

The Sirens Call

February 2016

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*The Fourth Annual
Women in Horror Month
Edition*



*'Things That Go Bump
in the Night'*

All Women ~ All Horror

*Featuring photography
by Karen Soutar*

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Shadow Hands | Victoria Griffin

It's gonna get you. You know that.

“What’s gonna get me?”

I've seen you looking at cars going sixty-five in a fifty zone and wondering how badly it would hurt. I've see you looking at bridges and wondering if the drop would kill you.

Porter was walking alongside the empty highway, on the left should because you're supposed to walk against traffic. The sun was low in the east, and his shadow was cast over the shoulder, its head severed by the line between asphalt and grass. The shadow was misshapen by Porter's bulky coat as it plodded along beside him, slightly out of step.

He walked faster and put his hood up, should a stranger see the fear creeping over his face. His shadow was tall and thin, like the stilted clowns at the circus, but it slowly shortened as the morning sun rose higher in the sky.

See that yellow bug over there in the junk yard? Its paint cracked and faded, the tires rotting off its axels? That's gonna be you in ten years, whether you're alive or dead.

Porter hummed a tune, not sure of what song he was humming. He imagined drunken bumblebees bouncing against his skull and filling his ears so that he could not hear his shadow speaking in that echoing voice.

He walked another mile up the hill before he realized his shadow had quieted. He glanced at the dark patch of asphalt beside him, redirecting his eyes quickly so his shadow would not catch him looking. A squirrel darted out of the trees in front of him. It stopped halfway across the road, turned back, then changed directions again and disappeared into the trees thirty feet away.

“Why are you so quiet?”

His shadow made no response except to leap over a log in its path.

There were no cars this morning, it being Christmas. Porter began to walk faster, glancing at the shadow, always there.

“Stop following me!”

Porter broke into a run, sprinting down the shoulder of the road before turning into the forest. The wind and branches stinging his face reminded him of running through corn fields as a child, running from his father, as his shadow hid in the cornstalks.

Like a hand had reached out and taken him by the ankle, he felt himself falling just before he struck the dirt, a rotting branch jabbing into his ribs.

His shadow was buried beneath him. Porter lay still, thinking perhaps it would suffocate.
Suffocate.

Forty years ago. His brother under him, surrounded by corn and the warm July night.

“Shh! Stay quiet. He'll hear you.”

Porter could hear his father's voice, slurred by distance and alcohol, winding its way through the stalks. Beneath him, his brother, Benny, was still talking.

“He’s gonna find us!” Porter hissed, before covering his brother’s mouth and pressing his knee farther into his stomach. “We can’t let him find us.”

“You boys better getcher sorryasses outa there ‘fore I...”

Porter tightened his grip over his brother’s mouth, holding still as their father’s voice grew closer, until it trailed off in the opposite direction. He sighed and rolled off of his brother and onto his back.

“I think we’re safe, Benny.”

His brother lay still and silent beside him. Porter got to his feet and dusted his pants with his palms.

“Get up, Benny. We gotta go check on Mama.”

Porter started toward the house, but his brother didn’t follow. The little boy was still lying on the ground, facing the black sky, a red print around his mouth from Porter’s grip.

Porter knelt beside his brother, squinting. “Come on, Benny. What are you doing?” He shook his little brother’s shoulder, but he didn’t move. “Okay, you stay here and rest. I’ll go check on Mama, and I’ll be back.”

Porter turned and darted into the stalks, feeling them sting his wind burnt face as he remembered the sight of his mama lying still on the living room floor, her body devoured by bruises, and Porter had thought she was dead. She had been so still.

Just like Benny.

When he stepped out of the corn, into the soft glow of the porch light, he noticed for the first time his shadow watching him. And he realized the terrible thing his shadow had done.

Porter wrestled with his shadow, surrounded by a crowd of trees. He had it by its dark wrists, his knuckles grinding against rocks and roots, and thought of all the horrible things those hands had done. Those hands had killed his brother. Those hands had held Porter’s tongue, stopped him from telling his mama. They were the reason no one found Benny’s body until it was sucked up in the combine and ground to bits. Those hands covered Porter’s eyes every night, as though that would keep him from seeing their evil.

As he hovered over it, resisting its attempts to free itself, Porter looked at the shadow’s face, as black as if it had been drawn with permanent marker, and he felt his face turning red from exertion and rage. This thing had taken so much from him—his family, his home, his life. It was the reason he had nowhere to go on Christmas day, or even someone to call. It was the reason he slept in ditches and beneath bridges. It was the reason he had nothing.

Porter ground his teeth together and released one of the shadow’s wrists. He brought his fist high and drove it into the dark face, pounding at its grisly form. Soil flew into his eyes, and blood seeped from his busted knuckles, and still the shadow remained unscathed. Porter could have sworn it was smiling.

Porter stopped as the world around him began to dim. The ground to his left and right darkened as a cloud swooped in front of the sun, and a moment later the shadow had

disappeared, camouflaged by the dimness. Porter stood on his knees, his shoulders back, his neck arched, his eyes wide and searching for a hint of his opponent.

He thought he heard a small car pass on the road.

Porter was slammed into the ground, his face toward the sky. He felt hands around his neck, squeezing just like they *(he)* had squeezed his brother's little face, and the air was disappearing. His lungs were burning. His eyes began to water. His head was bursting, and panic overtook him. The world around him was tinted with shades of blue, and his arms and legs were flying, his fingers reaching for his attacker, struggling desperately to save himself.

Try as he might, he could not touch a shadow.

A deep darkness fell over him. Like the darkest night he had ever known, the shadow's body was draped over him. It was tight to him and left neither air nor light. His limbs were still now, and his mind was dull.

As he died, the shadow slipped from Porter's body and settled beneath him, resting until someone came looking for him.

It would be a long wait.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Victoria is an East Tennessee native, currently studying English and playing softball at Campbell University. When she's not on the field or in the library, you can find her relaxing in a hammock with a good book. Her short fiction has appeared recently in Synaesthesia Magazine and FLARE: The Flagler Review, among others.

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Housekeeping | *Rebecca Snow*

Laughter seeped from the hallway as the electronic lock clicked. "I've never seen one of those key cards," the woman said before she stepped through the door.

"They're the same kind the office uses. You don't have to slide them. Just press them against the reader." A slender man followed her into the small area I had occupied for the past twenty-five years. "It's really helpful if you have your hands full."

Bags opened, clothes hung, bottled water rested in the tiny refrigerator. The flurry of activity mesmerized me. I'd seen it all a million times, people transforming a generic space into home for a few days. But this felt different. Something about the man and his unspoken intentions made the back of my neck itch.

"Do you think we'll have time to go to the beach?" She held up a floral bikini and smiled.

"If you're a good girl." He snickered from his perch on a short cabinet.

The woman flashed nervous grins between her bustling and laughter. The man dropped onto the bed and pressed a button on the television remote. Voices of a daytime talk show rerun

filled the room. She spread her toiletries around the sink and started the shower. He closed the curtains to block the street lights and fell asleep. I watched.

Dark thoughts rippled through his mind as he dozed. A dazing blow to a pretty girl's temple flitted into view as a slight smile pursed his lips. A scalpel sliced through flesh as gloved fingers probed the fresh wound. A soundtrack of painful shrieks played in the background. His eyes fluttered when a giggle erupted from his throat. A quick glance at the beige walls, bad artwork, and somewhat tasteful industrial carpeting reminded him he was in a hotel with a visitor.

Being a spirit had its perks. Most travelers' heads were filled with trivial ideas, pleasant memories, or impish glee. Glancing into other lives kept me entertained like going to a movie theater and seeing everything playing on one admission price.

I'd only experienced this man's particular kind of darkness once since I'd been introduced to everyone's deepest desires and fears. Just after the initial bright light disappeared when I turned away for a moment, the pitch black faded to a lit spot where parts of my body were being stuffed into several suitcases. A man hummed an innocuous tune that I still couldn't place.

The vague memory pooled into my awareness as I watched the forgotten stranger mop up puddles of my blood from the bathroom floor. Sleeping, I had dreamed of being breathless in a smoky bar. I awoke to a pillow pressed against my face. I struggled while listening to muffled chuckles until my last breath left me. At the time, it took a moment to realize that all the thoughts and memories in my head weren't my own. The lady with the rubber gloves and dishtowel was his mother, not mine. The red bicycle under his car tires belonged to a girl he'd dated in high school. A spray of red fanned across the pavement.

Mind reading came with proximity. Since I couldn't leave the place where I'd died, I was limited to reading the people who stayed in room 143. I moved to the bathroom and delved into the woman's thinking. Giddy excitement bubbled through her. Vague notions of donuts and Christmas lights danced in her enthusiasm. No inkling of danger lurked.

"Your turn," she said. Steam curled around the doorframe as she ruffled a towel over her short blond hair.

He stretched and smirked as he rose from his slumber. "Dinner first, then we'll see the lights." An image filled his head of a yard filled with twinkling decorations and a female form lying face down behind a giant inflatable Santa. A knife protruded from her back.

White hot anger rose in me. The lamps flickered. The air chilled.

"Turn the heat up, please," he yelled. "To eighty-five."

Smiling, she pressed the appropriate buttons on the heating unit with a chewed fingernail. The beige box whirled to life.

I faded through the wall. He stood on the slick tub floor just outside the jet of water, testing its temperature as he shivered. Goosebumps rose on his tanned skin as I neared. He stepped into the spray from the shower head. After wetting his dark hair, he used the entire bottle of complimentary shampoo and lathered. He eyes squeezed shut to avoid the bubbles.

I gathered my energy and focused. Making a few calculations for an awkward angle, I aimed. The force of the blow drew his feet into the air and sent the base of his skull crashing into the lower tub faucet. The water turned pink and then red as he lay in a heap. His brain was silent.

“Peter?” she called. “Are you okay?”

He didn’t move.

“Peter?!” Her frantic shout sounded closer.

The door opened. Her scream pierced my concentration. One short step crossed the short expanse. She crouched next to the tub and turned off the water. Pressing two fingers to his throat, she checked for a pulse. After listening to his chest, she sprinted to the outer room.

She lifted the phone’s receiver and pressed 3 numbers.

“I need help. There’s been an accident.” She paused. “He fell in the bathtub. I can’t tell if he’s breathing. I couldn’t find a pulse.” She took a breath and listened.

Visions of multiple futures clicked into focus, bouncing between hospital recovery, funeral scenes, and an empty passenger seat. Returning to Peter, she sat on the floor and held his cold hand. His blanched face stared at nothing. Her breath came in sobs, but she was alive.

She released her grip only when the first responders arrived. Her mind had quieted, but it held growing sparks of anger and heartbreak.

“What the hell?” A voice asked as the gurney rolled out the door.

I turned. A naked man resembling the deceased stood with clenched fists.

“Who the hell are you?” he asked. “And what the hell kind of prank is this?”

“Not a prank.” I stared with my head tilted at a slight angle. “You’re dead, and I’m your worst nightmare.” A slight smirk spread across my lips. “Welcome to eternity.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Rebecca Snow is a Virginia writer who doesn't have as many cats as she used to have. Her short fiction has been published in a number of small press anthologies and online. She's never met a ghost in a hotel room, but sometimes the pillows move by themselves.

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Black Barn | *Hannah Clark*

“You ready, sister?”

I glanced up from my sorting job in the trash can. The man before me was not my brother. He didn’t look like anyone’s brother. He watched me with wide, gray eyes, like he had scooped them from the cloudy sky behind him. He broke my line of vision, like a ragged mountain between the skyscrapers. I straightened up from the trash can. My backpack leaned on my leg, and I reached down for it.

“Ready for what?” I asked.

“For the snow.”

His hands were jammed in the pockets of his huge brown coat. He moved them around while he spoke, and they looked like twin aliens writhing in his gut.

“Big snow coming. Are you ready?” He said again.

I felt the strap of my pack with my thumb. I could probably run to the tracks and lose him.

“I’m ready.” I said. He laughed. His whole streaked face lit up with beautiful white teeth. I paused.

“Nobody’s ready.” He chuckled. “Especially not you, skinny.”

I closed my fist and considered knocking him for the last comment. He smiled, and his teeth flashed again. My own mouth looked like the city sky behind me, dirty and poorly built. All of him, his coat, his heavy boots, his wild eyes, screamed *wanderer*, like me. But his mouth, that was built with money. I eyed his arms. Maybe he was hiding a fancy watch in those moth-eaten pockets.

“What’re you selling?” I said, trying to sound tough. Trying to sound like I didn’t have a thin sleeping bag and an overpass to protect me from the storm.

“I only sell to people with money. I give to my sisters.”

He stepped towards me, and I raised my bag, ready to swing it at his head. He lifted his hands, showing two, weaponless palms. He smiled again, and I watched the perfect masonry of his mouth form the words, “Just take this, and when it starts snowing...”

He reached one hand back into his coat, this time drawing it out closed. He slowly extended the fist towards me, like the branch of a tree, and opened his hand. “...You’ll know where to go.”

It was a rock.

I sighed and let my shoulders relax. Just another nut. A funny nut.

I took the rock from his smooth hand. The gray stone sat neatly in my palm and had a solid, comforting weight.

It could probably pack a good fist.

When I looked up, the man had gone. I looked across the street, and up at I-95, roaring on the overpass above. Nothing.

I was grateful he didn’t give me a shelter card, or a church flyer, or something stupid like that. ‘Homeless advocates’ were always sneaking around, trying to herd you.

I slipped the rock into my pocket and lifted my pack. I had to tell Yaga about this guy.

I found the old stump of a woman behind a line of dumpsters by Back River Housing. She had flipped all the dumpster lids open, so they rested at an angle against the building. Beneath this lean-to she had stacked wooden pallets, two feet high, and I found her sitting on the pallets with her shopping cart parked next to her.

I peeked into her palace and whispered, “Can I come in?”

She sat with her eyes closed, cross-legged, on a pile of torn tarps and bags.

“Leave your pack in the cart,” she muttered, without opening her eyes.

I did so, and crawled up onto the pallets and under the dumpster lids.

"Is this for the snow?" I asked, squeezing besides her. She smelled like fish and smoke and magic, but maybe that was the dumpster.

"I'm making an igloo," she opened one eye long enough to wink at me. "I'm going to stay here, and no pigs will move me, because they're all running from the snow."

She giggled, a high, old woman laugh, and then snapped both of her eyes open to stare at me.

"What've you got?"

I smiled and dug a hand into my pocket.

"Something funny. An odd guy gave me a rock today. He said it would show me where to go from the snow."

I opened my hand to show her.

"Oh, wait..." I muttered, looking down at it. I hadn't noticed it before, but the rock had black letters on it, like someone had written on it with a sharpie. The jagged letters spelled out *The Black Barn*.

"This must have been on the other side," I said. "I didn't really look at it."

Yaga stared down at the rock. I felt a heat rise in my stomach. That guy wasn't a funny nut. He was trying to get me to come to his shelter. Or worse, his house.

"Ugh," I grunted. I made to toss the rock away from me, but Yaga caught my hand.

"It's just some shelter shit, by a poser," I said.

I pulled my hand away from Yaga. I knew his teeth were too perfect.

Yaga grabbed me again.

"No." She lowered my wrist and gently pried my fingers apart. "No, this is not a trick."

"I'm not going to a shelter," I said, a little too loud.

Yaga winced and looked up at me.

"This," she whispered, "is different."

She slipped the rock from my hand and studied it, turning it over in her hands.

"What did he look like?" She said after a few moments.

"Like us, I guess."

I watched a rat scurry up the side of Yaga's pallets. I kicked my foot and it squealed, running back under the dumpster.

"He had smooth hands, though, and rich teeth, so I know he was posing."

Yaga's deep, creased eyes widened. She pressed the rock back into my hand.

"You've been picked."

I released a long, slow laugh.

"Picked to be harassed?"

She shook her head, still staring at me. I felt her warm, rough hand around mine.

"You remember my daughter?"

I remembered a small girl, with big, soft arms and a red face. I'd only met her twice, right after I left my dad.

“This same man found her, last March. And gave her a way out of the cold.”

None of us, the people under the bridge, had seen Yaga’s daughter after that March storm. We figured she froze.

Yaga gazed out of her hovel at the road. The snow had started to fall. I watched the flakes spin in slow circles before the wet street consumed them.

“She told me, just before the storm, ‘I’m going to the Black Barn.’ And she looked so happy.”

I stared down at the stone, heavy in my palm, and felt a sudden desire to destroy it. I flung it away and heard it crack against the pavement.

“No!”

Yaga scrambled out of her tarps and knelt over the rock.

“You broke it...” she said back at me. “Oh, my...” her voice trailed off. I pulled myself out of the lean-to. The rock lay on the ground, cracked in half. I reached down and picked it up, but stone came apart in my hands. I gasped.

The inside of the rock was hollow and beautiful. A sharp purple lining of crystals coated the interior, their shimmering points melting into a deep blue. The center of the rock was a cathedral of color and light.

There was also a piece of paper.

“How the hell...” I pulled the paper out of the stone, the solid stone, which held it.

“He must have glued it together....” I muttered, but Yaga wasn’t listening to me.

“Read it,” she hissed.

I fumbled to unroll the scrap of paper. It was thick and yellow, like a piece torn from an old book. I pressed it open with my fingers and read.

Emily, we have a place for you.

I dropped the scrap of paper. Yaga snatched it out of a puddle. She stared at the writing, then up at me.

“How did he know your name?”

I shook my head. A gust of wind tore down the alley, sending white snow into my face. I turned back to the dumpsters.

“Can I stay here?”

Yaga had already pulled my pack from her cart. She pressed it into my hands.

“You have to go,” she said. “This is something strange. And if we ignore it, it will just follow you.”

I watched Yaga hobble back to her lean-to. She looked back, once at me, and I thought I saw tears streaming down her face. I wanted to shout, call her a senile crone, but instead I shouldered my bag and walked into the blinding snow. I wasn’t going anywhere.

My feet carried me down the deserted streets. Everyone had already holed up for the storm. I passed a few promising spots, some park structures, but every time I glanced in, a huddle figure told me it was taken. My ears and nose felt like ice, and I was losing feeling in my fingers.

I wandered past the train yard and down to the riverside. I figured the bridge might have room. As I turned out from an industrial park, I paused. Someone had spray-painted small black letters on the side of a cinderblock wall. Black Barn. I looked up at the wall, which belonged to a warehouse. The featureless building loomed up through the snow. I glanced around for a door. One stood just to the left of me. I hadn't noticed it before. On a whim, I tried the handle. It turned. I eased the metal door open, and a dim interior stretched before me. I considered turning around, but a blast of wind pushed me inside. I stumbled over the threshold, and the wind slammed the door shut. I turned to push it open again, but it was locked.

I wiggled the handle again. Then I pressed my shoulder into the door. Nothing.

I stood in the darkness, listening for movement. The room was warm, but I couldn't tell how large. I felt at the wall but found no switch. I pressed my back against the door, like an anchor, and slid into a seated position. If anything, I could wait out the storm here, and then someone, eventually, would come turn on the lights. Eventually.

I had no watch or flashlight. The only sound I heard was the wind, howling outside. The minutes, or hours, stretched into the darkness. I twitched at every noise. Somehow, my eyes never adjusted to the dark. It stayed an inky abyss.

After a while, I sat my pack in my lap and dug around for something to eat, but I found only crumbs. My hand brushed against a length of rope I used to tie my tarp down. I pulled it out and felt the fiber in my hands. Standing up, I set my pack against the door and tied one end of the rope to the door handle. Then I tied the other end to my belt loop. My tether in place, I started feeling down one wall, touching along its smooth paint. After about ten feet, the rope tugged at my waist. I hadn't found anything. I doubled back and reached the door, walking in the other direction. Ten feet later, the rope stopped me. Nothing.

I extended my hands in front of my face and stepped out from the wall. Slower this time, I waved my hands before me, taking small, uneven steps. I felt like an astronaut in the void of space.

I kicked something. I felt a slight impact on my foot and froze as I listened to a clinking metal object bounce away from my foot. I knelt down, feeling around my feet, but found nothing. I crawled along the floor, feeling damp concrete under my hands. I moved about a foot before my hands brushed against something soft. I jumped back, and then slowly felt at the space before me. My fingers met smooth fabric, like a blanket, with something soft and thick beneath. I pressed more. Something long and solid. I felt in the folds of the blanket.

Something with legs.

I recoiled and pushed myself backwards until I hit the wall. Arms shaking, I felt along the wall until I found the edge of the door. I reached for my pack and found nothing. The wet, bare concrete met my hands.

I reached up and pulled at the door handle. It rattled like the wind outside.

"Help!" I shouted and immediately regretted it. My voice echoed into the blackness, bouncing across the void and betraying the room's vastness.

Then I heard a response.

“What do you want?”

The voice echoed like mine, but without the fear.

I could only think to say, “Light.”

Immediately lights clapped on. A blinding whiteness erased my vision. I raised my arms and squinted until the room materialized. In front of me, rows and rows of red blankets lay, draped over long mounds.

I could tell they were bodies, because one lay ten feet in front of me.

A red blanket covered a narrow form, well, covered most of it. One corner lay, peeled back, and beneath it I saw a face.

“I’m glad you came, sister.”

My head snapped up. The man from earlier stood between two rows of red blankets. He had the same brown coat, the same hidden hands, the same pearl mouth. I watched him walk, like Moses through his red sea.

“Do you need something to eat?” He asked. I just stared at him. He stopped by the uncovered man.

“Everything needs to eat,” he continued, moving his pocketed hands so the front of his coat twisted like a growling stomach. “The problem is,” he paused, smiling down at me, “where to find food.”

I looked for an exit. At the end of the long warehouse, I saw another black door.

“You weren’t ready for the storm, were you, Emily?”

I refocused on his gleaming mouth, but stayed quiet.

“That’s why you came here. That’s why they all come.”

My eyes wandered without my consent, down to the edge of the body on the floor. I looked, finally, at the pale, sunken face.

My breath stopped, and I saw that his eyes were empty, hollow sockets, and his mouth...

I screamed.

His mouth gaped open, brown, with black holes where his teeth had been torn out.

The man above me smiled.

“Do you know what they keep in barns, Emily?”

I pushed off the ground, bolting from the man, running for the door.

But I forgot the rope. My waist snapped back, jerking my head down and feet off the ground. I landed on my side, hitting my head on the cement. Stars exploded in my eyes. Through the blur, I saw a black figure eclipse the light above me.

“Cattle,” he whispered.

The lights snapped off.

Through the darkness, I thought I saw a perfect row of white teeth, growing larger as they neared my eyes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Hannah Clark writes mostly poems in the small town of Chadron, Nebraska, about things that are not in Chadron, Nebraska. She also writes about things that are, like bread, fear, joy, and sometimes trees. This is her first attempt at embracing the darkness. So far, it's quite comfortable. Consider listening to her recent podcast project at: <http://wherewasi.libsyn.com/>

Twitter: [@palindromehere](#)

The Gates | *Lisa DeYoung*

Dear Diary-

Their cries woke me again last night. They beg, weep and plead for me to save them. Their desperate wails dig into my ear and gnaw at my brain. I cannot sleep. My head screams with their howls and my own frustrations. I made a promise I can't deny any longer. I must keep it. I must save them.

-Wilson

Dear Diary-

The constant banging on the ceiling woke me again last night. I don't know what he does up there. He also keeps the windows open all night despite the cold. It is freezing down here. I cannot sleep. I despise him.

-Alfred

Dear Diary-

I went to the prison last night to begin the work that had been planned months ago but I had forgotten about the gates. They terrify me. The dark demonic faces welded on the rusted, ancient gates stare directly into my soul. They tell me the woes of those on the other side, and warn me of my certain demise if I cross. My stomach aches with fear and my head pounds. I do not know how I'm ever going to be able to go back there.

-Wilson

Dear Diary-

While on my way upstairs today to talk to Wilson about the constant noise and of course the overall temperature of the house, I tripped over a muddy shovel that had been carelessly left in the stairwell. I landed on my head and split it wide open. I do wonder what he is doing with the shovel. Hopefully he is not messing with my garden again. I am going to sit down and have a serious talk with him once my head quits pounding.

-Alfred

Dear Diary-

I am too exhausted to write. I cannot get the gates to open. It was difficult to even go back there and I struggled with them all night long. It's as if they are frozen shut. I do not know what I am going to do.

-Wilson

Dear Diary-

I made it upstairs to talk with him this evening only to realize he wasn't there. The car is still in the driveway; I have no idea where he could have gone so late in the evening. The muddy shovel is gone as well. My head still throbs and I'm sure I'll be left with a horrid scar as a reminder of his carelessness. He left his door open and I shut all the windows that were thoughtlessly left open again. Hopefully the house warms up some so I may get some restful sleep tonight.

-Alfred

Dear Diary-

I fear I will never open the gates. I still can't get them to budge. My head pounds. I am terrified their voices will return to terrorize me if I am not successful and I simply cannot endure that torture again. I am attempting to dig a hole under the unmovable and ominous gates; and while the hole I've dug is quite impressive, I still have not gotten all the way under them. I swear they reach as far down as the center of Hell and they judge me as I dig.

-Wilson

Dear Diary-

Again he was gone when I went upstairs to speak with him this evening. The car is still here just like last night. I wonder where he is going and what he is doing. He left the shed open and my gardening tools spread about. I hate when he borrows my things. Even when he *does* ask he usually returns them broken and useless. I shut the windows again. If he wasn't my brother I wouldn't tolerate so much.

-Alfred

Dear Diary-

Hallelujah! Tonight the gates finally opened! Just when I thought I couldn't dig anymore, that my back would certainly break, they opened as if waiting for me all along; testing me. I collapsed with joy. They will be free soon, and so will I.

-Wilson

Dear Diary-

Wilson woke me up at 5:00 this morning knocking on my door. He had a friend with him, Mr. Haven, whom he insisted stay with me in the basement until Wilson could rescue Mr. Haven's friends and then they would be on their way. I was annoyed and could barely look at Mr. Haven.

He is an old fellow with a careworn face and pathetic eyes. How could I say no to Wilson in front of this man? I couldn't. So now I have one roommate, with the very real possibility of more.

-Alfred

Dear Diary-

The joy on Mr. Haven's face was unmistakable tonight. It was quite a bit of work to free him but it was worth it. I have asked Alfred to let him stay downstairs with him for awhile until I can free the others. I'm sure he is put out by this, but I believe it will actually do him good to have some company for a change. I am tired now and will go back tomorrow night for as many of the others as I can free. My head hurts.

-Wilson

Dear Diary-

Over the course of the last week my roommates have accumulated to the surprising number of 6. As much I thought it would be horrible to share my living quarters with others, I have found the company to be quite stimulating and fun. However, they all are in dire need of a bath. I do not wish to offend them by pressing the issue but they certainly have begun to fill my apartment with a tremendous and almost unbearable stench.

-Alfred

Dear Diary-

The last of my friends have been rescued this evening and are quietly relaxing with Alfred and the others in the basement. I have never been so exhausted in all my life and have never had quite a headache as I do. I feel as if I could sleep for a week.

-Wilson

Dear Diary-

I have not seen Wilson for three days now. He locked the door to the basement the last time he was down here and now we have no way out. I know he is upstairs; I can hear him pounding on the floor again. I have tried to yell through the ceiling to him but receive no response. His friends are growing restless and are eager to leave. As much as I don't want them to go, it has become rather cramped down here and the smell has certainly grown tenacious.

-Alfred

Dear Diary-

My company has grown angry with me. They insist I know where Wilson is and that I am keeping them from him. I saw one of them with a gun yesterday and now fear for my life. I wish Wilson would come back. I am panicking.

-Alfred

Dear Diary-

I can't believe I have been so careless. I trusted criminals. I brought them into my home and lived amongst them. I feared they would never let me sleep again until I freed them but now I fear to sleep at all. My skin crawls when I look around the room at the expressionless faces staring back at me. My stomach lurches from the stench. There is only one way out of this horrid situation. The angry faces of the gates still haunt me every time I close my eyes. I can't sleep.

-Alfred Wilson

Local Man Kills Himself After Excavating More Than 11 Graves from Local Cemetery and Keeping the Bodies in His Basement.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Lisa De Young lives in a small town in Northwest Indiana with her husband and three daughters where she manages a dental office. She enjoys writing fiction in her spare time and her work has recently appeared in *The Bleeding Lion* and *Theme of Absence* and forthcoming in *Ricochet Review*.

In the Evening Dusk | *A. F. Stewart*

Cradled in the last light, nestled in the first breath of the gloaming, waits a tickle of the ethereal. Listen now, to the laughter cracking in the trees, to the earth reverberating groan, that spectral music, sad lament of the rising night.

Whispers ebb from the graveyard, hushed hints of leftover voices at the periphery of worlds. Reality revolves to shadow, misbegotten shapes churning, spinning grey into ephemeral mist. Defeated eyes in past reflections, creeping spectacles of disaffection, exhaling on the expanding tide of once gone by.

Cradled in the last light, nestled in the gloaming, emerge the forgotten ones.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: 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 ventured into the light on occasion. She is fond of good books, action movies, sword collecting, geeky things, comic books, and oil painting as a hobby.

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The Man in Front of the House | *B.E. Seidl*

He was sitting on a mountain of snow in front of the house. Tilly saw him through the kitchen window; she had no idea what had brought him there. He was the only dark spot in a cloud of whiteness. The haze fogging the window seemed to stick to him like a cobweb. His hair looked scraggly, reminding her of a half digested spider meal. For an instant, the child thought she saw his hair moving. As she leaned slightly forward, pressing her tired eyes closer to the window, the wormlike motion of the gray mane seemed to stop.

The girl's muscles trembled, as if her little body weighed a ton. Vexed, she knocked on the glass. The unkempt figure didn't move. With difficulty she opened the window. The icy wind hit her like a thousand nails. Her heart was racing. She could feel the cold seeking to enter her feverish body, inspecting every pore of her skin, every opening of her sweat suit. Her thin voice, croaking, called out to him. "Hello! You!", but the man just sat there, his back turned towards her, unmoving.

Tilly wished she hadn't been on her own. She longed for her parents to come and make the man go away. In a sudden panic she pondered: what if they didn't return? The cold air was bad for her. It could make her sicker; cause the fever to rise.

Perplexed, she looked around the kitchen, searching for something to throw at him. She hoped to make him stir, for his stillness was the worst thing about him. Finally, Tilly found an old oven mitt and slung it out at him. The glove flew and brushed the man's head. Yet, he showed no movement.

The cold had taken over the kitchen. It clung to her like a straightjacket. With effort she shut the window. A feeling of drowsiness swept over her. It was as if she had been awake for hours, exhausting her body with hard, physical work. Tilly longed for the cozy comfort of her bed; the freshly washed linens, which she would throw on and off, covering and uncovering her feverish body, indecisive about whether she was hot or cold. Her limbs were aching. Dizzily, Tilly tried to concentrate, focus on her bedroom at the end of the wooden stairs, just a few steps to the left of the kitchen door. She didn't want to bother anymore about the strange man sitting out there in the snow.

Yet, she found herself drawn to the front door, almost as if the man were calling for her. Through the ringing tone in her burning hot ears she seemed to hear him whispering, pleading for her to come.

Reluctantly, she opened the door. Her parents must have forgotten to lock it.

The cold wind pushed the door wide open. Snow blew into her eyes. From where she was standing, she could only catch a glimpse of the motionless figure. The man suddenly seemed so far away. She could vaguely make out his legs resting rigidly on the snow. His upper body was bent forward with his hands clasping his knees. In the glacial winter air, there was no mist of breath to be seen.

Icy hands seemed to tear her forward. Staggering, she obeyed their urgent tug. Tilly was like a sleepwalker now- a puppet being guided by invisible strings. A single stomp for each step,

the child descended the stairs to the front yard. At the bottom she stopped, gaping at the man's quiescent shape, which still appeared so distant. She could feel the wet snow soaking her woolen slippers. Her tiny arms wrapped around her upper body, but she failed to stop herself from trembling. Tilly's teeth were chattering so loudly; they made her remember a story her mom had read to her a while ago, about skeletons dancing at a carnival. What if this was also just a story, and the old man only a dream?

Tilly drew nearer to the dark figure, wincing at the wet coldness around her feet. With every step, his silhouette got slightly bigger, flickering like a cloudy gray mass, an ugly stain in the white blanket of snow. It is peculiar how we are drawn to darkness, as if the imperfect is of particular appeal. The man's crooked shape grew larger, menacing, yet irresistible. Tilly could make out his face now. His skin looked sallow, grey, like old meat that had been forgotten in the freezer. His eyes were wide open and stared dully into space. His gloveless hands had a bluish tone and were blemished by frostbite. In his beard dangled little icicles, making the gray hair look like a snow-covered forest.

Shaking from the cold and agitation, the girl gaped at the old man. In the freezing air he wasn't shivering, his body was completely calm. The ringing sound in Tilly's ears was shrill, almost unbearable. A sudden sickness rose in the back of her throat. She tried to shout, but the scream came out as a croaking cough, muffled by the hissing of the wind. Tilly felt her arm moving, as if it had a life on its own. Horrified, she watched it reaching for him; like one of her baby animal magnets pulling to the fridge. Was he dead? What if he suddenly awakened, grabbed her and broke her frail arm in two?

The man was sitting stiffly and stoically, a slumbering giant on his throne of snow. Tilly found herself bending forward, her fingers eagerly searching for the filthy rags that were his clothes. There... almost... just a tiny bit closer... her muscles felt sore, her skin was cringing with panic.

Tilly sensed the rough surface of the man's tattered clothes tickling the tips of her fingers. Just before she could fully reach for it to tug on the sleeve of his dirty coat, she stumbled; disoriented. With a thud she landed on the hard bedroom floor.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: B.E. Seidl is a bilingual fiction and nonfiction writer. Her work has appeared both in print and in online anthologies and magazines such as Flash Fiction Magazine, 101words and Tethered by Letters. In her writing she seeks to collect kafkaesque moments and transform them into mysterious tales. She lives in Vienna, Austria.

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Things That Follow You Home | *Winnona Vincent*

The city streets were slick with rain. The streetlight reflecting against the car windows gave the street an eerie glow. Emma sat in her car seat behind her mother. She had grown just enough that if she stretched her neck, she could see out the car windows.

She was watching out the window that night, as they drove down the hill heading for home. The car ran over a crumpled piece of paper and Emma turned to watch it. As she watched out the rear window of the car, the crumpled paper grew legs and began scurrying after the car. Emma made a little sound.

Emma's mother heard her and looked in the rear view mirror. "Emma, baby what's wrong. Emma didn't answer but kept watching out the rear window of the car. Turning around she looked at the mirror, where her mother was still watching her.

"Mama what was that?"

"What was what Emma?"

"What the car drove over mama. It grew legs like a spider and its chasing the car."

"Oh Emma. It was a piece of paper somebody threw away. When the car drove over it, the wind from the car probably drug it along behind the car."

"No mama. It grew legs, shiny metal ones that look like spider legs. Mama it is chasing the car."

"Emma that is impossible!"

