background hiss was becoming louder than the music and decided to give the tape a few more minutes before she'd stop listening, at least she hadn't wasted her money paying for it. The singer sang about a lake and how she wished she could swim in it on this hot summer's day. Their soft voice became lower, it was almost a lullaby.

Her eyes were still closed, but she began to feel cold in the darkening room, and decided to get up after Side A had played out, and have some dinner, make the house warm. The singer became silent and began to play the guitar very slowly. They began to talk in verse now, almost chanting in a language she could not understand, the tone of the voice becoming lower and guttural.

She began to fidget, this spoken word music made her feel like she was being preached to. The voice on the tape caught, stopped for a second then spoke slowly, deliberately.

"I know you are impatient, but please carry on listening and whatever you do ... please don't open your eyes."

She froze.

"What did they just say? How do they know that my eyes are closed?"

She wanted to sit up and stop the tape, but she couldn't move. The room was in darkness now, a chill had settled on her. The guitar carried on playing a soft dream like sound, the musician had ceased talking.

"How long does this song go on for?"

The voice on the tape spoke back, speaking quickly as though they were about to cry.

"Not long. The song will not go on for much longer."

They carried on gently humming a tune she was sure she had heard, maybe from childhood or on one of the records she had brought home and tried to play. Surely this singer wasn't really talking to her.

Was she being spied on in her own home?

The voice whispered into the microphone, "Don't open your eyes yet. You will die if you do."

She kept still, fear held her like a fossil in stone. This person, man or woman, she could not work out which, was talking to *her*. Something moved around her. The house was infested with mice hiding amongst her music that was strewn everywhere, maybe it was them? She wanted to look but she stopped, whatever was hiding in the darkness could stay there.

The music continued. The singer's breathing was getting heavier as they spat out the lyrics, the charming song had deviated into something much more sinister. A door opened. Was it on the tape or in her house? She could hear it creaking, then slam shut. Her hands began to shake against her sides, she desperately wanted to move, to run, to open her eyes. The singer played a wrong note, stopped briefly then began the line of verse again.

Someone is with her. Someone is in the room with her! she thought.

They dragged something, a chair or a table and sat down. Another voice began to softly speak rather than sing. A hellish voice. Male and female, throaty and echoing. She could hear the tremor in the others voice, whoever it was talking next to them making the singer became higher in pitch, fading to a whisper as they tried to finish the song.

Rationalise, she thought, this often happens when you listen to music with headphones. You're OK one minute, then you get spooked! You're convinced someone is standing right behind you, ready to let their hands creep around your neck!

She screwed her eyes closer together, the singer had quieted, but the guitar continued to be strummed, a shaking hand trailing fingers over the strings.

"Oh God! When will this tape end? When will I ever open my eyes again?" she muttered, and in answer the guitar stopped. Silence. A hissing sound. The machine clunked as the tape spooled to a finish 'STOP'.

She wanted to move but could not, her paralysed body was freezing, her joints painfully restricted yet she felt warmth on her face, something was breathing against her cheek,

Don't be so stupid, she thought, Turn the bloody tape over.

She found it difficult to move her fingers, dead knuckles fumbling with the large plastic buttons, yet she still did not open her eyes. The prickling of the skin on her shoulders became an ache in her back as she fought to keep still. The orange glow of the street light shone through the window and illuminated her face in the blackness of her home. She could not see the shadows that had began to move about her, slowly spilling across the walls, sprawling over the floor; circling her, waiting for her to open her eyes and confront them.

She turned the tape over to 'Side B', forced it into the machine and pressed PLAY. The hissing sound began, it went on so long that she thought there was nothing on it; it had all been a joke, a sick one. Then the screams began. Male, female, high pitched and low; screams of "No!" or "Help me" some even screamed for God. All of them were terrified for their lives, facing the end with fear. She wanted to switch it off, press 'STOP', but she could not move and listened until the noise ended. The silence was broken by her heartbeat and her forced breathing. It was finished, she had listened, surely now she could open her eyes?

Her eyelids fluttered open as she began to relax. The room was now in darkness, the sun had set while the tape had played.

"I'm OK," she smiled, relieved. "Everything is OK. Stupid. I was being stupid."

The faceless person leaned over her swiftly. Its blank features, moulded like soft grey dough were less than an inch away from her face. Its body changed, mutated as though covered in a black billowing cape, its focus constantly altering. She inhaled quickly, her breath rasping in fear, saliva pooling at the back of her throat, drowning her, making her want to choke. The face moved, features straining to erupt like maggots under a thin skin. A mouth ripped itself free, a black gaping hole that emanated no voice just the hissing sound she heard on the tape. No voice, no singing, no music. 'PLAY/REC' depressed themselves on the machine and the spools began to slowly turn. As she screamed, she could feel a burning in her ears, as though hot sand was being poured into them, slowly filling every crevice, every gap, splitting the ear drum, pouring through to her brain. She could taste the grit at the back of her mouth, it began to flood her

sinuses, grinding behind her eyeballs and making the sockets raw. The mouth opened wider, the hissing sound became tumultuous. Her scream became dulled, smothered by the asphyxiating noise. The hissing ceased. Her hands dropped to her side, as her vision dulled and her hearing became muffled. Something was there, watching her patiently, waiting for her end. The machine jumped slightly as she felt the tape 'STOP'. She let out a long slow breath. Something whispered to her through the headphones,

"We warned you, DO NOT PLAY."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Donna Cuttress is from Liverpool U.K. She has written for Sirens Call Publications previously, featured in their first WIHM issue and in *Voices from the Gloom: Volume One*. She has also been published by Crooked Cat, Firbolg publishing and writes reviews of classic horror films for The Spooky Isles site. Her work for Kace Tripp Publishing's 'Crooked Tales' will be available soon.

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#### **Best Friends** Gloria Bobrowicz

Jodi was ecstatic; she'd just graduated college having earned a degree in Journalism. As a graduation gift, her parents had given her two tickets to an island in the Caribbean. Jodi thought long and hard about who she wanted to take as her guest. Maybe she'd invite her college roommate or perhaps her cousin, Suzi. They were both fun, but she didn't really feel close enough to share such a special occasion with either of them. She finally decided on asking her childhood friend, Donna, to join her. Donna and Jodi had become fast friends in the first grade. They went through Elementary, Junior High and High School together. Jodi was on the cheerleading squad, and had dated one of the football players while Donna chose the more academic route – she'd graduated at the top of her class.

When it came time to choose their continued education, Jodi decided to go away to college, live in a dorm; she wanted the whole college experience. Donna, on the other hand, though she could pick any school she wanted due to her GPA and scholarships, chose a local college and lived at home. It was only her mom and her and she didn't want to leave her mother alone. Though they chose separate paths, both Jodi and Donna stayed in touch through the years via Skype, facebook, email, and the infrequent phone call.

Having just graduated herself, Donna was looking forward to some relaxing time and enthusiastically accepted Jodi's invitation. Lying on a clean, white beach sipping an exotic drink with her best friend seemed like a fantastic way to celebrate her graduation.

Jodi was always Miss Popularity and Donna was the geeky one, but somehow they clicked. Donna always admired Jodi and helped her in any way she could. Even though Jodi sometimes seemed selfish, she loved her friend like a sister. If it wasn't for Donna, Jodi wouldn't have gotten the grades she needed to qualify for her own scholarships. She would have done anything to help Jodi succeed; she always had Jodi's back no matter what the situation.

The two girls made arrangements to meet for lunch at a local pizzeria and then afterward, go shopping for new clothes to take with them on their trip. Over lunch they caught up on news and gossip in their separate worlds. Donna invited Jodi to her graduation party. Her mom had invited all of her relatives and close friends to their home for sandwiches and cake. Not having much money, it was a small, unpretentious gathering. Jodi, of course, invited Donna to her graduation party, but unlike the intimate gathering to celebrate Donna's achievement, Jodi's parents invited over 150 people to a well known Italian Restaurant, reserved their largest banquet room, and spoiled Jodi with every want a twenty-three year old girl could have. Jodi was ecstatic; she loved the attention and all the hoopla that went with it. And if she was being honest with herself, she had to admit she was looking forward to all the extravagant gifts. Not liking to be the center of attention, Donna was content with what her mother planned for her.

Their celebration trip was scheduled to kick-off about a month after graduation: June 15<sup>th</sup>. They had an early morning flight out of Newark International Airport and were scheduled to land in the early afternoon. Both girls were excited and exhausted; neither had slept well the previous night.

Grabbing a taxi at the airport, they travelled to their resort, enjoying the beautiful sights along the way. They checked in and after having a delicious lunch with a few cocktails, decided to change into their bathing suits and go for a swim.

The beach was pristine, white sand and clear crystal-blue water. They grabbed a couple of floats from the resort's Cabana and swam out beyond the sand bar. Holding hands, eyes closed, they unknowingly drifted out into much deeper water. Suddenly, Donna screamed. Her raft flew into the air and promptly tossed her into the ocean. Bobbing up, she gulped in air and yelled for Jodi to help her. Jodi immediately reached for her friend, then saw the water turn red; Jodi froze. Something under the surface had hold of Donna and kept dragging her back under the churning water. A fear unlike anything she's ever experienced before washed over Jodi, she screamed and screamed for help, but there was no one in sight. Fearing for her own life, Jodi started swimming toward shore; all the while listening to Donna shout, "Don't leave me."

A lifeguard eventually saw Jodi struggling to get back to the beach and called for help. A boat was sent out and Jodi was picked up. Jodi told them what happened and begged them to go back for her friend, but there was nothing she or they could do. She dared not tell everyone what really happened. Heartsick and filled with guilt, her vacation was over; she booked the first flight home and was greeted warmly by her family. Donna's mother was there also, but all that greeted her were her daughter's meager belongings and a hope for the future that was now lost forever. She was absolutely devastated. This was supposed to be a

happy time. Her daughter had achieved her goal, was ready to conquer the world, and this gift seemed like such a godsend; an unexpected reward. Her beautiful, smart only-child was never coming back to her, it was not only surreal, but unjust that a life should end so young and brutally.

The funeral was nearly unbearable. Jodi sat and watched as everyone quietly told Donna's mother what a terrible loss she'd suffered; how bright Donna's future had been; how much she would be missed. How much of her life she'd still had before her. People hugged Jodi and said they were sorry she'd had to witness the horrible accident; all the while Jodi choked back the bile of her guilt.

Life went on for Jodi. She was hired by the local news station in a fairly lucrative position. One day, while sitting in a conference room for a daily meeting, she heard a soft murmur in her ear. "Why did you leave me?" Feeling warm breath on her neck, she began to get goose bumps. Who said that? Jodi looked around sure that someone was playing a prank on her. They couldn't know, no one could – she'd never told anyone. She chalked it up to overwrought nerves, a poor night's sleep, and the anxiety she was feeling as the anniversary of her ill-fated trip approached. Leaving the station early that day, she went home, had a long nap, and didn't give it another thought.

That evening, she met her mother for dinner. Even though the table they were sat at had four chairs, they chose to sit side by side enjoying the bottle of wine they'd brought with them. After perusing the menu, and ordering, they began chatting happily about Jodi's future. Out of nowhere, Jodi heard, "Why did you leave me?" She was so startled that she physically jumped and let out a small squeal. Concerned, her mother asked if she was alright. Across the table from Jodi sat her friend, one eye hanging down her cheek, her left arm gone, and a gaping hole in her midsection. "Why did you leave me? I would never have left you, I thought we were friends."

Jodi gasped, "What was I supposed to do? If I stayed to help you, we'd both be dead."

Jodi's mother was becoming increasingly worried as she tried to draw her daughter's attention.

Donna's spirit replied, "It was always about you, you don't care about anyone but yourself. I will haunt you every day until you die. You don't deserve a moment's peace. Look at me. I will never forgive you."

Jodi's mother couldn't believe what she was hearing; her daughter was shrieking incoherently at an empty chair that it wasn't her fault. Jodi eventually calmed, but wouldn't discuss the incident with her mother. They managed a strained meal together after which Jodi immediately headed home to her apartment.

Thinking the loss of her friend was too much for her daughter to deal with; Jodi's mother called her doctor the next day and made arrangements to take her to a nice, private home where they could care for Jodi, help her to rest and recuperate.

No matter the amount of anti-psychotic drugs or sedatives they gave her, the one armed, one eyed, Donna appeared in Jodi's room every evening asking, "Why did you leave me?"

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Gloria Bobrowicz has been a huge horror fan since early childhood. She loves books related to true crime – particularly the serial killer variety. Watching the movie 'Night of the Living Dead' or some of the older horror movies such as, 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers', 'The Thing from Another World', or 'War of the Worlds' with a bowl of popcorn is her idea of relaxing. Gloria is a coowner and the Editor-In-Chief of Sirens Call Publications.

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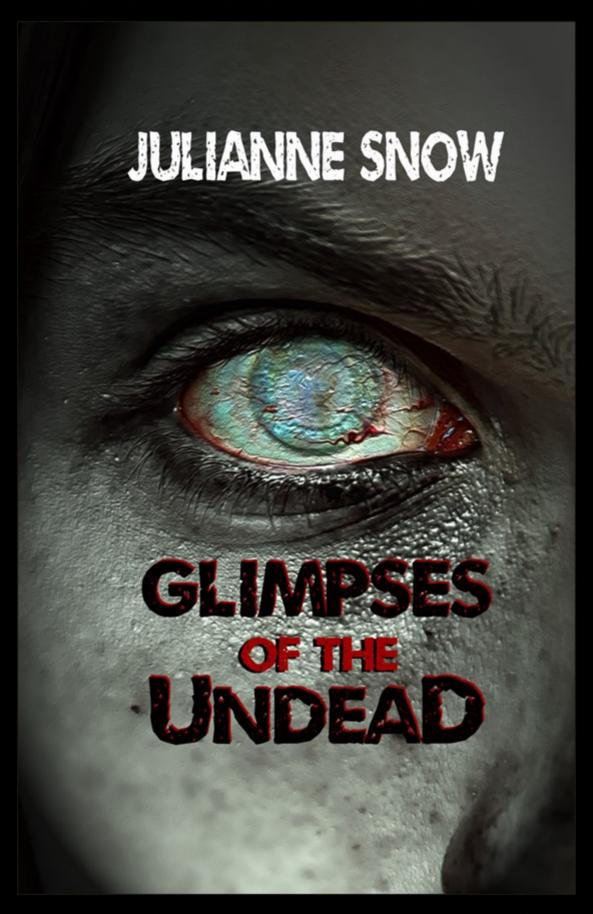








# A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION...



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## One Bad House Gwendolyn Kiste

Some houses are just built bad. They don't need an Indian burial ground beneath the basement or a violent murder in the attic or anything out of the ordinary in the kitchen or the bedrooms or the parlor. Some houses just don't like people. And that's more than enough to make the tenants' lives a misery.

And we were miserable—Mildred and I—from the moment our parents uprooted us from the world and set us back down on an angry street where there were no other kids who wanted to have fun. A street with a house—many houses actually—but only one house that mattered. And unlike the neighborhood children, that house did want to have fun, though its version of fun never quite dovetailed with ours.

"Let's burn it down," Mildred said a week after we moved in. "We can use the matches for Mom's candles and the rum from Daddy's cabinet."

I squinted at her, the July sun burning my eyes in that way that didn't burn at all but felt more like melting.

"You've really planned it out," I said, mostly because I couldn't think of anything else.

"I don't like it here." Crouched on the sidewalk, she flicked one domino, and all the rest tumbled. "And this place doesn't like us either."