They were coming into town and there was a red traffic light ahead of them. Emma's mother started to slow down and Emma turned to see if the thing was still chasing them. Sure enough it was.

"Mama don't stop! It is still chasing the car."

Ignoring Emma, her mother started slowing down. Emma kept watching the thing behind them. It was almost to the car when the light turned green. Emma turned around to see what her mother was doing. Her mother put her foot on the gas. The car started forward and Emma turned around to see where the thing was. It was gone. Emma sighed with relief and watched out the passenger window for a while.

Soon Emma was sound asleep. She woke up when her father opened the car door and lifted her out. Wrapping her arms around his neck she peeked over his shoulder, as he carried her to the house. Across the street laying on the curb was the crumpled piece of paper.

"Daddy! Daddy! Look it followed us home!" Emma buried her face into her father's neck and began sobbing.

Emma's father turned around holding Emma tightly in his arms his eyes scanned the street. "Emma, sweetheart, I don't see anything."

Emma straightened up and turned in her father's arms looking across the street. "There Daddy, there it is." She pointed to the crumpled paper against the curb. Her father looked where she was pointing.

“That is just a piece of trash someone threw out honey.” He carried her inside the house and shut the door.

“No Daddy, it grew metal legs and looks kind of like a spider. It chased the car and now it is across the street waiting.”

“Emma stop this nonsense!” Emma’s mother was standing in the kitchen doorway glaring at her and her father. “It is time for you to go to bed. Nothing followed us home!”

“Your mother’s right Emma, time for bed.” He carried Emma up the stairs. At the top of the stairs he stopped and called back down. “Louise let the dogs in; they can sleep with Emma tonight.”

“Oh Thank You, Daddy! King and Lady won’t let that thing hurt us.”

As her father tucked Emma in, the two German shepherds came through the door and jumped up next to Emma on the bed. They stretched out on each side of her laying their heads next to hers on the pillow. Emma’s Father made sure her window was closed and locked. Then he stood in the doorway of the room looking at his daughter and the two dogs. “You three go to sleep now. I do not want to hear any rough housing.” Emma smiled at him and put an arm over each dog’s neck.

Emma listen as her father went back down stairs. All she heard was the rain hitting the window. Then she could hear her parents talking.

“Kenneth what are you doing?”

“I am going to look at that piece of trash across the street.”

“Oh Kenneth, you are as bad as she is. There is nothing out there!”

“No Louise, Emma saw something. It probably was just a piece of trash blown by the wind. The light reflecting in the rain made the area around the paper look like legs to her. But I am going out and check to be sure. It will not hurt for me to check!”

The next sound Emma heard was the front door opening and closing. A few minutes later she heard her father coming back inside.

“Well, was it some kind of a monster?” she heard her mother ask.

“I don’t know. When I went across the street to look at it. There was nothing there. Louise, the rain is coming down and there is no wind. So what happened to the crumpled piece of paper?”

“How would I know. If it did not blow down the street someone probably picked it up and threw it in the trash. Where it belonged!”

“This time of night? In that rain? Really, do you really think someone would have been walking down the street and bothered with it?”

“Kenneth, I am not going to discuss this any further. I am going to bed! Are you coming or what?”

“I will be up in a minute. I want to be sure everything is closed and locked up for the night. Be sure the window in the bathroom and our bedroom is closed and locked.”

“Fine, really Kenneth there is nothing out there. Absolutely nothing followed us home. This is ridiculous.”

Emma heard her mother coming up the stairs and then the bathroom door shut. She was looking at the bedroom window. Emma climbed over the dogs and trotted over to it. Standing on her tip toes she looked down at the street. Emma thought she saw something moving across the street, but it was too dark to be sure. She closed the curtains and went back to bed. Snuggled between the dogs, she soon fell asleep.

Ladies' growling woke Emma. She could feel the dog lying next to her. But King was gone. Then she heard him growling near the window. She sat up and listened. There was a tapping, then a scratching at the window. King's growl was getting louder now. Emma and Lady slipped off the bed.

She thought it might be a tree branch being blown against the window by the storm. But it did not sound the way a tree branch sounds. She watched the window. There was a shadow there. It looked like a large spider. She watched the shadow move and raise one of its legs. It was scratching on the window pane. Emma was very scared, even though she knew the dogs would protect her. She took a deep breath and screamed for her father.

King started barking, he was not going to let it come near her. Her father rushed into the room and almost tripped over Emma and Lady. "Emma, what is going on? What are the dogs barking at?"

"It's at the window daddy. The thing that followed us home. It's trying to get in and King is trying to scare it away."

Emma's father rushed to the window and pulled the curtains back. Emma saw the crumpled paper with legs standing on the tree branch next to the window. Her father threw open the window and leaned out. The thing stuck one of its legs through his hand. He screamed in pain. King rushed to the window, standing on his hind legs he reached out and grabbed the thing. He yanked it out of his master's hand, then he clamped down on its body with his teeth. Shook it and tossed it down, to the ground below the tree. He began barking furiously at it.

Emma's Mother appeared in the doorway. She turned the light on and looked at all of them. "What is going on?"

"The thing that followed us home was trying to get in the window and King would not let it. Then Daddy came and opened the window and it hurt him." Emma said as she ran to her mother. She wrapped her arms around her mother's legs, burying her face into her mother's night gown she began sobbing. "Daddy and King are hurt."

Her mother looked at the others standing by the window. Blood was gushing from her husband's hand and the dogs mouth. She sat Emma on the bed and took the other two into the bathroom. "Kenneth what the hell is going on?" She snapped as she poured peroxide over the hole in his hand.

"Louise, Emma told you exactly what is going on! That thing she saw is real. It was trying to get in and King was trying to stop it. It attacked me and did this to my hand and if King had not stopped it. Things would have been a lot worse than this." He held up his hand that was still doing a good job of bleeding.

“Are you sure the dog did not grab your hand by accident. That all it was really, was the branch in the storm. After all, with the storm and it being dark and...”

“No Louise, it was not King. Look at this! Does this look like a dog bite! Look at his mouth! How could my hand have done that to his mouth?” King was laying on the floor at their feet with blood running out of his mouth. Looking up at them he thumped his tail and whimpered.

“Get dressed Louise, he needs to go to a vet. Then I need to get stitches in this and we need to figure out what to do about whatever that was.” He grabbed a towel and wrapped his hand in it and headed back to Emma’s bedroom.

When her father got to the bedroom door he froze. Emma and Lady were sitting on the bed. They were both looking at the window. He had forgotten to shut it. There were three of those things standing on the window sill.

Emma spoke very softly without turning around. “Daddy do not come in here. I don’t think they can see us in the light as long as we don’t move. If I move a little bit one of them raises its leg like it is looking for me. Then if I don’t move any more it puts its leg back down.”

“OK, Emma hang on. I will figure out a way to get you out of there! Try not to be scared.”

“I am not scared. Lady is with me she won’t let them hurt me. But could you hurry Daddy I am getting tired of sitting like this.”

“Yes sweetheart, I will hurry.” He backed slowly out of the door way and ran down the hall way.

“Louise get the big mirror hanging on the wall in our room. And bring it to Emma’s room only do not go in there.”

“Kenneth what are you doing now? I thought you needed stitches and...”

“Look for once in your life stop talking and do as I ask. Those things are back. I forgot to close the window and I have to get Emma out of the room!”

“Well really, have you lost your mind? Walk in and get her! I don’t know what has gotten into you Kenneth, but I have had about all of this stupidity that I am going to put up with! Emma Come here now!” She started down the hall towards her daughter’s room.

“Stop Louise! Do not go in there don’t you understand they will hurt you.” He chased after her but could not get to his wife in time to stop her from going in the bedroom.

Louise stomped into Emma’s room. She stopped in front of Emma and Lady who were still sitting on the bed. “Didn’t you hear me calling you? Why aren’t you moving.” Emma was staring behind her. She raised her small hand and pointed. Louise turned around just as the three things on the windowsill leaped across the room and landed on her body.

Lady raised up on the bed and started barking. Emma screamed, “Mama!” She started to get up and then she felt her father’s hands lifting her up. He carried her out into the hall yelling to lady to follow him. The dog was right at his heels.

Emma was watching behind them. She could see the window. There were more of the things coming through the window. Her father sat her down in the hall and holding her head in his hands got right up to her face.

“Listen to me Emma. Take Lady go in the bathroom. King is in there close and lock the door. Do not come out. No matter what you hear or don’t hear do not come out until I call you! Do you understand me. It is very important Emma Do not come back out until I call you!”

“Yes Daddy, but Mama, they are hurting Mama.”

“Do not worry about Mama Emma, I am going back to help her right now. But first you and the dogs need to be safe! Go right now.”

She took one last look in the bedroom. Her mother’s body was covered with the things and they were piercing her body with their metal legs. She did as her father had told her. Stopping in the bathroom doorway, she could hear her father screaming. She shut the bathroom door and locked it. She climbed in the bathtub laid down and covered her ears. The dogs climbed in and laid next to her.

She must have fallen asleep because someone was banging on the bathroom door. “Emma are you in there?” It was the house keeper. “Emma are you in there, open the door honey.” Emma rushed to the door with the dogs right behind her. Opening the door, the dogs started barking. The house was full of police, firemen and paramedics.

The house keeper picked her up and turned her around, so she could not see what was going on in the hall. A policeman came up to them. “Her aunt is on her way to get Emma. Take her outside to wait. Do not ask her anything until the child specialist gets here. She is probably in shock anyway. “

When the house keeper took her outside, the yard was covered in crumpled paper. Emma screamed and the dogs barked at them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Winnona grew up in the Los Angeles area and moved to Northern California in the 70’s. She became interested in writing before she graduated from High School. Winnona recently completed the NaNoWriMo, write a book in a month challenge. She currently enjoys writing short stories for publication. Horror and Fantasy stories are two of her favorite types of writing.

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Family Secrets | *Sammi Cox*

It happened once every month, when the moon was full. They would gather at our house, these men and women, strangers to me, who had traveled further than I would have imagined for a party. For that was what my mother always called it. *A party*.

But it wasn't an ordinary party. There were no balloons, no banners. But there was cake, although I could never have any, and there was dancing and music, of a sort. I would hear them

singing and chanting in the dead of night as I huddled beneath my blanket. That was what my mother repeatedly told me to do.

"Go to your room. Lock your door. Get into bed and cover your head with your quilt. Sleep if you can and if you can't... well... there is nothing to be done for it. These things need doing. You will understand one day. I can't imagine that it will be long now..."

I had no idea what she meant for she often spoke in riddles.

But this time something was different.

I was hiding in my bed, trying not to listen, not to hear the sounds that floated up from the bottom of the house all the way up to my room, when odd things began occurring. The walls shook. The floor shook. The roof creaked and groaned. I was terrified that the house was falling down.

Panicked, alone and worried for mother — the only family I had - I jumped out of bed and fled down the stairs which seemed to dance with instability beneath my feet. As I ran, the sound of wailing and laughing, an odd combination at any time, made me wonder sort of clandestine group my mother was part of, and why she let such bizarre things go on in our home.

On reaching the hallway, I noticed a bright light escaping from beneath the door to the cellar. I took one look at the front door. I realized that this might be my only chance of escape before the house caved in, but as dust continued to rain down from the ceiling, curiosity got the better of me. With the house in such a state of confusion, might I not catch a glimpse of what secret happenings went on below?

Still the walls and floors shook. Still the screaming, shouting, singing and chanting continued as if the gathering below was oblivious to what was going on. I crept to the door and turned the handle. The door seemed to give under an energy coming from down the stairs. It sighed as it whooshed past me.

I held my breath, my heart beating so fast, so loud, that I thought it would burst out of my chest. But I couldn't go back. I couldn't turn away. Something compelled me to go on and so, first one step and then another and I was making my way down the stairs.

The light I had seen from the doorway had been misleading. Now all I could see was the muted light of candles lining the walls, their flames swaying this way and that under the power of an invisible, intangible force. There was no draft. Surprisingly, the air was still.

Nearing the bottom of the stairs, I could still see nothing, for a shelving unit blocked all from my sight. The only sound I could hear was a soft humming to a tune I did not know. When I placed my foot on the floor, leaving the wooden treads of the stairs behind me, and moved past the obstruction, everything in the cellar changed as my eyes alighted on what, or rather who, was seated at the far end of the room.

I gasped. Could it be? Was I really seeing this vision before me, or could it not be some terrible dream brought on by the strange goings on in this house? It would not be the first time.

But I knew this was different. I could sense that this was very much real.

What I saw before me, sitting on a high-backed chair, ornately carved out of wood, was my father. My father who had been dead for the past ten years. At his feet lay an opened coffin, the

earth of the cellar floor disturbed. I could see a hole large enough for a body-sized box to one side of the room, dirt lying in small mounds around it.

As one, those present fell silent and all eyes in the darkened room turned to look at me.

I swallowed hard, wondering what I should do for I was forbidden down here at all times. But at least I had some measure of what went on now. These people were witches; witches who it seemed, practiced necromancy. They spent their full moons raising the dead. Or specifically, raising my father from the dead.

"Come here," my mother encouraged, a smile filling her face. "Don't you want to see your father? Of course, you do," she said, putting an arm around my shoulder and leading me forward.

But my father was dead, and had been for some time. It was impossible for this man to be him. It made no sense. "This isn't right," I whispered to her, but she continued on as if I hadn't uttered a word. "I'm sorry I came down, but... I think I should go back to bed now. I'm sorry I disturbed your party."

"You have disturbed nothing and are most welcome," my father said, standing up, opening his arms to me. He looked just as I remembered him. He hadn't changed at all. "In fact you were summoned to join us. It has been decided that now is the time for you to be let into the family secret."

But I didn't want to be let into any secret. I wished I had stayed upstairs, in my bed, and waited for the roof to fall in on me. I struggled to break free from my mother's grip. This was madness. How could these people do this? How could my mother? Horror and revulsion filled me; I had to get away. This wasn't right and I wanted no part of it.

"Unfortunately, daughter of mine, that is not a choice for you to make. In fact, you have no choice in this at all." My father almost sounded apologetic.

I tried to back away, my mother relinquishing hold of my arm, but there was a woman already there behind me. I gasped, spinning round as I walked into to her.

"Calm down," my mother said. "Everything is going to be all right."

But it didn't feel all right.

"I told you it would need to be broken to her gently, not like this, not with all this... *pageantry*," my mother shouted at my father.

"It's tradition. You know that. It's how it's always been done."

"But she's not like the rest of us. She's different. Sensitive. Why didn't you listen?" My mother looked worried.

What on earth were they talking about? Their words were not making any sense. What did they mean I was different?

As it all became too much for me, I felt the world spin. I collapsed to the ground, trying to steady my breath, but even as I lay on the floor and tried to get some measure of control over myself, nothing would settle. The house still shook and groaned. Even the dirt beneath me vibrated and moved. I covered my face with my arms, curling up into a ball, as the gathering of people closed in around me.

"It's happening. It's happening now," they began to whisper.

What did they mean? What was happening?

"She's changing! Look!"

A stinging, painful, tingling sensation, which started in my chest, spread out through my body. I screamed as I writhed aching on the floor.

When it finally passed, as I wiped my tears away, my hands touched my face. I didn't recognize it. What I felt was alien to me. It didn't belong to me.

I sobbed as below my fingers I felt the altered bones underneath my skin, but it was in my mouth where the most excruciating and painful of changes came from. I coughed and coughed, and felt blood dribble down my chin. I put a hand to my lips and grazed the skin on something sharp.

What was happening to my face? What was I changing into? Visions of all the monsters from my nightmares filled my sight. Vampires, werewolves, revenants, demons...

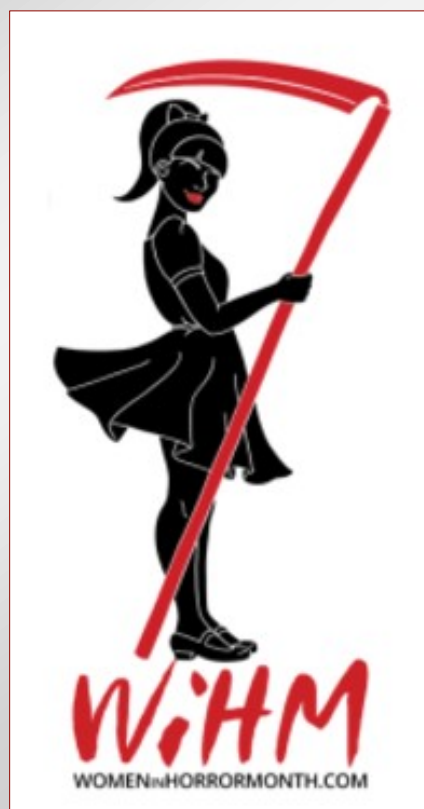
And then I saw it. Propped up against the wall, its lid shut, was a brand new coffin. My name, in bold, shiny gold letters, was written across its top.

"What am I?" I cried, looking at my parents.

"Perfect," they replied in unison, smiling proudly down at me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Sammi Cox lives in the UK and spends her time writing and making things. She is interested in history, archaeology, mythology, magic, and folklore, and yet it is the paranormal that often inspires what she writes. She can be found scribbling about a great many things on her blog.

Blog: <https://sammiscrabbles.wordpress.com/>



Be Careful What You Wish For...



~ Available February 14, 2016 ~
Print and eBook from Amazon and CreateSpace

Dark Exposure | C. Cooch

Danella gasped into the pitch blackness of the room. Not even a star, a moon or a street lamp could penetrate the haven she had created, aiming for that perfect night's sleep. She listened keenly, holding her breath even though her heart pounded a war tune on the inside of her ribcage, but nothingness... there was no sound. She looked at her fit-watch and let out a defeated sigh, always 3:20 am. Danella was a beautiful girl but that was not what she could see when she scrutinized her reflection. Her complexion was pale with a scattering of blemishes, grey dregs hung under her eyes and blood vessels bulged at the surface like tree roots in a mangrove swamp. She was in bad need of sleep. Crushed she slipped back under the covers, breathing in greedily the lavender essence. Despite her fatigue she could not settle into sleep for some time. Then when it happened it just seemed like seconds until her watch started to vibrate fiercely to get her up. Sipping a welcomed nutty brew she checked her fitness App's sleep function and groaned.

"Four hours sleep, great."

She showered as much of the weariness away as she could and faced the day feeling just like any other she had faced in the past month, so tired, exhausted and confused.

"Why 3:20am, what happens at that time for me to wake up?"

That evening Danella decided to set the silent alarm on her watch for 3:10am "Got nothing to lose, will be awake at 3:20am, again, no doubt anyways," she said to her microwave meal for one. After the habitual bath in muscle soak with a cup of chamomile tea she slipped into her warmed night gown. Continuing the nightly ritual of closing the blackout blind and matching curtains she then snuggled into bed letting out a sigh. She could hear her heart echo in her chest.

"What if I'm better off not knowing what wakes me up. No, I need to find out." She shook her head thinking to herself... *asking a question and answering myself aloud in the darkness, that's madness right there, the matter has to be solved.* Counting her breath and breathing deeply, she willed sleep to come quickly so as she could lap as much out of the hours before 3am as she could. She stirred slightly at 2:30am and listened, nothing... there was a faint mushroom smell however that wasn't enough to hold her until she drifted back to sleep.

Her wrist jolted and she nearly hit herself in the face as the vibration of the silent alarm fuzzed like a maniac mosquito in her ear. 3:10am.

What was she going to find? The bed jolted. Her stomach lunged. Could she hear anything? Oh hell, yes. Her pitch black haven was meant as a portal to the realm of sleep, it was almost impossible to adjust her eyes to this depth of darkness she had made, now it didn't seem like the best idea anymore. She started to feel she had manifested a refuge for something else to lurk in her blackness. Danella focused all of her attention to the sound. It was like a purring sound similar to the distant rolling of thunder. *Was it just a faint roll of thunder?* No. There was something in her room. It sounded like small feet thumping across the carpet in a hectic scamper, darting back and forth in no uniformed manor, like a retro pinball being tapped about from random edges. With a thud on the wooden bed frame, the sound ended. But it was not the end. She could hear a sweeping sound on the soft cotton cover and then felt it tug by her feet. Danella

held her breath and squirmed slowly under the covers simultaneously pulling them tight over her head. A flit of a reality check made her feel silly, as if this cover will offer a shield from whatever is there. She rapidly felt stifled under the cover but was too petrified to move. She felt a flutter across her shin; the thing was climbing up on the bed. She was running out of breath, but if she moved the covers from her face the horror might be revealed. If she couldn't see it, it would definitely see her morbidly trying to make out its form in the darkness. Her imagination was fecund. She hoped to hell and back the thing was nothing like she'd imagined however, she was not about to try and prove that wrong. No, she'd keep still and hoped... *it would go...* Right now though she desperately needed more air, pursing her lips she let out a soft puff and sucked oxygen slowly back in... she wanted more but couldn't get greedy, the thing would know she knew it was there and that's not going to be good, *right?* Another part of its body touched her knee. *Oh hell, it's making its way up.* Every muscle in her body was clenched. She continued to puff and suck not moving her chest or stomach.

Now, it touched her stomach. She couldn't keep this up anymore. She wanted to run screaming out of her room, she wanted fresh air on her face but it was too late the thing was too close to her.

She had to make a decision. Mustering all of the energy she could, she leapt up throwing the covers as hard across the room and then soared in the direction of the main light switch. Slightly misjudging and stubbing her toe on the dressing table, she slapped the wall in the right place and blinded herself for a few seconds. Danella rubbed frantically at her eyes to get them to work then grabbing a nearby shoe for a weapon, ready to face the thing. 3:20am, no sound, no movement, no smell. She collapsed to the rug, drained, holding her sore toe and steadying her breath. Whilst recuperating she made a panicked search and still found nothing in her room.

Danella replaced the blackout curtains with new white lined ones that allowed the silvery hue from the street lamp to softly bleach her bedroom leaving only a few shaded areas when the night came. She had tipped away the lavender buds and with no more reluctance she took a sleeping pill. Danella laid back to an unblemished sleep...

...the little horror constrained to just a few shadows.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Claire lives in Devon, UK, with her husband and three dogs. Some thirty-odd years ago a teacher told her to write instead of daydreaming, and she has been doing so ever since. She now hopes her daydreams come alive to entertain others, and is currently working on her first novel that will have you reeling alongside her heroine in a post-apocalyptic realm of horrors.

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



Becoming | Emerian Rich

Her shriek in the forest wakes me. A deep breath catches in my throat instigating a cough. She's been haunting me for days. I shiver, my coat lost. Planning had done me well in the first 48 hours, but the last attack brought me to my knees. Stinging gashes on my back alert her I'm cut. She can smell my blood.

A deep breath and I forge on, hoping for a miracle or savior. I run down a path I've seen too many times before. I've worn a series of footprints through the dirt, so muddled, a tracker couldn't tell how many of me there are. But there won't be any trackers. I am alone. Just me and her.

Another squeal echoes as I spot cabin logs in the moonlight ahead. I won't be safe there, but I'll chance it for sleep. I bolt for the door, but she zips in front of me, knocking me into the ground.

I take in the dangerous beauty of her. Her tattered dress flies about her like hundreds of moth wings as she hovers over me. Her hair is tangled and gray. Her body is transparent and wraith-like, but it makes her no less threatening. Wrinkles line her face and she smiles wickedly.

"You will be me," she says. Her voice hurts. It reaches into my ears like a long, crooked twig, scraping at my eardrum.

Nails swipe my cheek and my skin tears away. A slice down my back, my skin parts with a crackling rip. Pain shreds every nerve, splitting from my once youthful skin, leaving a disintegrating outer shell. A hand to my face, I look up in terror. I've become leathery as she. My vision clouds, vapors remain. I am smoke and agony.

I am her, she is me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Emerian Rich is the author of the vampire book series, *Night's Knights* and the painter's horror tale, *Artistic License*. She's been published in a handful of anthologies by publishers such as Dragon Moon Press, Hidden Thoughts Press, Hazardous Press, and White Wolf Press. Emerian is the podcast horror hostess of HorrorAddicts.net.

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

Daddy's Girl | C.A. Viruet

Claire tickled Erin on her birthmark, a straight line that was a slightly darker shade than the rest of her skin, and ran from her belly button to right under her little belly. The little girl giggled and squirmed under her bright pink comforter. "Good night and sleep tight. I will be in the living room reading, so if you get up and play I will hear you. Close your eyes and go to sleep." Claire gave her daughter one last kiss and checked that Princess Bear was next to Erin. Erin closed her

eyes and did her best impression of Sleeping Beauty. Claire suppressed a laugh as she turned the light out and closed the door.

Claire settled into her recliner with a glass of whiskey and a horror novel she had picked up at the thrift store. The cover featured an old Victorian house, and she was ready to get into a haunted house story. Her own house was quiet, the two dogs were sleeping in a pile on an extra large dog bed, and her daughter hadn't made a sound yet. She took a sip of her bourbon and opened up to the first page. There was just enough light to read by, and it complimented the authors opening scene. Claire was pulled deep into the book and hardly looked up.

Claire had just turned the page to the third chapter when both dogs woke out of a dead sleep. The two Labradors jumped up and headed to the back door, the fur on their backs standing up as they both began to growl.

"Hush, it's just the coyotes."

Claire flicked on the light in the backyard and peered through the window. There was nothing in the yard. She looked around and listened for the familiar cackling and yelping of the coyotes, but heard nothing. She turned off the light and waited. The dogs stood their ground, growling, only suppressing their warning barks because Claire was telling them to hush. As she looked into the yard, waiting to see what had the dogs on edge, the yard filled with light. Claire threw open the door, sure that one of the neighborhood teenagers had gotten drunk and crashed into the ditch out back, or maybe stalled their car out. As soon as she opened the door her dogs ran full speed ahead into the light, barking as they ran. Claire yelled after them, squinting against the harsh light. She stopped chasing them when she could no longer see. The light was too bright and her eyes were watering. She could no longer hear the dogs barking. Claire stood in the yard, confused. Her confusion turned to fear as she realized that she had left her sleeping daughter alone in the house, with no guard dogs and no idea what was causing the bright light. Claire ran towards her daughter's room, the light was there too, making the room even brighter than her backyard, brighter than the sunniest of days. "Erin!" She pulled the blankets off the bed, thinking she would find her daughter hiding underneath. Erin was not in bed, and her Princess Bear was gone.

Claire spun around the room, she looked in the closet, her favorite dress was gone, and her favorite backpack. Claire ran to her bedroom, "Erin!" she searched the bed and the closet. She still could not find her daughter. The panic made her heart beat hard and fast, the feeling rose in her throat, making it hard for her to swallow or breath between shouts. The light penetrated the entire house now, making it impossible for Claire to see in front of her, she had to shield her eyes with her hands and look down at the floor. *Sunglasses!* The thought energized her. She ran to the kitchen counter and put the glasses on, the panic subsiding for just a moment. She yelled her daughter's name and ran through the house one more time, searching frantically. Erin was nowhere to be found.

Along with the intense light, tears were obscuring Claire's vision now. She found her cellphone but could not make out the numbers on its flat touchscreen. Claire could see the doormat in front of her front door, she reached for the handle and pulled the door open, she

hadn't looked in the front yard yet. She stepped onto the front patio and closed the door. The intense light was gone as soon as she closed the front door. The light came through the small cracks around the door, but she was no longer surrounded by it. Claire took a step back from the door and blinked her eyes a few times. The sunglasses had provided a few seconds of protection and helped her eyes adjust as she looked around. "Erin!" The front patio ended and a hallway began. The front yard with its cacti and palm trees was gone. Claire stood on the brick patio and walked into the smooth hallway. As Claire walked she realized that she was in a tunnel, the smooth walls and floors did not give away a single corner or edge. There were no visible doors or breaks, and although she felt as if she was walking in a tube, the floor was flat and she had no issue keeping her balance.

"Erin? Are you in here? I know the light was scary, but you need to come out." Claire wasn't sure where her daughter could possibly be hiding. The hallway seemed to keep going, with no offshoots or doors.

"Erin!" Claire's voice echoed. She began to cry again, the tears coming hot and fast, she sat down on the floor.

"Please, I don't know what this is, I just want my baby..."

Her begging was overtaken by sobs. Claire sat on the floor, her head in her hands, her mind breaking. She let herself sob for less than a minute before she stood back up, wiping the tears from her eyes. In front of her was no longer an endless hallway. She was in a room, it was hard for her to discern where the floor, walls and ceiling began and ended. Claire was walking normally although her senses told her she might fall at any time. A short high-pitched laugh escaped her throat, still tight with panic. She grabbed her head, as if the laugh had actually caused something in her skull to break.

"Mommy? Are you OK?" Erin stood in front of her where there was nothing, her daughter was now there, naked, with her bear and her backpack at her feet.

"Sweetie, are you OK?" Claire took a step toward her daughter, but was frozen before she could embrace Erin.

"You can't Mommy. I'm sorry. I just took a shower and you can't touch me. I didn't want to scare you, I'm sorry."

Claire felt the tears streaming down her face, when she tried to talk she felt as if she was choking on a dry cotton ball. "It's OK, I am not just part of you Mommy, I'm part of Daddy too, and he came to get me. I'm getting too old to stay here for much longer." Claire tried to speak again, but still could not form words. *What do you mean?* Erin smiled, and Claire knew she had read her thoughts. "This isn't a birthmark Mommy. It's a seam." Erin put her two little hands on either side of the dark line that ran from her belly button, under her belly, and right above her groin. She pulled a bit and the dark line became wider, then separated. Claire tried to scream, she tried to pull away from whatever was holding her, but she couldn't move. Her heart beat harder and faster, it hurt now and she was sure it would burst. Erin's little fingers disappeared inside a gaping red hole that had now appeared as she continued to pull her skin apart at her birthmark. The little girl's face never changed from a smile as she continued to pull and the flesh separated

in a perfect line all the way up to her neck. Claire closed her eyes for a second, convinced if she opened them again it would all be a terrible dream. She opened her eyes again and was still frozen. Her heart beat even harder as she saw the strange silvery and moist flesh appear under the soft brown flesh she had always assumed was her daughters. Erin kept on pulling and then pulled each arm out, as if getting out of a pair of footie pajamas. Claire kept looking now. She did not close her eyes and did not try to move. She was willing her heart to slow down. The pain in her chest was unbearable, and she would not succumb to a heart attack before she saw her daughter for what she was now.

Erin was out of her person suit now, except for the mask. She pulled the face that her mother had loved for six years off like a Halloween mask. Her head was a similar shape, but hairless, her ears barely visible. Her eyes were the same bright blue. Claire looked at her daughter one last time. The little girl she had brought into the world and cared for was not a little girl at all, but something else entirely. *I knew she was too good for this world.* Claire smiled through the unbearable pain as her heart gave forth one last spasm.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: C.A. Viruet is a wife, mother and veteran who writes as much as she can, but horror is her favorite genre to write. She has been previously published in the Dark Chapter Press anthology *Flashes of Darkness* and will also have a story in the upcoming anthology for Women in Horror Month, *8 Deadly Kisses*. The proceeds of the anthology will be donated to Camfed.

Bats in the Attic and Rats in the Walls | *Donna Cuttress*

So, here I am, gripping singlehanded, a rattling, slimy gutter, trying to climb cracked roof tiles without falling to my death. In my other hand is the baseball bat, that Mrs. Smith threw at me as I began my ascent. She's dancing around the garden, genuflecting and crossing herself over and over, shaking her rosaries and screaming,

"Kill it! Kill the demon! Do it now dear!"

The demon is crouched at the roofs pointed apex, gazing malevolently down at the raging Mrs. Smith. It's milky, gelatinous skin looks slick, it's bones undulate underneath. It spits smoldering acid gobs at the old woman, spraying a warning like a skunk. It could easily hit her, and with her high pitched shrieking, I'm ashamed to admit, I wish it would.

"Do it now! Kill it!"

I throw myself at the chimney stack, grabbing the pot which rattles ominously and hug it. The demon turns slowly to look at me, unfazed, even amused. It stands slowly on its hind legs stretching to its full height of about seven feet. It walks along the apex, taking each step carefully, deliberately, its eyes burning with the molten hate of all those I have despised in my short life; a sadistic teacher, a school kid bully, the boss who fired me wrongly! Many enemies spy me through those fired up eyes. It gets closer and my whole body is shaking, the chimney

stack quakes with me. I begin to sob, the bat's too heavy to swing single handed but I'm not letting go of the chimney. Then it starts to rain, heavy and thick. The demon tips it's head back, extending its neck vertebrae painfully. It opens its long snout, bares its teeth and laughs *loud!* My feet begin to slip. I need to get off this roof, I need to run, save my life, but then I realize... I'm fucked.

Mrs. Smith, draped with too many gold chains, and smothered with brooches and bracelets, quickly offered me the cheap room. She ushered me into the bed and breakfast. Desperation and the low rates equaled a reason to remain, even though my instinct told me I should have got back in my car. The room was a mass of maroon frills, chintz and dried flower displays, but it was clean, so I nodded my head and handed over the cash for a month's accommodation. She smiled and informed me of her many resident guests. People just did not leave.

That first night I woke violently after having a sweaty nightmare. Someone was leaning over me, stealing the air from my lungs while pinching my nostrils shut. I sat up gasping for breath, blinded by dizziness. As I lay back, recovering, thanking all the gods it was just a dream, I heard a door click in the darkness like someone was stealthily closing it. Terrified, I pulled the itchy sheets and blankets over my head and hoped whoever it was, would go away like a good coward.

Mrs. Smith wished me a "Good morning dear" as I was leaving for work the following day. I thought to ask about the other guests, namely the night prowler, but noticed she carried a breakfast tray as she doddered up the stairs. On it was a covered plate that smelt so rank, I wondered *what* she was serving rather than to whom and left quickly, glad that I hadn't ordered breakfast. It was like rotted boiled meat.

That night I placed a chair against my door and ran to my bed. The old lady liked the radiators turned on full blast in the place and with the copious bedding I was soon cocooned and snoring. What woke me was the cold. The blankets had been folded back, not kicked off, and my skin was gooseflesh against the fresh night air. Someone wanted me awake. I sat up and heard the familiar clanking sound from the cooling radiator as unbled air bubbled. I got out of bed, and stumbled to the door. The chair was still wedged there. I jiggled the doorknob. Still locked like I had left it, with the key in. It was then, I heard it. Breathing. Heavy and encompassing. I couldn't hide under the covers this time. I went to turn the light on, but heard only the hollow sound of the switch clicking on and off. I checked the bedside lamp, its bulb had been removed. I thought about jumping from the window, but being on the third floor I didn't fancy trying to escape with shattered ankles. It was locked anyway.

The lights were out and I was in darkness with a heavy breather in the room... or was it? I picked up a shoe, yes a stupid weapon but it had a sharp heel and was the only thing in my panic I could think of, from under the bed and followed the noise to the chimney breast. It felt like the bricks were heaving with every gasp. I touched it, feeling the vibrations against my fingertips. Cement dust trickled as I leaned against it, my ear cold against the plaster. There was something

else. Whispering. Hissed words spat between each wheezing gasp. A language I could not understand, old and ancient.

I had to look up the chimney.

I crouched, my sweating, shaking hand clenching the shoe ready to impale with the stiletto heel. I gently shoved aside the dried flower display that sat in the grate and tentatively looked up.

In those brief seconds I saw what I thought was a dog or a wolf. Its scarlet eyes, opened wide with hate appeared from the dark. It was vicious and animalistic, with its pointed teeth and thick black talon like claws. It swiped at me, snapping at the damper guard in the chimney breast and sending me flying backward. I thought I could hear a voice somewhere, high pitched yelling, like a tired mother to a naughty child. I cracked my skull on the fireplace, rolled forward and passed out.

I woke the next morning in bed, all tucked in, but with a headache. I tried to switch on the bedside lamp, its glaring light meant the bulb had been returned. I got out of bed and tried the light switch. The room lit up. The radiator was hot and the ugly dried flower arrangement was back in the grate. I checked the door. The chair was still there and the key was in the lock. Everything that had happened, had not, supposedly.

I dressed and went to find Mrs. Smith. I could hear singing coming from the kitchen. I knocked hard on the door and pushed it open before she answered. It reeked of burnt coffee and whatever the stinking delicacy was simmering in the large metal pan on the stove. The walls were covered from skirting board to picture rail with Holy pictures and crucifixes. Candles burned and palm crosses hung from the ceiling. It was a moratorium of holy relics. She dropped the lid on the pan and stopped singing, shocked at having a visitor in her church.

“Mrs. Smith? I need to speak to you please?”

I covered my nose quickly before the stench made me wretch. She smiled and ushered me toward the dining room where I noticed, there were no tables set out for breakfasting guests.

“Mrs. Smith”, she played with her many rings while I spoke, “I have to report the noises in my room last night. Coming from the chimney, in fact I’m sure someone was on the roof...”

“Bats!” she shouted, “We have a lot of them around here dear.”

We looked at each other, she was eager to get back into the kitchen.

“I had no light either, the main switch would not work and neither would my bedside lamp.”

“Rats!” she shouted again, “We have them as well. Why do you think the rooms are so cheap dear?”

She backed away.

“Mother used to say, “We have ‘Bats in the attic and rats in the walls!’” A quaint saying, but unfortunately it’s true. I’ll do my best to sort it. Will you be having breakfast today dear? Tomorrow?”

I shook my head. She smiled and as she disappeared back into the kitchen, I was sure I heard her say,

“Amen.”

So, how did I end up on the roof, face to face with a terrifying demon?

I returned that evening and surveyed the B&B, from the front gate. There were no lights on upstairs. Where were the other guests? Mrs. Smith was dawdling about from room to room, switching on lamps and plumping cushions, while glancing at the grandmother clock on the wall, with its pendulum swinging beneath it like a hangman's noose. I let myself in quietly, pocketing a dusty pile of letters from the small table by the door and let it close behind me. She appeared from the parlor, gaunt and red eyed,

"Oh, hello dear," her failed nonchalance put me on my guard, "I'm so glad I caught you. I arranged to have someone look into those noises. They'll be here tomorrow, so if you can persevere for tonight, it should all be over by morning."

She slapped a hand over her mouth, realizing she had divulged more than she should, grabbed her rosaries and rattled off into the kitchen. I ran up to my room and locked the door with the key and chair, after making sure the lights were on first. I dragged the letters from my jacket pocket. Various names and addresses, bills and birthday cards for those who had stayed and never moved on, just like their correspondence. I packed my small bag, placed it by the door and waited for my chance to run.

I woke up laying on the bed, and tried to sit up slowly. Stupidly, I had fallen asleep waiting. The room was cold and in darkness. That noise began again. The breathing. That rattling phlegm soaked gasping coming from the chimney breast. The whole wall moved, bricks juddered with the reverberation of each wheeze. I made for the door, but whatever was above could sense what happened below as though the roof was made of glass. It followed me toward the door with small steps as though tip toeing on red hot coals. It stopped when I reached the door. I kicked the chair, unlocked it and grabbed my bag. Mrs. Smith was waiting, holding the baseball bat. She put a bejeweled finger across her lips indicating my silence and dragged me by the hand down to the kitchen.

"It's the only place it won't come near!"

I wasn't surprised. She thrust the bat at me.

"What is it ? A wolf?"

She laughed,

"No dear, it's a *demon*!"

I nearly dropped the bat.

"It lives in the walls and the attic. I used to be devoted to... another god. Down there, not up there," She pointed to hell then heaven.

"...and all them black candles and naked dancing certainly raised something! And now I... I have to feed it with human flesh to keep it content you see. But I'm tired, I want it gone. You have to help me! I'm too old. Kill it and all this is yours, everything. Just give me some peace."

She touched the jewelry about her neck, the sparkling rings on her fingers and the diamond brooches on her moth eaten cardigan. I realized she had acquired those spoils, from the previous guests who had ended up as the demon's main course. I couldn't run, the demon would

not let me get to the creaking gate without it pouncing, so I had to confront it. Climb up that wobbly ladder with wobbly legs and face it.

Its low laughter splintered in my chest, as it approached me. I thought, ‘*This is it, I’m going to end up in the pan!*’ The old woman was still screaming as I was feebly waving the bat. I let go of the chimney stack and tottered backward. The rain made the tiles slippery, and I fought hard to keep upright. The old woman laughed,

“OK, you’ve got her! What’s wrong with you? She’s right there! Kill her! Do it now!”

Mrs. Smith’s allegiances had quickly changed. I watched open mouthed as she bent over with laughter. I had climbed to my own death and the demon could see how inept I was at staying upright on the wet roof or, it seemed, alive.

“*Do it now!*” she screamed.

Her voice was piercing and annoying. I couldn’t stop myself,

“*Will you shut up!*”

The demon, began to laugh again, genuine this time, almost punching the air. It crouched on its hackles, its face now level with my own, its fetid breath on my cheek. I could see the rain drip along its overhanging brow. Those eyes narrowed as it spoke,

“Kill me? Kill me now *please*.”

“What?”

I nearly dropped the bat again.

“I cannot stand being here anymore. Just one swipe with that bat will send me back to where I came from. Twenty years of hearing that voice, eating that overcooked slop! Sneaking about the attic and walls of that floral hell house! *Kill me please... Swing the bat lady!*”

Carefully, I stepped backward. Mrs. Smith was going wild, hopping about the muddy garden and swiping imaginary claws.

“Are you sure? You want to go back to hell?”

He nodded slowly and crouched down further. I was the executioner, masked and waiting. I swung that bat hard and felt the contact explode up my arms as I fought to save my balance. Mrs. Smith stopped screaming. The demon tipped backward, acid and rainwater arcing from its snout and slipped slowly off the roof, plunged silently and flopped to the ground like a great wet slab of meat.

“What... what have you done?”

She fell to her knees, her fingers caught up in the chains around her neck, her rosary beads scattered about the grass. I grabbed the chimney stack with my free arm and shouted as the rain began to ease,

“Mrs. Smith, it should be a lot quieter now! No more rats or bats!”

She stood up, her jaw slack with shock, yellow grey hair dripping across her face and took a few steps backwards almost falling into the straggly grass of the garden,

“Now... what’s for breakfast *dear?*”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Donna Cuttress is a short story writer from Liverpool, U.K. She has had previous work published by Crooked Cat, Firbolg Publishing, Solarwyrms 'Latchkey Tales' and Flame Tree Publishings 'Chilling Ghost stories'. Other works for Sirens Call have been published in *Voices from the Gloom: Volume 1* and previous Women in Horror Month issues of *The Sirens Call*.

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Bent Metal



NINA D'ARCANGELA

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Mr. Boogens | *H.R. Boldwood*

I was eight years old in October, 1965, and already knew the important things in life. I knew that a properly placed spitball could do some damage, that an aggie beats a cat's eye every time, and that the good guys always beat the bad guys because good triumphs over evil. More importantly, I knew that adults wouldn't recognize real evil if it bit them on the ass.

Only a child's mind, a mind as inviting as a blank canvas, could attract the über demons who prey on our deepest fears. When I awoke in the dark of night to the taunting of claws that scratched my closet door, felt hot moist breathing on my neck, or smelled the fetid odor of decay hanging in the air, I knew that evil occupied my closet. I named my resident demon, Mr. Boogens. And on that October night in 1965, Mr. Boogens told me exactly what he wanted.

"I want *you*, Billy Boy," his words wrapped around me like a moldy shroud. "It's time to dance with the devil, you mangy whelp! Pull that blanket down and look me in the eye. Tonight's the night we've both been waiting for, 'cause tonight's the night that I'm going to get you, boy!"

I clung to my sweat-soaked blanket, the force field that protected me, eyes welded shut, wondering just what horrors lay in store for those who were 'gotten'.

"Go away," I whispered, not recognizing the pleading voice I heard as mine.

"No can do, Billy Boy. You believed in me. You made me real, now I get to make you dead. That's how it works. Stop stalling, runt. You can't escape. Open your eyes and watch what happens to little boys who believe!"

The bottom of my blanket pulled loose and a single claw traced its way up my calf. I yelped and snatched my leg back beneath the blanket, drawing an ugly cackle from Mr. Boogens.

"Think you're afraid now, Billy? Oh, I can do better, much better. Perhaps I should chew the meat from that calf, Would that about do it?" My bladder let loose and his frenzy grew. "Now we're getting somewhere! You keep on believing, boy. You just keep believing."

Sucking air into lungs that had forgotten to function on their own, I threw back the blanket, leapt from the bed and stood toe to toe with Mr. Boogens. Too terrified to meet his gaze, my eyes dropped to his feet – two humongous hairy stumps with long, gnarly toes that sported six-inch curved talons razor-sharp for shredding little boys. My eyes battled upward toward his filthy swollen belly. It was covered with matted fur that appeared to move. But that was merely an illusion created by thousands of squirming maggots that jostled for morsels of his rotting flesh. Tentacle like arms with no visible joints writhed at the sides of his barrel-shaped torso. Then, I dared look at his face. At first glance he appeared to have no eyes, but when he turned sideways one almond shaped eye, like a cat's eye, stared at me through a pus covered cataract growing on the side of his head.

"Is this scary enough for you, Billy Boy? Oh, I can do better, much better!"

I watched as his cat's eye grew into a cavernous void, dark and bottomless, quickly swallowing his entire head the way a black hole swallows stars.

"Come inside, Billy Boy. Come join the other little boys who believe."

Staring into that void I was seduced by the absolute purity of an evil that could eat little boys. Their giggles called to me... so inviting, so beguiling, even mesmerizing; but survival instinct prevailed. Groping the top of my nightstand, I found my weapons of choice – an eight inch straw and an empty gum wrapper. There was barely enough saliva in my mouth to wet the wrapper, but I managed to load it and launch it through my straw deep into the void with the accuracy of an air-to-surface missile. “You aren’t real!” I screamed.

Boogens roared as the monstrous void disintegrated and his sickly cat’s eye returned. “You pathetic pup, you *dare* defy me? I’ll flay you where you stand, you insolent child! You *will* believe!”

He swiped at me with his talons, barely missing, but his misstep gave me hope. He swiped again, clawing at my neck, and when he did I scrambled to snatch the only weapon I had left, my prized aggies. I hurled them into his oozing eye, and stoked by the power of my new found courage, shouted, “Aggies beat cat’s eyes every time!”

His features blurred and I realized that he was melting before my very eyes. His maggot-infested fur sloughed downward like rotting sheep’s wool, and the arrogance in his voice began to fade.

“Do you really think you can beat me, boy, with your pathetic spitballs and marbles?” His breathing labored; his words, though nearly inaudible, were filled with spite, “You–believed–in–me.”

I watched Mr. Boogens die that night in 1965; watched while his bones splintered into ash and his organs putrefied into puddles on my bedroom floor, leaving behind only a well-worn spitball and my beloved aggies. Bending to pick them up, I was overcome with a primitive pride. Victory tasted sweet.

I straddled his remains and delivered a eulogy that was simple yet profound.

“The good guys always beat the bad guys, Mr. Boogens. Even eight-year-olds know that.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: In another incarnation, H.R. Boldwood is a prize winning author and Pushcart Prize nominee. Boldwood’s characters are often disreputable and not to be trusted. No responsibility is taken by this author for the dastardly and sometimes criminal acts committed by this group of miscreants. ‘Mr. Boogens’ previously appeared in the short story collection, “Dead Reckoning” published by Grey Wolfe Publishing in 2015.

Facebook: [Mary Ann Back](#)

Cracked | *Carmilla Voiez*

Rachel studied Sam’s body, silhouetted against the reddening sun as he worked the bolts. Beyond him lay the twisting driveway. His excitement infected her.

“I’ve done it!” Sam pushed the gate open.

Rachel forced a smile and stepped through the narrow gap, hunched under her rucksack. White knuckles clutched her laptop case.

“I’ll close it back up.” He replaced the bolts and shook the wire fence as if to reassure them of their protection from the outside world.

The setting sun highlighted every aspect of him: jeans pulled tight around his perfect buttocks and the narrow waist that curved fluidly between denim and the hem of his t-shirt.

“This should be fun.” She blushed and swept her eyes across pot-marked concrete.

Sam stepped towards her. His fingers closed around Rachel’s and he lifted the case from her. Shoulder to shoulder they ambled along the overgrown drive of Ladyswell Asylum.

It had seemed like a great idea: their own ghost-hunter show broadcast live on Twitter, one hundred and forty characters of terror at a time. Excitement and fear battled inside Rachel from the moment she agreed to join Sam. She had heard the ghost stories, but felt it was worth the risk to spend a whole night with the man of her dreams.

Seven o’clock - the shadows lengthened. They agreed to check out each abandoned building in turn, to discover the best place to make camp.

The first was a two storey villa. Outside it looked like a disused school. The reinforced windows were subtly done. The hinges of the door had dropped and it stood ajar, wedged into muddy soil. They left their belongings outside to shoulder their way in. Inside, the gloom made her shudder. Her eyes fought to see a few meters ahead. Fallen rubble covered the floor. Layers of institutional-green paint peeled away from flesh-pink plaster walls. Exploding drips of water echoed through the hall. The smell of fungi overwhelmed them.

Rachel lunged outside, gasping for fresh air. Moments later Sam followed, shaking his head. “Too damp.”

The front door of the adjacent single-story building was closed. The wood creaked but did not budge when Sam pushed against it with his shoulder. Rachel walked around the outside and found a side door moving in the wind.

The mesh and glass panels of the door had been smashed and torn. Spikes of broken wire stabbed at the air. Stepping inside, they crunched over broken glass and fist sized chunks of concrete. The rooms were empty, but there was no shelter or clear floor on which to rest.

Building after building was broken and unusable. The sun dipped lower. They began to worry, wishing they had spent time investigating before the big night.

They reached the far corner of the ‘village’ and an imposing two-storey building. A surgical trolley, used by vandals as a battering ram, blocked the entrance. Rachel pulled it towards her to walk inside. Sam followed close behind. The internal doors whispered their welcome as she pushed them open then absolute silence. A long corridor sloped gently downwards to the left.

“This way?”

Rachel nodded.

Sam shrugged. He pulled a face, breaking the tension and making Rachel wheeze with laughter. They stood motionless for seconds that felt like hours, peering into the gloom.

Walking along the corridor, they realized the floor was rubble-free. On the left a glass-paned door to a small office stood open. A desk and swivel chair waited patiently, dusty but undamaged. A green filing-cabinet gaped. Files were crammed inside its drawers, case histories, lives abandoned.

“Looks good.” Sam leaned over Rachel’s shoulder. His cheek almost touched hers and his voice caressed her aching ear. She swallowed hard, trying to control her shaking body.

Rachel stepped forward, unpacked her laptop and switched it on. They left the computer to load up, using the time to explore. The room opposite was once a bathroom. The toilet stalls had no doors and a cast iron bath crouched at the center. A cracked mirror leaned between floor and shadowy wall, reflecting her feet. A few sinks hung obstinately from filthy tiles. Sam tested for water, but found none.

Wind whistled around the upstairs rooms. A door or window slammed above them, making Rachel jump. Sam laughed and affectionately patted her shoulder. She grinned, self-mockingly. His pupils were huge and his smile gentle. Looking away to break the spell, she hurried past him, out of the room and back to her computer.

The office closed around her, shutting out the noises of the wind. Rachel zipped open her rucksack and removed a torch from it, playing with its weight in her hand.

She opened the internet browser and accessed Twitter. Bite-sized chunks of chatter opened out on the screen. She touched the keys lightly, not wishing to disturb the silence. Sam’s footsteps clicked behind her and she smiled.

Staying at abandoned asylum. Still daylight. Quiet so far. No sign of ghosts yet.

Sunlight no longer penetrated the high window, and the flickering glow of Rachel’s laptop became their only source of light. Feeling cold, Rachel pulled a sweater and a bar of chocolate from her rucksack. She offered half to Sam. He placed it in his mouth, smiling contentedly as the sweetness melted over his tongue.

“Come here,” he said, opening his arms.

Cheek resting against his chest, wrapped in his arms, Rachel felt that she too might melt. When he dropped his arms and took a step back, the warmth drained from her skin. She coughed and sat down in front of the laptop, checking for replies to her tweet. Nothing.

“I’m going to wander around.”

“Do you want company?” Sam asked.

Perhaps too brusquely, she told him to keep track of replies.

She grabbed her torch and turned left, walking along the dimly lit corridor. She tiptoed, through an open doorway, into a large room. The windows in front of her faced west, and the room was filled with amber light, divided into tiger stripes by the steel bars bolted to the glass. To her left, was a wall and a dark archway. A glazed observation room jutted out from the wall to her right.

No furniture remained. She felt the hushed tension of the space and imagined its occupants, sitting about or pacing the room, unaware of each other. She heard a noise coming from the dark room beyond the archway. *An animal?* Curiosity pushed her to look, hoping to add spice to her

next tweet. Fear held her back. Anything could have been lurking in the shadows. Embarrassed by the temptation to call Sam, she took one step closer and heard rustling. She paused, straining her hearing, trying to visualize the size, weight and position of the thing. It sounded small. At least its movements seemed small. Rachel edged closer, hovering between action and inaction. As the evening sun vanished behind trees she reached the center of the room. The distance between her and the archway seemed to expand and contract. The sound shifted: a scratching sound, closer than before, to her right, beside or beyond the windows. She strode towards the opening.

Rachel flashed a torch-beam around the room. White light swept across a wheelchair, an overturned laundry trolley and, in the corner, a blackened teddy bear. She picked up the toy. Its fur felt damp and sticky. Recoiling, she released it and it thudded heavily on the floor. Rubbing her hands against the rough denim of her jeans, she tried to clean them, but could not shift the dark blue-green stain at the center of her palm. Scratching her discolored skin, she hurried back to her office sanctuary and Sam.

He stood up when he saw her. Instead of telling him what happened, she rushed to the laptop, eager to share the moment with the world. Typing furiously, careless of the noise, she wrote: *Scared by a bear. May need a tetanus. Heard noises. Getting dark now.*

“A bear?” Sam asked, reading over her shoulder.

“A teddy bear,” she replied. “But a very scary teddy.”

He laughed and touched her hair. “Show me.”

It took all her willpower to resist kissing his fingers. When they returned to the office, after paying a visit to the bear, Rachel broke another bar of chocolate into two generous pieces, thinking ruefully about the absence of alcohol in her rucksack.

“I wish I brought some beer.”

Sam smiled and retrieved two cans from his bag. He opened Rachel’s before passing it to her.

She took a mouthful of slightly warm liquid and sat down. “Thank you.”

Swallowing chocolate and gulping beer, she wondered where they should sleep. The thought of sitting shoulder to shoulder with Sam and dozing with their backs against the filing cabinet was tempting.

Rachel’s pelvis grew heavy. She needed the toilet. The sudden realization pushed her out of the office. The wind howled through the corridor. An open window slammed. She sprinted to the bathroom.

Finding the cleanest stall, she squatted over the porcelain bowl, careful not to touch it. Torchlight bounced around the room as she adjusted her position. When it hit the looking glass its beam illuminated the entire room. She placed the torch on the floor, pointing towards the mirror. The silvered glass was pitted with black acne and spider-web scratches. The reflected room looked misty and unreal, the bathtub disjointed, like an incomplete jigsaw.

Finished, she stood and pulled up her jeans. A movement in the mirror caught her eye. The reflected bathtub appeared clearer. Snakes of steam rose from its curved rim. Within the mist, a

dark dome of hair stood proud above the edge of the tub. Rachel stared at the real bath in panic. It was empty.

Wind groaned around the edges of the room. The sound was like the climactic scene in a zombie movie, where the heroine becomes overcome by a crush of the undead. She pointed the light towards the door and ran towards it, screaming.

Plop - the sound of a single drop of water falling. Her heart raced. *Where's Sam?* Instead of his hurried footsteps all she could hear was the sucking sound of water releasing a body from its embrace. A wet foot hit the floor with a slap, then another. Slowly, the sounds moved towards her. She sensed the outstretched hands of a naked woman and dead, milky eyes staring ahead. Staring at Rachel while thin, pale arms and fingers reached for her.

Screaming again, she ran towards the office, slamming the door behind her and cracking its frosted-glass panel.

"What's wrong?" Sam asked. His eyelids strained against gravity. He tried to push his slouched, sleep-filled body up to meet her.

Shaking her head, Rachel sat in the swivel chair. Her palms clamped over her ears, she rocked herself slowly at first, then more and more ferociously. She dared not look towards the door or even turn to face Sam, acutely aware that the latter would place the door in her periphery vision.

"I saw something," Rachel whispered.

"What did you see?" Sam asked.

She shrugged.

"I'll go and check," Sam said.

The door groaned open. The handle clicked as he closed it behind him. Sam's footsteps moved away from her. She turned to face the door, to call him back, confess her terror. Through the cracked panel she saw the squashed features of a woman's face pressed against the glass.

Help me, she typed. Rachel pressed the send button and prayed. The door-handle clicked sharply as something pushed it downwards. Cold, damp air rushed towards her.

"Help," Rachel whispered as narrowed eyes peered at her. A green surgical mask filled with air then compressed against the curved lips of a cruel mouth. The figure stepped away from the door and towards Rachel. She shook her head to deny its presence then closed her eyes as a knot of fingers clasped her throat and squeezed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Carmilla Voiez's award winning trilogy 'Starblood' is perhaps the first true female horror story ever written, dealing with both sexual violence and the struggle of a woman trying to make sense of a senseless world. Living in North East Scotland, she finds inspiration in the desolate places which surround her. She lives with her partner, two children and cat in her home by the sea.

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Lurking Status | *Jessica Walsh*

That handprint on your bathroom mirror was the hardest thing I've ever done.

Focus. Concentrate. Press down and pull away.

The misty remnants of my fingers faded off the mirror immediately, as you like your showers and steam so hot. The palm, however, stood strong and left an impression that would be impossible to miss. When the water stopped, I watched you step out and wipe your face with your towel. The moment you noticed it I felt a shiver slide down my back. Perfect.

You tilt your head and look at the palm print, wondering how it materialized there. I can see the expressions slide across your face, the confusion and a slight flicker of worry. Years ago, you could blame a pesky little brother, or one of the girls in your dormitory. Now, there's no one to point the finger at, as you live alone here. It scares you and leaves a delightful tingle across my skin. I'm enjoying the feeling, but it ends quickly as logic takes over. You shake your head and silently berate yourself for having an overactive imagination. You lift the towel and quickly wipe away all of the remaining mist on the mirror. You smile at your blurred reflection and forget about what had been there.

It all seems like a wasted effort, but I'm a patient creature. So very patient.

I'm standing in the corner of your bathroom, just beside the door, watching you tie your hair back, as you resume your morning routine. I watch as you pretend nothing happened, focusing on spreading your make-up across the edge of the sink and deciding what to wear.

Green eyeshadow. You always wear green on Tuesdays.

You posted about me online today, didn't you? I didn't see you do it, but I could feel the small tickle of attention whisper across my skin in your empty and silent house.

Were you sitting at your computer, typing up some report when your mind wandered back to the palm print on your mirror? Did you think about me right as you stepped into the bathroom at work to check your make-up? I bet there was a full length mirror in the room that triggered it.

Maybe you even walked over and breathed on the glass, pressing your palm against the cool surface to see if it matched your memory. Did the lines across your palm resemble mine? Was it the same size? Did that momentarily put your mind at ease? Or did you panic even more?

The possibilities make me grin. I know how you tend to dwell on things, letting something so small nag at the back of your mind as it grows. Didn't you know? That's why you're so perfect.

I can feel the tingle of people talking, the soft shiver of those reading over your little post and hashtag. It's probably just a single line, but I don't need much. I fit in perfectly between the celebrity who took an unflattering picture and the police officer who was shot on the way home from work. The little status about me will quickly disappear between the game updates and cute animal pictures.

Least that's what you keep telling yourself, I'm sure.

I'm still patient. Oh so very patient. While you're at work, I'll sit here in your kitchen, your unopened bills spread unceremoniously in front of me where you left them. It's just a little tickle, but it's growing. Stronger with each read.

By the time you're home, the couch cushion under me has depressed, showing an indentation from my hours of occupation as I watched your front door. I heard the key in the lock and the click of your heels as you turned off the alarm and dropped your purse on the table.

You're walking through the kitchen, thumbing through the emails on your phone while you chew on a stale piece of gum left over from the drive home. It's a familiar sight I'm used to seeing every day when you come home from work. You pay so much attention to that phone, you don't even glance around your living room to make sure nothing has changed. You just assume there's no one here, no one sitting on the couch not two feet away, watching your every move. You don't even know I'm here.

I can hear you mutter something about dinner plans as you walk past me toward the bedroom. I would get up to follow you, but I don't have to. Instead you're stopped in the doorway to the hall, forgetting any plans or intentions of on changing clothes, just staring at the little glowing screen.

Did you reach your post? I can feel more shivers as you thumb through the comments, slowly reading them over one by one.

Did you wipe the mist away with your hand the night before?

Are you sure you weren't dreaming?

That's creepy!

Are you sure there's not someone in your home?

You're sure you're alone, right?

Oh man, I heard about this happening to another girl.

Not too many comments, but a decent amount. After all, you're pretty popular online - or so you think. I've heard you comment to yourself about more followers when your phone vibrates; oh how those emails make you smile. You've even mentioned how often people share your statuses and pictures, passing them on to their friends. They all seem to like your witty one liners.

Where do you think I got the idea, after all? Did you really think you've been talking to yourself?

You're trying to come up with one of those one liners now aren't you? If you could write just the right thing, they'll all chime in and agree that you're just imagining things. But nothing is coming - I see you open the text box but there's nothing you can type to make that feeling go away. Everyone is scared for you, and I couldn't be happier. The small tickles feel like caresses to me now; long, sweet touches down my arm and body. I spread out on the couch as silent, unseen hands slide over me. They urge me to sink further back into the cushions and continue waiting. It's not time yet. I'm still patiently waiting.

You're brushing it off again, always so quick to hide behind logic and reason. It's safer there, safer to think that your house is empty, just like the day you bought it. It's safer to think that posting about it was foolish. You even try to convince yourself that you never saw it. You were just sleepy and imagined it all.

I'm sure you're even considering deleting the post as you set down your phone and pull the tie out of your hair. Or maybe you can make a second post. *Ha ha guys, I was just kidding.* Trolling. That's what it's called, right? But instead you put down your phone and let the comments and wondering grow. After all you have dinner plans. No time to worry about a silly post.

You're sure no one is watching as you pull off your shirt and throw it on the kitchen chair, heading across the hall to your bedroom. But I can still see you as you step back out, adjust your bra, and slip on a tighter shirt. Polka dots suit you, my dear.

I wonder, if you turned around right now, would you see the small indent in the couch cushion where I spent the afternoon? Would that make you pause and worry more? Would you run through the house and check all the closets and other rooms? Would it make you paranoid again, causing you to cancel your plans and stay here, trying to find me?

But no, the time isn't right. I can't risk you calling a friend to stay the night. Patience is better. I need you to wonder and worry. Enjoy your black dress and polka dots, we'll have our time soon.

Are you telling your friend about me? You left for dinner with a friend, something you do every Tuesday. It's part of why you wear the green eye shadow isn't it? He likes that color on you, doesn't he?

You're discussing the palm print while you're picking at that salad, aren't you? The kind with the thick leaves that you always try to eat, even if you hate the taste. You're telling him about the creepy experience from the morning and how it's completely illogical to think someone was in your house.

After all, I can't be someone, can I? I don't set off the alarm, I don't make the floor creak and I don't flush the toilet or run the water. I don't have to open windows or doors. Everything has to open something to get in. Right? That's what you tell yourself and your friend. That's how you know you're safe.

Unless, of course, I've been here all along.

I know you better than him. I'm here watching you every day and every night, memorizing your every move. I know every inch of you, so much more intimately than a lover, a best friend, or the man you're trying to court who likes green. He'll never know you as well as I do.

He doesn't know how you like to walk around your house in just a pair of panties. How you love to sit on the couch with a mug of hot chocolate and a thick book before bed. How you often doze off there, nearly naked, right in front of me every night as I watch from the floor, not more than a couple feet away.

The caresses are massages now. Thick, pleasurable hands pressing against my back and shoulders. I would moan if I had a voice, but there will be time for that later.

Does he believe you? Is he worried for you? He's not passing off your words, because I can feel him thinking about the possibility. I can feel the waitress lingering by your table to hear more of the story, forming her own thoughts. I can hear the table across from you whispering about what they're overhearing. It's positively delicious how you're spreading me around. Who would have thought that a simple handprint could cause all of this?

Even beyond that there are still people reading your post. They're whispering in my ears now, talking about me. They mention it in the grocery store while waiting in line. They whisper about it in their carpools on their way home. Some are even pressing their hands against their own mirrors, seeing if they can create the same effect. It's all positively delectable, really.

I can't wait until you come home tonight. I have a surprise for you. It's almost time.

You make sure your front door is locked. You punch in the code to your alarm system, not moving until you hear the robotic words. Alarm on.

Your efforts excite me.

You should take the makeup off, but instead you actually close the bathroom door. Fantastic. You close it tight, even test the knob, before you step into your bedroom and remove your clothes and finally relax. Of course, with the alarm on, the front door locked and the bathroom closed, you're safe again. Nothing can reach you in your bedroom.

I'm standing by your closet as you pull off your clothes and toss them into the laundry basket. I'm watching as you slip into bed naked and pull the blanket up to your chin. I'm smirking as you shift in bed until the pillow feels just right. I'm grinning as you close your eyes and force yourself to relax, preparing to sleep.

But I know you're thinking about me again. I can feel the caresses slide over my entire body. You're lying in bed, your eyes closed as you silently repeat to yourself that there's nothing in your house. It's cute how you tell yourself that post meant nothing. You're definitely going to delete the comment in the morning and it will all go away. Your followers might be confused, but it's better than believing that I'm actually here.

You closed your bathroom door because you like closed doors. The excuses are flimsy at best, but the logic feels safe and comforting. Nothing could have possibly left the palm print on the mirror, because there's no one, nothing else here.

And that nothing is walking across your room now, standing at the side of your bed.

Because, you see, I'm not nothing anymore. I'm a thought, a possibility, a small fear in the back of you and your friends' minds. It's stronger now and still growing as you tremble under the covers.

I know you're not asleep when I pull at the blankets, slowly pulling them back off your body.

I'm something now. And you're sitting up in bed, looking around the room with the most delightfully scared expression, clutching the blanket I just moved and fumbling for your phone. I watch you flip it on and shine the light around the room, but you still can't see me.

I'm smiling, smirking at you. It won't be long now before you can see me, and then we'll have some fun, won't we? I've been watching you for so long and I have some ideas of what we can do together.

A couple more days and a couple more thoughts. You could make a few more posts, but that doesn't even matter now. You're shaking so much the light from your phone is bouncing across the dark bedroom. Post about me or don't, you're still scared. Your fear is all I need and if you pass it on to others now, well that's just icing on the cake.

Just a little more patience, don't worry, I have it all planned out. I'm almost strong enough to touch you. Then you'll be scared enough that you might even be able to see me, standing at the edge of your bed, smirking back at your irresistibly scared expression.

That's when we'll have the real fun.

For now, enjoy the covers lying at the edge of your bed. You won't be sleeping tonight and maybe, if you get scared enough, maybe you'll feel me breathing across the back of your neck.

After all, I'm sitting right next to you in bed. Isn't the chilly cold of my body comforting? I'm right here, brushing my lips across the edge of your ear and planning every little touch that you'll soon feel. You can't escape me now, you're too scared of me. I'm not strong enough for you to hear, but it doesn't matter. Soon I will be, it's only a matter of time. Soon you'll be curled up in your bed, shaking and too scared to scream as I whisper in your ear.

"Hello."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jessica Walsh is an author and seamstress from the Midwest. She knows there's this feeling, when you read a good book, that the world around you sinks into the shadows to reveal something else. Comfortable places become magical, docile pets become mythical creatures and the shadows hold their own whispers. However normal the story may start, there's always something lurking in the background.

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The Bogeyman | A. F. Stewart

Snick, snick, scritch, scratch.

A scurry scuttling echoed across the floor of the bedroom.

Hold your breath, close your eyes. It's not real. It's not real.

Skrreeek, screeeeek.

No, no, no. It's not real. It's not.

Thwack, thwack. The bed shook. Something tugged his covers.

I won't look. I won't look. It's not real if I don't look.

A gurgle, a growl, a bit of warm breath against the skin.

You can't make me look! I won't make it real.

“Open or closed, it's the same. I'm still real.”

Cold, clammy fingers slithered over his mouth, choking off his scream.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: 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 ventured into the light on occasion. She is fond of good books, action movies, sword collecting, geeky things, comic books, and oil painting as a hobby.

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The Grandfather Clock | Alice J. Black

Lydia inherited the house when her grandfather died. The only person she had left in the world passed on and she was left nothing but an empty shell. Sure it had his possessions and still held that old man smell but it wasn't like having him there. Slumping on the worn sofa and ignoring the small plume of dust that fanned into the air, Lydia sighed. Nothing had been easy and it looked like things were just going to continue in the same vein.

Inheriting the house felt like more of a curse although she knew it was a blessing in disguise. All she had to do was wade through the masses he had collected over the years, spruce things up and the place would be liveable. It would set her up for life but it seemed no matter how hard she tried, there was no motivation.

When the old grandfather clock struck in the hallway, one of the chimes a little out of tune, she jumped out of her skin, head snapping towards the door. Her heart finally settled back into a normal rhythm as the echoes of the clock died and she breathed a sigh of relief. She had never liked that thing. There wasn't even an explanation for it but she hated it with a passion. That would be the first thing to go. Tomorrow. Right now she needed rest.

Leaving the light on in the hall—a habit she'd had since being a kid—she made her way up the stairs, turning back on herself at the landing and coming to a stop on the first floor. The first room had been her grandad's. The second was spare and the third was nothing more than a junk room. As a kid she always had the spare room. It had become her own for the time that she lived there but it had been a few years since she stayed in it. But right now it was either there or stay in the master bedroom and that was something she couldn't face.