Until then, I was sure I was the only one who could hear the house. It chattered at all hours, and while it spoke a language I never could crack, I always understood the gist of it. Its happiness when our mother crashed down the stairs with a basket of laundry. Its amusement over how our father drank enough to make a roadhouse buckle. Its irritation that I could hear the murmurs meant for the walls and no one else. And its fury when I sometimes talked back.

"You get the rum," I said. "I'll get the matches."

We started with the curtains. Mildred dumped half the bottle on the matted burgundy velvet, and I lit the match. But the living room decor refused to burn. The flame went out or the fabric was fireproof or the blaze caught—just for an instant—and extinguished again almost as fast.

"Let's try the carpet," Mildred said and sprinkled the rest of the booze in the corner.

I ran out of matches, and she directed me to the fireplace to retrieve more. But I knew it was useless. Another three dozen strikes against the box, and we were no closer to our goal.

"The house protects itself," I said, and while I hated that place with every fiber of my soul, I couldn't blame it. Self-defense was almost as natural as hunger or thirst or fear.

"You give up too quick." With a scowl, Mildred trudged to the liquor cabinet for a second bottle of rum.

But our father was already there, hunched over the raided alcove like a black and white movie monster before its prey.

"Which one of you girls got into my booze?"

One eyebrow raised, he stood us against the wall as though we were prisoners before a firing squad. Then he inspected us from the other side of the room, hopeful we might crack under the weight of his gaze.

Neither of us did, so he punished us both.

"Room. Now. No supper."

That night, beneath the imaginary shelter of heavy comforters, Mildred and I reminisced about when he didn't care so much about the contents of the cabinet. It was as if the house took the sting out of the gin and the rum and the vodka and replaced it with a velvet finale that no husband and father could refuse.

I cradled my hand-me-down doll, Lulu. "I wish things were different."

"Me too."

"They'll never be the same, will they?"

"I don't know," Mildred said and kissed her stuffed cat Linus on his head.

In the morning, a spurt of bacon grease skipped from the pan and burned our mother's arm. We went with her to the hospital, but our father stayed behind. He had apparently made the most of that second bottle of rum that Mildred never did pilfer.

"That's a pretty severe burn," the doctor said. "You said it was just bacon grease?"

Our mother nodded and stared at a scuffed floor tile.

When we returned home that afternoon, both Lulu and Linus had vanished from our bedroom.

Mildred and I performed a thorough search and rescue, tossing sheets and trinkets into the air, but we found nothing.

"Maybe it's payback for taking his booze," Mildred said.

"Maybe."

The house murmured something as I started down the stairs alone, but I did my best to ignore it.

I nudged our father on the couch. "Daddy, have you seen Lulu and Linus?"

He rubbed his eyes and scowled. "And what if have? Would that get me my liquor back?"

Our mother appeared in the doorway, massaging salve into her burn. "Do you have their dolls or not?"

"Only Lulu is a doll," I said. "Linus is a cat."

Our father scoffed. "No, I don't have their dolls."

"You aren't listening," I said. "Linus is a cat."

Our mother shook her head. "If you have their dolls—"

"I told you! I haven't seen any damn dolls."

My eyes began to water. "Not dolls," I said and collapsed to the floor.

My mother sighed. "Please go upstairs, sweetie."

Mildred and I spent the next hour parading with bubbles and rubber ducks. For some reason, the house never bothered us there. So we took long baths, so long that our skin transformed us into old wrinkled women.

"I wish this were the ocean," Mildred said, and I nodded.

We trekked wet footprints through the hallway and back to our bedroom.

There, on the center of the comforter, as if materialized from another dimension, Lulu and Linus had returned. Or what was left of them anyhow.

"It's better than nothing," Mildred said as she stitched a paw and glued a hand.

"Why did the house do this?"

"Maybe it wasn't the house," Mildred said. "Maybe it was Dad."

"You don't believe that," I said.

"No," she said, "I don't."

The house murmured all night, but in the bed next to me, Mildred never awoke. She just snored and cuddled the patched-up pieces of Linus. Though I had no reason to think so, I was sure the wall whispered a little louder just because it knew I was alone.

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That weekend was July Fourth, which meant our mother had to make six dozen cookies for the annual Rotary fundraiser.

"Do you think she'll let us have a couple?"

We watched from around the corner as our mother stole a treat for herself.

Mildred shrugged. "Can't hurt to ask."

Emerging from our hiding place, we blushed and giggled.

"Can't we have just one?" Mildred asked.

"These aren't for you," our mother said and smacked our hands. "Now go play."

"I think this place is getting to her," I said. "She never used to be so mean."

On the front porch, Mildred commenced a game of jacks.

I squinted into the sun. "If the house was a person, I wonder what it would look like."

"The same as it does now: like a house." Mildred rolled her eyes. "Houses always look like houses, and people always look like people."

"How do you know? Why couldn't a house be a person, and a person be a house?"

"Because that's not how the world works."

"But how do you know?"

"Because I know a thing or two about the world, that's how," she said, and I believed her. She was eight years old after all, and I was only six, and we were both young enough to believe there was indeed a vast chasm between us, one in which she was the scholar and I was the fool.

"I'm in the middle of this," Mildred said as if a trivial game was suddenly the centerpiece of her life. "So stop bothering me."

Muttering and kicking the ground, I wandered back into the house.

"Mom?"

No answer.

"Dad?"

Still no answer, though I already knew calling him was a long shot.

"Anyone?"

The house practically echoed with emptiness.

As if to lure me in, something rattled in the kitchen. I wanted to resist, but I crept toward the noise anyhow.

Two cookies rested on a plate in the center of the table.

"Mildred!"

She plodded into the room and gawked at the would-be treasure. "Do you think Mom left those out?"

"No, I don't." I gripped her arm. "Don't trust it."

"Why not?"

"Because I think the house did it." Though there was no chill, I shivered anyway.

"Maybe the house wants to make up with us," Mildred said. "Like how Daddy buys Mom flowers when he wants forgiveness for something stupid he said?"

I shook my head. "I don't think this house is eager to give us a dozen roses."

Mildred wiggled free of my grasp and snatched a cookie from the plate. She took a bite, crumbs spewing everywhere as she spoke. "Not roses, silly. Cookies."

She handed me the other one, but I shoved it in my pocket.

"I'm not hungry right now."

By supper, Mildred was retching violently. Mom didn't know why, and I wasn't sure I should tell her. But around midnight, when blood mingled with my sister's sickness, fear got the better of me, and I confessed our theft, presenting my uneaten treat as proof.

The rest of the cookies—so delicately displayed on trays entombed in plastic wrap—met the trash on our way to the emergency room.

"What a waste," Mildred murmured between heaves.

"Your family's becoming regulars here," the emergency room attendant said to my mother.

As always, she nodded and stared at the floor.

Mildred was diagnosed with simple food poisoning and sent home with antibiotics.

I sat on her bed. "How are you?"

"Sick," she said. "How do you think I am?"

"I'm scared," I said.

"You should be. It's not over yet."

I squeezed my eyes closed to hold back tears, but it did no good. The remains of Lulu were sodden by morning.

\*\*\*

Once she was feeling better, Mildred and I played in the front yard. Every day, we found new games to distract us. Jacks, cards, dominos. Sometimes we just lined up different sized rocks. Anything to keep us from the prison inside those walls.

But that house would always coax us back. It would holler our names in our mother's voice or hold our toys in limbo. We did our best to ignore it, but it would just try a new trick instead.

Like the last day when it sent something crashing down the stairs.

We found our mother on the landing, her body twisted but still breathing.

"What happened?"

"I don't know," she murmured. "But the carpet on the stairs wasn't crinkled like that yesterday."

The ambulance came and carried her away. With its mewling siren and blinding lights, it was as if a banshee had spirited her to another world.

"We'll visit tomorrow," our father said. "We need sleep tonight."

But sleep could never find Mildred and me again, not so long as we were in that place.

"We need to destroy it," I whispered, pretending the house couldn't hear us. "Before it gets one of us for good."

"We've already tried," Mildred said. "Fire didn't work. And what's more destructive than fire?"

I hesitated, my stomach roiling as a theory took form. "Its opposite."

We plugged all the drains in all the sinks and turn on the faucets.

"That won't be enough," Mildred said as we watched the overflow saturate the floor.

Because the house was so old, there were swathes of pipes that ran along the floor. Pipes that waited for us. Together, Mildred and I bounced on the decrepit lead until the metal gave way. The hot water spewed in every direction.

"Run!" Mildred dragged me to another room. We located another set of pipes and bounced like acrobats on trampolines until there was more water and more running.

The walls reverberated for a moment. I listened, but there was nothing else. Just silence. The bleakest silence I'd ever heard.

I glanced around. "What's happening?"

Suddenly, the floor buckled beneath us, and Mildred went sliding into the black depth on the other side.

I gripped the radiator and hoisted myself into a corner. "Mildred!"

She called my name, but her voice was a million miles away as though the house had simply swallowed her whole.

"Mildred." Tears stained my cheeks. "Please. Don't go."

Our father rushed down the stairs, at last roused from his haze. "What happened?"

"Mildred's in the basement! Help her, Daddy! You have to help her!"

He pulled me from the corner and cradled me in his arms as he sprinted to the front porch.

"What about Mildred?" I screamed as he set me on the sidewalk.

"You go next door and call the fire department," he said. "I'll get your sister."

I held up my end of the bargain, collapsing onto the neighbor's stoop and begging them to phone the police, the fire department, the National Guard.

And our father held up his end too, retrieving my sister from the deep abyss of that basement. Mildred never said what it looked like down there with all the water and darkness and ire of that house. And I never asked.

At the hospital, she shared a room with our mother, and they watched television together and complained in unison about the terrible food. It was the best sleepover ever.

\*\*\*

The house was condemned in short order, but the insurance only paid so much. My parents had to fill in the rest with loans and life savings and college funds that weren't to be.

"At least Daddy can't afford liquor anymore," Mildred said as we played on the floor of the one-bedroom apartment that ushered us through grade school and junior high.

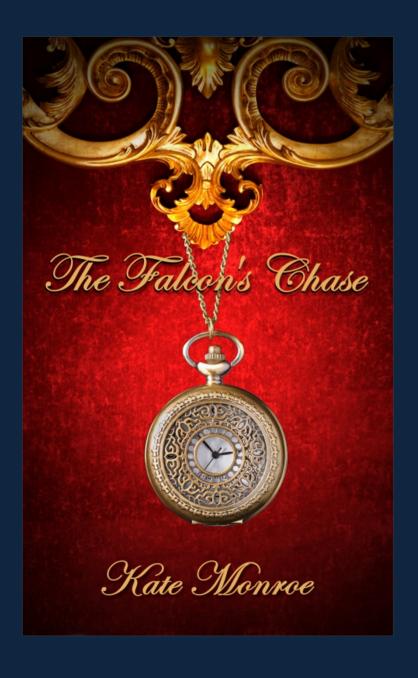
"Not top shelf stuff anyways," I said.

Our parents didn't stay married for too long after that. The house had done its damage, and there was no way we could reverse it. But Mom and Dad stayed on okay terms, and we still spent Christmases as a family, and that was enough for Mildred and me. Eventually, we added a half-brother and a couple half-sisters to the mix, and that made up for it, especially when the trio of youngsters watched with wide eyes as we recounted our tale of the house. Sometimes, they didn't believe us, and sometimes, they did. But skeptic or not, Mildred and I smiled whenever they pressed their ears to walls or examined stairwells with extra caution.

Because as we all knew, some houses are just built bad.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Gwendolyn Kiste is a horror and fantasy writer based in Pennsylvania. Her fiction has appeared in anthologies including *Strangely Funny II* and *Whispers from the Past: Fright and Fear* as well as online at Sirens Call Publications, Danse Macabre, and Sanitarium Magazine among others.

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# The Falcon's Chase Kate Monroe

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo and iTunes

## Hold Me Tight S.J. Budd

"We're so thrilled you've agreed to take on Jake, he's been placed with four different carers in the last three months, but no one seems to want to have him." Mandy, Jake's social worker, looked down at her notes, "Such a shame. It's usually the most challenging children that are the most rewarding."

Kirsty cleared her throat and took a sip of tea from the chipped mug in her hands, "You said his mother is ill, what's wrong with her?"

"I can't say," Mandy responded very quickly, she gathered her things and seemed eager to leave. "Good bye Jake," she finished without looking back.

"Thanks again," Kirsty called out after her.

Kirsty got up from her sofa and asked Jake if he was hungry, he shook his head but Kirsty gave him a bar of chocolate which raised a smile. He took it and shyly sat down beside her. She got the remote and put on a kids TV programme, it had been Jessica's favourite.

"I think we're going to get on just fine," Kirsty said. He was a very shy boy with dark hair and dark eyes, hopefully he liked football. It was Gary's burning passion and Kirsty had brought this little boy into her home not because she wanted to care for him but because she needed glue to keep her fragmented family together, and Jake was just the thing.

Kirsty received a text halfway through cooking dinner, it was Gary saying he would be home late, he was going for a drink with the lads, again. Kirsty sighed and gritted her teeth, these days he was never at home, never around when she needed him the most. No doubt he blamed himself but she forgave him as she did every time he did something wrong. No one's perfect she lamented, not even Gary.

Jake accepted his meal in silence and ate everything without protest, even the peas. Kirsty smiled he was a doddle to look after, this was going to be easy. Even when he was sent to bed there was none of the usual dramatics she had with Jessica.

"Jessie?" Kirsty whispered in the dark hallway as she waited outside an empty room that had been untouched since that day. She went back downstairs after seeing Jake to bed. There was nothing on the telly but there was a bottle of cheap wine in the cupboard, so she took that out instead and sat alone at the kitchen table with one glass.

Kirsty must have been really tired because she woke up the next day still sitting at the table. Jake was also sat next to her waiting with angry eyes.

"Jake, oh I didn't hear you come down," she quickly hid the empty bottle and glass before he saw and tried to act as if she was feeling on top of the world. He said nothing but glowered at her. "Do you usually have cereal for breakfast?" Kirsty inquired, she received no answer and turned round to see he had gone.

That was how it had started, Jake would not speak to her, would not go near her. Something in him had changed overnight. Kirsty rubbed her neck, it had been playing up again, a painful reminder of the day she had lost everything.

Gary was upstairs in bed snoring off last night's excesses, she knew better now than to wake him, he had a terrible temper that had become much worse. It was mid- morning, there was nothing good on the telly but she did find a half drunk bottle of whisky by the side of the bed. It was Gary's but if she put the empty bottle back after she was done, he'd just think it was him that drank it.

"You are disgusting, you're so embarrassing. Why can't you be like normal parent?" Jake spat, he had been sitting behind the sofa unknown to Kirsty.

Those words were all too familiar to her, "Jake, what are you doing behind the sofa?" Her words were beginning to slur and it was hard for her to act right.

Jake looked upstairs but made no move to come out, "Is he coming down too?"

"Gary? No he's asleep. He's really nice, do you like playing football. Gary loves football, he used to play professionally until he had his accident." Kirsty stopped suddenly, "But don't mention that to him, better to pretend you don't know."

"I hope you drink yourself to death." Jake hissed as he ran outside to the bottom of the garden.

Kirsty hid her face in her hands, there was only one thing she could do to numb the pain and that was to drink a bit more until it went away. It seemed like he knew her already, he hated her already. Was this what he did when he was placed with new foster carers? Was he deliberately trying to push her away?

She wasn't going to give up, not like last time.

"We're all hurting in this house Jake, but we can help each other. You can help me and I can help you. Does that sound fair?" Kirsty asked as she found him kicking about an old ball.

"You don't deserve help," was all he said.