Moving down the hall, Lydia paused outside the spare room. She dreaded to think what it must look like now and as she pushed the door open she found she was right to wonder. The walls were the same sickly beige color and were complimented by a dull grey carpet. Her single bed and the rest of the furniture were still in place, covered in a thick layer of dust. It had been a long time since anyone was in there.

The room felt cold and empty. Lydia shuddered. Even as a kid the room gave her the creeps but now she was an adult it was time to man up and deal with it. After all, this house was her future. Hurrying to the closet in the hallway, she grabbed some new bedding which didn't smell much fresher and changed the sheets on the single bed. Then, stripping down to her underwear, she jumped in between the cool sheets and laid her head on the pillow. A deep musty smell wafted to her and she inhaled deeply. It reminded her of Granddad and his ways. A small smile curled on her lips. She was going to miss him a lot.

As she closed her eyes, she made out the shape of a music box on the dresser across the room. Sometimes it was good to be home, other times it woke up too many memories. As she drifted off to sleep the words of her grandad echoed back to her as if he was standing right by the bed. *Don't leave your room after bed time.*

It was in the dead of night that she woke. There was no noise, no change, only the ticking of the clock from downstairs. She supposed she woke because the bed was unfamiliar to her. Then her eyes flicked to the dresser. The slim figurine of her music box was dancing ever so slowly to a silent tune. Lydia shuddered and pushed herself up. She rubbed her eyes and leaned forward, staring hard. Her eyes hadn't deceived her, the little ballerina was twirling as she always did but there was no music.

Lydia's heart thudded in her chest. That thing hadn't worked since she was about ten. Her grandad said the motor broke. Her clammy hands clutched at the covers and pulled them up to her chest. Just then the music kicked in, a slow tune to which the ballerina waltzed. What was going on?

An echoing boom shot through the house and Lydia jumped, her head jerking towards the door. The grandfather clock downstairs was chiming. She glanced at her watch, squinting at the face in the dark. Three a.m. It chimed three times and when she expected silence to reign over the house, it didn't. The clock kept going striking the hour as if it was much later than it was. Strange.

Shoving the covers back, Lydia wandered to the door. Her hand shook as she reached for the handle but a niggling voice in the back of her mind stopped her. It was her grandfather and the warning he always gave her. His voice rang out in her head like he was there beside her.

Once you go to bed, do not leave your room.

As a child she'd adhered to the rule, forsaking sleep sometimes, clutching her bladder as tight as she could waiting for morning to come. Well now she was an adult. Now she had to look after herself and something was telling her to go downstairs. Plus, she knew if she didn't fix that goddamn clock she wouldn't get a wink of sleep. Taking a deep breath, she darted forward and gripped the door handle, yanking it open before she had time to think otherwise.

The echo of the clock striking the hour was louder to her ears. Everything the hallway was dark, still, just as it should be, but a chill raced up her spine. Something was wrong. Suddenly she wished she had heeded the advice of the old man even if he was a figment of her imagination. But there she was in the passageway, exposed and cold. Hurrying back to the room, she pulled on her jumper and proceeded to make her way to the staircase.

Taking a deep breath, she moved onto the first step. The clock continued to strike. Hand on the bannister, she descended slowly. Her breath came out in ragged gasps and she held them in her chest as long as she could. Reaching the landing she spun and found herself facing the ground floor. Another deep breath and she continued. Down, down, down she went until her feet fell upon the brown carpet that looked almost black in the night.

Turning to her right she came to face the grandfather clock. Its face was stark white and the pendulum continued to swing in the glass case beneath. She took a step forward. Her hand rose as she walked. The last strike of the chime finally fell silent as she reached the huge clock. Her hand gently glazed the wooden case. It was warm to the touch.

"I told you not to leave your room after bedtime, Lydia." A cold voice rasped in her ear. A chill shot down her spine as she whirled. The thing she stared at was not her grandfather. His face was long and ashen, jowls hanging extended and thick beneath his chin. His eyes were dead black.

Lydia took a step back, raising her hands. "What are you?" she whispered.

A grin peeled his lips apart, exposing rotten teeth. "Your worst nightmare."

He lunged. Lydia fell back into the grandfather clock, her body crushed against the tall frame and the apparition in front of her. Struggling for breath, she pushed at the creature but to no avail. Her hands went through him. She screamed. It wasn't happening. It couldn't be happening.

He pushed harder and harder and she felt the vertebrae of her back pressing into the glass. She grunted. Then she felt something give but it wasn't the glass.

As the spirit continued to push, the gaping maw inches from her face, she felt herself disappearing. The grandfather clock was sucking her in. Her whole body was being pulled into the case and as she moved through the glass, like she was made of thin air, she found her mind filled with cogs and springs and time. She was becoming a part of it.

Her hands clawed for purchase at the frame but the pull was too strong. Her whole torso was in there now, her legs pulled back sharply and the only the only part of her that was still a part of the real world was her head but something latched onto her hair, yanking it back sharply.

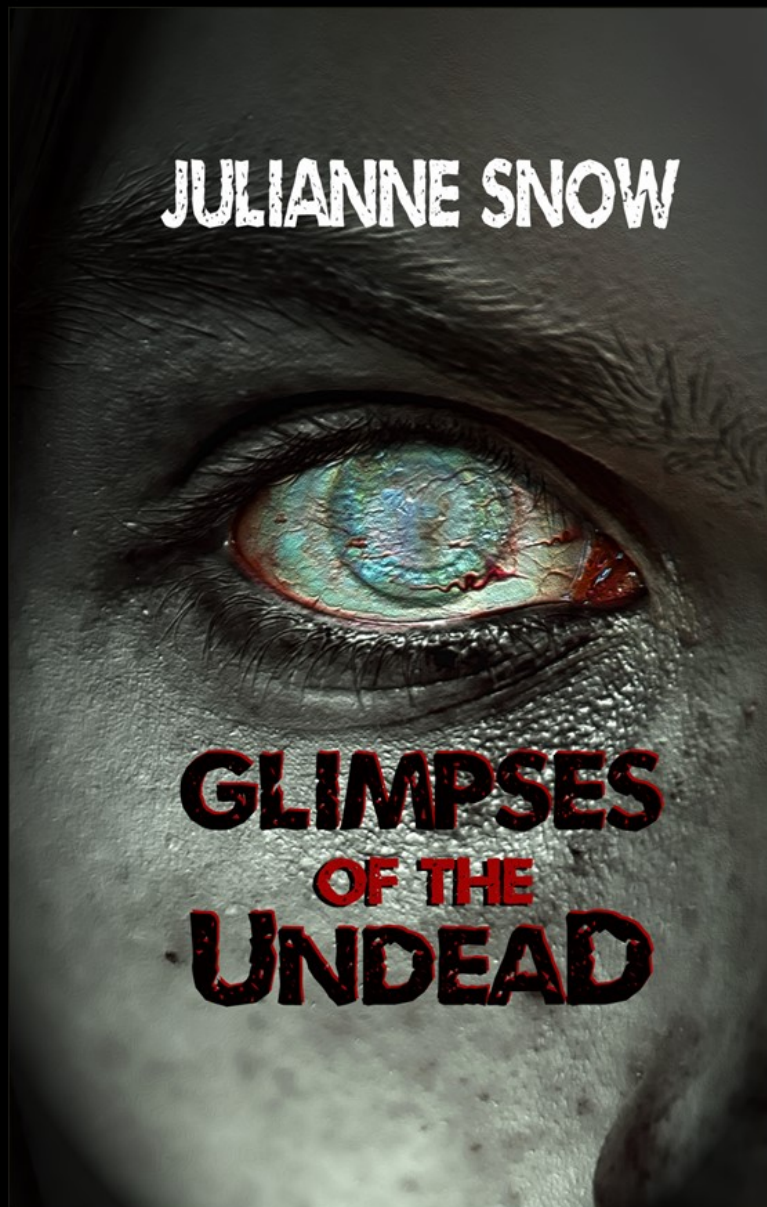
A scream filled the hallway and then everything was silent as the last will and testament of Lydia Hawthorn floated to the floor.

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. Dreams are currently a big source of inspiration and her debut novel, *The Doors*, is a young adult novel which originally came from a dream several years ago.

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

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Revenant | *Alison Armstrong*

I come scratching at your window,
wraith claws caked with mud,
hair sooty with revenant smoke
from our embered fire.
Where you walked,
where you ate
encoded in me
like a reflex gasp,
a ruminated cud
resurging from dissolution.
A strand of your hair,
a yo-yo thread
binds me to you
with need and dread.
A lagging distemper
disjoints,
anoints,
seethes,
unsheathes
as I tap the glass
with bleeding palms
stigmataed
by your
subcutaneous touch.

Fear | *Alison Armstrong*

Fear creeps up the stairs,
a drunken grandmother
hunched and bowed
with a moldering load.
Upon her back
she carries a burlap sack
of tuberous potatoes
incubated in stagnant cellars
where twisted, albino sprouts
spread and grow.

With gnarly knuckles,
she clutches the roughened rawhide rope;
with scuffy slipper footsteps,
she invokes her confreres and consorts
the stovepiped men
lurking long and silent
in childhood closets.

Secret fear
cloistered fear
conspiratorial, martyr fear
pads softly in my ear
as with lurching limp
and hollow creak
she staggers to the top step,
begging to be let in,
waiting to grab my hand
and lead me down the dusty stairs.

Horror Vacui | *Alison Armstrong*

They writhe across the page,
masquerade monsters
infesting medieval hells.
Amidst this illuminated jungle of letters
the decorative demons
sprawl and brawl,
swinging on vines
of g's and y's,
climbing up lianas of l's,
squatting smugly inside o's,
placebo imps
who leer,
rub crotches,
and shit
in an inferno
emblazoned in gold.
From the corners
of the dense, dark huddle

yawns the implacable white,
nothingness unconquerable,
dream-annihilating light.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dreams, memories, images from films, notes of music, dust on a fireplace mantel, stained and fading photographs, the endless, indifferent stars—all these have shaped and defined me as a writer. I am the author of two books, *Vigil and Other Writings* and *Revenance*, as well as articles, short writings, and poetry. Currently I am working on a sequel to *Revenance*.

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

Blog: <http://horrorvacui.us/>

Unleashed | *Tara Johnson*

Lying on splinters of my jagged soul,
It is empty in here.
Free flow immersed in black hollows,
Of new kiss connection lingers
Long after the body is no more.

Swaddled in the depths of swirling black,
Cotton candy wonder.
Pointy bits dig into untouched flesh,
With pieces of tears streaming,
The weak flesh is grounded, down, down.

No escape for the weakened bone,
Invisible chains are forever in debt
To an unseen deity.
Stinking putrid flesh fills my nostrils,
With nostalgia of toxins flooding my brain.

I know now the existence of Hell is real.
Experience is more vivid than the useless stories.
Crawling, unable to straighten my bent body.
I can hear it, drip, drip, drip
The sound of madness rammed inside my head.

My hand feels my ailing cheek,
With a chunk of flesh within my flesh.
How can this be?
Toxic sin embraces my entire being.
Ping, ping, ping

What is the source?
Pandora's box has been unleashed,
Ravaged by mischief with the,
Voodoo dance moving me, slithering, dragging.
Hell is real, my biggest achievement.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Tara Johnson currently resides in Cambridge, Ontario Canada. She has been writing short stories since the age of twelve. Tara recently discovered in the last few years she likes writing dark and epic poetry. She joined writing.com; a writing community online which has helped improve and expand her writing. Tara also enjoys traveling, nature, and trying new things.

Do Not Stand | *Peggy Christie*

Do not stand above my resting place.
I am here, I will give chase.
I am one of thousands resting still.
I am waiting for the time to kill.
I am not your loved one, you're just my meal.
I am empty, I do not feel.
Moving closer, crawling near,
I am almost upon you, can't you hear?
Do not stand above my resting place.
I will rise up and eat your face.

Puppet Of The Dead | *Peggy Christie*

Cold draft, icy tendrils
Flow down the corridor,
Twisting through the minuscule
Cracks and lines between
Brick and mortar, wood and plaster.

The frozen air touches my face,
Pulls at my blankets.
They reach for me,
The dead.

Others are blind, others are deaf
But not me.
I see their faces of agony.
I hear their wails of pain as they cry out,
Cry out for release.

They tell me things.
They want me to do things,
Things to other people.
I comply and add to their numbers.

Anger rattles the windows.
Frustration cracks the mirrors.
Torment darkens the corners.

How long will I be able to satisfy them?
How long until they grow restless again and want more,
More than just my help?
When will they tell someone else things,
Things to do to me?

How long until the dead claim me as their own?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Peggy Christie is an author of horror and dark fiction. Her work has appeared in several websites, magazines, and anthologies, including *Necrotic Tissue* and *Fearotica: An Anthology of Erotic Horror*. In 2016 her collection, *Hell Hath No Fury*, will be re-released through Dragons Roost Press and Source Point Press will publish her upcoming vampire novel. Peggy is also the Secretary of the Great Lakes Association of Horror Writers as well as a contributing writer for the websites of Cinema Head Cheese, Rare Horror, and Slack Jaw Punks. Peggy loves Korean dramas, survival horror video games, and chocolate (not necessarily in that order) and lives in Michigan with her husband and their dog, Dozer.

Twitter: [@PMonkey](#)
Facebook: [Author Peggy Christie](#)



Specter | Lori R. Lopez

She wore the night from head to toe, a ghost
in reverse, a negative specter in denial of death
yet steeped in it. An embodiment, serving as
the effigy for a lady in black, a mourning piñata
devoid of candy, spilling dark rose petals
when clawed apart by the deepest sorrow.
Her apparition paced moaning, lamenting . . .
grimfully stuck in a loop of despair;
a burial rite of contrition, her soul lost to
this earthly trail of tears, a faded gown's hem
dragging a path along the dusty surface
beneath restless feet.

A widow's veil adorned her aspect to conceal
the woes of a battered heart, curtaining the wraith
as if she were a corpse who grieved for the living
and refused to lie still, play dead, accept being gone.
Stubborn like that was she, a phantom without
a grave. For she had not been buried yet;
her time had not come. She had simply abandoned
all will to go on with the daily labors of existence,
the turmoil of a harsh fallow environment
where she was unloved, her family departed.

Neither kith nor kin remained but she, alone in
a vast world of emptiness and regret, mocked by
the memory of a warm life, of laughter and gaiety.
All that was left to her was this bleak attire
so often donned like a shroud as sickness raged,
coffins lowered to rest in the soil like crops planted
that would never grow, never sprout. And the
mourning, the wailing never ended until she was
consumed by it. Adapting the pose of the deceased,
in solemn reflection, as if attending her own funeral,
she may have perished a little.

The lady wept not for herself but those who lay in
neglect, and stalked the ones failing to pay respects.

Neighbors went on living as if her bloodline
did not exist. A reckoning angel she had become,
haunting the dusk, passing lit windows and tapping
the panes, rapping at bolted doors while the scared
quivered inside, believing she was back from another
realm, trailed by cemetery fog, draped in supernatural
angst, trapped in a loop of sadness and blame.
Why did everyone she cared about die? Her vacuum
of need drained the vitality out of any who endured,
cowering in the revenant's vicinity.

Lurkings | Lori R. Lopez

What happens when you close your eyes at night?
The answer would give you a precarious fright
To know what goes on round the helpless you
In the pitch-dark depths you slumber through.
The terrible fiendish insufferable lurkings
That would give your rest dreadful fits and jerkings
To behold if you peeked, if your mind should wake;
Best remain asleep or your grip might break
On the rational moorings that keep you from drifting
Off to the nether's treacherous shifting
And the moans of things you do not wish to see!
No, don't look, keep dreaming. Let the skulkers be.
You shouldn't tempt Fate or taunt those ghouls—
The transparent figures tracking grave mud and drools;
The nasties and naughties 'hind your closet door,
That go thud or creak rafter beams and floor.
Lull yourself quickly back to a state of drowsiness;
Ignore the kaleidoscope horrors and wallow in bliss.
Once your mind kicks in with a furnace-like blaze
And your eyes lose their coat of Sandman glaze,
You'll be lost, falling prey to their nightmarish keen;
Their shrieking and yipping out of daylight's sheen.
Do not shed this mantle of dormant dust
That allows you to languish in a bed of trust
And float upon vapors of unclouded relax,
Free of woes and worries that inhibit or tax;

The cares and troubles of gambolling brains
Set loose from corrals, taking leave of their reins—
Oh, I'm afraid it's too late, your head has raced
From its track, the mindless groove tenuously chased
In pursuit of the elusive thread our dreams weave
As we slip in and out the needle's eye to retrieve
another stitch, another moment stolen from Time.
A good night's sleep is surely next to sublime!
Yet can take a turn for the worse and go bad,
Catching even a glimpse of the beasties who pad
Or stalk and stump the deepest shadows of gloom.
You cannot lock the door to guard your bedroom...
The only hope is to sleep through its bitter worst,
And pray you won't wake at the heart of night cursed!

Soul Deep | Lori R. Lopez

Endurance I once prided myself on having
Beyond the threshold braved by most
Withstanding nightmare travails of terror
Coping against a belligerent ghost

At the shattering of the day's final glimmer
Darkness becomes a source of friction
'Tween life and death, a struggle for power
Opposing aims that cause nerve constriction

As twilight approaches, covertly gliding
A stealthy tread that makes no sound
I can hear chilled fluid gush through veins
The surge of my pulse beginning to pound

And I know what's ahead, there is no secret
To the mysteries of fate, of destined events
Shivering, I face the tumult before me
Afraid yet determined to end the suspense

Fists and jaws tight as a stranglehold
"Here goes nothing," I breathe to the calm

How tranquil a moment can seem that hangs
By a filament, bearing the weight of every balm

I had resolved in my heart the lengthy struggle
Would be over at last if I challenged the spook
“Let’s do this!” I call into the gloaming’s face
Brandishing naught except my rebuke

“Quit hiding, you bloodless demon of dusk!”
A lily-white countenance pushes from shade
I stare into eyes with the gaze of madness
The things we most fear do not always invade

“You want me?” I spread my arms in welcome
Or submission; perhaps the two are parallel things
A colorless mouth forms a wry expression
The spirit leans forth to peer deeply then brings

Both hands up to clasp my shoulders firm
Claw-like digits penetrate my flesh—
Frigid hooks to bind us, for our connection had
Severed and I escaped, confident as Gilgamesh

I did not need a soul, this ethereal substance
A nuisance; an albatross, these morals and ideals
It angers her I skipped free to do as I please
She doesn’t know how light, how glorious it feels!

I just dance away when she attempts to slip back
Being a very light sleeper, I feel the ice-touch
And jolt awake to deny her entry. The eidolon has
Made life a Hell by provoking, vexing me so much

The whisper of her presence as she hounds my steps
An apparition dogging me in relentless pursuit
Like an echo of anticipation, expectation
My senses are on edge, forced to remain acute

The strain has worn me down; one minute more
Of this waiting is intolerable. “Peace,” I deplore.

The Bad Dream | Lori R. Lopez

What was it in the dark that fascinated me?
Surely not its layers of blind obscurity
Like a hole so deep, it made a mind feel lost
The kind of blackness that could only exhaust
If searched for meaning, examined for gist
Spaded and prodded till I sprained my wrist
In the depth of unfathomable shade
Something lured and beckoned, eager to trade

It was nameless and dense, intense with longing
Then seized its chance at Midnight's gonging
As I lay unconscious in the thrall of slumber
But jerked to my senses aware of burnt umber
A hint of charred night had stolen to my nose
And summoned me from the bottom of a doze
To blink in perplexity and rub weary eyes
Ere endeavoring to return to pleasant lullabies

Tugging the drape of sleep across my brow
I erased all thought, pushed the cradle's bough
To swing and rock myself fast under
Having no idea I could be a creep's plunder
The jangle of chains alerted me to a visit
Though of what or whom, I could not inquire
Stepping to the floor my brain was awl
Emotions in a tizzy, I screeched like a squirrel

For a scratching effect had commenced behind
That disturbed the cockles of a palpitating mind
Heart flopping in my chest like a suffocating fish
I unhindered feet full of lead and sluggish
With tremulous courage I confronted the claws
And what was beheld gave me serious pause
Not to mention cause for a strident alarm
Piercing my ears like an approaching gendarme

Staggering unbalanced, hands clutching my head
I peeped at the culprit: quite horrific and red

Mottled and thorny, bulging with esteem...
And it dinged like a bell, this must be a bad dream!
Imaginary creatures were harmless, I dismissed
Yet prayed I could wake up by being kissed—
A happy ending to a fairytale adventure...
The denouement of a romantic tear-wrencher

My crepuscular guest raked a ghoulish mitt
While I blinked and pondered how to deal with it
Only one solution stood within my reach
Turning on a lamp, I thrust it back to the breach
Whatever crevice this ogre had emerged from
Real or fantastic, the darkness could not come
Past the verge of gilded light washing over me,
And I would be safe till it doused the electricity.

As I Lay Me Down | Lori R. Lopez

Do try not to shatter anything of value,
cretins of the dusk, while you circulate through
like blood-vessel ships of crimson and light
the canals and streams in this pool that is night.
As I lay me down neath a current of rest,
adrift in a lifeboat, a shallow beat in my breast,
for the sleeptide to wash cold porcelain features...
have a care with my soul, clumsy bumbling creatures.

If you stumble, please catch me from falling apart;
should you trip do not drip or spill the oil of my heart.
I am vulnerable now as I lower my guards
and would like to not end up in pieces and shards!
Be gentle with my form so as not to cause dents;
do not bang or bruise it, inflict tragic rents
as you scurry and scamper, you scramble and galump.
Take every precaution with me when you bump.

Is it really necessary to make all of that noise?
There ought to be lessons for you monsters on poise!
Nevermind, simply try not to jar me or jostle.

I would like to be as dead to the world as a fossil.
And for once, would you kindly not finger the mirror?
Your prints tend to smear and not polish any clearer.
All right, carry on with your ruckus and clatter.
I refuse to get up and investigate the matter!

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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Interview with Karen Soutar — Featured Artist

Sirens Call Publications is pleased to feature photography from Karen Soutar in this issue of *The Sirens Call*. In order to get a better feel for Karen and her artwork, we sat down for a few moments to ask her some questions.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Karen! Why don't you take a few moments to tell us about yourself.

Karen Soutar: I am mainly a writer and blogger, but I enjoy taking photographs of – well, anything that takes my fancy, really. Mainly landscapes and buildings, and if they're spooky, so much the better. Often the subjects I photograph relate to my writing pieces, or become the inspiration for a story. I've never studied photography formally, so I was very flattered to be asked to feature in *The Sirens Call*. My writing and my photographs can be found at karensoutar.wordpress.com.

SCP: What mediums do you work in? Is there a medium that you've always wanted to try but just haven't gotten around to yet?

Karen: As well as photography, I would like to get back into sketching. I did it a lot when I was younger, but let it slide due to the boring time constraints of being a grownup!

SCP: What are some of your main influences?

Karen: My interest in history and legend has always influenced the places I choose to visit and photograph.

SCP: Is there an artist you would love to work with?

Karen: It would be fascinating to work with the Scottish landscape photographer Colin Prior. His photographs are beautiful.

SCP: Where do you find your inspiration?

Karen: I find inspiration from Central Scotland, where I live. The scenery, and the stories, myths, and legends connected with it.

SCP: What is your favourite photograph that you've taken? Why is it your favourite?

Karen: My favourite is The Witches' Craig, a hill outside Stirling, Central Scotland. The photograph is taken from the graveyard of the Logie Kirk (church) below the hill. Legend has it that in the 18th century, witches conjured the Devil there, who then roamed the Craig in the form of a black dog. The photograph was taken on a typical overcast Scottish day, and it's my favourite because it captures a brooding quality to the sky and the hill that goes well with the legend.

SCP: If you could work on anything, what would it be, and why?

Karen: I would love to be commissioned to work on researching and photographing the sites of Scottish myths. Maybe I could write an updated tale for each location as well? Any publishers out there interested? *grins hopefully*

SCP: What is your favourite piece of artwork that was created by someone else?

Karen: Now I'm going to change tack completely! I own a beautiful portrait in pastels of my familiar - I mean, my cat - Jet, who lived to be 18 years old. After Jet died, my wonderful hubby commissioned a talented local Scottish artist, Donna Connolly, to do the portrait. It has pride of place on the living room wall, supervising my other 4 cats.

Thank you Karen for taking the time to speak with us!



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One Photograph, One Hundred Words...



The Couturier | *Nina D'Arcangela*

She often warned of the Couturier; misdeeds would bring the demon upon him. He worshiped his grand-mère; his mind knew no doubt, was fully malleable – perhaps too much so for the yarn she spun. Over the years, he woke more often than not to the peal of his own screams. She would rush to him, quiet youthful hysterics, soothe fears. In his night-visions, she lay in a widening pool of blood having fallen a flight of stairs. One evening, in utter darkness, the Couturier did indeed invade the noctambulist's mind, the act a simple one; his dreams the life-long rehearsal.

Silent Screams | *Julianne Snow*

Have you heard them?

The shrill tingle that flows up and down your spine, attaching itself to the fear present in the depth of your heart and the conscious thought within the unconscious part of your brain. It's numbing and enlivening at the same time. Those screams are the things of nightmares and you cannot escape the desperation and despair of them.

I've heard them many times, more times than I care to remember. They'll make you go a little mad if you're not careful to pretend you don't hear them. For once they reel you in... it's all over.

Restless Nights | *Renee L. Tennis-McKinley*

The clock flashed 3:01 a.m. Maggie looked at it through sleep fuzzed eyes trying to shake the dregs of the dream she'd been having. It had already faded to nothing more than an uneasy feeling. She rolled over and pulled the comforter tight around her shoulders, it was far too early to climb out of her warm cocoon. The alarm would ring in another three hours and she needed to sleep. The last few nights she'd woken from a sound sleep at various hours of the night. The broken rest was starting to wear on her. Things had been hectic at work; she couldn't afford to lose her edge in the meeting tomorrow. She started her relaxation exercise for the second time, willing herself to sleep.

A crash from the front of the house shattered her drift into slumber. In her startled wakefulness she realized this was the second crash. The first, almost unremembered, was the disturbance that had awakened her minutes earlier. Sitting up now she listened closely for the sound of a break-in as she did her best to keep her breathing low and slow. No need to start hyperventilating yet.

After a judicious wait she stuffed her feet into slippers and wrapped herself in her fuzzy blue robe. Just in case, she fished a five iron out of the golf bag parked in the corner of her bedroom. Part of her mind told her she was being silly, but a more wary part had her holding the club aloft with both hands tightly around the steel shaft, Maggie pressed her ear against the closed door listening for movement from the other side. Hearing nothing, she gently turned the knob and cracked it open just enough to peek down the hallway toward her small living room. Three closed doors lined the trail between her and the source of the noises she'd heard shortly before.

Stepping softly she made her way into the hall, one step at a time she traversed the space, stopping to listen at the spare bedroom, bath, and closet doors before reaching the open area of the living room. A sweeping glance showed her the front entry, chain lock still in place. The drapes at the picture window were still, no sign of a breeze from outside. Still, she stood for several seconds before moving into the room. Her quick assessment hadn't given a clue to the source of the crash. All was neat and organized as she had left it before going to bed hours earlier.

She stepped further in slippered silence to the kitchen doorway. Her head cocked to catch any unusual sounds, the club still held in aggressive posture, she proceeded into the kitchen. The night light from the alley behind her home leaked through the thin curtain and reflected from shiny enameled surfaces. Nothing out of place caught her attention. The dining table at one end still sported its small glass turntable housing salt and pepper mills. The chairs were still resting neatly beneath the table top. Over the stove all the pots hung in silent wait for tomorrow's meals.

Relaxing the grip on the club shaft she checked the back door and the kitchen windows. The light from the alley illuminated the trash can standing rigid against the house, its lid still tightly secured. The same light showed nothing inhabiting the small square of concrete bordered by grass that pretended to be her back yard.

Returning to the living room she peeked between the drapes. The ten feet from her doorstep to street were empty. No headlights or taillights were visible at either end of her view to the street. Her car sat hushed in the short driveway next to the house.

Maggie let the fabric drop back into place. Taking a long breath to relieve the built up tension she let the club head rest on the carpet and turned to go back to bed. Before her first step, the boom of a large fist pounded on the front door.

Three loud booms echoed by her shriek of panic. Then nothing, she stood frozen, the golf club now high above her head ready to beat her unknown visitor to a bloody pulp should the door open on its own.

After several seconds of silence, she crept to the door staying below the peep hole. After no further banging she dropped to the floor and crawled to the far side of the window. Once there, she peered carefully through the edge of the drapes across the window to the front step. It was still empty as was the sidewalk and street in front.

Biting her lip in indecision she once again stood, her hands now sweating on the club. She loosened her grip on the shaft unfurling the fingers that wanted to still curl around it.

Boom! Boom! Boom! This time from the rear door. Maggie put her back against the wall beside the window. She could see the kitchen from that corner. The back door stood unmoved by the beating it had just taken. She could see no shadows moving within the scope of the alley's streetlight. She could hear no movement from the concrete slab.

Now she was hyperventilating. No longer attempting any form of stealth she shot through the living room and into the hallway. The first door on the right was the bathroom. Without checking for sound, she yanked the door open and launched herself inside. A tiny night-light offered just enough illumination to keep her from slamming her toes into the commode. She could just make out the outline of the small window behind the blinds.

Using the five iron she viciously shoved aside the shower curtain just in case it hid an intruder. When she assured herself the tub was empty she stepped over the edge and huddled behind the curtain, club still held before her.

She startled awake to the blaring of her alarm. Stiff and cold from the uncomfortable porcelain, she crept out of the tub. The window blinds now held back the light of dawn. Still afraid she cautiously lifted one slat and peeked out side. The view was of the back yard. The street lamp no longer shining, the early sun on the other side of the house left shadows along the concrete and grass.

At the increasing volume of her alarm she let the slat go and slowly opened the bathroom door. The house looked much as it had the night before. The sun pushing through the front drapes didn't uncover any signs of intrusion. The chain still maintained its guard on the door.

She now hurried down the hall to her bedroom to cancel the shrill of the alarm. The door still stood slightly ajar due to her exit last night. She shoved it open and screamed in horror at the scene before her.

The mattress overturned, the screaming alarm lay on the floor beside the broken nightstand. Her dresser drawers were pulled free of their spaces, the clothing scattered. One of

the sliding closet doors swung loosely, the other leaned inside the space. Hangers were emptied, the remains of their contents shredded on the floor.

As Maggie scanned the chaos, a strangled cry escaped as she spotted the bright splashes of wet red covering the bed clothes and spattered on the walls. She sank to her knees, the golf club falling impotently from her hand as tears blurred the scene into a patchwork of scarlet and the soft blues she'd chosen for the room.

She backed down the hallway gasping for air. She dropped onto the couch, curled in misery. It was nearly dawn before she found the courage to return to her bedroom to find her cell phone to call for help.

Hesitating in the hallway outside the room, Maggie took a breath and stepped the last few feet into the room. Shock elicited a new shriek. The mattress sat in its proper place atop the bed frame, the sheets and comforter thrown aside as she had left them the night before. The alarm sat squarely on the shiny surface of the nightstand. Dresser drawers and closet doors were neatly closed. She glanced into the golf bag in the corner, where the five iron sat smugly with its partners.

It must have been a bad dream, she told herself. She moved trance like through the house for the rest of the day, ignoring the ring of her cell phone. Every so often she crept down the hallway to look into the bedroom steeling herself against visions of chaos and blood.

By dusk she had almost convinced herself it truly had been a nightmare. When night fell completely she tiptoed back to the bedroom for one more reassurance that all was as it should be. Then Maggie scuttled out clutching her fuzzy robe tightly about her and settled in front of the television and tuned to a bland prime time comedy she watched with mindless exhaustion.

She awoke in her bed, the clock flashing 3:01 a.m. The uneasy remains of her dream flushed away by the day's hazy memories. Maggie pulled the comforter around her tightly. She waited for the crash somewhere in the house, for the pounding on the door. She waited.

She woke curled on the couch, the alarm blaring from the room at the end of the hall. Confused she unwound the faded afghan she'd pulled from the back of the couch against the chill of the night.

She had missed her meeting the day prior, today she determined to pull herself together. She let the alarm blare as she made her way to the coffee maker in the kitchen. She measured the grounds and started the machine. As it began its assigned task she watched, chewing on her lip as she listened to the alarm's increasingly frantic beeps.

She continued to allow it to scream as she entered the bathroom to brush her teeth and wash her face. With no more excuse to delay, she trekked the long length of hallway to the door at the end. She hesitated to open the door; afraid of what she guessed lay behind it. She stared at the abattoir she had faced the morning before this time without the accompanying shriek. She slammed the door, her breath coming in gasps, then returned to the kitchen.

Maggie sat at the small dining table drinking coffee in hot gulps. She briefly toyed with making a call to the police, but accepted with certainty they'd find nothing except a woman in

need of observation for a mental breakdown. Not only would she report the description of the blood spattered room, but the new addition; a body wrapped in the sheets.

No. She would just wait it out. In a short time the room would return to normal. Even so, Maggie couldn't motivate herself to return to the room and dress for the day. Once she had emptied the pot, she started a new one.

She woke to the clock flashing 3:01 a.m. She pulled the comforter over her head as tears pooled on the pillow. She cried herself back to sleep.

She woke still sitting at the table as the alarm blared from the bedroom. Her hand was still wrapped around the overturned cold cup, the last of the coffee spilled. She rose to her feet, back aching, neck cramped.

She scanned the living room, the door and drapes still closed, the afghan neatly draped over back of the couch. Upon returning to the kitchen for more coffee, she found the table top clean and her mug hanging from its peg. The alarm raised its volume to claim her attention.

Maggie skipped the stop at the bathroom and walked slowly down the hall. Without hesitation she opened the door of her bedroom. Kicking aside the crumpled contents of the empty drawers and stepping across the overturned mattress, she found the clock from the floor amid the rubble of the nightstand. Grabbing the five iron laying on the floor, she smashed the blood encrusted club head into the noisy appliance until it ceased its incessant shrieking.

Maggie didn't bother to wash her face or brush her teeth. She didn't consider calling the police. She simply awaited their arrival.

Surely someone would miss her, call the authorities. Her nightmares would finally end when the police broke in and found her bloodied body in the chaos of her bedroom.

Then she could rest.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Renee Tennis-McKinley lives in a haunted old farmhouse with her retired husband, two demonic cats, and a half blind spaniel that barks at invisible people. She's had a personal essay published in Our Write Side's Steampunk Christmas Newsletter. Most times she's sharpening her skills with various writing prompts. When she's not writing, she enjoys bowling, yarn crafts, and hoarding Christmas trees.

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At the Door | Debbie Manber Kupfer

“Let me in! Let me in! There’s a monster out here. He’s ten-foot tall with shaggy green fur and long sharp claws. He has one huge purple eye that’s staring at me and rows and rows of pointed teeth waiting to crunch my bones for his lunch. He’s getting closer. I can feel his breath on my neck. He’s licking his lips. He’s reaching for me with his terrible claws. For the love of all that’s holy please let me in!”