As the day progressed Kirsty's mind became clearer, this had been a big mistake. Jake was not going to bring the things back that she had so desperately wanted. They were not going to be a family, he was just another broken creature in a house of suffering. She made that call to Mandy who did not hide her disappointment in Kirsty's decision to stop caring for the boy.

"I'll come round tomorrow, give you a chance to sleep on it," she spoke coldly.

"Can't you come and get him now?" Kirsty pleaded looking out the living room window to the stranger in her garden. The line went dead, Mandy had hung up.

"What have I done?"

Kirsty couldn't sleep at all that night. Jake had really unnerved her but at least he had put up no fuss when she sent him to bed early. In fact he had welcomed it, he must have been glad to be away from her. Kirsty sighed and rubbed her temples. Was she really so terrible a person?

Gary was down the pub again, he didn't care for Jake. This had been one very big mistake. She got out of bed but she wasn't going to drink this time. Her life needed changes she needed to stop it for good.

"I have a problem," she whispered as she traipsed down the hallway. When she got to Jake's room she heard a sound and paused. There was another muffled giggle, it sounded like a girls chuckle.

"I told her, I hope you drink yourself to death," Jake giggled followed by more laughing. Kirsty was shocked that Jake was capable of laughter, he seemed such a sombre child during the day. Now, in the darkness he was unrestrained and free.

"She didn't say anything back," there was another pause. "No I didn't get a smack either." Kirsty leaned in trying to decide whether she could hear another voice, "I'll make sure to stay out of his way." Kirsty thought about going in and turning on the light but there was something that stopped her from doing so. She wanted to know who he was talking to; there was definitely somebody else in there with him.

"Jess, if you're still feeling sore you can sleep on the bed and I'll take the floor. I don't mind." There was a rustling of bed sheets followed by several soft creaks on the floorboards. "Of course you can sleep in with me, I'll hold you tight."

Kirsty took a step back and nearly fell down the stairs in shock. Quickly she went downstairs, luckily there was a can of opened beer that Gary had left on the kitchen table. He'd be mad when he would get in later and see it was gone, but right now, she needed it more than him.

How could he have known her name? Was it possible Mandy had told him? Surely it was a strange thing to tell a child? Was Jake really talking to Jessica? An overwhelming surge of emotion took over her like a rip tide pounding a beaten shore. She had not allowed herself to feel anything for the last six months and now *it*, the very thing she'd been trying to drown, had burst through the dams. Was he really talking to Jessica, her Jessica? Her only child who tragically died six months ago. She saw it now, Jake was not the glue needed to hold this family together, but the bridge in which to speak to her daughter. She wanted to go up there now and speak to her, but she didn't want to blow her chance.

Eventually Jake came down shortly after nine AM, Kirsty had refused any more alcohol after that beer and was completely sober, it hurt like hell but she was ready for it, ready for the suffering of the darkest dawn. Now Jake was here, she'd find a new day to begin again. With Jessica's help also, she knew she could turn her life around.

"Jake what have I done to upset you? I only want to be your friend." Kirsty had made him a special fried breakfast, she'd nipped out whilst he had been asleep to buy the ingredients needed.

"You're mean," was all he said as he pushed the plate away.

"Look Jake," Kirsty said taking hold of his shoulders in her grip, "I need to know. Were you talking to Jessica last night? Is she here? Please I need to talk to her. She's my daughter." Jake wriggled away from her with a surprising strength.

"Don't touch me. I know what you did."

"What do you mean? Look, can you speak to her or not?" Kirsty asked growing impatient, all she wanted was her little girl back.

"Yes I can, but she doesn't want to speak to you and neither do I" Jake said retreating further back.

"But why?" Kirsty cried, the struggle to stay sober was getting too much.

"Because you killed her! She hates you," Jake roared. He added in a quieter tone, "She's told me everything, that you two drove home after a BBQ. You let Gary drive even though you knew he'd had too much to drink. He crashed the car and she died, but instead of giving her justice, you lied and said it was you driving." Jake threw up his hands in disbelief, "And you still love him, you still let him sleep here, in her home."

"I don't have anyone else now," Kirsty whispered. She tried to get closer to Jake but he retreated further backwards, "Please ask her to speak to me. I'll do anything."

Jake shook his head unmoved, "She lives in the darkness now, where you put her. She only whispers in the dark."

"How can I find a way to speak with her? Please Jake, she's my daughter. I need her back, I can't take this anymore." Finally her resolve gave way and she collapsed in a pitiful heap upon the dirty cracked linoleum floor.

There was a knock on the door and Jake froze. There was a grim look on his face and mournfully he glanced upstairs. "I knew you'd do this," he said, knowing who was on the other side before he'd opened it. He smiled as if remembering a happy memory. "Gary won't be waking up today."

"Wait. Jake what are you talking about?" Kirsty fought down the urge to be sick as she raced upstairs.

"Hi Mandy," Jake said cheerily, "I'll just get my things."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - S.J. Budd is an author living in London. Her biggest influences include H.P.Lovecraft, Patrick Rothfuss and anything concerning the strange and paranormal. Previously she has been published in Sanitarium Magazine and when not writing short stories, she is working on her first novel.

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#### **Hunt(ed)** Julianne Snow

His breath came out like a whisper, passing over his lips louder than he wanted. Sullivan heard it down the hall, the scratch of its nails sharp on the linoleum floor of his office.

He had no idea what it was but once he heard the screams, his instinct was to dive for the cover afforded by his desk. As he hid, his heartbeat quickened, the fear of knowing next to nothing pounding loudly in his chest.

Deep down Sullivan was a coward but that was okay. He didn't need to be the hero. In fact, he was happy to hide and hope.

"Hello? Can anyone hear me?" The voice was tentative, quiet, almost a whisper but still loud enough to be heard by the creature stalking them.

Sullivan wanted to shush them but didn't dare risk giving up his location. Instead he squeezed himself into a smaller ball on the cool floor beneath this cheap mass produced desk.

A shrill scream rang out as it pounced, one of his coworkers coming to a horrific end. The sound of it eating reverberating through his body. It was close. Too close.

Sullivan felt the need to move, his body twitching with the pent up fear and nervous energy of its closeness. But he stayed, knowing that movement would attract its attention. But he wasn't stupid, least of all today.

With his eyes squeezed tightly closed, he heard the huff of its breath as it stiffed out its next meal. It was a quick succession of sounds that made him release his bladder as the shame of it washed over him.

In that moment Sullivan knew it was over. He knew the creature would find him now, especially with a warm, fragrant trail to lead the way.

He smelled it as he felt the warmth of its rank breath on his face. Opening his eyes for the last time, he saw for the first time what had sought him out. It was a thing made of nightmares, evil incarnate in a misshapen form.

Sullivan opened his mouth the scream, but no sound came out. The last sight he saw was the sharp rows of teeth descending over his face. Then thankfully there was only darkness.

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It moved away, hunting for its next meal, listening for the sounds of fear, reading the anxious energy in the air, smelling the stale but pungent odor that oozed out of the pores of the frightened.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Julianne Snow is the author of the *Days with the Undead* series and *Glimpses of the Undead*. She is the founder of Zombieholics Anonymous and the Publicist and Co-Founder of Sirens Call Publications. Writing in the realms of speculative fiction, Julianne has roots that go deep into horror and is a member of the Horror Writers Association. With pieces of short fiction in various publications, Julianne always has a few surprises up her sleeves. Be sure to check out *The Carnival 13*, a collaborative round-robin novella for charity which she contributed to and helped to spearhead which was released in October 2013.

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#### **Shuttered** Casondra Brewster

Eva sat in the dark of the living room smoking a joint. The house was quiet, a stillness she rarely experienced – maybe once or twice in 20 years of having a family. She could hear the refrigerator making ice, humming a tune into the night to sing the dishwasher to sleep. She was glad for the ice, later she would need it. She let the smoke swirl around her, starring at how it picked up the light from the LEDs from the electronics in the entertainment center. It was like little fairies of doom were twirling in that smoke.

The doom, however, had already happened. It lay in the beds of the house, scattered on park benches, hospitals, jail cells, and school yards. She knew there were others that stood frozen in the knowledge that they were part of the thirty-three percent, the radio news had reported that an anomalous thirty-three percent of the global population remained healthy. One-third. They didn't have the time, or the people to figure out why. She was part of that number. She didn't care about that or any of them right now. She just cared about getting stoned and maybe sleeping more than 45 minutes at a time tonight.

Sixteen hours ago the last coughing fits from her son had filled the sounds of the house, punctuating the emptiness left by the corpses of his siblings and father in the other rooms of the house. There was no one to call for help. The TV had stopped broadcasting after her youngest had died. The radio quit picking up anything about an hour ago. The police had stopped patrolling days ago. When she realized, she likely wasn't going to get this. When she realized her jokes earlier in the week about Captain Tripps, weren't so funny.

She thought maybe she should cover all the little red and blue lights of anything and everything, so that any looters didn't come. Would anyone be in that mindset really? She was of two minds, let them take it, kill her – she really didn't care; or, fight them off until death do her part her from her dead family home. She wished the dog hadn't run away. But Eva had run out of food, and the damn thing was starving. There were no open stores to get the dog food and she hadn't much the dog could eat. She had split the last can of tuna with the dog a day before it ran away.

She had spied someone ambling through the park that bordered her property. He moved like he'd drunk an entire distillery. She wasn't judging. She had her vice: the darkness, her joint, and the inability to do anything right at this particular moment. At least that guy was walking. He had somewhere to be, to go, something to do.

She stubbed out the smoke, and went out in the garage. She stood there a moment, letting her eyes get used to the deeper darkness in the garage. It smelled stale in the garage. She grabbed some painter's tape and returned to the main house. Then she set about to covering the lights on the cable box, the TV, the stereo, the computers, the microwave, and stove. The painter's tape worked well to blot out the light, just as she had reckoned. Hopefully, it wouldn't permanently damage any of the appliances or electronics. Why she cared about that, she couldn't fathom. It was just instinctual. Save what you can.

She moved through each room, covering alarm clocks — anything and everything with a light. Her cell phone sat on her bedside table. The power was still on, but the cell service had weirdly been off and on. She had no one to call. Anyone she would talk to was dead. Text messages stopped when her husband had died, which was before her daughter. He lay on the couch in their master suite, covered up by her old Army sleeping bag. Tomorrow she would move the bodies to the garage. That's when the ice would come in handy. At least that would stop the rotting process until she could bury them. She'd bury them beneath the giant old-growth tree in the southwest corner of the back yard. But the ground needed to thaw more. Where were Sam and Dean when you needed some graves dug? She chuckled to herself. How could she think like that in the midst of this? However, how could she not? Pop culture can't save you now, she thought.

She finished covering the lights and went to put the *rolladen* shutters down. She and her husband had jokingly installed them in order to make their home more defensible against the inevitable *zombie* apocalypse. Although the real reason was that after living in Europe, she missed having the comfort and safety of them – and it was less to clean than curtains and shades and blinds. Here she was using them to keep the rest of the world out, no zombies, but death all the same.

She pulled in a load of firewood from the back patio, moving as quickly and as silently as she could. The house was warm enough for now, so she didn't have to start a fire. She didn't want the attention. Not now. She'd have to pull out the guns and clean them and arm them...and she was too tired for that. Not

only was inside the house quiet, but as she gathered the firewood, the outside was dead silence. The quiet outside was the kind of quiet she had only ever heard following September 11, 2001, when air traffic had stopped for days following the attack.

Once the firewood was inside, she checked and rechecked every door and window that it was locked, shuttered tight and all lights in the house were covered. She picked the joint up again, determined to smoke herself to sleep. She flicked the lighter, but didn't get a chance to go through with it.

"Eva..." It was a whisper at first, hoarse, unsure. "Eva?"

Silence. Eva listened and waited.

No more whispers, instead, there was a knock at the door. She peeked out through her daughter's bedroom window, and could see the crazy lady that lived three doors down. She looked terrible. But the woman was crazy even before this plague hit the world. Therefore, Crazy Lady could be sick and Eva wouldn't be able to tell. The woman was always unkempt, dressed in her dead-for-six-years husband's clothes all the time – flannels, men's sweatpants, garden boots, and generally looking like a rummage sale threw up on her. The woman knocked again, and Eva moved into the shadows of her daughter's room, ignoring the corpse on the bed.

"Eva! Please, I need help..." the woman was clearly speaking with her mouth up against the door. Then she coughed. Eva knew she would have to ignore her. The woman tried the door. She rattled the screen door, but it was locked, too. Eva moved in long, silent strides to the garage and unplugged the automatic door, internally hitting herself for missing that during her earlier security check. Then she strode, as if she was going from river rock to river rock, avoiding the creaks in her wood floor, back down the hall to the master bedroom. She grabbed the 9mm she had hidden behind her bedside table. Even her husband had not known it was there. Then she crept again to the end of the hall. The woman was on her front steps, still, calling her name, crying, and coughing. Eva shook her head, as if that would help make the woman leave. For now, she would not answer the door. She hadn't decided if she was going to fight or let this pandemic take her. She just wanted to go to sleep.

After about 20 minutes, the rattling, coughing, and crying stopped. Eva could still see the crazy woman's shadow near the door, however. She just sat there doing an inventory of the course of events, as it happened to her. She felt like it all started for her when the police were driving up and down the streets telling everyone to stay indoors. That's when her youngest got sick. The helicopters flew constantly seemingly everywhere for near 12 hours straight. Then the rest of her family got sick. People were freaking out on social media. Then no more police. Then it was clear she wasn't going to get sick. Then her youngest had died. When she came in to check on him, after making some broth for her husband, which he would only barely sip on, his eyes were open, but he wasn't breathing. Those big blue eyes that had looked so glassy and lost were now clouded and frozen. Her baby. She had bawled for hours, the others too weak to comfort her, say goodbye, or really muster up an ounce of energy to grieve. She put his Sponge Bob comforter over his body, and closed the door. She dialed 911. The only answer was a busy signal. Following that, there seemed to be no more TV, save the Canadian channel, which lasted only eight hours longer. She moved to listening to the radio. Her husband, who rarely got sick, then died, making her son and daughter even more fearful. Eva had tried what she could to make them feel safe, like they were going to beat this. She waffled between knowing she was immune to wondering when she was going to get sick.

She sat there, at the edge of the main hallway and foyer. Waiting. Hoping the crazy lady would just go home. Waiting. Concentrating on being quiet, staying awake, and being alert, like she was in a fire-fight position, waiting on the operation to take place. More hurry up and wait. She breathed deep and embraced the suck, thinking, go home, woman; just go home.

"I know you're in there," Crazy Neighbor Lady hissed.

Eva took the safety off the gun. She visualized rushing the door, swinging it open, putting one bullet in crazy lady's head, locking back up, and heading back to her sleep ritual. She hadn't shot anyone since 2004, not since Iraq, before that Afghanistan. She was sure that crazy neighbor lady was sick, that she had what the media was still looking for a catchy nickname for before broadcasting stopped. In Eva's mind it was just 'the plague.'

She heard the woman on her porch cry out, "Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour." Then more sounds of weeping.

Eva then smelled smoke. She race-walked through the house. She found no fire, nothing. Then as she passed the kitchen window, she saw orange light out in the park. She peered through the peep hole of the *rolladen* shutters towards the flames flickering. There were about a dozen figures standing around a large bonfire. She grabbed the binoculars on the shelf by the window. Used for bird watching before life on the planet shifted, the binoculars now helped her spy a funeral pyre. As the fire grew more intense, she could tell the bonfire was made of bodies. The figures standing around it were mostly men, young men, like her son's age. There was only one woman. Eva focused her eyes harder through the binoculars. She tried to see if she knew who it was. The bonfire's light illuminated eyes full of loss on the lone woman, but not identity. Eva swallowed. That woman could easily be her.