Slowly the door creaks open and a face peers out. “Ah, so he looks just like me, then?”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Debbie Manber Kupfer grew up in London and today lives in St. Louis. She is a writer of puzzles and fiction and the author of the fantasy series, *P.A.W.S.* She believes that with enough tea and dark chocolate you can achieve anything!

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Night Games | Morgan Songi

Just after dawn. It was snowing hard, so Dean got up and out. Finished feeding the yearling calves on the school section before nine and by the afternoon the west Nebraska panhandle was hosting a full-on blizzard. First week in November; early for it. But Dean knew the high plains country could get clobbered pretty much anytime nine months of the year.

The blades of the steel windmill in the back yard screamed and squawked.

Damned wind. Constant. Fifteen to thirty miles an hour on good days. Start blasting at forty miles an hour plus and it drives the snow across the pastures and fallow wheat fields, pushes it into walls of twenty foot drifts. You grow up with it. Live with it day after day, year after year, but you can't keep it from getting under your skin.

As if in reply to his unspoken thoughts, the weather stripping around the front door vibrated with a buzzing ferocity.

Freaking nerve racking is what it is.

He'd driven the seventy miles to Howard's Bluff for his monthly grocery shopping last Saturday and Cliff from Cargill's Butane-Propane Gas had been out to the farm and filled the tank the day before. *Now tonight. Gonna' get colder than a witch's tit. Nothing to do but settle in. Heat up one of those newfangled microwave dinners. Watch Gunsmoke on the boob tube. Drink. Hell, yeah.*

First, get Rocky in. Dean pulled open the door and snow laced with icy sleet lashed his face. He pulled his sweater up around the back of his neck and called into the growing darkness. "Rocky! Come on, boy."

The wind-driven snow blew a force field of pure misery across the threshold. Dean stepped outside and yelled as loud as he could. "Rocky. Rocky!"

Stopped when he heard the singing.

"Ice cream and lemonade."

Christ on a crutch! Kids. Singing that goofy thing we sang when we played outside during recess. District 37. Consolidated country school. What was it? Thirty years ago? Had to be. At least that long

"Show us something..."

What the hell?

Out beyond the band of shelterbelt trees. *Kids? Couldn't be. Even if old man Hanson a mile north had Davie, Scrugs and Irene for the weekend they wouldn't be out in this. No way.*

Dean stumbled backwards as Rocky the Australian Shepard shot into the house, bolted through the kitchen and scuttled down the basement steps. Nails scraping and scratching all the way.

"Show us something if you're not afraid."

No damned way. Has to be my imagination.

Dean slammed the door shut and stood with his back pressed against it.

'Steal Sticks', 'Anti-Anti-Over', 'Mother May I'. I remember how we played all of those, but I can't remember what we did while we sang that stupid ice cream song. Got to admit, I've been a little rattled since the knock-down drag-out fight with Verla. Since Verla...but that was...hell's bells that was...what?

A year ago this month, actually. And, it was an accident--Sheriff in Hansford certified it--even if she had been asking for it. Good riddance to bad rubbish. Loud-mouthed alkie. Should have stayed put up on the Rosebud reservation instead of fooling around down here, raising hell with decent people.

Dean went into the kitchen and opened a can of MIGHTY MUTT, Rocky's favorite. "Here, boy. Dinner's on." He scraped the can loudly with the knife. Nothing. *Dog must have sacked out. Getting old, like me. Takes more than the dinner bell anymore to get him moving.*

I'll give it another half hour and give Dixie a call. Never did have a problem having a woman around and Dixie was a damned good handful of woman. Sex on wheels ass, nice perky boobs. Nurse in the ER at Saint Joseph's. Catch her during her break. Tell her after the storm lets up I'll drive into Permanence Saturday night and pick her up after work.

In the meantime...get my shit together.

The bourbon he'd poured before he started hearing things needed topping off and the frozen steak and mashed potatoes tray wasn't going to get itself into the microwave. *Four minutes. Ya' gotta' love technology.* He finished off the bourbon, poured another.

He was taking the steaming food from the microwave when Rocky growled from the top of the basement stairs leading into the kitchen. Dean jumped forward, bashed his forehead on the corner of the microwave door and dropped the tray. "What the hell? Damn it Rocky, what did

you have to go and do that for?" The dog growled again, a guttural rumbling deep in his throat before disappearing back down the stairs.

Dean wiped up his ruined dinner with a wad of paper towels, threw the mess in the trash can and went to the phone. The sound of Dixie's whispery voice would settle his nerves. A didn't-give-him-any-grief girl, she even had him going to services at the Methodist church Sunday mornings whenever she had the weekend off.

He picked up the receiver on the landline phone and dialed. Three, nine...nine, seven... nothing. No dial tone.

"Shit." He kicked the dog dish across the floor sending dog food spewing against a cupboard door.

"Ice cream..."

Louder than before. It couldn't be.

"...and lemonade."

Rocky growled from the depths of the basement, followed by a howl like something straight out of hell before winding itself down into a whine then a whimper.

"Show us something..."

The wind vibrated and moaned around the door. Dean hated the sound. It made his skin crawl.

The door rattled in the wind. He moved toward it. Reached toward...

"...if you're not..."

...the doorknob. Frigid cold radiated from it.

"...afraid."

...tingling his fingertips. He cupped his hand, ready to grasp it and watched in horror as the doorknob turned.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Morgan Songi's essays, short stories and poetry have been published in the US and Canada. She began writing at age eleven with an 'unappreciated' poem about her mother's driving. At thirteen, she was accused of plagiarism because an essay was 'too good'. She's been told her poetry is 'too tough', her prose 'too lyrical', but continues to write. The occasional infusion of Scotch probably helps.

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Sleep Walker | *Magenta Nero*

Eyes flicker, then open. He stares up at the shapes that form and disperse in the fluid dark. He is like water or smoke, infusing the flesh, seeping into it, merging with muscle and bone. The body rises. Feet land quietly on the floor. He can feel cold skin resting on thin, worn carpet. Toes

stretch and flex. Blinking in the dark he knows where he is. He has come several times before. Slowly he stands up and begins to walk. Each step is rigid and reluctant; the body has not yet warmed to him. He can't be sure how long it will allow him to remain but for a little while it is his.

He stares down the long dark hallway, drawn towards the haze of light at the end. He walks along slowly, trying not to bump into things, finally coming to the kitchen. The dim glow of street lights seeps in through the window. He glances around, waiting as details become clear. The bench tops are cluttered with appliances. Cups are stacked carelessly on an open shelf. The sink is full of unwashed plates and pots. A vase of crowded flowers sits on the windowsill. There is always so much work to do, her housekeeping skills have not improved.

On the wall by the sink, a magnetic strip holds a collection of knives. Last time he came he was so entranced by them, he stared at them all night. They are an exquisite set of knives with polished handles of dark wood.

The fraction of light in the room plays on the knives, illuminating the blades in soft focus. He approaches them and examines them closely, stepping back, stepping forward, until he finds the ideal spot from which to view them.

He can see the quality of the steel, thick and gleaming sharp, and the wooden handles sculpted to fit the palm with balanced, comfortable ease. Stunning craftsmanship. Mesmerized he gazes at them. There is a long thin blade that curves to a tip. Breath taking is the flat wide blade, a blade with which to cleave. Two smaller knives, daggers, light in the hand, for quick fast strikes. And a long serrated blade, to saw through stubborn things. Tenderly he rearranges them in order of size. He feels a deep longing to yield one, a delicious craving uncurling. Nothing much, just a tiny little nip on the wrist, barely there, perhaps she would not even notice.

He selects one of the small sharp knives. In the moonlight the skin is a pale shade of blue. Slowly he drags the blade over tender flesh leaving faint trails of pink. He does this several times and then one final draw, a bit harder, makes a light incision. Blood collects quickly in tiny beads along the razor fine line. He feels nothing, no pain. Intrigued he stares at the wrist until he is startled by a sound. He carefully replaces the knife back on the wall.

The voice is faint in the darkness. It disturbs him. He can feel the body twitch in response, threatening to wake. He must find it and silence it. It is the little girl. He has glimpsed her before but has never come close to her. He shuffles back down the hallway.

"Mommy?" the voice calls softly.

He enters the small bedroom. She is afraid. She is still asleep but she can sense him. The thick curve of sleeping lashes, paper thin skin stretched over eyeballs. She is restless. He reaches for her and lightly strokes the bony arc of her spine. The bodies are familiar and a sense of calm flows between them. The little girl settles and soon falls back into the breath of deep sleep.

He walks to the large bedroom window and looks outside. He would like to go outside. Wander in this beautiful body. Rain is falling gently and all is dark, quiet and still. Through the

trickle of raindrops on the glass he can see a row of bare trees along the wet glistening road. They seem to be cut from the night, delicate and intricate silhouettes. Everything is enhanced, looking through another person's eyes. And then he notices his reflection. Her face.

She was his lover once. He never did let go. He couldn't believe she didn't bother attending his funeral. Bitch. As if their relationship had meant nothing at all. She never understood how much he loved her, she even had the gall to accuse him of stalking. It gives him great pleasure to possess her body in this absolute way. Now she belongs to him, forever. Soon she will realize the truth; they were made for each other.

He turns slightly to admire the curves of her body reflected in the window. She is wearing a thin nightgown, her breasts visible through the sheer fabric. He touches the long blonde curls that drape her shoulders and runs restless fingertips along her collarbone. He would like to touch her, really touch her, but he is afraid he may wake her. He can't be too careless.

It was difficult at first and it took great effort to find her. He drifted through nothingness mourning her, willing himself to her side. He hovered above her, watching her slumber, wondering if she was dreaming. Pushing against her mind, falling into her thoughts, he discovered how to blend with her.

Returning again and again he will claim her body and mind completely, little by little. Each time he goes a little deeper, a little further. Perhaps he may come to stay, he ponders.

Time passes differently here than on the other side. The laws of the physical body have become unfamiliar, it is like being born again. He seems to get trapped in thought for endless moments, fascinated by subtle sensations and glimpses of things.

He notices the darkness is changing hue, dawn is not too far away, it is time to leave. He takes her body back to its bed and lays it down. Eyelids close and he is gone.

In the morning she is standing in the kitchen drinking very hot coffee in rapid sips. It is burning her mouth but she doesn't notice. Her daughter is sitting at the table eating cereal. The loud crunching is an unbearable noise. It mingles with the fear churning within her. She keeps glancing at her wrist, bewildered.

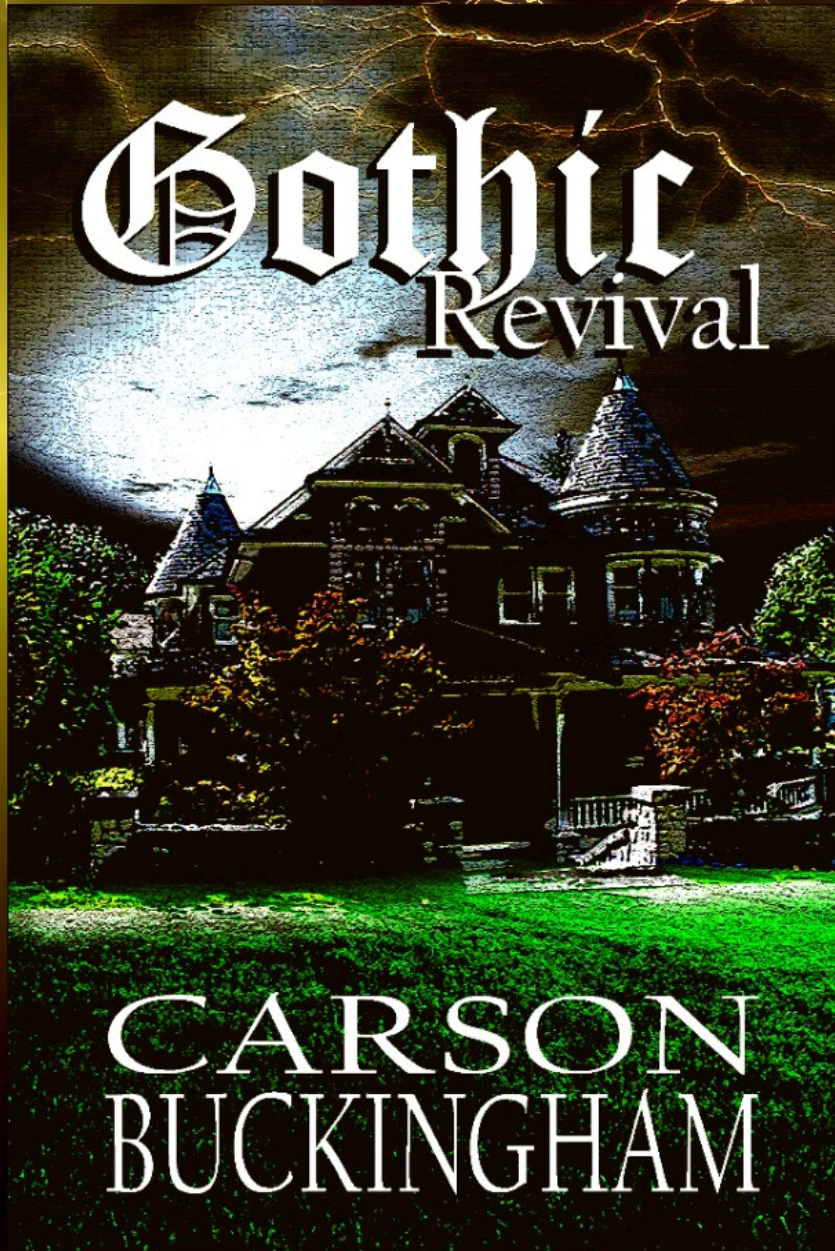
Her panic builds as she glances around the room. Those teacups on the shelf, that is not how she stacks them. The vase has been moved on the windowsill, she's sure of it. The flowers, there is something odd about them. She stares at them and realizes they have been rearranged in the vase. She is beginning to feel sick. This is not the first time these odd little things have happened. Things move around and order themselves in new ways. She is not imagining this. Her eyes fall on the row of knives mounted on the wall. They are aligned from smallest to largest, evenly spaced and perfectly upright. The sight of them is confusing and then terrifying. She glances at her wrist again, her breath catching. The cup slips from her hand. It shatters loudly, scalding coffee splashes her bare feet.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Magenta Nero is an author and poet inspired by myth, magick, mysticism, madness; she loves to spin dark tales weaving elements of Gothic horror, fantasy and erotica. Her work has been published in The Sirens Call eZine, Sanitarium Magazine and in fifteen anthologies from James Ward Kirk Fiction and J.Ellington Ashton Press. She also writes for the horror writers group Pen of The Damned. Magenta hails from Italy, has lived in the U.K. and Japan, and currently resides in the Northern Rivers, Australia.

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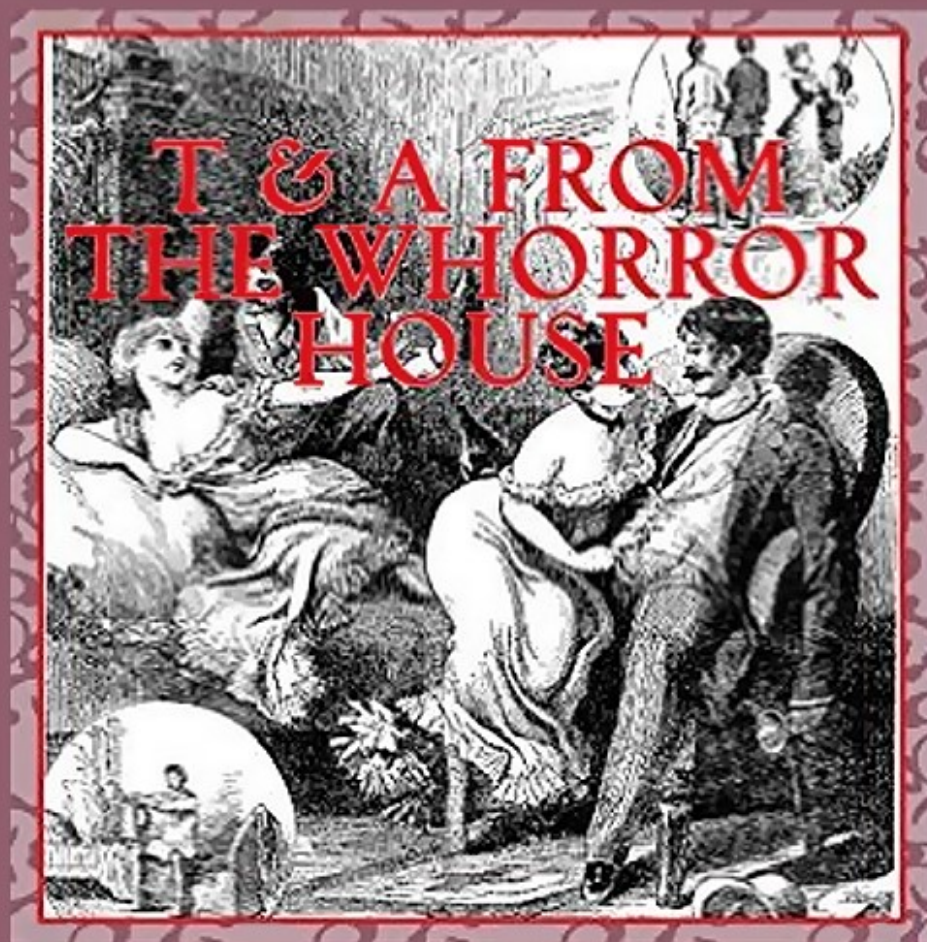
Blog: www.magentanero.wordpress.com

"Excuse me, did I hear you were looking for work?"
but with the job come a series of unusual conditions...



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The Spelling Bee | Kenya Moss-Dyme

Beneath Lupita's bedroom window, leaves crunched under a weight much too loud to be a squirrel or a cat, but the dog next door growled and barked viciously at a threat of some unknown type.

Lupita sat up in bed and stared at the window, as if looking in that direction would help her identify the trespasser. Less than a minute later, she heard branches cracking under pressure directly outside.

Barefoot, she bolted across the floor and pressed her forehead against the glass to look at the ground. Seeing nothing to warrant her concern, she shrugged and began to turn away when she caught sight of a pair of glowing red eyes, staring back at her. She quickly ducked behind the curtain, holding her breath until she dared to look into the darkness again. The light of the moon outlined a dark mass moving along the tree line. She tapped the window with her fingertip and the figure ducked behind the trunk of a tree just a few feet away.

Keeping her eyes on the yard, she dragged a chair over to the window and sank down into the cushion. *I've got all night*, she said softly, resting her elbows on the window sill.

She wouldn't lose much sleep because she rarely slept anyway. Her nights were mostly a holding pattern, a suspension of activity during which she would lie on her back and stare at the ceiling until morning light filled the room.

The red eyes blinked again.

"I see you," the girl whispered, her breath leaving moist clouds on the glass. It was time to run again.

Mahindra waited for the students to be seated before standing up behind the desk and smiling cheerfully.

"Good morning, students! My name is Miss Ma-hin-dra. Your regular teacher, Miss Alexander, is feeling a bit under the weather, so I am filling in for her."

She briefly flipped through the binder on the desk to review the class schedule.

"I see the first thing you'll have today is a spelling bee. Shall we get started?"

Assorted groans rumbled through the classroom as Mahindra pulled out the list of spelling words and directed the students to stand next to their desks. Her attention was drawn to the window, where a female student ignored the activity in the classroom and kept her head turned to the window.

Mahindra flipped to the seating chart at the front of the binder. Holding it up to align with the placement of the students, she slid her fingers across the labeled squares until she determined the identity of the girl.

Lupita was her name.

A wild mass of tangled curls framed the pallid landscape of her face, and Mahindra noticed for the first time the wash of freckles covering an angry red scar traveling from her hairline down the bridge of her nose. Lupita's eyes were focused intently on something outside of the window,

something that only she could see through the branches of the tree brushing against the glass; a bird or a plane, perhaps.

“Lupita,” Mahindra called and the girl turned her head just slightly, brows furrowed and lips pursed in annoyance. “Do you plan to join us?”

“She’s new, Miss Mahindra,” explained another child, helpfully.

“I don’t care if she’s new,” Mahindra scoffed. “She still must participate! Stand up, Lupita!”

The girl twisted her body and rose gracefully from the chair, fixing Mahindra with a glare that was indescribably cold; colder than a ten year old should be capable of mustering. Lupita tossed back her hair, revealing eyes the color of blue steel. Mahindra felt her heart quicken and her hands tremble.

“Now, on to the spelling bee,” she said, and proceeded to challenge each child with a word from the list. If they spelled the word correctly, she would move on to the next child; if they misspelled the word, they were directed to sit in their seats.

One by one, the children were eliminated from the spelling bee until only one child remained standing: Lupita.

Mahindra tried to contain her excitement as she flipped to the spelling list for the next level.

“PERSPICACIOUS,” Mahindra said to Lupita.

“P-E-R-S-P-I-C-A-C-I-O-U-S.”

Mahindra quickly found another word. “ICHTHYOSAURS,” she pronounced slowly.

Lupita paused and looked down at her feet. “I-C-H-T-H-Y-O-S-A-U-R-S.”

Mahindra fired off word after word and Lupita masterfully batted back each set of letters with ease.

The seated students began to squirm; unsure of what they were witnessing but the tension in the air was unmistakable.

Having exhausted the list of advanced level words, Mahindra closed the book and peered at Lupita over the top of her glasses.

“CONSANGUINEOUS,” she said with a sly smile.

A boy on the front row shifted uncomfortably in his seat and raised his hand. “Miss Mahindra, those aren’t on our word sheet,” he said hesitantly.

Mahindra ignored him and kept her eyes on Lupita.

Fiddling with the collar of her blouse, Lupita cleared her throat, dropped her hand and stared directly into Mahindra’s eyes.

“C-O-N-S-A-N-G-U-I-N-E-O-U-S.”

Mahindra dared not press any further. The students were already shifting nervously in their seats and she didn’t want to scare them; she dared not risk sending them home whispering about the crazy substitute. But she couldn’t take her eyes off of Lupita.

“You may sit down now, Lupita,” she said, her voice cracking as she tried to suppress her excitement.

Lupita rolled her eyes and slid back into her seat, where she resumed gazing out the window. Mahindra resisted the urge to chuckle at the girl's brazenness.

For the remainder of the day, it was difficult for Mahindra to concentrate on the scheduled activities. But during recess, she stood by the playground door and watched Lupita move curiously among the other children. They regarded her warily, moving aside as she passed, avoiding looking directly at her. Lupita stared straight ahead as she approached the roundabout and slipped easily between a set of handles. Gripping the metal bar with both hands, she pushed off with her feet and spun around with much more force than her tiny body should have allowed. Still, she closed her eyes and held on tightly, her knotted hair flying in the wind.

Another child stood to the side, shuffling her feet in the grass as if she was waiting for a chance to jump on but the disc was spinning too fast for her to mount safely. Lupita made no attempt to slow it down; instead she stuck her legs out as she spun, forcing the girl to keep her distance.

Mahindra resisted the urge to run out on the playground, grab Lupita and take flight down the street. But she knew there would be too many witnesses, so she restrained herself and suffered anxiously through the rest of the school day.

The dog growling next door alerted Lupita that there was *something* in the yard again.

She lay on the bed listening to the footsteps around her window; the ground crunched as *something* walked the length of the brick wall, circled the house then returned. She waited until they walked in the opposite direction before she raced to the window and threw back the curtains. The same glowing red eyes hovered in the dark, staring back at her from the other side of the window. More startled than afraid, Lupita snatched the curtains closed as she stumbled backward.

She paced the floor of her bedroom while considering her next move; escape was still a possibility if she moved quickly. Down the hallway toward the front entrance she ran, but the doorbell rang just before her hand reached for the doorknob.

"Who could that be at this hour?" Her adoptive mother rose from the recliner in front of the television and stepped protectively in front of Lupita to unlock the door.

Lupita opened her mouth to stop her but before she could utter a word, the door swung inward and Mahindra bolted across the threshold.

As Lupita stared in shock, Mahindra ejected a blade from beneath her sleeve, raised her arm in the air and sliced cleanly across the woman's throat before her brain could fully register the intent of her guest.

Kicking the door closed behind her, Mahindra skillfully caught the woman's body in the crook of her arm and gently laid her on the floor. Blood gushed from the wound in her throat and soaked Mahindra's clothing but that was of little concern. Time was of the essence and she was on a mission.

Snapping out of her spell, Lupita gasped and turned on her heel and ran toward the back of the house, but the sound of Mahindra's voice assured her that resistance would be futile at this point.

"It's time to go, Lupita," Mahindra called out, then crouched on all fours and sprinted across the room toward the girl. She stood up straight and locked each of Lupita's hands inside of her own, holding tightly to prevent her escape.

"Or should I say, Bezhtar?"

Lupita's head snapped up to look into Mahindra's face and her eye color changed from steel blue to a bright, fiery red to match Mahindra's. She opened her mouth wide and howled as the crude scar running down the bridge of her nose split open and the skin peeled apart, revealing the sloping scaled-covered head of a reptilian creature. Her lips thinned and a glistening forked tongue snaked out across a row of sharp teeth. She hissed and spat at her captor.

Undaunted, Mahindra smiled and tightened her grip on the girl's hands.

"I searched all over for you." She shook her head at the transforming child. "You made it very difficult this time. I thought I had you when I picked up your scent in a small city by the water in Ars-en-Re'." Mahindra laughed heartily. "The skin of an old woman - that was very clever! But I couldn't grab you with so many eyes around."

Bezhtar began to quake and tremble as Lupita's human skin continued to peel down and away from his body, leaving his amphibious form exposed. His long tail uncurled itself from within the folds of skin and flailed around on the floor behind him.

"But I knew you would not stay in Ars-en-Re' for long - the saltwater air is very bad for your precious skin," Mahindra took a finger and stroked Bezhtar's cheek; he drew back and hissed at her again. Her finger left a black trail where it made contact.

"You've had your fun amongst the humans, Bezhtar. You've had adventures that most of the others on our planet will never experience," She spoke calmly while the creature struggled beneath her grip. "You've seen things in this strange world that they will never see - I know because as you jumped from body to body, I was always hot on your tail!" Mahindra threw back her head and laughed at her own pun. "I'm sorry, you don't find that funny, do you, my dear Bezhtar?"

She chided him as she dragged him through the doorway and down the front steps. "Why must you continue to do this, Bezhtar? Your superior intelligence would never allow you to be happy here for long."

Defeated, his tail thumped sadly down each step as they moved closer to the street. He curved his claws around Mahindra's palm and scraped her wrists but Mahindra refused to release him. She knew firsthand how sneaky he could be; she also knew that the Leader had run out of patience with Bezhtar's tricks, so now her own life depended on his retrieval - and disposal.

"Next time, I'll choose something with wings! You'll never be able to catch me if I'm soaring through the sky!" Bezhtar grumbled under his breath in the childlike manner he'd adopted while posing as Lupita.

“Oh, Bezhtar, I can assure you - there won’t be a next time,” Mahindra turned to face him when they reached the center of the street.

“There *really* won’t be a next time,” she repeated as a single tear dropped from the corner of her eye.

Suddenly, they were bathed in beams of light from the spaceship hovering overhead and Bezhtar was sucked away from her grip. Mahindra released him just as her arm was snatched violently upward. She recognized the fear in his eyes as he was being snatched into the air, the horror on his face when he realized that this was the last time he would escape his planet - the last time he would do anything at all. The hatch slid open and accepted Bezhtar moments before the spaceship tilted backwards and disappeared into the sky.

She would miss him. He always made her job enjoyable, albeit challenging. This was his most ingenious disguise yet. Slipping into the adoption center and waiting to be adopted took extraordinary patience not common among their species. But once Mahindra picked up his scent, all she had to do was find the right time to make her move. Miss Alexander was an unfortunate casualty of Mahindra’s job as a Hunter.

“Is everything okay out there?” A woman stood in the doorway of a neighboring house, holding on to her snapping dog.

“Everything is fine, ma’am, go back inside,” Mahindra replied, peering through the darkness at the direction of the voice. *Close the door and I won’t have to hurt you and your creature.*

The woman hesitated, sizing up the dark-clothed figure standing under the streetlight, then decided to mind her own business. She snatched her dog back by the collar and closed the door but the dog continued to snarl at Mahindra from inside the house.

The communication device in her pocket beeped and she withdrew it to read the new retrieval orders from the Leader. This one was hiding in a rainforest in the Congo and she could look forward to shedding her human skin for the warm, wet tropical climate.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Kenya Moss-Dyme began writing short-form horror in her teens and won several scholastic writing awards for her creative work. *Prey for Me*, the hard-hitting story of a monstrous child-abusing preacher, was her first published work, followed by the dark romance, *A Good Wife*. A lifelong fan of the macabre, she is now focused on publishing her nightmares and creating new ones.

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The Candy Striper | *Melody Luttrell*

The shop was closed for the day, the curtains drawn, and the floors mopped. Mistress was settling down to a nice meal, her table manners pristine as always. I watched carefully, my mop and bucket ready to clean up the floor when Mistress was finished for the night. She did not acknowledge my presence, but that was usual.

Taking a bite of her dinner, Mistress chewed in silent contemplation for a few seconds. She preferred her meat rare, and the blood welled over her lips, which was then carefully wiped away with a snow white napkin. "Madeline." I looked up expectantly, in what I hoped to be in a worshipful manner. "Madeline." She sighed again.

The dull thunk of her favorite carver stabbing into the table filled my senses. I watched silently, my smile slipping slightly. "Madeline! They're not sweet enough!" The short woman of rage and fire stormed off. I was helpless but to follow, abandoning my mop against the wall. Mistress grabbed a box of cookies and a giant bag of various candies, slammed the door open and rushed down the stairs, her long black skirts almost catching, and I prayed she would trip and break her neck, and the girls and I could leave this hellish existence.

Candy and 'Baby' Ruth were sitting silent, watching the helpless lump in the corner, their eyes glazed over in horror and agony. I said a quick prayer of thanks that at least they were not screaming. The new ones always screamed for days before they fell silent, numb and unfeeling, sure that they were to never be found, forgotten by the wide outside world.

"Sweeter!" She screeched at Candy. "Sweeter!" She threw the box of cookies at Ruth. "Sweeter! Sweeter! Sweeter!" Howling at the cowering young women before her, Mistress grabbed at her hair and began to rip it out. "It must be sweet! The meat must be sweet! I must be sweet!"

The girls simply looked at her with blank faces, quiet as the grave. Pain fogged the memory better than any drugs, and these girls had plenty to hurt over. The one in the corner, Mary Jane, had still not moved, but then, I didn't expect her to.

Mistress continued in this manner for another couple of minutes, but finally calmed herself, as we did nothing to agitate her, and she whimpered to herself. "The meat, Mummy. I must be sweet like Sissy. I'm sweet too! I wanna be sweet." The speech of a poor, fumbling, homely child shone through, and I knew that she was no longer in this frame of reference.

I stepped in. "That's enough now. Come on. To bed with you." She went quietly, and I was able to get her to bed with little problems. I headed back downstairs. "Mary Jane?" She was huddled over her stomach off in the corner, her eyes glazed and unfocused. "Mary Jane." Taking the bottle of creme de menthe from under my skirt that I had been given just for these times, I allowed her a large gulp. "Mary Jane, I have to take a look at it." Wide green eyes screamed a pain she could not vocalize, and I patted her cheek lightly. "Come now. I have to make sure it won't be infected." Slowly, carefully, I pried her fingers away from a small bandage, soaked in her blood.

Mistress cut too deeply this time. The lines were slightly jagged, and had anger written into

the gaping wound. Mary Jane had already lost enough blood, and I quickly set to work. Gathering thread, I shoved a chunk of hardened taffy into Mary Jane's mouth before dashing rubbing alcohol into her laceration, wincing at her muffled scream. "I know dear. I know." Swiftly, I sewed the gash shut, saying a prayer of thanks as I felt her relax as the pain caused her to black out.

Finishing up my work on Mary Jane, I cleaned the area, and laid her head down gently. Ruth and Candy watched me reproachfully. "Eat your dinner, dears. We mustn't make Mistress angry again." I turned to head up the stairs.

A small, shy voice followed me. "What's happening to us, Madeline? Are we going to die?" Ruth's eyes were clouded, as Candy's were, and every girl before them, but there was still a small spark to them.

I turned back to face her. "We serve Mistress. Each of us have our own purpose. Now, eat up. It wouldn't do for you to get sick on us now." I waited until she dutifully ate several cookies, smiled at her, and headed up the staircase. "Enjoy yourselves, dearies." Because of Mary Jane's ordeal, I would be back downstairs in a few hours, so the light was left on. They would be awake for some time more anyway, being nocturnal in their dark prison.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Currently living in Springfield, MO with a spouse, a roommate, a ghost, and 2 cats, Melody spends her days helping the living, and her nights fighting the dead. Eventually she'll finish the other millions of ideas floating in her head.

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In Absinthe Dreams | *H.R. Boldwood*

Heavy the heart that mourns a child! In absinthe dreams she comes to me, arms outstretched, frail, so pale against her Rosewood coffer.

At graveside's edge, her voice beguiles me; a siren's song that compels beyond all reason.
Mother, I am cold.

I claw beneath her headstone, dirt spraying, fingers tearing, blood flecking the filigreed box inside the worn and rusted vault that holds her tiny bones.

I am here, she whispers, stay with me.

Once cradled in my arms, she sighs. We are at peace, for in that dark and silent tomb, we lie forever joined.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: In another incarnation, H. R. Boldwood is a prize winning author and Pushcart Prize nominee. Boldwood's characters are often disreputable and not to be trusted. They are kicked to the curb at every opportunity when unwitting publishers agree to accept the stories they appear in. No responsibility is taken by this author for the dastardly and sometimes criminal acts committed by this group of miscreants.

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Available on Amazon

A Conversation with Death | *Betty Gabriel*

The night was unbearably warm. I was hot and sticky, and although I had flung the windows wide before coming to bed, I was suffocating in the stuffy air. Beside me, my husband James snored under a pile of covers. He wasn't overheating. Something to do with my age, then.

I slipped out of bed and groped blindly around the floor for a discarded t-shirt. A wet nose gently touched my fingers and I scratched the fuzzy brow of my beloved pooch, Charlie. He lay down again, old now, but contented enough. I couldn't love a creature more than I did him.

The clunk of my bamboo wind chime drifted through the windows, signifying a breeze outside. I pulled on my t-shirt and padded through the house, unlocking the patio doors, stepping out onto the decking. I felt the sweat prickle on my skin as it dried. Instant relief.

Movement at the bottom of the garden. I scrutinized the darkness. Nothing to see. A fox? Most likely one of the neighbor's cats. I walked in bare feet across the lawn to our picnic table and chairs, relishing the slick coolness of the grass between my toes.

I was almost at the seating area when I noticed the figure sitting in my chair. The hooded black cloak made for wonderful camouflage in the dark. I started in alarm, adrenaline kicking in instantly, but the figure raised a hand, not in friendship but as a pause. I caught my breath, waited. A pale finger indicated the chair next to it. My eyes flicked back towards the house. Should I make a run for it?

"Sit." The voice of a woman. Assured. Calm. She didn't sound like a threat. I sat.

"Who are you?" I asked, casting a longing look back over my shoulder at my open bedroom windows. Perhaps my husband would wake up.

"I am death," the woman replied.

The air was still as I processed this. Death? My fingers twitched against the armrests of my seat and I leaned forward to get a better look at the woman. I still couldn't see her face, just a pale countenance buried deep beneath the hood of the cloak. She was clearly staring at me though.

A lunatic, surely?

"Oh." Movies had taught me it was imperative to keep the crazy killer talking until help arrived. What does one talk to Death about? "Why are you here?"

"I've come to collect," she said, her voice low and sincere, almost apologetic. It wasn't what I wanted to hear.

"Oh," I repeated, unsure of what else to say.

I swayed backwards in my seat and took a deep breath. Is this how it would end? James would find me here in the morning? Would he be devastated? I hoped so. But perhaps he would relish his freedom. I had him under false pretenses in many ways.

"False pretenses?"

I looked at Death in horror. Her interest was clearly piqued. But I had not articulated my thoughts aloud. How had she...?

A noise that sounded a little like a giggle emanated from deep within the folds of the cloak. "Death is legion. We are many. We know all."

"All." Of course Death would know all. I folded my hands in my lap and looked down at them. In the moonlight, I could see the faint trace of what I had assumed would one day be liver spots, but I should have had another twenty or thirty years ahead of me. Undeserved time, though. This was to be my day of reckoning. I had known I would have to face it one day, and just lately the fear of it had been eating away at my insides.

"Will it hurt?" I asked, "the moment of dying?"

"Well now. That all depends. On how you die."

I thought longingly of James again. Over the years our passion had waned, but he was the one I had always wanted, had fought to be with. I wanted to fling myself down on the grass and beat against the earth, beg for my life, spend more time with him. Appreciate him more.

"Some people die very painful deaths." The woman's contemplative voice interrupted my thoughts. Behind me somewhere, a rope creaked thickly, and my breath caught in my throat. In my mind's eye I could see the dangle of a noose.

I bit back a scream, digging my finger nails into the wood of the armrests, staring wildly around me. "Is she here too?" I whispered, my voice thick with fear.

"Who?" asked Death.

"Cecily."

I hadn't said her name out loud in years. It escaped now. A hiss, a will of the wisp. Hushed words darting nervously around the garden. A firefly set free from the darkest recess of my memory.

"Something you need to confess?" Death goaded me.

I thought of Cecily, as she had been when I first met her in those heady days of college. She had shared a house. Me, her and my friend Lara.

"She was different to us. A different background. At the time we saw her as... a lower caste... if you like..." It sounded repugnant to me now.

"I don't."

"No."

While we spent our money on endless supplies of cut price designer gear and nights out, Cecily wore discount store jeans and t shirts, checked shirts and trainers, and nothing else. Because she had nothing else. Cecily could pack all of her belongings into a single medium sized suitcase. She had spent years in foster care because her mother had been a drug addict unable to cope with a daughter she hadn't wanted in the first place. Cecily moved from pillar to post, but she always adapted. Wherever she went she took her books and her sunny nature with her. She studied while we partied, and we despised her for it. We treated her badly, yes we did, but she never complained. She was sweet natured and forgiving, and we took advantage of that – counted on the fact that she was malleable and vulnerable.

Why? Because Cecily badly wanted friends, and so we gave her our friendship, such as it was, in ways that suited us. Mostly we insisted that she be the one to wash up and tidy up, clean

the bathroom, empty the bins, pay certain bills. Low level stuff. Nothing too awful. Then Lara – finding herself up against an impending deadline for an important piece of coursework - coaxed Cecily to write a paper for her. Lara passed her module with flying colors, and after that we both demanded Cecily's 'help'. Cecily didn't like doing it - this cheating - but we insisted it was important.

Still Cecily remained as sweet tempered and patient as she had always been. We took her to parties when she wanted to tag along, which wasn't often. I didn't consider her particularly attractive and so didn't see her as a rival for anyone's affections. That was my mistake.

Making a play for James was hers.

Tall, athletic, blond and beautiful, James was my dream man. We had been dating for a few months and everything had been going well. I worked hard at keeping him interested. But then one night at a party, I brought Cecily along and realized he was making eyes at her. I went into the kitchen to pour us drinks and when I returned they were standing together, sharing personal space, his eyes on her mouth, her smiling at his words.

I sidled in between them. Handed James his drink. Led him away. When he glanced back at Cecily, just that once, I knew I had to do something or lose him forever.

"He was everything to me."

Death made a snorting noise. "Truly?"

What was Death getting at? I loved James. I did. But yes, he was from a good family, was well connected. He was studying business and was going to join the family firm. He was predicted a bright future. That was what I wanted. To be with a man with a bright future. I had no other ambitions for myself. I intended to have some sort of career, but I didn't care what it was. I wasn't interested in working myself to the bone.

But if I was totally honest? I guess James was my best hope for the huge house of my dreams, along with an upstanding position in the community.

I felt Death's eyes upon me. My palms pricked with fear.

"He had to be mine. She could have ruined it all."

"What did you do?"

I had been furious. A red mist of anger descended upon me and although I giggled and flirted with James for the rest of the evening, my mind slowly churned a thick hatred into a pernicious plan. James drank a little too much, and so the accommodating and dutiful girlfriend that I was, persuaded him to leave his car in my care and go off clubbing with his friends.

I roped in Lara, also the worse for wear, and explained what had happened. Being a good friend, she shared my outrage. At the end of the evening we located Cecily who seemed uneasy. Perhaps she sensed that she had overstepped my mark with James, I don't know. We coaxed her into the car. Then when it became apparent we weren't driving home she questioned me.

"We thought we'd have a little more fun," I said and smiled, my face nearly breaking under the duplicity of it all. Cecily settled into her seat, but her eyes were worried.

I drove us to the Devil's Stack, a local geological anomaly, and a place I knew well. I had a part time job there, selling ice cream and tourist tat. Under the dark brooding sky, as the clouds

chased across the moon, we could make out the enormous boulders that nature had piled on top of each other at some point in earth's pre-history. The wind blew through the stacks making an eerie sound. Beneath them were an equally odd set of naturally occurring caves. During the day the area was packed with walkers and families having picnics. In the evening, the place was locked up.

But not completely. I led my friends down to the entrance of Blue John, a cave known for the brilliance of the blue gems embedded within the stone. I had brought along a flashlight from James' car, and Lara had her phone. We used these to illuminate the way. Then we spent a little time supposedly goofing around as we walked deeper into the cave, although Cecily was quiet and reluctant to join in. I caught her looking at the exit numerous times.

Finally, I found what I was looking for. A small enclosed cave we used to store postcards and ice cream cones. I unlocked the entrance and moved in first. Lara stepped politely back to allow Cecily through. As soon as Cecily had entered the cave, I did an about turn, exited and slammed the wooden door tightly shut, sending the bolt noisily home.

Lara hooted with laughter at how easy it had all been. Cecily screamed and banged on the door. I put my face to the crack and shouted in. "Stay away from James, you bitch! He belongs to me."

"And then we left," I told Death.

"What happened to Cecily?"

I shrugged, non-committal. It wasn't something I chose to think about. Someone had found her and set her free. I never saw her again. I assumed she had not completed her degree course.

A hand shot out and icy fingers cruelly pinched my arm. I saw the scene through Death's eyes, felt Cecily's terror.

The wall of the cave was rough against my back. Water trickled down from the ceiling and the weight of hundreds of thousands of tons of solid rock, mere inches from my head, pressed down on me. Surely there was no air? I couldn't breathe! Claustrophobic and terrified I moved forward to bang my fists hard against the door, but it was solid. I heard myself on the other side - words that in my panic I couldn't quite catch. Laughter. Footsteps dying away.

I was alone in the darkness gasping and weeping. Kneeling I searched for the gap between the floor and the door, my fingers scrabbling against the freezing cold stone. In the corner behind me, I heard something move. Shrieking I pummeled the door harder, then dug my nails into the ground, frantically trying to make the miniscule gap wider - praying it would offer me air and an escape. Something brushed against my face and I squealed. My bladder released and my jeans were suddenly warm and wet. A spider. That was all.

But something was in there with me, something I couldn't see. It was keeping me company. I heard it breathing. Rasping. An echo of my own tortured breaths. I could sense it moving. I lashed out blindly, wildly flailing my arms around, my clenched fists connecting with the solid walls. Over and over I struck out until my hands were a blooded, pulpy mess. I screamed and shrieked until my throat was raw, and then, because the pain in my hands was too intense, I struck the door with my head. Bang. And then again. And again. And again.

“Help me. Help me.” My voice, a husky whisper, kept time. I was going to die here. No one would come.

I violently ripped my arm from Death’s grasp and turned away from her. “Someone came. They did.”

“At 9 the next morning.” Yes. Someone would be opening up. A long night nonetheless.

“She survived. I know she did! I saw her in the paper.”

“You saw what exactly?”

“I saw... I saw...” I shrank away from what I saw. Death stared me down.

“She thought she’d been possessed. She killed herself.” My voice broke. “Not long after. She hung herself.” The creaking of her rope had haunted my dreams ever since. I had as good as killed Cecily. I’d known that for thirty years. I’d lived with the knowledge buried deep within me. “I needed to have James though. Whatever the cost.”

Death was silent.

I shuddered. “And now you’ve come for me.”

What awaits us when we pass? How painful will death be? Surely I would burn in hell for all eternity.

But Death was shaking her head, and a familiar figure had scampered up to us. “No. I’ve come for Charlie.” My faithful hound was wagging his tail, his eyes shining as he looked happily up at Death. “Your time will come soon enough. But you’ll suffer on this earthly plane first.” And then Death was gone and I was alone, my mouth open, my heart broken.

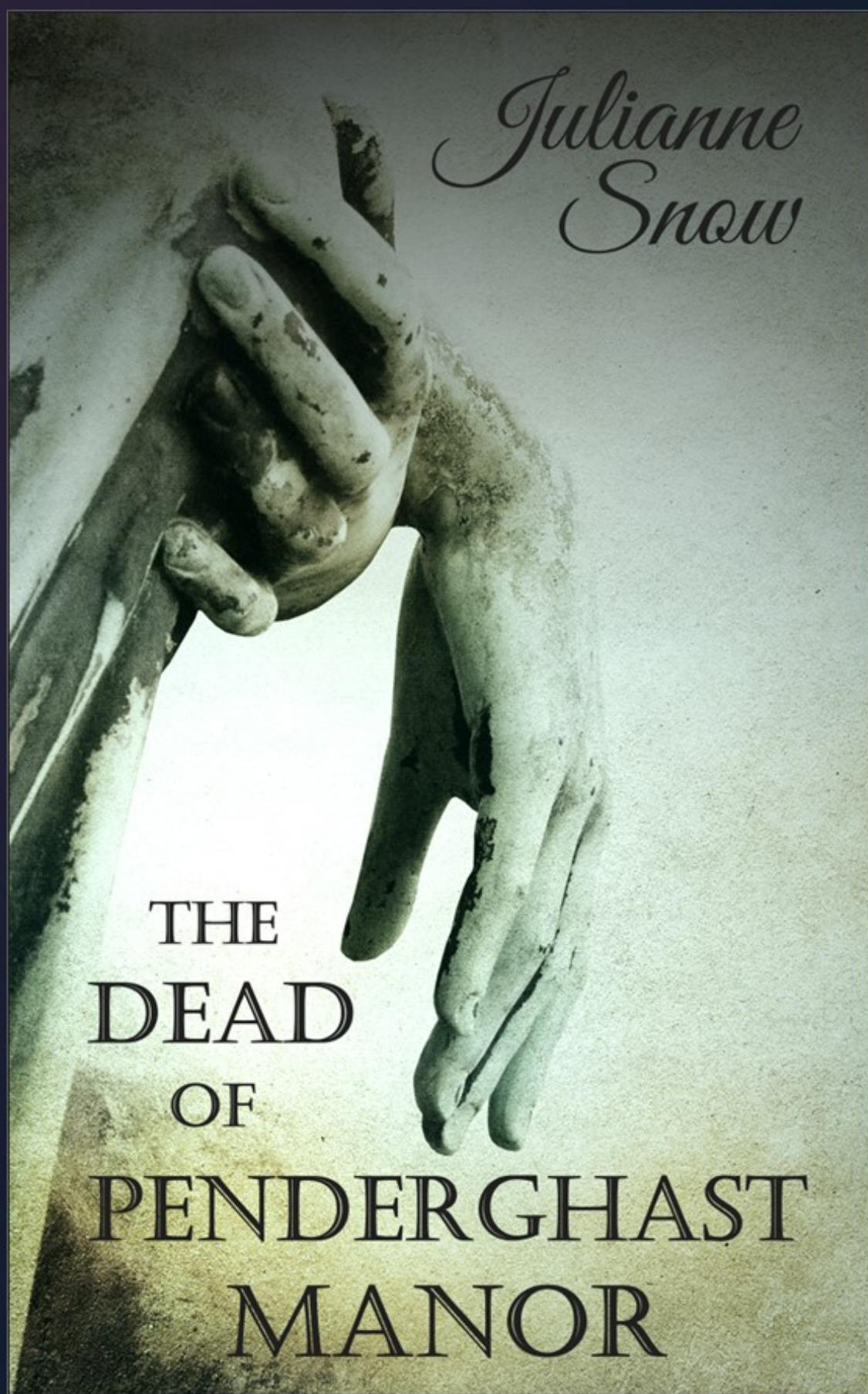
“Zoe?” Startled I turned. James was standing behind me, his face clouded. “Who were you talking to? What did you do to Cecily?”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Betty Gabriel is a mildly eccentric tea drinking Brit who has a penchant for cider, curry and rock music. She has a PhD in history, and runs a small gift shop by the sea. In her spare time Betty is a soup maker extraordinaire. If she isn’t watching Ninja Warrior, she can usually be found with her fingers poised over the keyboard with the intention of killing off another character.

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



Available on Amazon

All Harvey Black wanted was a cold drink to wash down the dust. He pulled the big rig into Andre's Bar and climbed down the side of the cab. He knew better than to stop at Shadow Ridge, but he's just so freaking tired lately, and he couldn't seem to put his finger on why.

His run is over and home is in the next county, but exhaustion urges him to rent a room. The sleazy joint behind the bar is run by a mother and son—Bates Motel style—but Harvey Black doesn't give a damn; if they want to murder him in the shower, that's their business.

At least he'd get some sleep.

Harvey pulls out a stool and slides his rump over the red, cracked leather. He decides on a Jack and Coke. The Coke to cleanse his parched throat and the Jack to wash the pain.

"Damn, it's hot in here; don't you have air conditioning?" Harvey complains to the bartender.

"Broken. Sorry, Señor'."

"Can't you at least open a window, then?"

"Can't do that either, they're painted shut."

"Now why the hell would you folks go and do a thing like that?"

The bartender gives a wry smile and continues polishing the glasses.

"It's the curse, Señor'."

"What curse? Another Jack and Coke, please. More Jack, less Coke this time."

The bartender does as he's told and presents another drink.

"The townsfolk in the valley below whisper of a black monster, a winged devil that perches over their ancestors' tombs while casting shadows across the moon. Not far from here is an abandoned church from the late 1800s; a decaying habitat for the beast, complete with broken pews and a bell tower. Starting at midnight, the monster rings the bell every hour, on the hour, until dawn. The church bell is his siren's song, luring anyone that hears it to their doom."

Harvey scoffs. Such hogwash.

"So, you painted the windows shut so no one can open them and hear the bell ringing?"

"That is correct, Señor'. All of the windows in town are that way, also. Have been for many years. My papa beat me profusely as a child when I tried to open the ones in our house."

"You had a cruel papa."

"No Señor', a protective one. He knew that if the monster didn't eat me, he would at the very least turn me into his likeness."

Harvey looks at the man squarely, searching for some sort of bullshit in his eyes. The handsome Latino simply stares back at him.

"You actually believe this nonsense?"

"Sí," The bartender looks down at his watch. "It's 11:30 pm I suggest you either rent a room out back and settle down for the night, or get in your truck and get down Highway 19 as fast as you can."

Just then, a slow boiling starts to brew in Harvey's gut and nothing sounds more inviting than a stale set of sheets.

"I think I'll stay. What about you? Aren't you going to buckle down for the night?"

The bartender gestures towards the back. "I stay here. The bar and hotel function as a refuge for people like you. Those passing through that don't know any better. We stay open most of the night. Everything else in town closes at 9:00pm. Hop to it, Señor'."

Harvey waves a generous tip in the air before plopping it down on the table.

"For the bedtime story," he says, and leaves the bar.

He ends up in Room 11. Not horribly close to the end of the building and yet not too far from the office. He plops onto the bed and dials his wife. He doesn't call her for the same reasons that most men do: because he loves her, or because he doesn't want her to worry. Harvey's hope is to simply gain some sympathy.

Ida Black answers on the first ring.

"Harvey! Where the hell are you!"

"I'm in Shadow Ridge. I got myself a room for the night. My guts are all buggered up and I'm exhausted. I think I'm coming down with something."

"I know what you've come down with, you've decided to order yourself a whore. That's what you've gone and done. Nothing good comes out of Shadow Ridge. I ain't no fool, I know what goes on in that seedy hotel."

Ida Black was most certainly no fool. She's been slowly feeding her husband poison for the past few weeks. Hopefully just enough to shut his body down, but yet not enough to trace. His potato soup is getting cold on the counter, and her dearly beloved has missed his next dose.

And it pisses her off.

"Now Ida Mae, you know better, I've only ever had eyes for you." Harvey whispers into the receiver with as much conviction as he can muster. It was closer to the truth twenty years ago, before Ida became such a bitch. But if Harvey was ever anything, it was faithful.

Ida knows that her husband is true, but she doesn't care. She finds great joy in busting his balls every chance she gets. In her mind, her husband is a weakling, a pushover. If he'd knock her around a bit when he got angry, she'd see him as more of a man.

"Cut the crap, Harvey, and get your sorry ass home." She slams down the receiver.

Devotion is blind and often miserable. Especially when you *are* a genuine pushover. Harvey swings his legs over the side of the bed with the intention of putting on his shoes. He swoons. He feels the Jack and Coke clamoring up his throat. He runs to the bathroom only to fall to his knees in front of the toilet. His drink is not as soothing coming up as it was going down. When he progresses to dry heaving, he rolls onto his back across the cold linoleum. It's so damned hot in here. He pops the buttons from his shirt instead of taking the time to undo them. He takes a deep breath and allows his body to do what it needs to.

He jolts awake from the knock at the door. He doesn't remember closing his eyes.

"Open this damned door, Harvey! I know you're in there!"

He groans and curses beneath his breath.

“Coming, dear,” he calls.

He swings open the door. His wife in her three hundred and sixty-two pound glory stands highlighted by the light of the moon.

“Ida...” something dark flies across the sky, throwing a shadow across his face.

He grabs his wife by the arm. “Get in here!”

“Don’t manhandle me, I’m here to take you home!”

He slams the door behind her. “I’m not going home. It’s not safe out there.”

She scoffs. “What are you afraid of? Dirt? A cactus? God forbid we get chased by a tumbleweed! My mama was right; I never should have married you.”

Harvey collapses back onto the bed. “The bartender says there’s a monster out there at night, that we need to stay inside until dawn.”

“The bartender is an idiot. There’s nothing out there. We’re going home. Get up.”

Harvey glances at his watch.

1:59pm.

He reaches from the bed to grab his wife, but she’s too quick for him. He tries to stand, to leap for her, but his legs are as weak as a baby’s. He covers his ears with his hands just as she opens the door.

He doesn’t hear the distant chime from the bell in the crooked tower. Instead, he watches his wife slip into a wide-eyed trance.

“Ida!” he calls, but he can’t hear himself, he’s too scared to remove his hands. He watches her leave in her floral Mumu, hiking up the hill in a pair of old sandals.

He doesn’t love her, not really, but he can’t see the point in letting her go off like that alone. Harvey may be a pushover, but at least he’s decent.

He stuffs tissues into his ears, as much as can possibly fit. His wife is but a dot on the side of the hill and he has to hurry to catch up with her. He pleads with her as they struggle through the sand. When he tries to physically stop her, she throws him a punch right in the kisser. He stumbles back and lands on his duff.

“Fine, you old bitch.” he says, and no longer tries to stop her. Instead, he follows at a safe distance.

At the top of the hill is, indeed, a church surrounded by humble gravestones. Ida has stopped and is staring at the bell tower. But no, it’s not just the bell tower. She’s staring at what is perched *on top* of the bell tower.

A horned beast twice the size of a man grips the roof with talons instead of toes, watching them with mild curiosity. He pushes off into a steady glide, spreading his perfect, dragon-like wings. He circles them once, twice, three times, before landing on the ground in front of them. His naked body is chiseled to horrible perfection. His skin is of an unnatural color, a mixture of coal and slate. Finally it dawns on Harvey what he’s looking at.

“A gargoyle...” he whispers.

The beast breaks into a fanged smile, reaches over, and flips the tissue from Harvey’s ear in a single swipe.

"I prefer Goji," he says.

Ida has thus far failed to move.

"Go home, Señor'," the creature hisses, "I've already warned you once."

"B...bartender? How? How can this be?"

The Goji stares back at him with black, pupil-less eyes. "I always had to learn things the hard way. Papa beat me to teach me a lesson, but if he wanted to save me, he should have beaten me to death. I just *had* to see The Goji."

"There's more than one of you?"

"No, there can be only one Goji at a time. By the time I met the Goji of my nightmares, he was already very old. A new Goji needed to be created and I was volunteered by my curiosity."

"What is the purpose of a Goji, exactly?"

The creature's eyebrows twitch, as if choosing not to be insulted by Harvey's rudeness.

"I keep the darkness at bay. The shadows you see in the corners of your eyes, the bump in the night that can't be explained; these are the evil spirits that lurk just outside your consciousness. My complexion is that of midnight, for I carry their evil on my skin."

His eyes shift from Harvey to Ida, saliva dripping from his fangs.

"I'm doing you a favor, Señor'." His eyes roaming across Ida's body. "I know evil when I see it."

The beast leaps into the air at a terrible speed, plunging his talons into Ida's shoulders. He sinks them deeply into her meaty flesh, all the way up to his knuckles. The pain causes her trance to break, but she is powerless against him. She screams in octaves as he carries her away, her blood staining the desert dust.

Harvey stands with his mouth agape, not quite certain what to think. He decides that he better head on down the hill, in case The Goji wants dessert.

Harvey's health makes a comeback not long after his wife's 'disappearance.' He continues to drive his truck down Highway 19, passing through Shadow Ridge without stopping. It could just be a trick of the eyes, especially when he's tired, but he swears he sees a shadow cross over the moon on particularly clear nights.

He blows his horn in greeting, just in case.

He thinks he sees the shadow flutter, like a giant bird dipping its wing.

Harvey will never again stop at Shadow Ridge. He has a perfectly good reason not to. But he'll always pass through and wave at the shadows, because one of them might be his friend.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Kellie Honaker has written for WV Writer, Prerogative, The Greenbrier Valley Quarterly, and is the author of Grandfather Hollow, a horror story collection available through Amazon. When she isn't rescuing animals or fueling her book addiction, she's busy mastering the art of becoming a hermit and a writer. While editing, she reads aloud to her most valuable critic: her blind rescue dog named Teddy.

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Melinda waited a few yards in front of the *W. H. Smith* newsstand, adjusting her position so that a massive and shiny stainless-steel column blocked her view of the shop. A gold pea-coat was draped over her right arm. Her left fist gripped the extended handle of a red, twenty-two-inch rolling suitcase. The area was deserted. It was early morning. She'd boarded the plane in Boston the previous evening, and now it was breaking dawn outside the soaring glass and metal walls of Dublin's Terminal 2.

After what seemed at least thirty minutes, anxiety and hunger made her stomach ache. She was supposed to wait. For someone. Was it Dana? Melinda decided to walk, to stretch her legs. Inhaling, exhaling slowly, she straightened her shoulders and began to move, pulling her luggage after her. She glanced down at the top of her breasts; it appeared she was wearing a sweater hand-knit from rainbow yarn. A childhood memory blinked in her mind; the glimpse of a plastic toy loom, a kit supplied with yellow and rainbow-colored acrylic yarn.

Her low-heeled shoes clicked over the sparkling amber tiles of the floor, the wheels of her bag made a soft rumbling, purring sound. She traveled up one sleek escalator, down another, wandered through concourses of white scaffolding, past shops, cafes, and bars. There were few other passengers. Airport employees in black and hot-pink vests stood at attention and ignored her, their hands behind their backs. A chill radiated from somewhere deep in her bones; her skin felt prickly with gooseflesh. She tried not to shiver.

Melinda approached a structure that looked like a giant basket inside a bowl-shaped wall of windows. It supported multiple walkways four stories high. At her level, the bottom level, there was a railing and she stopped, peered over and down. There was a roadway underneath, as if the terminal had mutated into a bridge.

"Here, take this," a man said, startling her, making her twist around.

Two men with platinum hair, their eyes hidden behind dark glasses with circular lenses, stood beside her. One of them was shoving a stapled packet of papers in her direction.

"No," she said. "Go away."

He thrust his hand forward and stuffed the papers behind the folds of her coat. "Take it."

Melinda let go of her suitcase handle and plucked the sheaf out but instead of tossing it away, she studied the first page. It was a type-written tract framing a picture of a desolate and odd seascape that abruptly came to life--bluish green, foamy waves rose in rhythmic rows and rolled, crashed onto yellow sand and black rocks scattering armored, multi-legged, crawling creatures. "What is it, what is this?" she demanded, and hurled the papers to the floor.

One of the men snorted. His black jacket crinkled as he folded himself in half and retrieved the packet. He shot upright and his already pale face blanched to a ghostly shade. "It's the Devonian," he said and held the first page immediately in front of her eyes. "It's a picture of a Devonian beach. Can't you see?"

But all she saw now were several paragraphs ranting about human evil and weakness and the end of the world, and references to a white cat. "What white cat?"

The other stranger in black grabbed her from behind hooking both her elbows. Her pea-coat slipped to the floor with a soft flop. The one holding the papers smiled without opening his mouth. His shades appeared to darken, grow larger and more round. He looked like an owl.

She tried to scream for help. People passed by, there was a busy highway below, but no sound emerged from her throat. *HELP, HELP ME, LET ME GO* screeched in her mind.

The man behind her began to sing, "...Crying cockles and mussels alive, alive-o! Alive, alive-o-o, alive, alive-o-o..."

"Alive, alive-o-o, alive, alive-o-o," echoed and bounced. Melinda finally heard her voice scream, "Stop it, please stop!"

She awoke with a gasp and bolted upright in her bed, her chest heaving, her heart pounding. "Geezus shit, what the fuck was that?" Melinda glanced behind her and to the right, at a digital clock that rested on a bedside chest-of drawers. It was 6:41 a.m. Yanking the sheet and blanket up to her shoulders, she steadied her breathing. The room was dark. Even behind the mini-blinds and drawn weaver-cloth curtains fronting the casement-window, there didn't appear to be any sunrise glow. She maneuvered herself out of the queen-sized bed and stood naked. "What is that smell?" she asked out loud. "I'm cold," she added, hugging herself and shuffling toward the light-switch beside the doorway.

When the overhead light flared, she ran a hand through her tousled, short brown hair and yawned almost spasmodically. "I need some coffee,"

She made her way out to the hall, and down to the kitchen, studied the kitchen window that faced directly east—there was only darkness. "What the hell?" She found her landline phone sitting in its charger on the counter, and dialed the time and temperature; the rapid beeping of a busy signal sparked her nerves. The programmed coffeemaker suddenly gurgled as it switched on and she jumped. "Okay, okay, everything's fine, calm down," she tried to reassure herself.

Melinda padded barefoot into the dining area that had been converted into a home office. Her laptop rested at one end of an oval oak table, to the side of the sliding glass doors that led to a small patio and yard. The aroma of coffee brewing anchored her, made her feel more secure, and it neutralized the odd, rotten-egg odor that she'd noted before. Lowering herself onto the bare oak chair, she wrapped one leg around the other and drew both knees up, gripped one shoulder with a hand and turned the computer on with two fingers. She typed in 'Devonian' and clicked *Search*.

"Hmm, it started four-hundred-sixteen-million years ago. Three continents, the first significant spread of terrestrial life. Sharks in the water. First fish to develop legs, walk on the land. The first forests, the first soils. The air becomes oxygenated. Earth as we know it starts to emerge. Late Devonian extinction event..." Trembling, her muscles clenched. She felt trapped and disentangled herself, leaped up, walked quickly into the kitchen.

She returned with her mug of steaming coffee and sank behind the laptop once again, squinted at the glowing screen, typed 'white cat' and 'the white cat' and hit enter. The contours of her face shone silver and blue in the shadowy room. "Huh..." she muttered, and raised, rotated her head, stared at the angled, vertical-blind slats in front of the glass doors. The world outside

remained seeped in grainy blackness. "Don't I have a job to go to?" she asked the walls, then glanced at the *Favorites* list on the left side of her screen to find a name. "Melinda Kearny," she read. "I guess that's me."

The first page of results unfurled and Melinda chose one at random. "Fairy tale, a Lang fairy tale, 'The White Cat,'" she muttered, reading the story, trying to concentrate. She absently sipped her coffee, abruptly winced and groaned. The liquid was already an icy sludge that smelled like rot and tasted like spoiled meat. She dropped the mug and pushed it away. "What a strange story... the white cat is a princess cursed by a witch to look like a cat, and all her household are turned into cats as well, and the princess is beheaded to save the hero." Her spine pressed against one of the cold oak spindles of the chair-back. "Do I have a cat?" She couldn't remember. "A white cat?" Melinda checked the time in the tool-bar at the bottom right. It read 6:41 a.m. "What the hell?" Her voice was loud--dull echoes bounced around the room. "What the hell is the matter with me?" She rose to her feet and shoved aside her chair.

"You have a princess cat," she heard someone say. "Your princess is Molly and she's alive, alive-o-o."

Melinda turned in place and put her hands on her ears. "Shut up, leave me alone," she shouted.

"Mummy, Mummy, wake up, please wake up," came a little, piping, sweet voice.

Melinda began to run, back through the kitchen, into the hallway, toward her bedroom. She threw herself over the threshold and froze in place, staring at a plump, white cat that sat on her rumpled satin bedclothes, a red ribbon tied around its neck. The animal gazed with enormous, round green eyes at the human, then slowly blinked.

"Mummy, Mummy, wake up, wake up, hurry, wake up!"

"I'm trying, I'm trying," Melinda cried as she turned away from the cat, and began searching frantically for some clothes; she slammed the bi-fold closet doors open, tore out drawers and rummaged inside them but couldn't find a stitch. Her eyes squeezed shut. *Wake up, wake up, wake up...*

"Mummy, hurry, hurry, wake up," the little voice rose an octave.

Melinda was dizzy and began to sway. She braced one foot, then the other, to keep from falling but her thoughts were melting, spiraling into the inner swirl of a tornado. It was hard to breathe and she concentrated every fiber of her conscious self on the sound of the child's voice begging with single-minded persistence as if her mother could solve everything simply by her presence.

Melinda opened her eyes gradually, painfully. The world was brown. It was wet. The world was cold. It was spongy and slimy with hanging tendrils of grey. Her body seemed paralyzed.

"Mummy, Mummy, don't be scared," the little girl said.

Melinda focused on the adorable face of a child as it hovered in her view, auburn curls frizzed with moisture, a red bow untied and wilting like a rivulet of blood in front of a seashell ear. "Are you Molly?" she whispered.

"Mummy, try to get up, let's get outta here," Molly answered. The little girl hopped to her feet--her legs were scratched and bruised--then dropped back into a crouch and grasped Melinda's upper arm with both delicate, pudgy hands; she pulled and tugged. "Mummy, get up," she demanded.

"I can't, I can't," Melinda told her. "I can't move. I can't feel my arms and legs."

"But you have to, we have to get outta here," the child insisted, her features puckering, her complexion blotching. She rose again and flung out her arms as if they were angel wings.

"You are an angel," Melinda murmured. "Molly is my angel, she's my princess. She's alive, alive..."

"You have to get up, you have to try, we have to get outta here," the child repeated. Her legs appeared to pump up and down as if she were running, but she remained in one place.

"Where are we?" Melinda asked. Her teeth ground together and she moaned with the effort as she identified her fingers stretched prone on either side, recognized the sensation of something doughy and viscous under her fingertips. "I'm stuck, I'm stuck to something!" she exclaimed.

"They're mean. They got us and they're mean. We were in the air, flying... but I escaped..."

"But I... I don't remember. Who is mean?"

"The monsters with the big black eyes," she answered, and sat down cross-legged next to Melinda's shoulder.

"But ... I don't remember, who did I marry, when did I have a little girl?"

"Mummy stop it, you're scaring me. I'm your little girl. I'm Molly." She lowered herself and snuggled against Melinda's torso, one small arm draped across the woman's lower chest.

Melinda studied how the tiny fine hairs on the child's arm gleamed, even in the faint, bile-colored, ambient light. "How is it you're free, you can walk around? Where are we, can you see?"

The girl shrugged but otherwise didn't move. "There's giant snake arms and gold and red stuff and mossy things," she answered. "It smells like an old stinky pond in the summer."

"But... but I really want to wake up now..."

"You are awake, Mummy." She raised her chin a bit so that she was looking directly into Melinda's eyes. "If they let us go, will you take me with you?" she asked, her brows knit together.

Melinda saw that Molly had big, round, green eyes. The detachment, the disassociation that had kept her emotions locked away in a safe place, suddenly evaporated. Panic, intense terror blossomed inside her. "Oh God, who are you, where am I?" she spit out between pants. She could sense the surface she was attached to, along every inch of her naked skin.

The child sat up. "You have to be strong, Mummy. You have to stay awake and don't get scared. They won't kill all of us. Most of you stay asleep after they talk to you in your head. Human people jump from bad dream to bad dream and get so scared; poor people are so soft and break so easy. But I'll stay with you, don't worry," she added, and patted Melinda's forehead. "I love you now. You're my Mummy."

"I don't have a child, I never had a baby, I was on an Aer Lingus jet on my way to visit my sister Dana in Ireland..." She remembered looking out a window, and seeing a plane below. "It was my plane, I saw the green tail-fin with the shamrock on it..." Something happened, but she couldn't picture it, couldn't mentally capture it; every time she tried the images slipped away like melting water. "Her muscles tensed and stretched but the more she tried to exert her will over her own body, the tighter the prison became, and the more she was lashed by emotional waves commanding her to be exhausted and hopeless.