There was a pounding on the front door. Crazy Lady was getting more aggravated. She screamed, "And he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator."

Eva spent too many years in parochial school. She knew her Bible verses.

More yelling and pounding, and unintelligible recitations came from the porch.

That was it, Eva had decided. She visualized again the swift motion of opening, firing, slamming, and securing. All of this was done holding her breath, so she wouldn't be exposed. Although, she knew this didn't make sense. She'd already been exposed. She took a deep breath and bounded toward the door. In an instant it was done. The crazy woman, a bullet in her forehead slumped to the ground. The door was closed, locked. What she would give for a shutter on the door, too. The crack of the weapon had seemed so loud to Eva. Her ears rang. It had totally ripped through the silence, leaving her exposed, she knew. Why hadn't she used a pillow? She shrugged and vowed she'd move the body back down to the woman's yard when she could.

Didn't matter, she scurried to the back window to check on the activity in the park. No one had moved. The fire grew more intense, the smell of smoke now acrid with decay. Eva realized at that moment, she was still holding her breath and breathed out. She stood there, eye on the bonfire, gun in hand, just breathing deeply. "What next? What next?" was looped in her mind.

The internal call for sleep was still strong, but she wanted to see if the bonfire people went away. She had a vision that in the morning they might come knock on her door, they might see the Crazy Lady with a bullet in her brain. That didn't mean she had to answer. She started wondering why she didn't own any claymores. She shook the thought out of her mind. Why was she worried? If they were survivors and they weren't coughing?

That was for tomorrow, right now, she needed sleep. She sat down on the couch again, facing the now de-lighted entertainment center. She put the safety of the 9mm back on and set it on the coffee table. She picked up the joint out of the ash tray and lit up. She inhaled deeply. As she exhaled, she knew what she would need to do. But that was for the next night. Right now, she needed sleep. She finished the joint, leaving the roach in the ashtray, and went down the hall to her bedroom. She paused briefly to look at the silhouette of her long-time lover under the desert khaki sleeping bag. "I'm sorry, babe," she said, and crawled into bed.

As she let herself fall to slumber, she thought maybe she heard helicopters again or maybe her husband snoring. But the other side of her brain registered the death smoke coming from the field behind her home. "There's always tomorrow," she whispered into the room's stillness, and closed her eyes.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Casondra Brewster was born on the east side of Detroit before doing some traveling in the military as a photojournalist. She's now a Cascade Foothills urban farmer, wife, and mother to five children — one of whom has Autism. These things combine to find lots of dark undercurrents in her stories. Alongside writing she fancies herself a junk artist, turning everyday refuse into useful, artful items.

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## A Change of Season Jess Landry

Mama didn't come tuck me in. She didn't check under my bed for monsters or read me a story or kiss me good-night. She didn't close the blinds on my window, so the moon's light spilled into the room like an avalanche tearing down a mountain. Across from where I lay, wrapped under Sleeping Beauty bed sheets, the moon set fragments of Ginny's side of the room aglow. Shreds of her empty bed lit up like patches of pearlescent snow. The moon's icy grip touched hints of her bed sheets, tossed like they'd been through gale force winds. It licked the rims of books she had intended to read, books that defied gravity with their tilt. It hung on posters coming loose off the walls like snow weighing heavy on spruce branches.

I clutched onto my teddy bear, drawing him closer towards my face. Teddy had once belonged to Ginny, she had once clutched him as I did then, feeling the scratch of his chocolate-coloured wool against her chin, running her fingers along the soft ridges of his button eyes. The faded scent of Ginny wrapped around Teddy like a warm blanket on a cold winter's night, and I felt the scrape of his fur against my quivering chin. I squeezed my eyes shut, the tightest I've ever shut them, and imagined with all my might that it was her I was holding.

"Please," I whispered into the back of Teddy's head. "Please, Ginny."

When I opened my burning eyes, my big sister's bed wasn't empty.

Ginny lay on her back, eyes fixated on the ceiling, porcelain skin lit up under the moon's spotlight. She wore the plain blue t-shirt she often wore to sleep, the one she said that made her feel warm. Her mouth was wide open. Her chest heaved like she was having an asthma attack, but no sound followed the air escaping her lungs. Her fists clutched at the mess of sheets underneath her.

"Ginny?" I barely whispered, hiding my face behind Teddy.

My big sister didn't stir.

"Ginny?" I asked a little louder, peeking out from behind his scratchy wool.

Nothing.

I watched for a few moments, waiting for her to respond in some way. When nothing came, I gathered courage from myself and Teddy and stepped out of bed onto the cool hardwood floor. I paced my steps from my bed to hers, locking Teddy against my chest, cringing at every creak my weight made against the floorboards.

Her body continued to heave silently as I came up beside her. It must have been the shadows playing tricks, but her eyes, once blue like sapphires, seemed like bottomless pools of black water.

"Please," I whispered to my sister. "Say something."

I loosened my grip on Teddy and reached out my shaking hand to touch her.

She immediately stopped heaving. Her body relaxed. She closed her black eyes.

The room fell still. The air around me thickened like sap from a bleeding tree. Outside the bedroom window, it felt like the world had paused.

Then Ginny opened her black eyes, and they were on me.

I ran back to my bed as fast as I could, throwing the safety of the sheets over my head, wrapping myself and Teddy in a protective cocoon. I lay in a ball for what felt like days, sweat dripping off my palms and into Teddy, my ears focused in on any out-of-the-ordinary sound. When no sounds came, I began to relax. I shifted a little in my bed, enough to force a crack in the sheets.

Ginny's bed was empty, just like it had been the night before. Just like it would continue to be. Ginny's gone, Mama had told me. Nothing's bringing her back.

Somehow, I managed to fall asleep.

Sunlight drowned my room the next morning, bleaching everything it touched. I squinted over to Ginny's side as I stretched and yawned and told her to wake her lazy bones up. But as my eyes became accustomed to the light, I saw her bed hadn't changed. The sheets were still a mess. Her tower of books still leaned. Her posters still wilted.

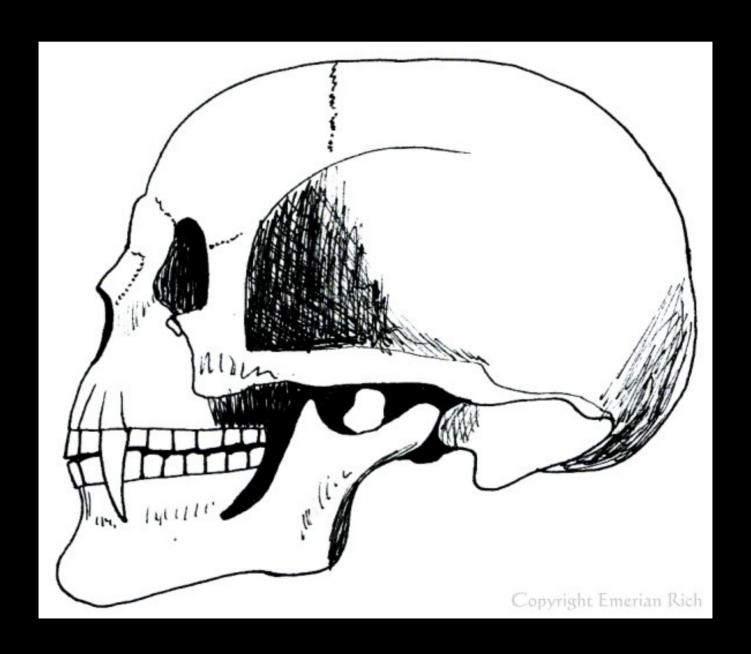
I pulled Teddy against my chest, breathing in Ginny's dying scent.

Just another day without her in it.

Tonight? Who knows.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Jess Landry is a graphic designer by day and a writer by night. A lover of all things horror, you can usually find her scribbling down ideas for her next story or watching some obscure movie. She currently resides in the icy wastelands of Winnipeg, Manitoba with her husband and two cats.

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#### Cross Your Heart Lisa Lepovetsky

Hi again. Sit down over here, right next to me. No, on the other side -- I can't stand anybody sitting on my left, where my heart is. I'm left-handed, and I need to keep my left hand free. Like when I made us blood brothers yesterday. Yeah, I'm funny that way. I'll just move these old newspapers. Bums always leave newspapers on park benches, did you ever notice that? I hate bums, don't you? Well, at least this one won't be back.

Zip up your jacket, that wind's a little chilly, even for May. It just whips through the buildings like a flood or something, and by the time it hits the park, it's full of grit and garbage. You have to watch out for the wind, especially when you're little, like you. After you finish your hamburger and eat your sundae, we can go somewhere more sheltered. I know a great place.

You had a good time yesterday, didn't you? Me too. And the day before? Yeah, I thought so, I could tell. When guys become blood brothers, like us, they know stuff about each other without even saying anything. Like you probably know I didn't tell anybody about us being secret friends, right? And I know you didn't tell either, without even asking you. See, I was right.

Something about your eyes lets me know -- maybe that shiny spark behind the violet color of your iris. I love that color, it's like the city sky just before night falls. Oh, the iris is that ring of color in most people's eyes, the part that circles around the black pool in the center. Yes, I know my irises look clear, but actually there is a color there if you look really close, a kind of pale, smokey color, like fog or a cloud across the moon. You almost have to look away to see it. Some people think it's a little scary, but I know it makes me special.

Look at my left eye. Closer. There's a picture of God in there. Well, maybe the light's bad here. Later, I might even let you sit on that side and look again -- I'll bet you see it then.

Hey, I have a great idea -- you know what we can do today? We can play in the creek way back behind the old amphitheater. You'll really like that. The water's all mucky and the pollution's killed off a lot of the plant and animal life, but maybe there's something still left for us to see down there. You can never tell what we might find if we look hard enough. You ever play in the creek before? Maybe back behind the projects, closer to home, where you can just barely still see your back door if you squint?

She won't, huh? Just because you can't swim? Heck, the stuff in the water'd kill you before you ever drowned. Don't look scared. You know me, I was just kidding. I spend lots of time back there, and just look at me, I'm fine.

Well, your mom can say what she wants, but she doesn't care about you much, I can tell. Look how she lets you wander around the streets by yourself, where anything might happen to a little boy all alone. She doesn't even make your lunch, just gives you a couple of bucks and sends you out to McDonald's. No telling who you'd meet up with, if you hadn't met me a couple of days ago. You need somebody like me to take care of you -- a real pal. In fact, I'm kind of like a big brother to you, aren't I? Yeah, a blood brother.

Well, tell your pal the truth now, have you ever gone down to the creek anyway, maybe when Mommy was too busy with your little sister to be watching you? I'll bet you did. You can tell me, I'd never tattle. I mean, heck, what are best pals for? I'll tell you a secret if you tell me one.

I knew it. Good. That's real good. I think every boy ought to have some naughty secret he doesn't tell anybody -- except maybe one special person. Except maybe his best pal, his very best pal in the whole world. Okay, now for my secret.

You know, I remember when I was about your age. Yeah, I see your eyes rolling upward. Grown-ups always end up saying that, don't they? I don't know why. But I think you'll like this story, anyway; I love telling it.

As I was saying, I used to go play in the town dump. We lived out in the 'burbs then, about a half mile from a big dump -- what they call landfills now. It's where towns -- little towns, not big cities like this one -- put all the garbage that won't fit down the toilet. They're great places to get rid of things you don't want anymore.

But the dump was a great place to find treasures, too. Little amber bottles -- with corks still in them sometimes. Toy six-shooters that might even work if you held them just right and could find strips of little exploding caps to use with them. Magazines filled with pictures of pretty girls you could keep under your bed till your mom found them and burned them, and held your left hand, the one near your heart, that the devil used, over the fire until -- anyway, you could find all kinds of neat things.

Dumb Jeffy Brimley used to make everybody give him the best stuff, though. He was a year older than the rest of us -- and about twenty pounds heavier, too. The bully. There's a bully in every gang of boys in every neighborhood in every town in America -- in the whole world, in fact. Jeffy Brimley was ours. He hassled us and teased us, about how skinny or fat we were and how our parents talked and what hand we used -- all kinds of stuff. And we couldn't ever tattle on him, even if we wanted to, because we weren't supposed to be playing in the dump in the first place.

f course, there were dangerous things back there in the dump, in those gigantic mounds of trash and refuse, too, like old refrigerators or water tanks you could climb into and maybe never get out of again. And there were rats and all kinds of nasty vermin that would give you diseases and stuff if they ever bit you, maybe if you even touched them with the wrong hand. And there were packs of stray dogs that people dumped along the side of the road out there, when they grew up and weren't cute little puppies anymore. Those animals were hungry all the time, and hung around the dump looking for old bones or juicy children who couldn't run away fast enough. And you knew that if you ever got trapped in one of those discarded appliances -- even if your foot or hand got stuck and held you there -- you were critter-food for sure.

My old man warned me over and over that he'd thrash me good if he ever caught me going out there. But he was always worried about his work and buying another six pack, so he didn't really pay that much attention to what I did. And my mom was always praying at the altar she set up in the guest room when my brother died. I'm sure they never suspected how much time I spent down there. Nobody did. Not even after dumb Jeffy Brimley vanished two days after school let out for the summer. His parents didn't even start looking for him for a week, 'cause he was always running away from home. And by then ...

Of course, I stayed away from the dump for a couple of weeks, just to make sure nobody connected me with his disappearance, in case he was found. Oh yeah, I figured Jeffy'd be found sooner or later, but he never was. And, best of all, he never came back to bother me. Neither did any of the others -- and nobody suspected. It got to be a kind of game, after a while. And after a while, the dogs were still lean and hungry-looking, but the rats were fat and sassy. Like I say, that dump was a great place to get rid of trash and strays. And I kept their left hands for souvenirs. Still have them, too, if you want to see them.

But I like it in the city better. Here in the city, they just dump stuff they don't want in the river, and it flows wherever it wants, sometimes leaving bits and pieces, sometimes picking up something new. I'll bet you'd be amazed what I've found floating in that creek behind the amphitheater. It's kind of sad; nobody goes down there anymore -- afraid, I guess. There hasn't been a show on that stage in more than two years -- at least not one folks would pay to see. Though sometimes you can hear screams and cries for help echo through the band-shell like weird songs if you listen carefully enough when it's really dark out here. And then that small splash, after everything's quiet again.

Sometimes, I crawl under those hanging willow branches by the water, and I just lie there on my belly, waiting to see what drifts by. Cardboard boxes, clothes, old toys. I even found a kitten once, nearly drowned by the time it got to me. It was so scared when I pulled it out, it bit my hand, my left hand. Can you believe it? I knew what it was then, what was inside it, poor thing. Its fur was all matted and muddy, and its tiny grey neck was so thin and delicate under my fingers . . .

You all finished? Great, me too. Then let's go down by the creek. Here take my hand. No, my right hand. You shouldn't still be making that mistake. You'll have to learn. I'll have to teach you; I'm a real good teacher.

No, we don't need to tell anybody where we're going. Your mommy's probably too busy with that new baby, and anyway, you'll be home before dinner. Sure I promise, and real pals always keep their promises. Like we promised never to tell anybody about each other. You didn't, did you? Cross your heart and hope to die?

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Lisa Lepovetsky earned her MFA from Penn State. She's widely published in both the horror and mystery fields, including Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine and many other periodicals. She's also had work appear in such anthologies as *Dark Dixie*, *The Crow* and *Blood Muse*, to name a few. This story first appeared in *100 Vicious Little Vampire Stories*. She also writes and produces mystery dinner theaters.