Molly stroked Melinda's hair with quick, awkward movements, exactly the way a six-year-old child would, her motions filled with affection but lacking finesse. "It's okay, Mummy. I'll take care of you," she said, leaning on her other arm, tilting her head slightly. "You are my Mummy, and I'll help you. They let me run around and throw me scraps to eat and tickle me under my chin. But all I want is my Mummy, and I'm so happy you're here and you woke up." Molly lowered her chin and kissed Melinda on the cheek. "Now, you have to try real hard to move but don't panic or struggle or it'll hold you tighter. And don't be scared, don't ever be scared. It's when you're scared that they see you."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Rivka grew up in South Florida and currently lives in West Virginia. In the 1980s she published stories in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, the *Far Frontiers* anthologies, and the *Women of Darkness* anthology, and more recently has placed stories with *The Sirens Call eZine*, *The Literary Hatchet*, and *Riding Light Review*. She has a BA in history, MAs in sociology and counseling, and a BSN.

Dolls | *Suzie Lockhart*

The moon shined through the window high above as I huddled under plush blankets on my new bed, shivering.

I could see beady little eyes reflecting the moonlight all around, and could swear the toys in the room were watching me in the dark.

I was terrified.

My new, adopted mother seemed nice enough, but her home was too big.

Bigger even than the entire orphanage had been.

I hid under the covers, trying not to be afraid. I swore I could hear them moving.

Those toys...

Scratching and soft bumping sounds whispered through the big, dark room.

Finally, I could take it no more. Tossing off the blankets, I darted out of bed and ran for the light switch. I clicked it on. My eyes searched the room.

Searched the toys.

Something looked different. The toys had moved—I was sure of it.

I put on the fluffy robe I found, lying across a chair near the door, and walked around the room, trying to remember where the toys had been before Ms. Alexander tucked me in.

The doll in the red dress!

It had been closer to the dollhouse... I was sure of it. I picked her up and studied her. Something was vaguely familiar about her blonde curls and bright blue eyes. She was one of those kind of baby dolls that when you laid her flat, her eyes closed.

I decided I liked her better with those eyes closed.

In fact, there were several dolls like it, so I laid them all flat so they couldn't see me anymore.

The door of my room opened and Ms. Alexander came in.

"Is something wrong, dear?" she asked. "Clara, it's too late to be playing. You should be in bed."

I was too embarrassed to tell her the truth.

That I was scared of the dolls.

So I slowly walked back to the big, four poster bed. Ms. Alexander handed me a glass of water. I took it, fascinated by how the light shimmered off of it.

My new mother must've noticed, because she chuckled softly. "It's Waterford crystal, dear. Do you like it?"

I nodded.

"Do you need to use the bathroom?" she asked.

I nodded again and placed the glass on my nightstand. Anything to get away from the room. She led me down the hallway, to a door between my room and a locked one.

That room scared me too. Because it was locked and I didn't know what was inside.

I was too afraid to ask more about it.

Even the bathroom here was larger than the room I'd shared with five other girls at the orphanage.

"Do you need help?" Ms. Alexander asked after I'd lingered in there for a while.

"No, ma'am," I replied.

"Okay, sweetheart. Wash up. It's time to get back to bed."

I did as she instructed, taking as long as I possibly could to wash my hands.

Stalling.

Finally, she hurried me along. I shuffled back to my room.

"Drink some water," she urged. I did as I was told.

My new mom tucked me back in bed. She gently caressed my cheek. "You know," she began. "I always wanted children." A faraway look was on her face. A face that suddenly seemed older. I hadn't noticed the lines etched into her fair skin before now. "We tried for twenty years."

She sighed wistfully.

I began to feel funny. My skin was tingling. I heard a lot of tiny scuffling sounds.

I realized with a start that I couldn't move. My eyes traveled over the toys again, and I saw the doll with the red dress standing on the balcony of the dollhouse. As it stared at me unblinkingly, it finally dawned on me that that thing looked exactly like a girl who'd been adopted out shortly after I came to the orphanage.

My eyes met Ms. Alexander's.

"It's much easier to keep track if you are all in one place, dear." Her voice sounded far away as she smoothed the hair on my forehead. "It won't be long now. By morning you'll be joining your brothers and sisters."

A twisted smile marred her face as she looked around at the dolls. They were all standing now. Staring at me.

I could feel a hot tear roll down my cheek.

Mrs. Alexander wiped it away.

"Don't cry, my Clara," she said, holding up a blue doll's dress for me to see. "I already have this lovely little gingham picked out... just for you."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Suzie Lockhart attended The Art Institute of Pittsburgh after graduating, but the gnawing urge to write remained. Upon discovering the ability for macabre storytelling, Suzie embraced her inner-creepiness. Writing with her son & business partner, they have over thirty-five short stories, in a dozen paperback publications and a variety of eZines. The duo also won two P&E Readers' Poll awards for anthologies they have edited. Presently, her energy is focused on writing a YA novel.

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Jack the Stripper's Floor Refinishing | *Lori Safranek*

"Tim." Annie nudged her husband's shoulder. "Wake up."

"No."

"Damn it, wake up. Someone's parked their car on the road outside and they're blasting their stereo."

"Can't hear it, I'm asleep," came the voice muffled by his pillow.

She gave him another nudge on his shoulder, this time more of a smack.

"Ow! Listen, lady, my wife isn't going to like you showing up in my bed, trying out your S&M moves, though I kind of like them."

Annie took her pillow and whopped Tim on the head.

"Very funny, now get up and look outside."

"Ugh, why didn't this supposedly loud stereo wake me up? I was sleeping just fine," he asked as he slowly rose from the bed.

"It's the bass, it's so loud, I swear it's shaking our entire house."

Tim grunted and pulled on the jeans he'd worn that day. He scratched his belly and listened for a minute.

Bump.

Bump.

Bump.

"Yeah, it's kind of ridiculous. Some kids partying, probably."

"I don't care if they're partying," Annie grumbled. "They had all this empty farmland out here for partying or parking, why do they choose right in front of our house?"

"Stupid, most likely. That loud ass music has to do something to their brains."

Annie laughed. "Well, whatever's wrong with them, go out there and make them move."

Tim looked at her. "Oh, just go out there and move them? You're sending out little old me against who knows how many great big football players in that car? I could get beat to death, woman. And for your information, I have not paid our insurance premium, so don't think this is your lucky day.

Annie pointed toward the door. "Go, little old you. I have faith in you. And I paid the insurance, so we're good."

Tim gasped. "Vile woman, you are a schemer! Okay, I'm going out there. If I don't come back, call 911. Or your insurance agent, I suppose."

Annie laughed as her husband headed out of the bedroom. She heard the front door open and shut.

Tim walked down their front sidewalk and toward the Ford Explorer parked just barely in front of their property. Damn kids. The bass was really pumping, even worse now that he was outside. How could anyone stand that inside their vehicle? He tried to see how many people were sitting inside the SUV but the windows were dark. Crap, were they gang members?

I am turning into a real country boy, thinking like that, he thought. Moving out here with Annie has changed my attitudes. I see dark windows, I assume it's gang members. Who knows, it could be a couple of retirees, reliving high school memories, necking out in the boondocks. Sure, Tim, that's what it is.

He was close enough now to see through the windows and all he could see was the steering wheel and two empty seats. What the hell? *Oh, Lord, tell me they are not in the back seat, naked. I do not want to see that.*

Squeamishly, Tim took a step away from the Explorer and noticed a decal on the side of the SUV. *Jack the Stripper's Floor Refinishing*. Ok, this dude has a strange sense of humor. Tim knew he wouldn't hire the guy. Just reading the name of the business gave him goose bumps. That pissed him off and he marched back to the window and knocked loudly.

"Hey! Whoever's in there, open up!" His voice was loud and firm. "Shut your damn stereo off and move your car away from my house."

No answer. Tim pounded again. "I said turn your damn stereo off! Now!"

Tim heard no movement inside the truck. He leaned closer to the glass and cupped his hands around his eyes to peek inside. There was no one inside. Damn it. He jerked the door open and confirmed that no one was inside the SUV though the stereo continued to pound, louder now with the door open.

Tim stomped around to the driver's door and flung it open. He fumbled for a minute but found the keys in the ignition. "Thank God." He turned the power off, silencing the throbbing bass and aggravating song.

He tried to pull the key out of the ignition, yanking twice before finally just giving the door a kick and giving up. He slammed the door shut, swearing at the idiot who would leave his car running in the middle of nowhere and even worse, leave music at top volume, disturbing a quiet summer night.

A mosquito buzzed near Tim's ear, one of his pet peeves about summertime. He swatted at the bug, got it then realized he had smeared blood on his own face and his hand. Ugh. He hated the sight of blood, even the tiny amount a mosquito's death left. Damn it. What a night. He kicked the Explorer again, out of spite.

Tim limped back to the house since his angry kicking had left his bare toes sore. As he got close to the house, he realized he had left the front door open. Marvelous. More mosquitos. He walked in and shut and locked the door behind him.

"Annie, you're not going to believe this shit," he yelled. "Some jackoff left the stereo blaring and the engine running, and just took off! The truck was empty!"

He started up the stairs to their bedroom. "Did you hear me, hon? Asshole parked it right in front of our house, then left it like that."

Annie still didn't answer. If that woman had fallen asleep, he was waking her up and making her listen to him. After all, he was out there because of her. She had better be awake.

"Annie? Wake up, Annie girl!"

He walked into their bedroom but the bed was empty. The blankets and sheets were twisted and laying half off the bed, but Annie wasn't there.

"Annie?" Tim called for her again.

He walked past the bathroom and back downstairs, and finally into the kitchen. No Annie. His heart was beating a little faster, although he didn't know why. He had left her safe and sound in the house.

"Annie! Annie! Answer me, honey!"

Tim couldn't find her anywhere and was ready to run upstairs again when he noticed the front door standing open. Dark stains stood out on the beige carpet in the hallway.

"Annie? Annie, where the hell are you?" he screamed as he ran out the front door.

As he stepped off the front porch, his foot slipped in something wet. He looked down to find a trail of the dark stain he'd seen inside. He bent down and touched it. His fingertips came away red. Blood, it was fresh blood. His mind could not take it in. Why was blood on his sidewalk?

Before he could react, he heard an engine roar to life. His head snapped up. It was the Ford Explorer!

Bump

Bump

Bump.

The music was playing again.

He scrambled to his feet. What was happening?

He could hear the words to the song.

"I'm that thing that goes bump in the night, I'm the shadow who carries a knife,

I'm that thing that goes bump in the night, I'm the monster who steals your wife . . ."

Tim ran after the Explorer but it was speeding away. He kept running until he collapsed in the road, still hearing that

Bump

Bump

Bump of the bass as red taillights faded into the dark.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Lori Safranek is the author of the Freaked Out horror short story series on Amazon, as well as several horror stories published in anthologies. She spent several years as a newspaper reporter in Nebraska before deciding to try her hand at fiction writing. Lori lives in Omaha, Nebraska, with her husband and two dogs. She's an avid fan of anything zombie and a little disappointed that she lives in the middle of the country, because it'll be the last place the zombies will reach. Or will it?

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“No good will come of this,” said old Bojana, standing by the stream.

“Aye, poor thing. Her soul is damned,” answered her younger friend Cveta. Almost all the village was gathered now, on both sides of the river and on the little stone bridge over it.

The first woman snorted, “Bull tits. That’s just what the priests say to keep everyone a-feared. It’s him I’m speaking of.”

“Him?”

“Him that drove her to it.”

“Wladan Petrovic, I hear tell.” Cveta spat on the ground. Old enough not to be chased by ribald gallants, she was not yet so old as to forget the sting.

“No one will say a thing.”

They stood watching for a few minutes longer as several of the younger men took off their boots and rolled up their loose trousers to wade out into the stream where a white pile of skirts was visible, tangled in the reeds just under the bridge. Clucking and shaking their heads they walked away, just as Goran, the miller’s assistant, came staggering up, shirt flapping loose and hair still filled with the garbage from wherever he’d slept the night away. Pushing through the crowd he came to a stop on the slimy rocks at the edge of water and fell to his knees. Goran wailed and tore his hair, his tears, snot, and spittle falling in the mud. “Rada! My child, my flower, forgive me for not protecting you!”

Without turning back Bojana said, “Pssst. He’ll be dead before harvest. She was the only thing keeping him from drinking himself to death as it was.” Cveta grunted in agreement and both made the sign of protection.

The rains came just the right amount this spring. The streams did not flood but filled their banks, high enough for the cattle to drink deeply without fouling the water. The rapids burbled and trout darted over the gravel. The weather was perfect for Trinity Week and the children gathered the birch branches to build bowers, decorated with glass beads. The women whispered the old name, Green Week, to each other and tied charms to the branches of the willow that trailed into the shadowy pools above the bridge. The men broached the distillation from last harvest and boasted of their conquests, past and anticipated.

Jyorg Wladanyic was a boaster. He had reason. Jyorg could boast of having studied two full winters at the monastery school in Lasota. He could (and did) boast of the herds and flocks his father grazed in the meadows. He could boast of a strong back and golden hair, but he did not. Instead Jyorg smiled, to let his eyes pave the way for his hands, as he made the rounds of the market square. A slap here, a tickle there, as he helped himself to bread and apples from the tables. Some of the farmer’s daughters laughed and demanded kisses in exchange for cheese. Others forced their lips into wide smiles and held still, hoping that his roaming hands would go only so far before something brighter and shinier caught his eye.

That evening there was music and dancing in the town square. Tomorrow would be the procession, with the children dressed in their cleanest, crowned with flowers, carrying the totems of the old gods in the guise of the new saints. Everyone who could get away from their fields and byres came to dance in the circle of beaten earth and drink by the bonfires. Jyorg danced much and drank more, laughing uproariously as he shared and spilled the sharp plum rakie. It was nearly midnight when he headed for home, across the little arched stone bridge, to the big wood and plaster house on the other side of the river. Jyorg walked quite well for a man who had drunk so much, but then he was tall and fit. A final bottle, carelessly appropriated from the butcher's wife, dangled in his hand. He sang a ribald song in his strong young voice. The sound carried over the water as he walked up the modest span. Carefully setting the bottle on the stone lip of the rail, Jyorg loosened the front of his trousers. He was tall enough to direct his stream out above rail as he stood, feet apart, looking about him. The moon was over half full and the smell of water hyacinth and new growth on the spruce filled the clear air. He grinned. Tomorrow would be a good day.

The air turned wet and cold as Jyorg felt, almost more than heard, a long sigh pass softly over him, like a wind through a barn. Shivering he glanced over his shoulder and jumped, leaving a misdirected spray of piss on the rail. On the opposite rail of the bridge, a hand reached over the lip and a second long sigh brushed over Jyorg's ears, faint and unsteady. The hand scratched and patted about, making slight gritty sounds, scrabbling for purchase with long pale fingers. The flesh was grey and ragged, shrunk to the bones and away from the nails. Shaking, Jyorg did up his trousers and turned completely around, pressed back against the rail. A thin forearm appeared, unfolding and then flexing at the elbow. The mottled skin caught the light like the birch branches that hung all about the village. And like the birch, pieces of it peeled back, showing layers beneath. Jyorg's breath sped up and he sucked in a great lungful of decay, the smell like half the wolf-kill deer he had once stumbled on in the forest, its throat rippling and heaving with maggots. He retched, bread, cheese, and rakie fouling the stones of the bridge. When Jyorg opened his eyes, the night was clear again. The breeze was fragrant and an owl hooted softly in the distance. He whirled around, then stumbled to the opposite rail, steeling himself to look over. The water rippled and gleamed below, reflecting the stars.

Cursing, Jyorg grabbed the rakie and took a deep pull, then spat it out. That cheap bastard Duzhan, he wasn't clearing the heads off the rakie! Poisoning a man, he was! Jyorg dropped the bottle and staggered down to the water's edge at the foot of the bridge, kneeling and scooping up water into his mouth and over his face.

"Sir? Are you well?"

Jyorg started up and looked around, blinking water out of his eyes, then flinging himself back on grass when he saw a dim form on the far bank. He heard a delicate giggle and rubbed his face, trying to see. A young woman was knee deep in the water, stepping out of the reeds. She wore a loose embroidered blouse like all the women of the village, and a petticoat. Both were wet and clung to her form. The shape of her full breasts and her nipples, cold from the water, peaked under the fabric. The cloth was almost transparent across her belly and he could see the

indentation of her navel and the darkness below between the curves of her thighs. Scrambling to his feet Jyorg said, "I thought you were someone else." The maiden laughed, "Who else would I be?" Her hair was pale and shone silvery in the moonlight, wet against her back as she turned and began walking upstream in the water.

"Wait!" called Jyorg as he hurried along on his bank of the river, "Where are you going?"

She gestured with one slender arm, "That way."

"What is your name? Can I walk with you a way?"

"One question at a time." The maiden's lips curved off even teeth as she smiled at Jyorg. "Some company would be lovely." She came to a willow tree and passed among the trailing fronds, dragging her fingers over the charms tied to the branches. A bell tinkled. Jyorg started into the water, "It will be more congenial to walk together," he said, floundering in up to his waist and kicking out into the pool. "I'll wait," said the woman, pausing in the shadow of the willows.

Jyorg was a strong swimmer and the river was not wide, even here where the current ran lazily. He came up with water streaming from him and grinned at his charming new acquaintance, who smiled back, tilting her head to one side. The willow cast dappled shadows across her silvery cheek. "A kiss for my efforts?" Jyorg said as he set his arms about her waist and pulled her against his chest. "It seems only fair," she answered, twining her hands behind his neck. Jyorg bent her back and covered her mouth with his, pressing with his tongue. She tasted like the coldest spring water on a hot day and her breasts felt soft against his chest. One hand went to her buttocks to bring her against him and the other took her breast. She laughed softly and her hands went to the front of his trousers. He began pulling up her shirt, anxious to feel the flesh under the fabric, "So eager," she murmured against his lips, licking his teeth lightly. "Just like your father."

Jyorg stopped and pulled his head up. "What?" Looking down in the dimness, he saw only the faint gleam of light on white teeth and pale eyes before hands took his head and drew him back down for another kiss. The soft lips were cold and the fingers clutching his cheeks were hard. He drew her back against him, but then felt the flesh shrink in his hands. Soft hips under his finger became slippery, like the mossy rocks beneath his feet. When he started to pull back, the fingers holding his head clung, nails biting his ears and temples. The soft tongue pressing against his became hard, lashing deep. Icy water filled Jyorg's mouth filled with icy water, and he fought for breath. It was not just water, something else – a roiling, living mass that flooded his throat, freezing and tickling. Struggling and gagging, he managed to break free and fall back into the water. He spat and gagged, heaving out a stream of frantically coiling maggots. The water had turned frigid and slimy. Slick ribbons of weed coiled around his legs as he choked and tried to scream away the twitching, squirming things under his tongue and deep in his nostrils. Jyorg looked up, trying to see who or what he had followed here. He could only manage a gargling, desperate whine instead of a scream, and he soiled himself, briefly warming the water.

The thing standing in the water still had long shining hair and at least one breast, so if he'd been able to form a word or thought, he might still call it a maiden. Jutting shoulders tented gray

skin and strips of rags, or mottled skin, peeled back like birch bark from ribs and arms. Above the water, the thing's hips and thighs stood out, spare and slippery. Still trying to scream and thrash his way upright, one of Jyorg's hands broke the surface and clutched in his fingers was a slick, gray rag. Looking at it and then looking up again he wailed. It was a pocket of flesh, slid off her breast in his grasp like the skin of an over ripe plum. A withered nipple caressed his palm. Gagging, he threw it away and struggled backwards. His head fell underwater and his shoulders dragged against the rocks and gravel. Pushing up out of the water, Jyorg managed to fall against the bank. Grasping a willow root the young man tried to pull himself upright and then his eye caught movement in the branches above. A hoarse whimper escaped him. If he had anything left in him to puke or piss out, or he would have. There were two more emaciated figures in the branches.

One of the creatures gurgled—a wet, dragging sound. It had great pallid eyes, glowing like the moon on a foggy night. Huddled above, clutching the twigs with long, bony fingers, it was clad only in fine white hair, tangled all about it in the leaves and branches like a web. Its knees folded up next to its head and its toes grasped the branches. “Jyorgy,” it chuckled. “Jyorgy Wladanyic.”

Another voice sighed and whispered, “Yes. Yessyess, sissterrss...” Eyes rolling frantically, Jyorg stared at the third thing, descending the bole of the willow tree. Its black hair dangled in greasy ropes toward the ground as it clung upside down to the trunk and where there should be eyes, only empty pits gaped in its skull. Teeth gleamed in the dimness as it twisted its neck up to look at him. Jyorg wept and shook, “Please. Please...”

“Please? Please what?” The first creature spoke, its face hidden in shadows, its voice still sweet and musical. Jyorg tried to speak but his jaw just shook while snot and tears, ran down his face. The decayed maid bent forward towards him, bringing with her the scent of putrefaction. “Leave you alone, perhaps?” She put her face down in front of his. The forehead, one eye, and the cheek below it were perfect, the eye blue and fringed with dark lashes under an arched eyebrow. The softly curved cheek was smooth and white. But there the delicate skin ended in rags, dangling around the empty cavity of the nose, the bare teeth, and mortified gums. The other eye was a slick, lidless grey marble, trembling in its socket. A sharp nail trailed very gently across his cheek. “The young master wants us to leave him alone, sisters.” The other two laughed, the wet gurgle echoing over the scratchy whisper. “Yes, yes, please leave me alone...” Jyorg wept and pleaded.

“Ah, Jyorgy, sweetling,” said the maid. He shook his head frantically as she lifted his chin with her bony fingers. “Relax. It will be quick.” Her mouth came over his once again, the rotting flesh of her tongue nudging his teeth. He tried to struggle but hands came around his ankles and wrists. He could not scream and couldn't move his head. Wet chuckles and the soft rustle of the willows muffled his whimpers. Jyorg's eyes bulged and flooded with blood.

“Drowned did he?” mumbled old Cveta, as she stood by the bridge, holding her niece's arm and listening to the sounds of the crowd gathered by the willows.

“Drank too much rakie and fell in the river. They found the bottle shattered on the bridge,” answered Ljuba. Cveta snorted, “It’s been twenty-five years coming.” Ljuba shook her head and rolled her eyes affectionately at her blind aunt. “Auntie, Jyorg was only twenty-one.” Whatever Cveta was going to answer, she forgot as she tilted her head to listen to one particular voice, raised above all others. “Jyorgi, my boy, light of my days!” wailed Wladan Petrovic, “Forgive me for not protecting you!” His sobs echoed across the sparkling water.

“Idiot.” Cveta spat. “You don’t protect against the Rusalka. Except by not making them.” She made the sign of protection.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: I write social commentary, romance, and science fiction. Sometimes I keep them separate, sometimes I don’t. After fourteen years as a commercial litigator I work as a litigation consultant, writer, and freelance troublemaker. When not preoccupied with the infamous “work/family balance,” I enjoy reading biographies, baking yeast bread, and digging in my garden.

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A Reckoning | A. F. Stewart

I stared into the black eve, past the frosted windowpane. The crackled gnawing of the hearth fire relieved the onerous silence in the room. Oh, *that* delicious irony, knowing how many times I longed for silence and it comes tonight. The one night I needed clamor, the raucous noise of life to ease my burden.

It’s fitting, though, even if I yearned for different. This quiet night for what was to come. One’s death should arrive with soft footsteps.

Wait.

Shifting shadows, the rattling of bones. A gasp escaped me.

Where was it?

Then... fetid breath tickled at my neck.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: 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 ventured into the light on occasion. She is fond of good books, action movies, sword collecting, geeky things, comic books, and oil painting as a hobby.

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The Lock | *Miracle Austin*

Gerrie Knots heard many tales about the Garmountsville Hotel throughout high school.

It sat up on Wasp Hill. Many swore the grounds were haunted and whispered stories about what they'd witnessed.

She never believed the tales. So she decided to stay at that hotel one night, just to prove her best friend, Hazel, wrong.

Hazel begged her not to stay there.

Gerrie refused to listen.

Hazel texted Gerrie the night before her trip.

H: Gerrie, please, please, don't go!

G: Whatever! I'm going to prove to you that your crazy tale is just that... crazy!

H: If you stay there, then always lock your door and never forget to fasten the silver chained-lock after midnight.

G: Sure. I'll pack a dozen garlic cloves, a few wooden stakes, and special ultraviolet high beam flashlight while I'm at it.

Gerrie drove to the hotel and checked into room 797. After she rested for a bit, she decided to tour the small city for a few hours. She ate dinner at *Serena's Secrets*, a family-owned Italian restaurant—two refills of garlic fettuccine and several breadsticks later ushered in her sleep zone earlier than planned. By the time she made it back to her room, she just wanted to curl up in bed and drift off to sleep. It was almost 11:30 p.m.

Gerrie's cell phone beeped—a text from Hazel lit up the screen.

H: Please, please, don't forget to lock your door with the silver-chained lock before midnight.

G: Hazel, please... please, go to sleep. I am. See you soon.

Gerrie threw her cell on the bedside table and jumped into bed. After about twenty minutes, she heard something bumping at her door, and the door squealed unbearably loud, as it opened. She turned over and grabbed her cell phone from the bedside table.

She turned the flashlight on and shined it all over the room. Her door was wide open.

Gerrie rose out of bed and walked over to the door. She saw nothing in the hallway. She shut the door and locked it. She noticed the silver chain swinging back and forth.

She heard something bump into the wall in the closet. She turned the lights on and opened the closet door. Only empty hangers swung back and forth, making a soft clanking sound; an ironing board rested on a hook inside and an extra blanket sat on a shelf.

She laughed to herself and mumbled, "Hazel's crazy text just got me wound up."

She turned off the lights, peeled back the comforter and sheets, and lay back down in bed.

Gerrie drifted off to sleep after thirty minutes or so—something fell onto the floor causing a loud crashing sound. She jumped up with her heart racing and cell phone in hand. She shined the flashlight in the area, only to discover it was the antique ceramic lamp from her bedside table.

She was too tired to clean up the mess and figured that she would take care of it tomorrow morning before checking out.

She pulled the covers over her head and closed her eyes again... She then felt something cold licking each of her toes.

She opened her eyes and grabbed her cell phone once more. Gerrie slowly pulled the covers up off her feet. The licking ceased. She rose up and crawled down to the foot of the bed.

She saw nothing.

She pulled the comforter up on the side of the bed to look under the bed. It was vacant except for a few dust bunnies and scraps of paper.

Before she rose up, hot, stinging breath showered her neck as a deep, garbled voice whispered, "*You forgot to use the silver chain to lock your door.*"

She turned around to see what it was and before she could identify whatever it was, she felt its long claws piercing her neck. A line of blood dribbled down her chest and splattered onto the white sheet. Before it could finish her off, her phone beeped.

Gerrie tried to grab it, but it jerked it from her hand. Within seconds, it loosened its other claw from around her neck, leaped from the bed, and jumped out the window.

She was barely able to dial 9-1-1; she didn't recall being transported by an ambulance to the ER for immediate surgery.

Her vocal cords were severely damaged and swollen from the attack and surgery. Gerrie was lucky the doctors and nurses were even able to save them. She overheard someone say that she may never speak again; it hurt to even whisper.

The hospital contacted Hazel.

She walked into Gerrie's room, grabbed her hand, and bent down to whisper in Gerrie's ear, "I told you to lock your door with the silver chain."

Gerrie pointed at a notepad and pen on her bedside table. Hazel grabbed them and handed them to her. Gerrie wrote as best as she could on the pad, her hands trembling with each letter she attempted to write: "What attacked me?"

"It's called a Ta-Wan-De-Ran," Hazel said.

Gerrie wrote out a few squiggly question marks, as Hazel continued to explain.

"Soul-stealers... they prey on those who don't believe. You see, that hotel's grounds have been infested with them for a long time and only the silver chain lock keeps them out. They hate silver, and the chain would've protected you, if you would've just listened to me. Your cell phone must possess silver accents because the Ta-Wan-De-Ran retreated from your room, before it could rip out your vocal cords to gobble up your unleashed screams and suck your soul out. Where's your cell phone?"

Gerrie pointed at the dresser next to the hospital bed.

Hazel pulled the door open and picked her cell phone up.

"Hold out your hand, Gerrie," Hazel said.

Gerrie grimaced and held her hand out. Hazel dropped the cell in her hand.

At first, it felt fine to Gerrie and then it started to feel like someone was holding her hand over a heated flame. She dropped it on the floor and noticed a bed of blisters inside her throbbing palm.

“Just what I thought, Gerrie... I’m so sorry.” Tears ran down Hazel’s cheeks. She pulled latex gloves out of her coat pocket, slipped them over her hands, and reached over to place her hands over Gerrie’s nose and mouth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Miracle Austin is a YA/NA cross-genre author who works in the social work world by day and the writer’s world by night. Doll, her debut, paranormal novel, will be released on 2-14-16. She enjoys attending diverse book festivals and comic conventions. Miracle resides in Texas with her family.

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Dear Michael | *Selena Kenworthy*

Back then I was a lonely girl and so, I was delighted when you came into in my life. Finally I had met somebody who didn't want to change or fix me. My dreadful fashion sense, my unruly hair or my grubby, untidy flat did not bother you. You just liked me, and that was the best feeling ever.

In the beginning we had so much fun, just you and me, cozy evenings spent watching television and listening to music together. We discussed anything and everything, things on the news, like the awful murders in the area, the police were warning young women not to go out alone at night. Do you remember? You let me ramble on and on about my insecurities, my woeful attempts to be accepted socially and told me none of it mattered. You said “Celebrate who you are, revel in your awkwardness, poke a stick at convention.” I was so glad to have you there in the flat, you made me feel secure when there was so much stuff about crime in the papers. Remember I had no one else, no family, my mother was dead and my father was goodness knows who. There were no friends, no boyfriends only painful memories of school bullies and looks of disgust from those more genetically blessed than I. You made me feel properly loved for the first time in my life.

I worked in a supermarket but I went to night school after finishing work and I did well. I got some qualifications and then found a dull, but dependable job in an office. I managed to save a deposit for this place and then, of course, when I moved in I met you. We became a team, don't you remember? Us against the world! We used to love spending our time waiting for new things to be delivered for the flat, a couch, a table, a lamp. We decorated the place and spent forever rearranging the furniture so it looked its best. Sometimes while I was out you would rearrange it

all again by yourself, a bit too creatively at times. Lamps don't work very well upside down.

Once the flat was looking smart we started our lovely cozy evenings together and it wasn't long before you were in my bed every night. Your speciality was stealing the duvet, I used to wake up freezing cold and then you would mess around and not give it back. But you were so handsome I would forgive you anything. You were my best friend. I am still not sure what you saw in me at first, but I started, little by little, to change. I bought some new clothes, shoes and make up, lost a little weight, started making an effort with my hair. It was all for you, I didn't want to lose you, and you gave me confidence to try all these things. I thought if you could love me then so could others. I think it was there it started to go wrong. You didn't like me talking to other people and you certainly did not like me bringing anyone home. Sophie from work called in one day unexpectedly and you went berserk after she left. You waited in the bedroom pacing, I sensed your anger, and then when she went I could not believe your reaction. You smashed my Mum's mirror in temper and you knew that was precious. It was spiteful. I just need to tell how I felt, don't feel bad about it now.

From then on it got worse. The more independent I became the angrier you got. The cozy nights became less frequent. You were so restless you could never sit still and you paced the flat, banging the furniture with your fists. Then when I was out you started systematically damaging the flat, making scratch marks in the paintwork on the doors or on the table top.

I tried to remain calm, my own growing agitation seemed to feed yours. I went out more which made you worse. I needed to get away from you, I needed space. The duvet game became a nightmare every night and moved on to you pushing me out of the bed and then running around slamming the doors in the apartment. Then I could hear you scratching at the furniture at night, I could never catch you in the act but I knew it was you. Lack of sleep made my work suffer, my boss became concerned, I explained that I was having relationship difficulties, she was supportive thank goodness.

I started getting really frightened when you threw that coffee cup at me and it cut me just above my eyebrow. Friends at work advised me to leave and said the abuse would only get worse. They were right, it did. Once you woke me in the night with your hands around my neck, I could make out your teeth gnashing in the dim light. Hate seeped from you. Sometimes when you did something really mean to me you cried and you would sit on the floor in curled up in a ball rocking back and forth. It upset me to see you like that despite the fact that you had hurt me.

Then you just disappeared for a while, after the neck incident. I think you frightened yourself at how far you went. I missed the good times, our friendship, obviously not the violent bit. I thought you were not going to come back and part of me was relieved I have to admit. It would never be the same would it? After all you had crossed a line; I could not trust you anymore.

You did return however, I heard the familiar scratching again one night. In the morning you were all smiles and behaved as if nothing had changed. I was speechless, I just went along with it all and left for work not knowing what I was going to do.

That night, returning late from work in the dark winter evening, from the outside the flat

looked as though there was a party going on. Inside the lights were flashing on and off and music was blasting. When I entered I could not believe what you had done. Every piece of furniture had been turned upside down, some things piled up on others. Anything that was breakable lay shattered in pieces on the floor, any fabric in the flat was ripped and shredded, you had thrown some disgusting slime on the walls of our once beautiful home. The place stank of something I had never smelt before, all I knew was that it was foul and evil. You were crouched in the corner a smirk on your face, hate in your eyes, it was then I saw you then for what you were. Terrified, I tried to leave but you were on me like a pouncing cat, hissing through your gritted teeth as if you were going to bite me. I was so frightened, you moved away and then you started launching anything you could lay your hands on at me. You produced an unearthly roar from your huge, ugly, wide open mouth and followed it by puking more of the slime at my feet. I made for the door again and reached it before you, and I ran out into the dark street. It was cold and raining and I was sobbing. I had no money, no bag, no keys, no coat, but I simply had to get away from you. I started walking down the road in the dark and was relieved to see a figure in the alley by the house.

Thinking back now I was an idiot, I mean who flees a haunted flat and then asks a strange man lurking alone in a dark alleyway if they can help? It did not occur to me to think what he was doing there, loitering in the dark, I was just so afraid of you. When he hit me the first time with the hammer I wondered if you two were friends, if perhaps this had been a plan. He hit me again and I felt some thick liquid spill down my face, it felt warm like sunshine. He hit me again and again and eventually I fell asleep.

So, here we are you and me again. I have decided I'm not going to be like you. I don't want to stay here. Of course it is regrettable that we both died so early and with such violence, but I am not going to hang around here and make others miserable like you do just because of my own bad luck or was it stupidity? I am moving on, leaving this world and so you should Michael, I think it is time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Selena Kenworthy lives in Cheshire, England with her husband, three children, dog and two cats. In between working, running kids to sports activities, cooking and dog walking she loves writing short stories and novels. Horror and speculative fiction stories are her favourite writing genres but, she has been known to dabble in the odd romance story.

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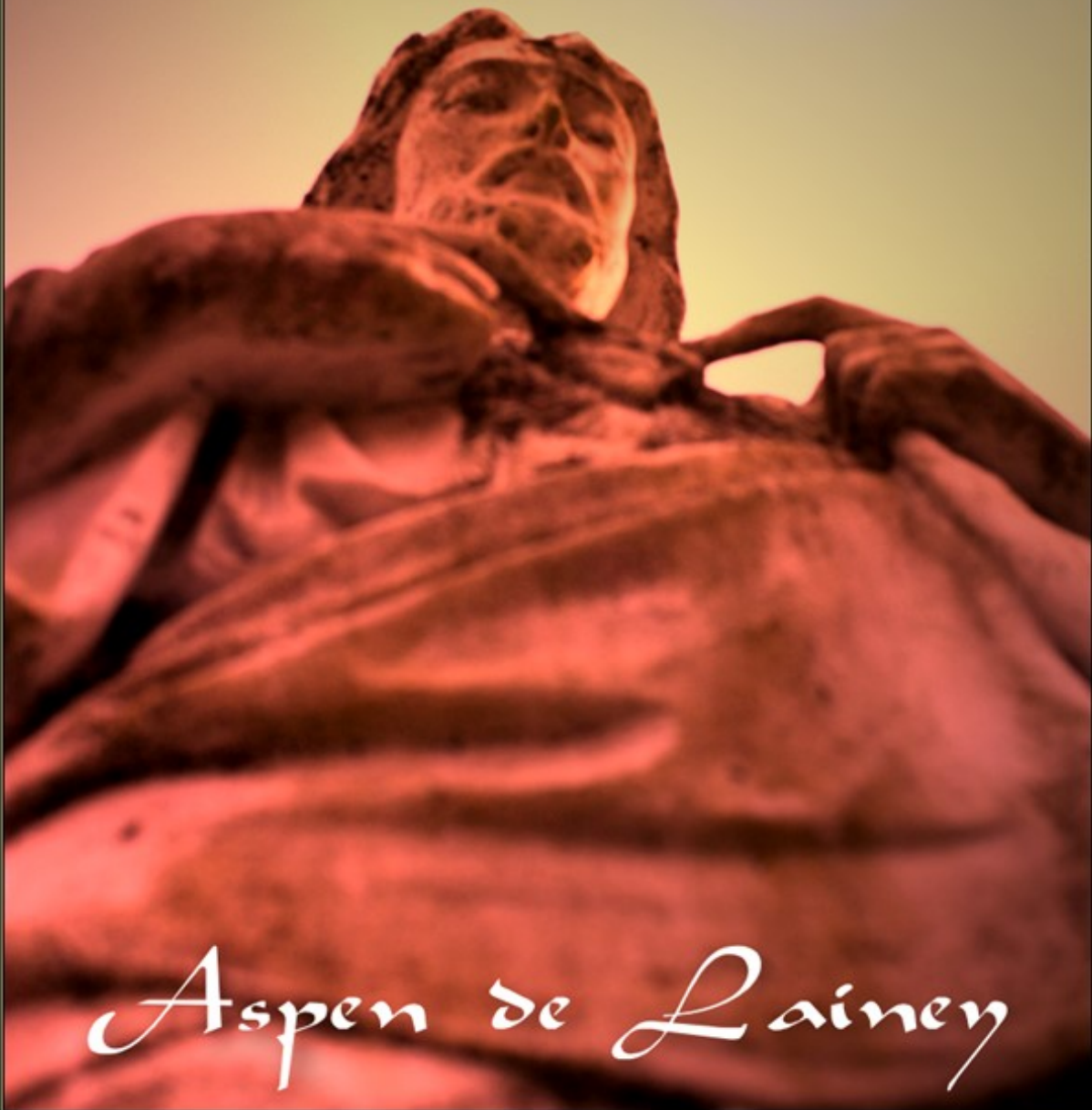
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“Any change in 201?” Lynn Evans asked, adjusting a sprig of uncooperative blonde hair with a bobby pin. She pulled a time card out and filled in the hours after glancing at her watch.

“In Josh? No. I’m afraid his condition is unchanged,” assistant nurse Jamison replied. “Did you put that feather next to his bed?”

Lynn didn’t answer. She bit down on her lower lip, staring at the time card.

Nurse Jamison kept her brown eyes down, filling out a patient chart. “But hey, his new roommate Jackson McCrue’s another story. His vitals looked good at last check.”

“Really? Well, that’s fast. He was just admitted to this unit two nights ago, wasn’t he? The motorcycle wreck?”

“Yep. The postop complications look like they’re clearing,” Jamison shook her head. “Who would’ve figured. All that cranial damage, but it looks like just maybe he’ll turn around.” An optimistic smile hovered on Evie Jamison’s parted lips as she shrugged, lifting her hands up in a question. “Goes to show you there’s always room for a surprise,” she paused, “no matter what the head nurse says to expect.”

Lynn laughed. “Well, that’s a nice surprise for a change. Working the PVS coma ward takes more of a toll than I’d have thought.”

“Well, the Persistent Vegetative State crew is a quiet bunch,” Evie said below her breath, an eyebrow raised.

“You’re terrible!” Lynn slapped the air, but bit back a smile.

Dr. Jacobs entered the muted green hallway from one of the rooms in the back. His dark complexion smooth and unchanging as he scanned the patient chart in the folder then stuffed it back into the slot on the wall as he entered the next room.

Lynn and Evie watched Dr. Jacobs’ smooth gestures and gave each other a look.

Lynn smirked. “He’s something.”

“Tell me about it.” Evie filed her paperwork and blotted on some dark red lipstick. “Well, have a good night, if you can on this late shift.” She gave two kisses to the air.

“You too. Now get out of here!” Lynn cackled. She turned to the evening’s patients, thumbing through the records. Her eyes lingered on McCrue’s notes. She watched Jacobs leave the ward, the long gait of his easy stride. Half attracted, half repulsed, she couldn’t help but let her eyes follow the curve of his firm body beneath his white lab coat.

Okay, cougar. Stop staring at Dr. Beautiful and go back to work. Lynn redirected herself, chuckling. Then she walked over to room 201, her white clogs shuffling until she hesitated at the door. She scanned Jacobs’ notes. *How much could he glean from a 15 second observation?*

Patient unresponsive. Vitals strong.

Lynn hadn’t seen much of the newcomer, McCrue. She stood in the doorway for a moment, taking in the bleachy aroma, spotless tile, and the thin veil of a curtain separating the two beds. The evening sky darkened, and the dull light of the hallway lit her actions. She didn’t

like turning on all the lights in the rooms, even if they were unconscious, and mostly worked beneath the light of the monitors.

On the wall opposite the beds hung a pair of bulletin boards, one for each patient. McCrue's was empty. He hadn't been here long enough to accumulate the kind of useless token or sad reminder of the life he once led.

On Josh's board hung a few old get well cards, wrinkling at the edges, one snapshot of his parents and another of a him with a busty woman at a beach. She touched the small feather she'd set beside his bed for luck.

Lynn frowned as her eyes moved from the wall over to the young, lean Josh laying motionless in the bed. A whirl of tubes hung, intersecting his arm with fluids and medicine. His mouth half open, held an intubation tube for oxygen. She couldn't help but care for him, he looked so like a replica of her son. She set a hand on the edge of his face, pushing back a coil of black hair behind his ears.

Behind the blue feather sat a row of pictures from the college football team. A small plastic rooster, and another card addressed to 'Roo.' It looked like a woman's handwriting, if you can guess such a thing. Big curly lettering, neat. Signed with a heart. Lynn wondered if it was the same girl from the picture and smiled, thinking about a big college jock like Josh being dubbed 'Rooster.' *Probably cock of the walk*, she thought, straightening the pale blue sheet at his broad shoulders.

Every shift Lynn came in to wish him well, pray. No one seemed to notice, so she kept at it. Hoping one day, he'd wake up. Like her son hadn't. She adjusted the flowers in the vase on the table, glad to see so many of his friends were visiting. The bright white daisies and sunflowers gave a sunny burst of cheer to the plain sterile room.

Lynn pushed open the blue curtain and set her eyes on the newcomer, McCrue, and at once he opened his eyes, as if on cue. She jumped back, letting out a little gasp, bumping the edge of Josh's bed.

"Hello," he said.

Lynn glanced at Jackson McCrue's monitor, her eyes wide. She needed to confirm the science. *Could he be awake? Functioning?* She swallowed hard, forcing herself to stare at him, that monstrous face with words coming out of a hole of a mouth.

"Yes, I'm here. See?" McCrue pointed at the buzzing beeping equipment monitoring his heart rate, brain activity, and breathing. He tugged the tube from his nostrils. "Glad it wasn't like his," he nodded to Josh's intubation tube, snugly fit into the trachea.

Lynn stood silent, shocked. She checked herself. Evie said his vitals were improved. She felt a little annoyed with herself for her reaction. *I'm just surprised*. She forced a smile, but couldn't look at his face. *Healing. Isn't that what my job is all about?*

"You can't imagine the pain I'm in. Could I get something for it?" He pushed a smile slowly onto his face. The effort looked excruciating. Around the reddened lines and scars it looked impossibly sore, bruised, and raw. "Bike wrecks are worse than I thought." He reached to touch his face, stopped by a tangle of tubes holding his hands in place.

"I'm sorry," Lynn moved to him, "Let me get that for you." She brought her attention to him, sliding the curtain closed on Rooster.

"Welcome back from the Land of Nod," she said. "Let's get the doctor in to take a look at you." She adjusted the tubes, gently lifting the tape from his arm so he could reach his face.

Lynn poured some water into a dark pink plastic cup. She fitted a lid to it and popped in a straw. "Here you go," she offered. When she turned back to face him she bit back a sound of disgust.

Jackson peeled up the eye patch covering one eye. He pressed his fingers all over the edge of the bruised and reddened flesh.

Lynn struggled to make eye contact. The eye he'd uncovered still bulged from the socket, directly in the line of the skull fracture. The surgery was so recent it hadn't had time to heal. The other eye was open and alert, but streaked with bright red lines crisscrossing the whites. Carotid-cavernous fistula, CCF was the technical name. The severely bloodshot eye looked like a swirl of red marble. The red swirled in his eyes like a bucket of blood was dumped into a gallon of milk. The veins engorged from the impact of the accident. Being able to identify it didn't make it less horrific to see.

Jackson took a long, grateful sip of water, ignoring the tense expression on Lynn's face. "Been out long?" he looked at his Josh's bed, a dark blot behind the curtain.

"Longer than some," Lynn said, her voice flat.

"Bet my face looks like a *momento mori*," Jackson squinted, then cringed.

Lynn's face went blank as an open question. She didn't move in any direction, just forced herself to look at the patient, like nothing was wrong.

Jackson pressed on, "You know, a reminder of death. Like a skull or a bone. Writers used to keep that kind of thing around to remind them to seize the day. That's what I am now. A reminder of death."

Lynn looked at the reflection. His face was an ugly blur of angry red lines, bandages, and swelling. Hardly a face at all beneath the mess of scars and stitching. "Don't be too hard on yourself. You're lucky. It was a bad wreck. The surgeons didn't know if you'd even make it." She pulled a face, then added, "Maybe I shouldn't have said that." She went pink as she turned to face him. Her voice scolding as she asked, "Were you wearing a helmet?"

"Can I get out of here now?" Jackson asked. He reached a bandaged arm for the bed rail.

"Not quite. You're going to need monitoring and lots of tests. We have to make sure there isn't any permanent damage before we send you on your way."

"What about my roommate? How damaged is he?"

Lynn frowned. "We can't talk about other patient information. Sorry. HIPPA and all that."

"I'm just being neighborly. Checking on my roomie. He looks like he's got all the fans," he pointed at the cards and flowers. He stared at her, adding, "So what's with the feather?"

"Just a token. Good luck. Power." Lynn looked away.

"Ah, I was thinking flight. Marking when it's time to leave, you know. Should I pray? Or is it time to give up?"

Lynn's frown deepened. "We can't ever give up." She glanced at the empty bulletin board, hoping someone cared about this kid. "Not ever."

McCrue stared at her. Something in her face betrayed that she had given up, lots of times. Maybe not on the guy one bed over, but on plenty of others. And it had hurt. Her face was deep with wrinkles, not related to age. She looked young enough to have a kid his age. Maybe forty-five, but her face told another story. He would've guessed her heart was threadbare.

"Well, what if he can't get better? What if I always look like this?"

Lynn swallowed hard, sensing something churning in her stomach the longer she forced herself to look at him. In her time since starting, not to mention training, she'd seen plenty of blood and guts, dozens of horrible accident victims. But they were always unconscious.

Now Jackson McCrue sat here. Upright. Staring at her. Slurping his water. Fidgeting with his bandages and oozing wounds. Talking and talking about his own ugliness, trauma, and death like it was a joke. It was too incongruous to stomach.

"I'll bet he wouldn't want to stay that way," Jackson pushed his hands on the bed rails, slipping them back and forth. "We're the same age, I bet."

Lynn stared at him. His red eyes widened. The swollen eye looked like it could roll out of his head if he moved too fast. "Let me adjust that eye bandage for you." She moved to the side of his bed and changed out the eye patch. She sighed with relief as she covered the bulging eye. "Let's leave that covered until the doctor thinks you can take it off," she instructed.

Jackson ignored her, circling back to the topic she wanted to avoid. "Well if I'm not okay, I'm not going to stick around. I'll take that feather and fly away." He looked toward Josh's bed. Jackson's voice was smooth and calm, like he had hatched a plan already to take matters into his hands, if it came to that. "If it were me like that, all those months..."

Lynn scowled. *How could he know that?*

"I'd want someone to help me. To do more than send flowers and cards. I'd want an out," his voice was definitive. Clear.

"You're young. You have a lot of life left," Lynn corrected.

"Not like that I don't."

A filmy sweat erupted on Lynn's skin. She sensed he was going to press this onto her, this decision, this request. Morally, she wasn't sure where she fell on the matter. It was a personal decision, she could grant that. But as a nurse's aide, well, it was frankly illegal.

"You'd help a boy out, wouldn't you?"

He sounded like her ex-husband. The night they'd made the decision to turn off the machines. Tears welled in her eyes.

"You wouldn't let me stay like that?" Jackson asked, his voice a whisper in the dim light of the room.

Pellets of sweat beaded on Lynn's face and ran down her neck in streaks. Moisture began to pool around the elastic waist of her white pants and the clammy, in and out haze of her attention started to falter. Her palms were numb and her head felt floaty. Woozy and detached. She was about to faint.

Jackson's voice kept pleading, "You'd make it stop."

Lynn's body moved in a slow motion wave as it crumbled to the floor in a heap.

"I'll do it myself if I have to. For both of us," Jackson said. "Fly away home."

When Lynn woke up, she was laying back in the tweed couch in the nurse's lounge, her feet up and a cold towel pressed to her forehead. She blinked a few times, trying to figure out where she was while she smacked her lips. A bright light shone overhead. Dr. Jacobs' voice pierced through the painful ringing in her ears.

"Do you know what happened?" He lifted her eyelids one at a time and stared into her pupils.

Lynn shook her head.

"Do you know what happened to the boys in 201?" he asked.

Lynn began to cry. A single tear at first, then a flood of tears flowed like the floodgates had opened on the dam of her heart. She pictured the feather, worrying she'd summoned something to the room. Something terrible.

"Is Josh okay?" Lynn managed to ask.

Dr. Jacobs shook his head. He set a dark hand on Lynn's pale forearm. For a moment he hesitated, unsure if he should interrogate her about what had happened or check her vitals. He put his fingers onto her wrist. Her pulse was faint, skittish. "Josh is dead," he finally said.

Lynn took the news like a slap, though she'd figured as much. Her shoulders shook as she sobbed harder.

"We're going to need to get her checked in," he said to the nurse behind him.

Lynn's tears didn't slow. She forced out a long, low exhale. "Jackson," she hissed. "He said he would do it," she added. "H-he was going to k-kill him..." she stammered.

"The boy next to him?" Dr. Jacobs asked. "Impossible. He died. Hours ago."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Schraeder's creative work has appeared in *Dark Moon Digest*, *Carnival of the Damned*, *Between the Cracks*, *Haz Mat Review*, *Animalia*, *Four Chambers*, and other journals and anthologies. Author of a poetry chapbook, *The Hunger Tree*, new work is also forthcoming at *Slink Chunk Press*, *Far Horizons*, and elsewhere.

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A graphic of a handprint pressed into a dark, textured surface. The handprint is covered in blood, with some blood dripping down from the fingers. The background is dark and grainy, suggesting a wall or floor.

DAYS **with the** **UNDEAD**

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JULIANNE SNOW

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Collaborative Interview with the Ladies of *The Sirens Call* - Issue #25

For this issue of *The Sirens Call*, we decided to open it up to the women you find published in these pages and ask them about their experiences as a woman writing in the genre of Horror. Each of the authors was asked to answer the same set of questions and while some chose not to participate, what we got back was both enlightening and eye opening. Read on to find out what the women of the 25th issue of *The Sirens Call* have to say about writing horror and the need for Women in Horror Recognition Month...

Sirens Call Publications: Why is Women in Horror Recognition Month important to you?

E.H. Qin: Women are still underrepresented enough in all genres that I think genre-specific focus on the work of women writers is important to bring balance and diversity to the voices available to the readers.

Rivka Jacobs: In general, because women horror writers should be given the spotlight, but I've found that the mainstream publications only focus on a few well-known names. The way Sirens Call Publications celebrates Women in Horror month, is to publish the good horror stories of a wide variety of women writers, giving as many women as possible a chance to shine.

Hannah Clark: I'm speaking from the perspective of a complete newbie, not to the writing world, but the horror one. I never saw myself writing horror. All the horror, suspense, and sci-fi author's I've known personally are male. I imagined the readership of those genres as predominantly male, so I subconsciously closed them off as avenues for my own work. Then a friend (and male horror author) showed me this recognition month, and I realized I had been wrong. Women read and enjoy just as much chilling literature as men do, so why shouldn't they write it, too?

Lori R. Lopez: There is a deep-rooted belief that women are less than men in certain ways. Realistically, this could be true about certain women and certain men. Some are stronger, some are weaker in some regards but smarter, more capable in others. And some of us ladies may be less aggressive, less excited about sports (like some men). The key word is "some". Not all. Some ladies write mushy romance novels. I'm not one of them. That doesn't mean I love gore. But I do love Horror and have since I can remember. The fact that readers would decide to skip my titles because I'm female, preferring to read a spooky or scary tale written by a male author because it could be more entertaining just seems really, really unfair. Judge me by the quality of my work, not my gender. That goes for every girl out there who grew up digging cemeteries and monsters and macabre themes; who channels it into creative arts like writing, poetry, art, music, film, costume design or whatever. Who doesn't want to scream in a movie, she wants to grab the axe out of the maniac's hands and growl at him that he'd better rethink his decision to hack her

to pieces. I think it's essential to celebrate and educate the world that girls can do whatever they put their minds and hearts into. Some of us happen to love Horror.

Miracle Austin: I strongly believe that a woman can write about anything she thinks or dreams up—no limits. The only limits that exist are personal fears or what makes us most uncomfortable.

B.E. Seidl: It is great to see the work and projects of women in the horror industry promoted and showcased around the world.

SCP: Do you find it more difficult as a woman to gain readership in the horror genre?

Peggy Christie: At this point I can't tell if it's me being a woman or the fact that I'm inept at pimping myself.

Winnona Vincent: I do not find it more difficult to gain readership, but more difficult to get published. People looking for horror writers once they find out you are a woman will not read your work or consider you as a horror writer.

Alison Armstrong: Since most of the authors, male and female, I know and associate with either write or analyze horror fiction, I have not personally experienced any difficulties in acceptance based on my gender. One drawback I do experience, however, is that many people tend to confuse the distinctions between horror and paranormal romance. Due to the popularity of Gothic romance novels amongst female readers, it is sometimes assumed that if you are a woman who includes supernatural elements in her fiction, you must be a writer of paranormal romance instead of a horror writer. I would like to see more exposure for women horror writers.

B.E. Seidl: Personally, I don't think it is more difficult for female writers to gain readership in the horror genre than it is for males. After all, some of the pioneers of the horror genre were women (such as the Gothic novel authors Ann Radcliffe or Mary Shelley, horror writers like Shirley Jackson or bestseller authors like Anne Rice) and have had an enormous influence on contemporary horror fiction and continue to transcend cultural borders in their readership.

Lori Safranek: This is a difficult question, since I'm fairly new in horror. I'm not sure how or to whom I would compare my work.

SCP: Are there topics you feel are taboo to you as a woman?

Donna Cuttress: No topic should be taboo because of your gender. Whether you can do them justice and be sympathetic is another matter.

Jessica Walsh: Not at all. I don't feel that there are any topics that we can't write. I do, however, enjoy stretching the expectations and writing in genres where we're not normally expected, as it makes the experience more memorable and hopefully a bit more unnerving for the reader as they're used to a more masculine version of horror.

Kenya Moss-Dyme: Not really taboo because of my gender but there are topics I would probably never tackle just because I don't see any value in exploring – or exploiting, such as bestiality. There are some splatterpunk and gore books that use that as a theme and I can't read it or write about it. If I happen to cover child abuse, rape or domestic abuse, it needs to have an underlying message that adds something important to the story, not just for titillation.

Betty Gabriel: No, I hope not. I'm limited only by my imagination, and my fear of not being original. If I can think it - and believe me I can conjure up a hell of a nasty mess in my head – and someone else will be up for reading it, then I'm prepared to write it. Yes, there are one or two things I don't like to think about so I won't write about those, but otherwise I have no boundaries really.

Alison Armstrong: I don't feel that certain topics are taboo because of my gender, but I would not want to write stories that degrade or subjugate women. I feel a sense of responsibility to other women and to myself to not perpetuate attitudes promoting the debasing or victimization of women.

SCP: Have you ever considered masculinizing your name?

H.R. Boldwood: Oops! Is my pseudonym showing? ☺

A. F. Stewart: I have and I did, a little. I use my initials, instead of my given name, in part because I wanted to be gender neutral, and not pre-judged. And since I also write in the fantasy and paranormal genres I wanted to avoid any possible paranormal romance preconceptions. I'm not certain if it was a necessary step, but the name, A. F. Stewart, does look good on a book cover.

Rivka Jacobs: Yes! And I have. I didn't notice any difference in acceptance rates.

Winnona Vincent: No, but a lot of people think Winnona is a man's name. I once was hired to ghost write a Horror novel. The client liked my proposal. He excepted my outline and chapter ideas. I was half way through writing the book. Every few chapters I sent my work to the client. He wrote back he was very happy with it. Then he wanted a current photo of me because he had decided to make me a coauthor of the book. I made the mistake of sending him one. He wrote me

back the next date that he had not realized I was a woman and a woman just could not write the type of book he was looking for. I was then terminated.

C. Cooch: Yes, I had given it some serious thought. My bookshelves are dominated by big names that are all male in this genre, so it seemed I had to do something. I settled with using my initial then surname, to obscure the fact I was female. I felt the reader would not judge and give me more of a chance.

Miracle Austin: Initially, I started to pursue a masculine name or use initials with a last name because of what I've read about how men continue to receive more respect in the horror-writing world. However with all the amazing influences and accomplishments of well-known women horror writers—past and present--, such as the incredible Mary Shelley, Toni Morrison, Nancy Kilpatrick, Anne Rice, Shirley Jackson, Octavia Butler, Hiroko Minagawa, Alaya Dawn Johnson, Rachel Caine, and so many others, I decided to stand my ground and retain my feminine pen-name. I haven't looked back.

SCP: What challenges do you face as a woman writing in the horror genre?

Victoria Griffin: My biggest challenge has been learning to remove my personal emotions about the perception of female writers from my work. I am stubborn by nature, and I tend to intentionally defy expectations for the sake of defiance. I often used gore and profanity for shock value, simply because I felt that I was not supposed to. By stubbornly defying the notion that I could not write *my* stories because of my gender, I ended up writing someone else's stories. I pushed so fiercely against expectations that I landed somewhere contrived. It was only after I shed expectations completely that I found a truer version of my voice. That is not to say I don't still consider the societal context of my stories, or that I will ever shy away from breaking boundaries. But those considerations and conversations take place when the writing is done, when the words are on the page and the story has already come into its own.

H.R. Boldwood: I'm a new kid on the block. I choose to write under a pseudonym to alleviate some of those challenges. Maybe a male reader will give me a shot if he doesn't know I'm a female. Literary publishers, in my opinion, do tend to judge horror writers harshly. This way I can submit my literary work under my true name, and my horror work under my pseudonym. And ... I use a pseudonym because it's just plain fun. Mine uses my late father's initials and the last name of a whack-a-doodle character, William Boldwood, from, "Far From the Madding Crowd". That was my brother's suggestion. He's one of my beta readers. Apparently, he thinks I'm a whack-a-doodle. Sorry 'bout your luck, bro. It's genetic.

A. F. Stewart: As a woman I wonder if I'm being taken seriously, and I worry about the possibility of online harassment (which thankfully hasn't happened to me yet, at least in relation to

my writing). There's also a certain kind of responsibility these days in writing female characters; I think women horror authors have to walk a fine line when it comes to any exploitation and victimization plot scenarios.

Peggy Christie: I think being able to break through people's misconceptions that women don't really like horror in general or enjoy creating it. I'm not sure if that's a remnant of the by-gone era of 50s housewives and Miss Manners because horror wouldn't be considered "lady like". But why is it so hard to believe I can organize a fantastic dinner party AND slaughter all my guests with strategically placed booby traps... I mean, write about killing them. Writing is what I meant.

SCP: What advice would you give other women considering a career in horror fiction?

Victoria Griffin: Write with confidence. Write stories you believe in. The stereotype that dissuades women from writing horror will not change unless women truly embrace the role. Develop thick skin as early as you can, and don't let negativity stop you from writing chilling stories.

Kellie Honaker: Be gentle with yourself. One of the worst things a writer can do is compare themselves to other writers. We've all done it. There will always be someone whose skill you covet. This is unfair to the both of you. They've earned their unique voice from their own personal experiences, just as you have done. I believe everyone has at least one good story to tell, and no one can tell it quite like you. Writers are highly protective of their work. It becomes their children. And of course, no child is more perfect than your own (so I hear). This is why I stay away from snarky writing groups. Everyone thinks they're the next Stephen King, when they'd actually thrive and be happier as an Edward Gorey. Learning to take criticism is a delicate balance. So maybe your dialogue is a little choppy, but your descriptions are flavorful. Notice your weaknesses and work on them. Your writing is not crap simply because it's imperfect. No use throwing out a rose over a droopy petal. In response to the other questions: I do not feel my writing is inhibited by my gender in any way. I just think men are more drawn to read and write horror just as women are more drawn to romance. I write horror because that's what interests me. So what if I'm a girl? In the words of Eleanor Roosevelt: no one can make you feel inferior without your consent. Men in horror didn't stop Anne Rice. People will give you hell over something for the rest of your life, that's part of being alive, but if you let that hinder you from something you love to do then that's your fault, not theirs. I write what I want to write. I feel I'm fairly decent at it. The fact that I have lady bits seems inconsequential.

Kenya Moss-Dyme: Network. Women are really open and welcoming and helpful, so find your place and mingle. The men – not so much, they are more closed off and less engaging. But the women in horror will cheer you on, advise you and support you.

Debbie Manber Kupfer: Do not be scared of visiting the dark places inside you. We all have them. When I wrote the early scene in P.A.W.S. where Alistair (my villain – a werewolf) kills and consumes a man I was literally shaking. I couldn't believe that I could write something so evil. Explore your personal demons and write them down, you'll be amazed where they will lead.

E.H. Qin: Know your cultural framework. So much of what scares people is based on layers of how we see the world and what we conceive of as a threat. Women walk in the world with a different sense of physical and psychic safety than men. Know how to use the way you relate to the world in your story telling.

Jessica Walsh: Write about what scares you. It doesn't matter if you're male, female, straight, nonbinary, white, black, etc. Each person is different and at the very core, each of our fears are different. This means that we all have unique twists to offer to the genre and those are what you should delve into and offer up.

SCP: Do you feel that gender plays any part in getting noticed in the genre?

Renee L. Tennis-McKinley: Yes, I think women are generally thought of as only romance writers.

Lori R. Lopez: There's no question that Horror is and has been a male-dominated field. One thing I love about *The Sirens Call* is that it's run by ladies. *The Horror Zine* is run by a woman. Both are excellent publications. There need to be more female horror authors who are widely known because people have that expectation about guys writing darker, better, more exciting material than us girls. Sorry, not true. We used to be frowned upon and talked about if we were into Horror. It doesn't mean we can't still be "ladies" or "feminine" if we are, and attitudes are changing toward us. Yet that idea about men writing the best horror is a stubborn one. We have to prove it wrong, and this is difficult when it is harder to be noticed if we're female horror authors. Once the very top names in the genre are women, or at least some of them are, it should help. I think that whole deal about hating *Twilight*, vampires that sparkle, was kind of a sexist horror attitude. Maybe I'm wrong; maybe it was more of a genre war than a division between males and females. But I see a very similar misconception involved: the belief that women write a "certain way", lighter and less intense, less dark, less chilling. Every day we are proving this false. But there is an attitude we must overcome; a "joke"... I do, however, know quite a few male horror authors who fully respect their female colleagues and support their work. The problem seems to lie chiefly between publishers and readers. We must work toward a day when horror stories are judged on merit rather than who wrote them; when the creaking doors of Horror are opened as wide for women as for men. I do see improvement. I believe we're making progress.

C. Cooch: I think it did. I hope that is not the case now. There are so many brilliant female writers getting great attention in other genres. Logic just says it cannot be impossible; it's just a matter of time for women in the horror genre to claim some of that book shelf space.

Emerian Rich: By publishers and media, absolutely. I think readers aren't as picky about man or woman as the system is.

Hannah Clark: I feel, in any genre, you can be noticed if you are considered an out-lying gender. If you're a man writing corset-ripping romance, if you're a woman writing heavy, esoteric sci-fi., you'll be noticed. People notice because you do not fit into their image of the genre's authorship community. This attention might even garner the author more attention, helping the sale and appreciation of his or her works, but for the wrong reasons. Authors should feel merit based on their works, not their bodies. By promoting the work, not the novelty, of an outlier in a genre, we can raise standards and erase outdated ideas of authorship.

Donna Cuttress: In film, yes, especially if you are young and look good covered in stage blood. I'm sick of seeing a dead woman at the beginning of a film. Some people, male and female, seem to be reluctant to pick up a horror novel if it's written by a woman. That's their problem, they're missing out. Attitudes need to change.

SCP: What mistakes have you made; would you do anything differently if given a second chance?

Renee L. Tennis-McKinley: Being afraid of what others would think of my twisted mind. Differently? I'd let go of the reins on my nightmare and let it take me where it will.

Betty Gabriel: I was hired as a ghost writer once. I signed my story away for a tiny pay check. It was a great story. I feel like I sold a child. I've never done it since even though no other short story has earned me as much as that one. My stories are a part of me and my identity. I won't easily part with them again.

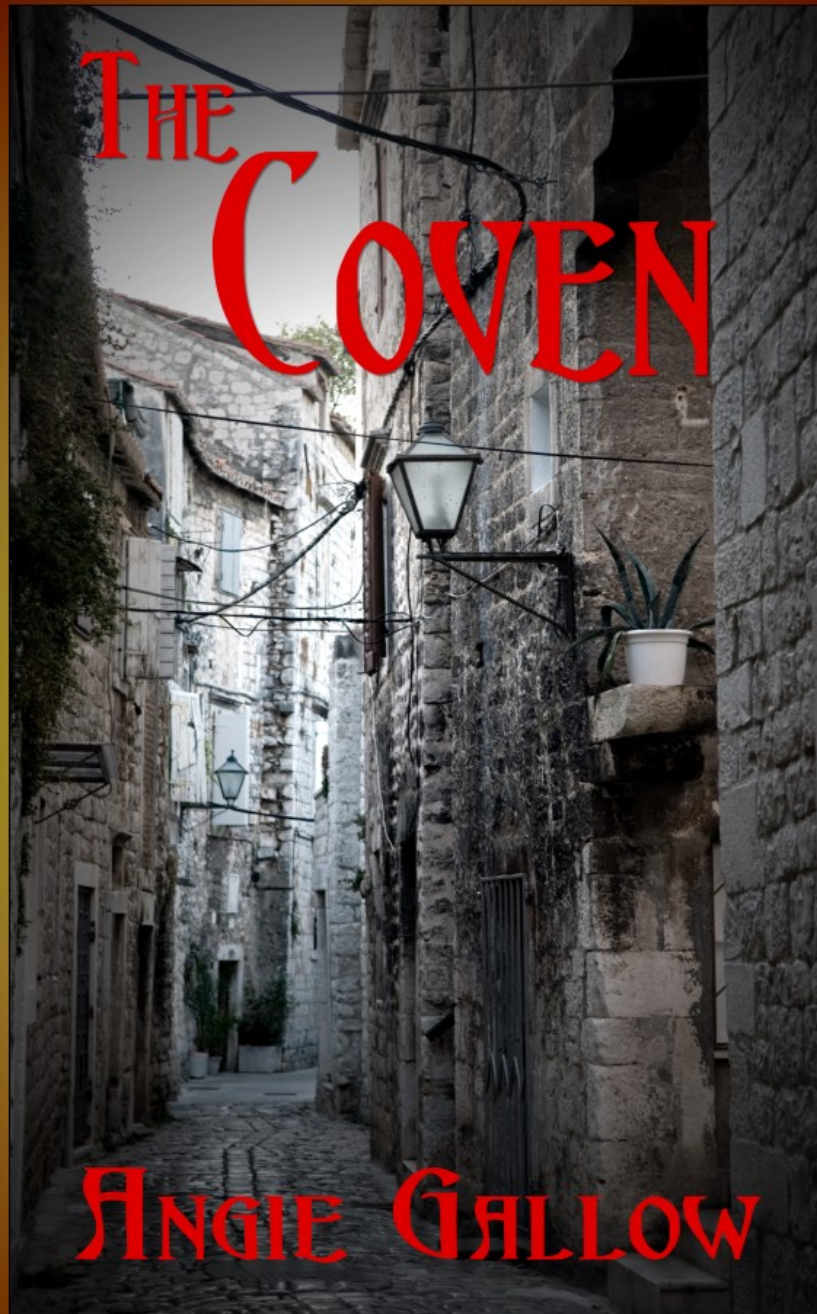
Lori Safranek: I think all writers make a few mistakes in the beginning. My biggest mistake would have been not writing enough right away and trying to socialize too much. If given a second chance, I would be far more professional, and spend much more time writing and less time chatting on FB.

Debbie Manber Kupfer: I would have bitten the bullet and showed my writing to others earlier on. I've been writing stories since I was a child, but never had the confidence to show my work to others until just a few years ago.

Emerian Rich: Besides major in English, no. Any mistakes I've made have gotten me to the place I am now. Life is about trial and error. If you never fail, you'll never know the sweet victory of success.

Thank you Ladies!

**After a gruesome betrayal, Vampire Sebastien Vilmont is flung into
a whirlwind cat and mouse game of survival.**



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