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#### Death in the Lady's Dressing Room Charie D. La Marr

Inspired by "The Lady's Dressing Room" - A poem by Jonathan Swift

"Betty! Betty! How many times must I call, you stupid girl? Where are you? Holding up your skirt for the stable boy? Spreading your legs for the gardener? Is that what I pay you for? Betty! Get in here, you ugly harlot! I need to be laced now! Master Strephon will be here any minute to take me to the ball, and look at my waist! I'll be the laughingstock! "Did you see Celia?" they'll ask. "Is she with child or just been dispatching of too many chocolate crème bon-bons? Gluttonous bitch. What do you think? Does she resemble a cow or a pig?" Get in here, Betty! Tight lace me now!"

"With pleasure, Miss Celia." The voice came from behind her. It was deep and raspy and chilled her to the bone. She gasped and started to turn.

"No, dear Celia. Stay where you are. No need to look. You know who I am. I understand your dilemma. How long have you been preparing? Four hours? Five? How long does it take to cover the stink and the dirt? To disguise bare patches in your hair? A woman must look her best at these soirees in order to catch the eyes of the right men, no?"

"Betty!" she called out. "Please, come quick!"

Celia felt the bony hands at her waist. Her breathing quickened and she could feel her heart pounding in her chest. A skull rested on her shoulders and whispered into her ear.

"Such a wide waist, my dear. Fifty-five centimeters, at least. Perhaps fifty-eight. Shameful. When you know that there will be girls there who are at least ten centimeters smaller." The hands were icy cold as they pressed into her—even through the layers of silk, brocade and petticoats. "We'll have to do something about that. It will take a great deal of tugging and pulling to bring you in ten whole centimeters or more. How difficult it must be for you to breathe when your lungs are so restricted. How hard it must be when you are spun around the dance floor until you're breathless!"

Celia's body was rigid as she listened.

"And what do you give for your beauty, Celia? Belladonna powder in your eyes to make them sparkle? Blue shadows for your eyelids made of lead and antimony sulfides? Red to stain your lips filled with mercuric sulfide? Perhaps your face powder still contains arsenic. Is that the price you pay for your allure?"

She sighed softly and glanced at the bottles and jars on her dressing table. She'd used all of those items to prepare for the evening. Were they really dangerous?

"And what of your hair?" he asked, running his face through her elaborate upswept style held by gold and diamond combs. "Do you wash the roots with ammonia?"

There was a moment of silence.

"So where does all this beauty lead you? To madness, perhaps? Or to a face old and wrinkled before its time? Will it bring you great suffering and pain? Perhaps even death? Will they look at you in your casket; click their tongues and remark at how old you look for such a young age?

"Well, you shall never know, my dear. Because I've come for you tonight. The ball will go on without you. "Where's Celia?" they'll ask. "She's always so lively at these parties, such a beautiful woman. Her laughter tinkles like the finest crystal. And so delightful as a companion. What will she wear tonight? Her gowns are so beautiful! I hear they're custom made for her in Paris. I wonder why she didn't come. Has anyone heard from her? Is she ill? Has she sent her driver with word?" He chuckled to himself.

"No, please," she said. "Don't do this."

"You'll be the most beautiful corpse in the bone yard, my dear." The bony hands grabbed the laces of the black silk and lace whalebone corset and began to pull. Celia held her hand on her stomach and took a deep breath. Her breasts lifted out of the top of the dress. Everyone always admired her lovely décolletage.

"Enough," she said gasping. "Stop it now."

"Oh no, dear Celia. I can pull it much tighter."

"No!" she said. She tried to pull away, but the laces held fast in his hands. "Let me go! I'll scream!"

He pulled harder. She began to feel the tightness in her lungs. It was difficult to inhale. She wheezed as she drew in her breath.

"In another few moments, you won't be able to scream, my dear. You can already feel the air emptying from your lungs—the struggle to respire and fill them again." He pulled tighter.

Her pulse became more rapid. Her lungs burned like fire. She could see the tips of her fingers turning blue. Behind her eyes, her head hurt like it had never hurt before. She opened her mouth and tried to scream, but nothing came out. He pulled tighter. She fell forward, knocking the mirror to the ground and shattering it. She began to convulse, her hands wildly scattering the cosmetics on the dressing table.

He pulled more. The whalebones bent as far as they could and snapped one after another. Her body began to slow down. He pulled one last time and her body became still. He let go of the laces and they loosened immediately as she fell to the floor.

He paused long enough to straighten some of the bottles on the dressing table. He knelt beside her body and rubbed the back of his hand on her pale cheek. "Beauty is nothing more than an illusion, my dear Celia. And it always amazes me how many women live with the delusion that beauty brings out goodness in people. It doesn't. Beauty comes from your heart, not your face. But you never learned that. You taunted and teased. You treated people unkindly. You used beauty the way a common whore does. In the end, you earned your place in hell. Those laces you prided yourself on were nothing more than the strings of a puppet.

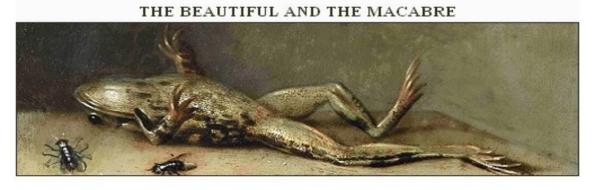
"I'll leave you now. They'll find you here later and think you suffered some sort of paralytic fit while being laced. "Such a shame," they'll say. "Such a beautiful woman to die so young."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Distantly related to Mary Shelley, Charie D. La Marr created a genre called Circuspunk (Urban Dictionary) and written a collection *Bumping Noses* and Cherry Pie and a horror novel Laugh to Death. She's written in Nyzarro—the New York version of Bizarro, Squid Whores of the Futon Fish Market. She's participated in many anthologies including Memento Mori, Bones and Ugly Babies 2, In Vein, Ripple Effect, Oneiros Books' CUT UP! She was selected for 2014 Ladies and Gentlemen of Horror—one of 14 new voices in the genre. She writes in many different genres. She's most proud of working with an Iranian translator, translating Vernon God Little into Persian—a bestseller in Iran.

A redhead with a redheaded attitude, she lives in NY with her mother, son and fur children Bailey Corwin, Ruth and Casey.

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# PHRENIC PRESS



... of or relating to the Mind

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#### A Conversation With The Void Lori R. Lopez

I was virtually blind, eyes staring useless into an expanse of night that went on and on. A small laceration on my left cheek oozed a trickle of dampness to the edge of my jaw. It wasn't this presence surrounding me that inflicted the wound. Memory had dissolved to a haze, a tremendous effort, yet I deduced the nick occurred when a small pin on my lapel ripped off. I loved that pin. It was silver, shaped like a wolf, one of the most maligned and misunderstood of creatures. That was me. I took courage from the gift, which had mysteriously appeared on my pillow one day. Mom never explained, but I liked to believe it came from my father, whoever he was, or had belonged to him. And now it was gone, rendering me alone against a force that engulfed my mother before my eyes and made her disappear. Like magic.

Whether it swallowed her or squeezed her into nothingness, I hadn't the foggiest. Perhaps it absorbed her. I hoped in my heart she was okay and had merely slipped through a crack, vanishing into another world. Some parallel dimension at the opposite end of a wormhole. It would have to be an opening so tiny or thin I couldn't see it. Practically invisible. Was it a black curtain? The fabric of illusion?

Panting, I touched a trail of blood. Then reached forth, my finger slick, to swat at the draping obscurity. "Mom?" A wistful query, my voice scarcely audible. I was spooked, to be honest. The thing creeped me out.

I could heed an entity around me, swirling, touching, exploring. It felt like unspoken whispers, the sinister undertones of danger. More like hints of it. A vapid flutter; a snatch of motion I was unable to identify and could not be certain of hearing or glimpsing.

On occasion, however, I could feel it as a clammy presence startling my flesh, cold and wet. I perceived a myriad of moist tongues licking me. Other times it seemed dry and rough; it coiled about me, a giant python, exerting pressure. Why was I being tormented? My mother had been plucked away, her demise merciful compared to this. It was enough to drive a person mad, yet I refused. Insanity wouldn't aid my situation.

How do you know?

The question hung in the dark, thick with suspense. I circled it and studied it from every angle. Or thought I did. It might have been in my head, like the question. It was all surreal, a dream state. Only my eyes were wide open. Whatever was going on, I felt torpid and confused as if the murk overwhelmed me, dulled my senses, numbed what reflexes had not been lost from disuse.

"How do I know what?" The tongue in my mouth lay heavy. The words in my throat scraped. I struggled to remember what I had been thinking.

A sigh rippled the sea of intangible ink. Words nearly formed. Not quite. An indistinct murmur: *Insanity will not help.* 

I crowed to myself that it replied. It was no delusion. I was fairly positive the chasm had substance. We blankly regarded each other.

I pulled out a response, withdrawing my arm and fist from the depths of my gut. "It was just a guess."

The night clutched me by the throat, constricting my windpipe. This is no guessing game. Either you know or you don't.

The thing sounded (although I did not fancy I could hear a thing) vaguely threatening.

"You're . . . hurting me," I gagged.

The pressure ceased. It was more as if it wasn't there.

"I'm not imagining this," I insisted.

Perhaps it's the only way out. Surrendering to madness.

"You're the one who's crazy, not me." It was a bluff. I couldn't be sure.

Come on, the dusk invited in that voice that wasn't a voice.

"Come on where?" I stalled.

Take the plunge. Bail through the window of your soul.

With a sudden whoosh of vertigo, I felt dizzy and sick, teetering at a great altitude on a narrow ledge that I couldn't see, could only assume was there. What if it wasn't? Would I fall? Would not believing cause me to drop? And where would that leave me? I would be no better off. I almost thought it might be what this shadowy nightmare wanted, to steal my soul. My spirit. Claim it for a prize. Well, I would not give up

that easily. I would not abandon myself.

"You'll have to rip it from me, shred by shred!" I vowed.

Your sanity? I already have it.

"My soul!"

Was this darkness around me every night, lurking, abiding a chance?

A chill notion invaded my fearful mind. Did we close our eyes oblivious to how dangerous that might be? Naive to the threat waiting to wrench our essence out of our bodies if we should weaken and lower the innate guard against it, the gate of our resistance?

Terror jumped to another conclusion. Was this Evil? My church attendance tapered off ages ago. It wasn't a conscious choice, more like disinterest and carelessness. I told fibs, little white lies. My mother cheated at cards. Had she doomed us? Her deception was silly, harmless fun, to see if she could get away with it. No, this didn't add up. We were small potatoes compared to the excessively corrupt things going on in the world. Why us? Why suddenly arrive and devour? We didn't deserve this fate.

What was she doing when it took her? What had I been doing? My orbs sealed as decreasing faculties concentrated within. The mental screen was vacant, black as pitch. The previous moment had expired, evaporated or whatever. Like Mom. If only I could remember. It might be the key. To what? Opening a portal? Reaching through and hauling her back to this side?

"What do you want?" I shrieked, beginning to lose it. Beginning? That was a laugh. My mother was gone in a blink, just gone. I was talking to . . . nothing. Freaking out, afraid of the dark. Was I a shivering child of four? Where was an adult when I needed to be one?

Oh god, could it be Death? Was this the shroud that enveloped us at the end of our days? Had it come for me so soon — prematurely? I was in good health as far as I knew. It had been awhile since my last check-up but I felt okay. Did it come for my mom and decide to stick around? Or notice me and become greedy?

I hollered into the void, "What have you done with her? Spit her out!"

We had our differences, as much as we were alike. Too alike. The woman could be demanding, even irritable at times. She admittedly had her faults, yet I loved and admired Sylvie Nettles. She had tried to live on her terms. For a parent that might seem a bit selfish, but my mother had sacrificed her freedom to raise me the best she could, alone, instead of taking the easy way out. I owed her everything, and I wanted her back.

"Please." My attitude shifted. "Please let her go."

Why should I? A tough-guy retort.

Why indeed? My lips flapped, chin trembling. A weary muddled brain strove for coherence. I strained to tie together elusive threads, almost grasping them. It was the living-room. We had switched off the television. I stood and then what? Why couldn't I recall it?

"What happened to her?" I insisted.

Nothing.

"Oh yeah? Then where is she? Why isn't she here?"

The void chuckled. It was an impression of a laugh. She is. You just can't see her.

"Mom?"

The hope was dashed by silence.

"Why isn't she answering?"

She did. You aren't listening. You never listened.

Breath hitched. That was like something she would say. And it was true. I had often been preoccupied with my own concerns, my own interests.

A shaking hand rose to a tightly clenched throat that ached inside and burned on the exterior where the darkness had gripped me in a chokehold. This was not my doing. My fuzzy mind could be clear on that much.

"You're hiding her!" I accused.

She's right here. There's no need to be defensive.

Again it sounded (without any sound) like her. "Where? Quit playing with me. You said this isn't a game. If she is here, then show me."

I can't. It's impossible. I turned out the lights.

Of course! That was the missing puzzle piece. I stood and the lights extinguished. Maybe she didn't vanish, it only appeared she did because the opacity was so dense and abrupt.

"Mom?" I groped around me at emptiness. "Mom, I'm here!"

You're too late.

"What do you mean?" I gasped in alarm.

She's going away. She asked me to tell you . . . goodbye.

"Goodbye?" Hot tears poured out, wrenched from a cracking heart. What hurt the most was that she didn't say she loved me. Had I been that awful, that selfish of a child? I couldn't remember. I should remember! What if I never told her, proved to her how much I cared? I was an introvert, a private person, carrying a grudge, dealing with not having a father and being picked on for not making friends, not fitting in. Yet I had never felt so detached or craved so badly to not be left alone! "Mom? I love you," I croaked. Could she hear it?

Too late, echoed the abyss.

"Nooooooo!" I moaned. Crumpling to my knees, I sobbed in despair. And it came to me, the final words we exchanged.

"I'm getting old, Stevie."

"Nah, you're fine." A hurried remark. Anxious to retreat to my room, my bed, and read the next chapter of a novel in blessed solitude, I was reluctant to be stuck in a lengthy discussion.

Her mouth opened. She intended to elaborate.

I hastened to rise and kiss her brow. "Goodnight, Mom."

It was as if a plug were pulled. The house went black.

What had she been on the verge of sharing? A snippet of truth? A grain of wisdom? Those words, for their absence, were incredibly precious and significant. I felt their loss with unaccustomed fervor.

Why are you sad? You're free now. You have the house to yourself. Isn't that what you wanted?

Miserable, I mumbled, "There's a difference between wanting something temporarily and wanting it forever."

Is there?

"Yes. A huge difference."

Seems more like indifference.

A latent guilty conscience flared. "Be quiet! I didn't request your opinion."

I didn't offer it.

An involuntary swallow. "What about me?"

I haven't decided. It's fun to watch you squirm and suffer.

My stomach twisted. "Are you the devil?"

I'm not anything or anyone. I simply am. Technically, I don't exist.

"So you're a paradox?"

I'm everything. And nothing.

"Make up your mind," I joked and wiped watery eyes on my sleeve.

A mind has limits. I am vast, infinite.

"The cosmos? I'm talking to the universe?"

What makes you think I am a subject you could name or define? Give me some credit.

I should have stopped, should have realized I was outmatched, over my head. I was too stupid to remain blissfully ignorant. Foolish, I mocked the dark. "Okay. Forgive me, I'm just a dumb human. You're bigger than the universe, beyond the parameters of Astrophysics. I guess you're String Theory and the stuff dreams are made of. The base of a Multiverse and Metaverse. The fundamental ether. Is that it?"

You cannot possibly fathom all that I am and am not. You only need to know one thing. I am everywhere. You can't escape me. There is nowhere to go. If I choose, I can snuff you like a flame in a single huff. I can lift you into the stars to splatter and paint a moonbeam, or ingest you with a slurp like tomato soup. You survive because I allow it.

My smirk drooped; my attitude sobered. "God? Is that you?"

What makes you think I didn't create your god?

"Then you're a supergod?"

I am the starting point. The place of origin. The beginning and the end. I am also tired of this conversation. You're a speck composed of specks.

Blood froze to an arctic river. Plates and chunks of ice floated, bumping, slicing veins. Maybe I would bleed to death internally. I could hope.

Straightening, I sagged with a defeated posture, helpless. I felt so depressed, I wished I could leap from that ledge, but even such a fatal act was denied. My feet were stable, down to earth, braced in socks on the living-room rug.

Like it said, or didn't say, there was no escape. Life and death were equally inevitable. It was only a matter of time. A question of when . . .

I could hear it: an incessant broken hum, usually tuned out. The void did not speak, yet it communicated. These murmurs were always present, an indirect menace. We were better off not listening. Tone-deaf, unaware.

Now that I knew, I was disappearing little by little. I sensed molecules disconnecting, iotas scattering. It was agonizing, a multitude of needles and pinpricks at once. This death was torture. Why did I have to ask so many questions?

The pain was a stage. A transition. Eventually I'd become part of it, the blackness and whispers. I would return to the total dark. We would be one.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Lori R. Lopez wears hats. Under the hats lurk secret unsavory furtive things that go bump in the night and slither beneath your toenails as you sleep. Titles include ODDS AND ENDS: A DARK COLLECTION, THE MACABRE MIND OF LORI R. LOPEZ, JUGULAR, MONSTROSITIES, AN ILL WIND BLOWS, CHOCOLATE-COVERED EYES, and POETIC REFLECTIONS: THE QUEEN OF HATS. She designs her own peculiar covers and illustrations.

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#### **Secret** Tabitha Thompson

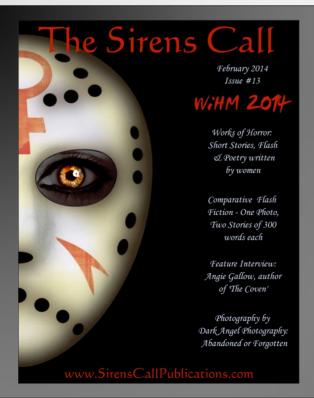
Her only guide was a voice. A faint whisper that she heard amongst the crisp, cool night air against her naked skin. Her nose began to run as a result of the air but Lisa refused to allow her to have a break of any kind. With her battered and blistered feet treading along glass, grass, dirt and branches, she wasn't sure if there was any hope of being saved. This was supposed to be a Valentine's Day for her and her husband, a day she's supposed to remember instead it became one she wished she could forget. She ignored the signs of an envious, needy and hostile friend who wanted her life and husband and kept pushing for Lisa to be a part of her family, so she figured now she caused all of this. The Valentine's Day massacre that occurred in her home with broken glass, blood and the mutilation of her husband given to her from Lisa as a sick, twisted gift. She tried to escape but was stopped by a thrown knife in her back which left a stinging, wincing pain and before she could turn and see the severity of the wound, Lisa bound, gagged and stripped her naked, leaving to walk into the forest.

She should've known better with the sexual advances and constant whispers but she didn't listen. Her husband ended up paying the price by having some of his remains being served to Lisa with chocolate and champagne, forcing her to watch before being blinded and taking the long, torturous walk. She knew Lisa wasn't too far behind, if she tried anything Lisa would end her life quickly despite hearing her in her ear saying words such as 'I love you' and 'Keep Moving' with a venomous, low tone. Lisa finally told her to rest after 3 hours where she was standing near the edge of a cliff which led o a cold, icy river below.

She could feel the wind blow even harsher now and knew that it was the end of the road and Lisa would have the final say without having any say. Her lungs began to cease drawing in the harsh air and her body began drawing goosebumps and blood as Lisa raked her sharp nails across her back. With one low chuckle Lisa whispered, "This is all for you. From your secret admirer." She plunged into the river, feeling the rocks, branches and water show their cruel side towards her body, leaving her to wash away in the sea with the words secret admirer lingering through her ears.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - My name is Tabitha Thompson who's a lover of pizza, music, shopping, caffeine and a good horror movie. When I'm not writing horror stories, I'm with my loving family, partying with my friends or studying for my upcoming English degree.

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#### Starlet's Web Adrienne Dellwo

What a tasty little fly. Step into my parlor....

"Don't go in there!" she said. He stopped dead in his tracks. Well, in his tracks, anyway. Ha-ha, it's not like he's me.

"Did you feel something, Jen?" He turned and started back up the little staircase instead of coming down under the stage with me. His face was all pale.

"Something's down there, and it's not friendly," the bitch whispered, looking over her shoulder as she dragged him away. Where does she get off saying I'm not friendly? How does she even know I'm here?

And off he went, the little puppy dog, with all that bright, shiny energy. So much potential in him, and not a clue what to do with it.

"I thought I felt something, but I just figured it was the dark." He blushed. *Idiot.* "I dismissed it because I didn't want to look weak in front of you."

You ARE weak, obviously.

They headed toward the door to the auditorium, and I shot up through the stage so I wouldn't lose sight of them. They walked right through and went out the doors in the back. I strained to hear them -- ah ha, going to the balcony! Perfect.

I swept up there and cleared the railing just as they walked through the door. *Now, what to do to that thieving bitch....* Got it!

Walking down stairs is treacherous, whore, especially when you can't move your foot! How do you like that?

Oh, such a delicious scream as she fell, sliding one, two, three risers down!

"Are you okay?" Ah, the puppy is so concerned! Fuck you, puppy.

The bitch stood. Ha! Ripped tights, bloody knee, carpet burn on the elbows. Nice.

He took her arm and helped her hobble to a seat. She made a big show out of limping while some guy setting up equipment off to the side rushed over to see what was wrong.

"I'm okay, Tony," she said, giving him a pathetic smile. "Just get the projector going, or James will freak." He asked if she was sure and puppy told him yeah, she'd be all right.

Not if I have anything to do with it, fuck head!

"What happened? Did you miss a step or something?"

"Nate, it was so weird. I picked up my foot and then ... I couldn't put it down. It's like it was caught on something, only there was nothing for it to get caught on!"

Is that a tear? Yes, I think it is! Huzzah!

"That's weird," he said.

"It is. And you know, I'm pretty sure I feel something up here, too."

"Do you ... do you think the ghost tripped you?"

Now they were giving off more energy than I could lap up. Yum, yum, yum, yum, yum! Gotta love the taste of fear.

She nodded, swallowing hard. "Or held onto my foot. That's honestly what it felt like."

\*\*\*

I don't like mediocre plays in my theatre. I'm glad this is a one-night run because the dress rehearsal was painful enough.

Ooo, look at us, we're experimental, we're cutting edge! Whatever. Like no one's ever done multimedia theatre before. And that stupid bitch -- thinks she's so important because her boyfriend did the video. He should keep his day job. You know, the one where he brings Jim Dear his slippers.

I'll show her who's important around here. Uh-oh, now how did that knot get untied?

"Look out!" the director yelled from the back of the house as the screen -- and the thick metal bar that held it -- crashed down to the stage.

Damn him! That trampy-looking actress barely jumped out of the way. Oh, well. Let's see the curtain go up on time now!

Just as I was enjoying my gloat, I felt something odd. Not just odd, either, but really not pleasant. From the balcony.

Bitch! She was sitting up there with her eyes closed, and I could see the energy streaming from her.

But not energy I wanted to eat. This fucking slut knows too much!

"You're not going to stop me that easily," I directed back at her.

That should have startled her. It always startles them when I talk in their heads! But not her, oh no. Figures I'd have to deal with a for-real psychic when I was already in a bad mood.

"I'm sorry we disturbed you," she thought at me. "We meant no disrespect."

"THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE LET HIM COME DOWN TO ME!"

"You'll have plenty of energy to draw from once the show starts. You must know that. Isn't that why you stay here?"

"I don't like you."

"Again, I apologize. I'll only be here for a few hours. Surely we can come to some kind of terms."

Can you believe the gall of this one? "Why would I want to come to terms with you, bitch?"

"Because if you won't play nice, I can make you leave."

"No you can't." But I wasn't so sure. She was strong.

By now, I'd drifted up so I could stare at her over the balcony railing. Not that she could've seen me, even if her eyes had been open, but I knew she could feel me getting closer and I wanted her scared.

And the bitch had the nerve to smirk. At me! Then she reached over and took her puppy boyfriend's hand, and what I saw then? If I'd had blood, it would have been all icy inside my veins: she syphoned off his energy. I didn't know the living could do that!

Then she started chanting. Chanting! It wasn't Latin, but I don't know what it was. Something like, "Ah elfin todd dir sin din dew," or some nonsense. Only it didn't *feel* like nonsense. It fucking hurt!

"Stop that! STOP THAT! What are you doing?" I shrieked at her. Then I realized -- she was trying to cast me out of the theatre. And it was working.

I tried not to sound afraid, but it was hard. "Okay, okay! Let's come to terms! I'm not bad, you just ... you just surprised me, that's all! I'm not used to being noticed."

"Good," she said, all smug. "I'm glad to know you can be reasonable."

The word 'relief' doesn't begin to cover what I felt when she stopped that chant. I hadn't felt pain in so long I'd forgotten what it was. I didn't want to be reminded again.

"What do you want?"

\*\*\*

So we came to terms. The bitch. What was she, a lawyer?

"You will not harm anyone who is in, associated with, or here to watch the performance."

What fun is that? I thought, but only to myself. I didn't want to interrupt when she was on a roll.

"You will not move, damage, destroy or in any way disrupt props, costumes, set pieces, or equipment."

Oh, come on! That is my right – even duty -- as the theatre ghost. Performers come to expect this kind of thing!

"You will glean energy only from the atmosphere created by the performance itself, and not directly from individual actors, crew, or audience members."

Great, starve me out, already.

"You will, in these and all other ways, be unobtrusive and cooperative until the end of the show."

"Fine, whatever. I'll be a nicey-nice ghosty until this ridiculous play is over. And you'll leave me alone?"

"In exchange, I will not try to cast you out this evening, nor will I come back later with my friends who are even more powerful. Do we have an agreement?"

I said yes to all of her ridiculous terms, and on top of it all, she then had the nerve to ask questions!

"How long have you been here?"

I told her five years instead of twelve. I never agreed to be honest.

"Did you die in the building?"

"No." Behind it in the alley, actually, while the audience cheered for the slut who took my role. But you don't need to know that.

"Why are you here?"

"Because I like it here. And because of the energy."

"The energy emanating from under the stage was much stronger than you are now. Why is that?" Nosy bitch. None of your business. "Because I spend a lot of time there. Residual energy builds up."

I could tell she didn't quite buy it, but I wasn't going to tell her highness about what I had trapped in my web. The diva I brought low. The little sniveling thing. The one who rages. They kept me fed ever so well, but, of course, one tires of the same flavors all the time.

\*\*\*

I knew this play wouldn't go well.

If you're so cutting edge, why are only 43 seats full, hmm? Oh -- another flubbed line, color me stunned!

But if you think they're dying on stage, wait until you see the finale. The bitch isn't the only one who thinks like a lawyer: this agreement ends when the curtain comes down.

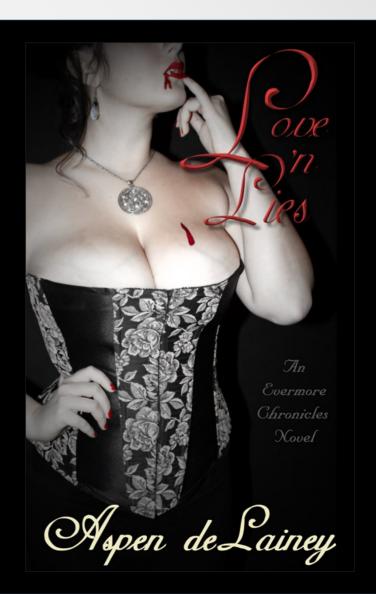
And I'll be waiting.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Adrienne Dellwo lives in Washington state, where she works as a freelance medical writer, writes and produces indie film with her husband, and is raising a son and daughter who keep life magical. She's had short stories published by The Horror Society and DarkFire Fiction, and her first novel, *Through the Veil*, is soon to be out from Sky Warrior Books.

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# Where Scary Can Be Funny



Available on Amazon

# The Truth in Abercrombie Alice J. Black

Icy breath licks the back of my neck as I scurry further under the covers. They're up past my ears now past the point of being able to breathe comfortably, but I don't care. All that matters is being as covered up as humanly possible. I even consider ducking right under that blanket and igniting my phone as a night light but the rational side of my mind resists. I'm fine--safe--nothing can touch me here.

When the whisper cuts across my cheek in a haze of cold air and stale breath, a squeak leaks from my mouth. I am a mouse in hiding from the trap that is set and I cannot move. I'm frozen.

"Hannah..." the whisperer continues. It taunts, jibes, repeating my name over and over until it sounds senseless. I cannot tell if it is a man or a woman. I've never been able to since arriving and I doubt I ever will. One thing I do know is that staying at Abercrombie Manor isn't going to be a possibility. As soon as the dawn comes, I'm out of there.

You have nowhere to go. There it goes again, my rational mind always trying to win out. Of course, it's right. My parents sent me here for the holidays and there's no way I can make my way back home alone.

I dare to open my eyes and see the moon peeking in through the slit in the heavy, velvet curtains and I'm thankful for its brief spark. I feel safer somehow, protected. In complete blackness I'm a vulnerable creature lost and alone.

It's still not enough light to let me creep from the bed and switch on the light or get some sleep. I am a puppet controlled by the dark. I lay there until the crescent drifts across the sky in a lazy movement and the sun rises sleepily on the horizon. Only then do I feel safe.

The morning brings an overwhelming exhaustion that seeps into my bones. I ache all over, every movement hurts and my eyelids are so heavy that I feel them dropping shut every minute.

"Hannah!" the sharp voice brings me to attention. I lift my head and stare at my gran. Across the table from me, she's well dressed with a jumper pulled right up to her neck and a full face of make-up. I can't help but snigger inwardly at the attempt she's made to hide her wrinkles. Instead of growing old with grace, my gran has never accepted her maturity and instead hidden behind fake products and hair dyes. All it does it make her look like mutton. I'm just glad she grew out of her short skirt phase. "Yes, Gran?" I finally answer her as I take a spoon of soggy cereal. It turns in my mouth and I balk at the taste before I swallow without chewing.

"Why aren't you dressed?" Her lips are pressed together in a line of disappointment.

"I'm tired." My voice is small, whiney. I'm transported back to being a ten year old child again. I dreaded visits with Gran even at that tender age for her whip-like tongue and never-good-enough attitude. She's been like that for as long as I can remember; an old woman with a snarky attitude. Mum said it all started after my grandpa passed away after a fall down the stairs. Now I have to face it full time every holiday.

"It's rude to sit at the table in your nightwear."

"Fine. I'll go to my room." I pick up my bowl and she barks an order at me to sit down. As I jump with fright, the bowl tumbles from my hands and hits the table, sloshing milk on the polished oak. "It is also rude to leave the table halfway through the meal."

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. It's only breakfast. But then, I realise I'm glad she scared me silly into sitting back down. I'd rather be in that dull dining room than alone in my room despite the fact that daylight was now pouring through the windows.

From the moment I set foot into my bedroom, I hadn't been able to shake the feeling that there was something there, watching. Hairs constantly stood on edge and my nerves were completely shot. Not to mention the cold that snakes through my skin and into my veins, traversing my body and chilling me to the core. No, there is something I hate about that room.

"What are your plans today?" my gran asks, bringing me out of the lull.

I shrug. I have no idea. I'm stuck in the middle of nowhere in her manor house while snow covers the fields beyond. I don't want to be there. Apparently my parents needed some respite. I'm not that bad, am I? Sure I got into a little trouble now and again, but I was led to believe that was par for the course for a teenager and I am only fifteen.

"You simply cannot spend another day cooped up in here. You must do something." There's no suggestion, no warmth, no compassion. "I will not have you lazing around my house."

I open my mouth, about to remind her that we're in the middle of winter and the hugest snow storm this side of the country for centuries but I stop myself. A little detail like that isn't going to stop her being so disciplined. But there is something I have to ask her.

"Gran?" I venture in a small voice. I can't even look at her. My eyes fixate on something incredibly spectacular in my bowl while hers bore holes into the top of my skull.

"Yes, Hannah?" For a moment her tone softens. Almost like she's a real grandma.

"Can I change rooms?"

The explosion hits hard and fast as her fist slam the table causing a mini-quake in my milk. More of it spills over the sides to join the rest, fast becoming pools. "You are a stupid girl!" she remonstrates, her voice hard and harsh. "There are no such things as ghosts and I will not hear of this anymore. You have your own bedroom—which is more than some people have—and you will be grateful for what I have given you. Now finish your breakfast and do not speak to me of this again."

With a flourish, she pushes her chair out, swings her whole body about in an overly-wide circle and sashays from the room with her head held high.

From where I'm sitting, I see a grey streak peeking through the black strands of her hair and I push my hand against my mouth against the guffaw that rushes to my lips. Braying now would only serve to double her anger and she would punish me with extra cleaning duties or no dinner. What a lovely gran she is.

My day drags and I'm passed from pillar to post and experience a day serving my gran. I have no idea why my gran is so snooty but there you have it. Perhaps it comes from a life of living alone. My granddad died almost ten years ago now and she rarely has visitors. I try to pass her attitude off as a hermit's mood and reason that I only have another week left.

As I crawl into bed that night I'm sure I'll fall asleep. I've been worked to the bone and I'm dog-tired. As soon as my eyelids begin to droop, that's when it starts. I'm suddenly ice-cold, as if all heat has been sucked out of the room and goosebumps rise on my flesh even under the covers. I huddle up tighter as suddenly my eyes are wide. I know what's coming.

"Hannah..." the voice rasps as a smile in my ear. It wants to be heard. I delve deeper under the blankets and cover my ears with my hands but the whisper filters through the way light finds its way into the darkest of places. "Hannah..." The voice haunts me, runs through my mind and rings through my body like a bell.

It hits me then. This ghost—thing—wants my help. Why else would it send alarm bells tingling the way they do? If not then surely it would have hurt me by now, it's had ample opportunity. Slowly, I grasp the covers with my fingers and dare to pull it down until my eyes are peeking into the darkness. That's all I can see, shadows and blackness across the room. Then, to my right, something moves. My breathing speeds up as my heart quickens. I'm clutching the blanket like it's my life jacket and there's no way I'm letting go.

"Hannah..." the voice calls again. Steeling myself, I lower the covers further until my mouth is just visible and I reply for the first time in three weeks.

"Hello?" My voice sounds small in the room—tiny in fact—and I tremble as I wait for something to happen.

"Hannah." This time the voice is sturdier, less of a whisper in the dark and more a voice. I can tell now that it's a man. There is movement again to my right and my heart slams into my chest but this time it's not as bad. The realisation that I've been in that bedroom for almost a month and have never been hurt despite the nightly visits hits me. I know I am safe. No, this spirit is asking me for something. But what?

In a flurry of movement, I shove the covers back and thrust myself up until I'm sitting. I still can't see anything but it feels more polite not to be half asleep while consulting with a spirit. "Hello," I say, this time more definitively.

"I need you, Hannah." Shadows meld against the darkness and something comes into focus. Something a darker colour than everything put together. It draws my eye and as I watch, the blackness forms and becomes a figure. It is still vague but I can tell by the silhouette of this person that it is a man. His shoulders are broad and thick, his chest muscled despite the age.

"What can I do?" I ask, keeping my voice quiet. No sense in letting Gran think I'm talking to myself. "Avenge my death."

The words slam into me with a dull force. Vengeance. That means this spirit thinks he was wronged somehow. I force myself to take a breath. "Who are you?" I ask, my voice still quiet but before I hear the answer something floats across my brain.

"I'm your grandpa." The words hit me again and my jaw is working but no sound is coming out. The man that stands before me—so to speak—is my grandpa. I was too young to remember him well when he passed away but now that I see him, that hint of a smile plays on my mind and a memory jolts me. He tosses me in the air and for a moment I feel like I'm flying, free. Then I'm falling, falling, heavy and with it the fear that I'll die. Then I'm in his arms and we're laughing. I'm safe with Grandpa. Then there is another residue of a memory from my five year old self—an argument between my grandparents plays out. She is vicious, conniving. Evil, even then.

"Grandpa," the word falls from my mouth as tears form, stinging my eyes. It's all too much. I know now with a sudden rush that his death was no accident. "What... what happened to you?"

A brief sigh escapes his lips and he glances at the floor as he remembers. "My death was no accident, child. I was murdered."

Murder! The word rings through my mind as my heart beats an erratic rhythm in my chest.

Suddenly, there are footsteps outside clicking along the hallway and as soon as he materialised, my grandpa dissipates. The white mist that surrounded him fades just as my gran marches into the room. Hawk-like eyes scan the whole space before settling on me. "Who were you talking to?" she barks.

"Nobody," I lie.

"I'll know if you have boys here young lady."

Ha! If only she knew. "No boys, Gran."

"Be quiet and go to sleep." With that, she gathers up her skirts and swishes from the room. She doesn't go along the passage to her own bedroom. Instead, she makes her way down the winding staircase.

I'm up and out of bed before I know what I'm doing, tiptoeing across my room and opening the door. A sliver of yellow light reaches up from downstairs and I can hear the distant mumble of the TV. Creeping along the hallway, I keep to the shadows. Making it to her bedroom, I grab the brass knob and open it slowly, pushing inwards until it clicks open. I risk only the lamp on her bedside table and for the first time since I was a child, I see her room. Nothing has changed. Her bed takes centre stage in the room. Four posters of dark mahogany complete with dark canopy surrounding. In contrast, her sheets are white. The rest of her furniture matches the bed.

Opening a drawer in her bedside table I come across a notebook. It's ornate and heavily patterned and as the first page opens, I know I've hit the jackpot. Her journal. The entries are sparse, few and far between and it doesn't take long until I'm right back at the beginning where it all started.

Dear Diary,

I have done it. I have finally done it. John is dead. And to the eyes of everyone but me, it was a mere accident. For years I have suffered this fool. It was torturous just listening to his monotone voice day in and day out. And to think, the whole family loved him like he was some god while I was left standing in the corner. No, that wasn't the life I wanted. Now I'm free to be myself.

Oh it feels wonderful to breathe.

Nancy.

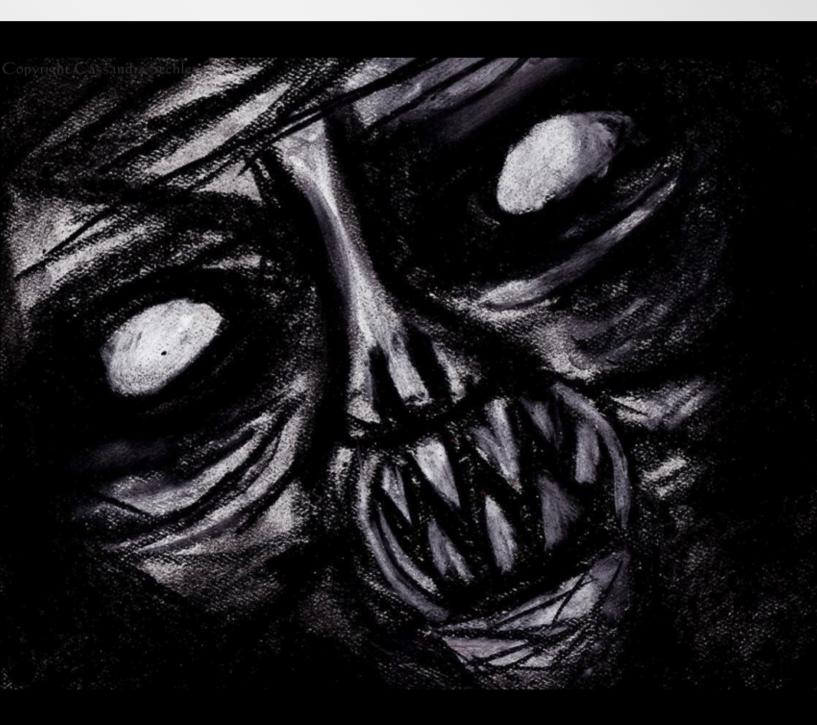
The flicker of the ghost in my room comes back to my mind. My grandpa was murdered by my gran. Breathing is difficult, the air escaping my lungs as I heave and gasp. Then finally, I open my mouth wide and feel the cold rush of air inflating my chest. My heart is still lurching heavily against my ribcage and the muscles in my limbs are pulsing with adrenaline.

I hear that familiar clacking of her heels and then she swings the door open, raw fury on her face. "Hannah!" she screeches. Black eyes drop to the journal I hold in my hand and her jaw drops. "Grandpa will have vengeance."

I rush at the old woman I called my family. This is her undoing.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Alice lives and works in the North East of England where she lives with her partner and slightly ferocious cats! She writes all manner of fiction with a tendency to lean towards the dark side, but she also challenges herself and writes out of her genre too. Dreams and sleep-talking are currently a big source of inspiration and her debut novel, The Doors, is a young adult novel which originally sprouted from a dream several years ago and grew from there.

Facebook Page: <u>Alice J. Black</u> **Blog:** <u>alicejblack.wordpress.com</u>



## Blind Fear D.M. Slate

In the end, there's only darkness. And pain. And loss.

Startled, Laura's body jerks awake, dragging her out of the nightmare. Sitting up in bed she brings a hand to her temple, pressing lightly against her fresh-shaven hairline. Her fingertips trace the edge of the jagged gash, following the trail of sutures just under the surface of the thin gauze.

Her eyes blink rapidly - yet she sees only darkness. Her vision is gone. She's blind, now.

Listening, Laura can tell that it's nighttime. Only muffled monitor beeps from neighboring rooms pierce the dense silence of the rehabilitation unit. She scoots to the edge of the bed and drops her feet onto the frigid tile floor. Shivering, Laura grabs onto the bed's foot railing for balance before standing.

Reaching out into the blackness she waves her arms from side to side, feeling for any obstacles blocking her way. Inching along, Laura moves slowly until her outstretched hands meet the wall of her tiny room. Feeling her way along the wall she finds the bathroom door.

Grabbing ahold of the handle she pushes the wooden door inward. A warm *swoosh* of air passes by as she crosses the threshold, carrying with it a faint whisper...

"I've been waiting for you."

Letting out a frightened *yelp*, Laura swings her hands wildly in the air before calling out, "Hello? Is someone there?"

Petrified, she doesn't move. Her eardrums scour the dark abyss, searching for any clues. Only silence responds.

Relaxing a bit, Laura moves further into the bathroom. Reaching the sink she turns the faucet on and cups her hands, filling them with water. Bending down, she drinks, savoring the feel of the cold liquid on her raspy throat.

"Your hair looks nice, today."

Choking, Laura gasps in mid-swallow, spraying water out of her mouth and nose as she coughs and sputters. Her hands instinctively rise to cover her head, trying to hide her hideous appearance. Even without being able to see herself, Laura can imagine how she looks. Repulsive.

Trembling in fear she asks, "Who are you?"

Again, no response.

"Who's there?"

Silence.

Swiveling on her heel Laura turns. Taking two bold steps forward she reaches out with her hands, attempting to grab onto the intruder. Her fingers wrap around nothing but thin air.

From behind, a soft chuckle echoes in the bathroom doorway.

The hair on the back of her neck stands at attention. Shivers race down her spine and her stomach churns. Feeling dizzy, Laura reaches for the wall and leans against it. Sweat pours from her glands. The potent mixture of pain medications is making it hard to keep her grip on reality.

Is someone in the room with her, or is it just a trick of her drugged mind? ...or her guilty conscience, maybe?

Stepping away from the wall Laura shimmies through the doorway and points herself in the direction of her bed. She leaves the security of the door frame, counting as she walks. *One, two – smash.* 

Laura's shins collide with a rolling cart of medical supplies. The cart shoots across the room as she trips and falls, flailing to the floor with a heavy *thud*. Upon impact with the tiles, the horrible memory flashes before her sightless eyes, yet again.

She's in her car, driving. Her phone is ringing but it's buried in her purse. Looking away from the road she reaches across to rummage through the bag. A deafening *pop* pulls her eyes back to the front of the car.

A man's body slides up the front of her hood, smashing into the windshield. Glass shatters in all directions. She slams on her breaks, cranking the wheel to the side, and that's when her car begins to roll. Her head smashes into the steering wheel – and then everything fades to black.

Laura snaps back to reality. Heart hammering within her chest, she scampers across the cold floor in the direction of her bed.

"I'm here to help you. Take my hand."

She freezes in mid-motion. There's a sinister sound to the whispered voice. Terrified, she spins on her knees, listening. Confused, Laura can't locate *where* the person is standing.

Reaching out into the darkness Laura's fingertips snag the edge of her bedding. Grabbing onto the sheets, she clambers toward the bed. As she rises to her feet the icy touch of a massive hand encircles her tiny wrist.

Startled, she tries to pull away – but the grasp is too strong.

"Let go of me! Don't touch me!"

Fighting against the unseen assailant, Laura attempts to tear away. Overpowered by brute strength she's pushed back onto the bed. First, her left hand is restrained by the straps on the side of her bed, followed swiftly by the right hand. Still struggling, Laura lets out another protest.

"Help! I'm being attacked!"

A sharp prick pierces the skin on her arm, followed by the burning sting of the injected medication. Within seconds Laura's body relaxes and she stops struggling.

Laura hears footsteps leaving her room, followed by a familiar male's voice. It's Alfred, the night orderly, speaking with one of the other nurses.

"I found her on the floor, again. Some sort of paranoia attack, I guess. She's restrained now, and I gave her some meds – so she should be out for a while."

Alfred pulls her room door closed and walks away, tending to his other night time duties.

Laura's head feels heavy with sedation. She struggles against the restraints but it does little good. Giving in to the medication she rests, lying still.

From just next to her bed Laura hears the heinous whisper, "I'm still here."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Danyelle (aka D.M. Slate) resides in Colorado, where she's lived for most of her life. Her first sci-fi horror novella was released in 2009, followed by two novels and several short stories over the next five years. In 2014 Slate won the Wicked Woman Writer's Challenge hosted by HorrorAddicts.net with her audio story *Photo Finish*.

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## La Luna Justine Johnston Hemmestad

Lucia was awoken by a rap on the bedroom window. She sat up in bed, her black hair falling over her shoulders as she narrowed her eyes to see through the dark. But there was nothing, only the limbs of a sycamore tree enlivened by strong winds, its leaves waving like large hands. She glanced toward the sky but was only able to catch a few glimpses of the full moon, la luna that she knew was her mother's spirit, for the clouds had become thicker since her grandmother had told her to go to bed earlier. She breathed the lingering scents of beans and homemade tortillas from dinner, thinking that a rain storm would crash down on her Grandmother Echidna's Alamogordo home at any minute.

She turned back the blanket and shifted her legs out of bed. Then Lucia took her nightlight off the bed table, a softly burning skull to remind her of the last holiday she had with her parents —Dia de los Muertos - and tugged down on the hem of her t-shirt. She bit her bottom lip as she rushed over the carpet, knowing that she had to wake her grandmother and go to the basement where the house was strongest. The pictures that hung on the wall in the hallway were all taller than Lucia, but she caught a glimpse of the one of her father - he held a sombrero in his hands and smiled into the camera in his home country - just as she rushed into her grandmother's room.

She had not turned on any lights in her panic; she believed the spirits of her father and mother would guide her soft nightlight. As she bumped against the bed with her hip she realized she was where she needed to be and she reached over to feel the lump that was her grandmother beneath the blanket. She nudged her grandmother's figure a bit too roughly; wind screamed so loud outside that she couldn't believe she hadn't woken up to get her grandmother earlier. She couldn't help her fear. She kept nudging.

The elderly lady, so thin and frail that Lucia had been afraid for her lately, leaned up in bed. She pressed a palm against Lucia's cheek, then ran her long fingers through Lucia's hair. Lucia liked the touch of her grandmother's boney fingers on her scalp and in her hair because it meant that she was loved. She never felt alone though she had no parents like all her friends did. "I am awake, mija, what is it?" her grandmother asked. Lucia pointed toward the window and pulled the tan drapes aside so that the violence outside was visible. She watched as the trees were nearly blown onto their sides and the rain began to pelt the window, and she peered to her grandmother in fear. "Ay, mija – I see, a storm," her grandmother said as she pulled Lucia into a tight embrace. "You are afraid. Come, we'll go down to the basement, you'll feel safe there."

Lucia liked the feeling of her grandmother's silken grey hair flowing over her arm as she helped her grandmother get up out of bed, and walked with her toward the kitchen. Her grandmother was a little unbalanced and needed her support as she walked, especially having just woken up, but she smelled of the rose-scent she had taken a bath in before she went to bed and Lucia loved being near her. As they entered the kitchen, the smells from dinner only hours earlier began to make her hungry again. She looked toward her grandmother, widening her eyes and rubbing her stomach. Then a clash of thunder sounded and she jumped, almost knocking her grandmother off balance though she had held onto the kitchen counter. She clinched her grandmother's hand, her face distorted by fear. "Do not be afraid of thunder, mija. There is nothing to fear from nature. It's all in the Lord's hands." But Lucia looked to her oddly and motioned toward her grandmother's ear. Her grandmother laughed, then said, "God lets me hear very loud noises through my feet on the ground and my hand on the counter – they shake."

Lucia closed her eyes for a moment to take her grandmother's words into her soul. Then she glanced toward the basement door at the end of the kitchen and tugged on her grandmother's hand. "Sí," her grandmother said, "let's go into the basement. You open the door." Lucia's eyes were tightened with fear as she shook her head. "I know you're scared, but we must go into the basement where you'll feel safe from the storm. Are you more afraid of the basement or of the storm?" her grandmother asked tenderly. Lucia nodded and turned toward the door. She strengthened her heart to enter as she reached toward the doorknob. "It's fine, God is with us, never forget that," her grandmother whispered. "Open the door."

The door creaked, and Lucia stared to the darkness into which the stairway descended. "I know you don't like going into the basement, niña, but what happened to your parents was so long ago. There is nothing down there anymore." Lucia shook her head, her hand trembling in her grandmother's grasp. The first memory she had was of her grandmother, her nightgown bloodied, coming out of the basement to call the police. Something awful had happened to her parents, who were living down there. Lucia was always.

with them except on that day, when she had gone upstairs to find a doll she had lost earlier in her grandmother's room.

When she heard her grandmother's scream, she ran as fast as her little feet would take her to the kitchen, where the deepest sense of sorrow washed over her – she knew something was wrong. The last she ever used her voice was when she saw her blood-drenched grandmother standing in the basement doorway and screamed. "I tried to save them," her grandmother had told her on that day as she held Lucia in her arms.

Her parents had died at the hands of a stranger who must have secretly come in or been living there all along without anyone knowing. There were lots of crevices and tight, hidden fits between beds or in storage boxes where someone could hide without being discovered. When she had gone there in the years since to help her grandmother fold the laundry, she sometimes heard boxes shifting or a whisper in the dark, but when she tugged on her grandmother's hand to get her attention, her grandmother always told her not to worry, that the house made strange noises even before she lost her hearing when Lucia was a baby. She had often told Lucia that sound was the tunnel for the spirit, and to never take her hearing for granted, even if what she heard frightened her. She told Lucia that as they folded laundry, they were organizing their spirits.

Lucia took a small step toward the first landing, her grandmother with her. They stopped abruptly, though. Lucia saw a dash of light in the darkness, at the end of the stairs. She held her breath. Her grandmother made no movement either. The light seemed to grow until it was clear and distinct. She held her grandmother's hand too tightly. "Mija, do you see that?" her grandmother breathed.

Lucia's gaze darted toward her grandmother as she nodded, then she took a step back. Her grandmother nodded too and also walked back, still holding her granddaughter's hand as she turned and walked swiftly out of the kitchen and through the living room toward the front door. Lucia began to cry, silently, tears seeping into her t-shirt as though they were blood running from a cut. Her grandmother unlocked the door and pulled Lucia out into the rain, which stung her skin and doused her hair in the first moment. Her grandmother struggled to reach a mesquite tree at the end of the driveway. Lucia clutched it in the warm winds, and though it was thin, she prayed it would support her from the terrors that were outside.

"The house is haunted," Lucia's grandmother said into her ear. "It has been that way since your parents were killed." Lucia shook her head so violently that her neck hurt and her wet hair clung to her face. "Yes, it has been. You have heard noises in the night. It is them - they will not rest." Lucia shook her head again. "They will not rest because your mother loved another man who was not your father." Lucia closed her eyes in disbelief as thunder cracked so loudly that she could have been inside the cloud that hosted it. "She needs me to stay here; I can't leave her now. I have to go back inside, but you have to stay here where you'll be safe. Hold tight to this tree." Lucia shook her head and reached for her grandmother as she pulled away. "I will be fine, she won't hurt me."

Lucia watched as her grandmother stumbled through the whipping rain, her nightgown clinging to her body, to go back inside the house. Lucia couldn't stand it; even if her grandmother was worried about her mother being mad at her because she left, she had to protect her grandmother. She let go of the mesquite tree and ran after her grandmother. Though the heavens dumped buckets of water against her head, she reached the house and ran inside, never closing the door behind her.

"Grandmother," she weakly called; it was the first word she had spoken since her parents died. But her grandmother wasn't anywhere. Lucia stepped toward the kitchen, reluctantly and carefully. There was no light. She had to find her grandmother; she could not leave her grandmother. She felt the floor flatten beneath her feet as she walked into the kitchen, very aware of every noise that the storm made. If there were evil spirits in the house, they would know she was there after her grandmother ran back into the house; there was no turning back.

She walked over the floor toward the basement door, which was still open. She turned her head to look inside, calling upon all the strength of God to be with her. Lucia flinched and stepped back when she saw the glaring light at the end of the stairs again. The next time she looked she had braced herself so that she wouldn't look away. Staring toward the light she could make out no outlines of anyone – it was like the

light hung in the darkness by itself, but it wasn't staying where it was. The light was coming up the stairs. Lucia screamed and turned to run – but something grabbed her hand. "Grandmother – they know we're still here!"

"Don't leave, child," the terrifying creature that clutched her arm whispered viciously. Lucia slowly turned around – to see her grandmother with sharp knives as teeth and a streak of blood across her wrinkled brow. All frailness seemed to have left her.

"You killed my mama and papa," Lucia uttered, dazed.

"They needed to die, and now you need to die. La Luna cannot save you, don't call on her."

"Let me go!"

"I tried to let you go when I took you outside. But it's too late. You came back, and you'll never leave - come down here to see how your parents died." Lucia's grandmother tugged on her arm until Lucia had no choice but to go. She was too afraid to fight even though she knew her grandmother was a monster and would not be stopped. Lucia had been blind to a monster that tricks, even though La Luna had tried to shed light on her.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Justine Johnston Hemmestad is a wife and mother of 7 children, ages ranging from six to twenty-two. She's soon to earn her BLS degree from The University of Iowa, where she will pursue a graduate degree. She hopes to one day publish her novels and teach creative writing.

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# An Interview with Heidi Lee Douglas, Writer and Director

With this month being the sixth annual Women in Horror Recognition Month, we sat down with writer and director Heidi Lee Douglas to learn more about her and her short gothic thriller *Little Lamb*. Welcome Heidi, why don't you start off my telling us a little bit about yourself.

**Heidi Lee Douglas:** I started out as an activist filmmaker. I crossed over into drama because I got sued by this big Tasmanian logging company for making films. I hadn't done anything wrong but my films about the destruction of the ancient forests were getting global reach, and the court case was a way to try and silence me. It took 5 years in court, they lost the case, but in that time I wrote a man-eating mermaid feature film as an emotional release from the pressure of the court case. It felt like that strong mermaid archetype came to me to give me strength to fight.

After the court case was over and we had won, I wrote a short film script called *Little Lamb* about a convict woman wanting to escape imprisonment. I made that film between 2012 and 2014, and it my first short drama film and it premiered at Fantastic Fest last year. I realise now I vented some of my personal experiences of oppression getting sued into the world I'd created in *Little Lamb*.

Sirens Call Publications: What was it like switching from the documentary filmmaking procedure to creating a work of fiction?

**HLD:** Working as a one woman band – shooting, doing sound, writing, producing. directing and editing for my documentary work, I really understand most of the roles on set. And I know how to get good coverage. I tended to do quite a few takes with the actors because I was already editing the film in my head, and I innately knew once we got the take. Drama and documentary storytelling have a lot of crossovers, but what I love about drama is the pure creativity of making a world from scratch, and that imaginative place being created together with a team of artistic people. There's also a level of metaphor you can shape and mould with drama that exhilarates me.

#### SCP: Tell us about your short film Little Lamb?

**HLD:** *Little Lamb* is a feminist retelling of the Bluebeard story set in 1829, in convict era Van Diemen's Land (which is modern day Tasmania), and follows the journey of a young convict woman Louisa who is desperate for freedom so she rashly chooses a new master. Alone on his isolated farm her hopes for a new life are undermined by the grim truths she discovers.

SCP: I've watched the film and found it compelling in so many ways. *Little Lamb* won the award for Best Script in the 2012 Stranger with My Face Film Festival 10 by 10 Script Challenge. With that in mind, how hard was it to create a 10 page script in 10 days? Did you already have an idea churning in your imagination or did that come to you after deciding to enter the challenge?

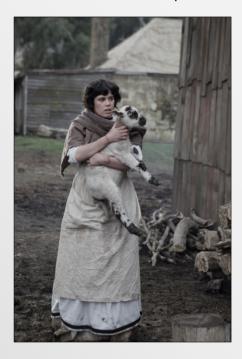
**HLD:** I had just moved house and cities when I discovered the Stranger with My Face Film Festival writing challenge. I had been so busy making factual content that my horror filmmaking dreams has been on ice. But with my edit suite still in moving boxes, it was a good week to spend my evenings writing. I made up a whole new story for the challenge whilst I was driving a few hours to visit family. Music and the changing landscape of driving has always been where I have made up stories, since I was a kid going on long road trips with my parents listening to their Kate Bush tapes. Once I had the story mapped out in my head the writing was more of a process of refining and strengthening that story.



#### SCP: What difficulties did you face while making the film?

**HLD:** The main problem was not being able to find a producer, in a small community in Tasmania, that was willing to take a risk not only on me as a first time drama director, but also on a very ambitious script. One local known horror producer said to me there was "too much mud and too much blood" for him to take it on. So I had to write/direct/produce and edit my film. All whilst being a full time mum to an 18 month old son. But I loved it, every moment of it. And juggling it with being a mum was a pleasure. I had a lot of production meetings at playgrounds!

Doing all of these roles was second nature to me from my work in documentary, so I wasn't intimidated at all. But doing it all unpaid was hard as I got into a lot of debt. But money comes and goes, whilst the experience of making the film will stick with me for life. I luckily had a fabulous Mentor Producer Roger Scholes, who by the post production period I had realised was really a co-producer as he had invested so much into the film. Roger is an experienced doco/drama writer director who has been mentoring me on and off for ten years. He has a fantastic art department knowledge and helped do a lot of that on the film, as we didn't have an experienced art director.







SCP: Do you feel there is a negative or inferior perception of women working in the horror genre? If so, how are you working to combat those stereotypes in your own sphere of influence?

**HLD:** Most of the men I've met in the horror film industry have been intrigued and supportive of me as a "new voice" in horror. I haven't felt any perception of inferiority, but I have felt intimidated by the sheer percentage of male to females in the industry. My experience of documentary filmmaking has been much better in representation of women in the industry with years of experience in positions of power.

I have really noticed that a lot of men in the horror industry aren't in touch with female audiences, and so are missing out on a huge market opportunity by tapping into what female horror/genre audiences want to see. Female audiences in particular love my film *Little Lamb*, and are effusive about wanting to see me make my feature. Female audiences are really craving seeing themselves onscreen. In much the way when I saw Jane Campion's *The Piano* I felt like I'd never seen a film that resonated with me as much. I resent sitting flicking through movies on iTunes with my husband, because its all male heroics movies or women in rom-coms, and neither appeal to me. I want to see smart, dark intelligent films with more complex female characters. There is more films like that in sci-fi features than any other genre at the moment.

SCP: That's a great point Heidi! How important do you think the Women in Horror Recognition Month Movement is to gaining equality? Is there anything you feel that could be done better in terms of raising awareness?

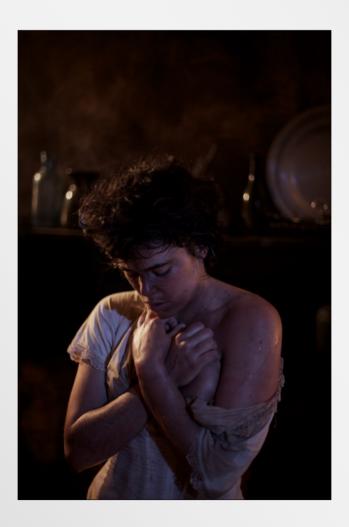
**HLD:** Women in Horror Month is really important for promoting the work of female directors to new audiences, and helping female directors connect with each other and supportive media representation. That kind of empowerment is going to help create positive change, slowly but surely.

In terms of doing things better in terms of raising awareness, from what I have been reading online it seems like there is a really growing awareness of the inequality of female directors in the film industry, generally, not just in horror, and perhaps we need to find a way to link the women in horror movement with that wider movement.

I also think a lot of audiences don't realise that horror itself is a highly diverse genre. For instance, I personally am not a fan of gore horror, I prefer psychological horror, like Jennifer Kent's Babadook. I call my film *Little Lamb* a "gothic thriller" rather than an outright horror film.

Thank you Heidi for taking the time to talk with us. On a parting note, women in all outlets of horror need to band together in order to effect true change.

If you'd like to learn more about Little Lamb, you can visit <u>www.littlelambmovie.com</u> for more information.



All stills from Little Lamb are courtesy of Dark Lake Productions



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