



The Sirens Call

June 2012

cover price \$2.00



Featuring:

*Short Stories and
Flash Fiction of
"Obscure Ink"*

*Original Art Work
& Photography*

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

*Featured Author
Jason McKinney
talks about his
new book 'Dog World'*

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Bop 'Til You Drop: A Collection of Haunted Tales

Spectral mists or ectoplasmic goo – what does a haunting mean to you?

Weave tales of cursed objects or ghostly frights that strike a chord of fear into the readers bones. Horror should make itself at home within these stories – we want only those that would scare the fear seeker in all of us.

We want your finest narratives of hauntings but with one simple twist...
They have to take place in the 1950s. *No exceptions!*

Deadline for Submissions: July 30, 2012

A Friend of a Friend Told Me: Legends of Urban Horror

We've all come across them. The warnings told by a friend of a friend – *be careful!* Some ghastly end met while undertaking a dare, don't go in there, that's the Devil's Gate! Or perhaps your mind leaps to the cryptofiction realm - Bigfoot, the Chupacabra, or monstrous alligators roaming the sewers under New York City!

Wherever your mind takes you, we want to come along for the ride. Ensure your story is dark and edgy, preferably full of horror – we want the reader to be too scared to step off the beaten path and wander into realms unknown.

All urban legends are open for interpretation; just be sure to add the requisite elements of horror.

Deadline for Submissions: August 20, 2012

Bellows of the Bone Box

Travel to a world where steam power is widely used, and weave a tale where Steampunk Horror rules the night.

Tell a tale of imagination, fascination and horror that will keep the reader enthralled by what was or might have been in an age dominated by clockworks of brass, pneumatic tubes, airships with ether screws, and leather worn out of necessity not vanity.

Stories of Steampunk Horror only please, and don't forget to make your shine a bit gritty!

Deadline for Submissions: September 17, 2012

Please visit www.SirensCallPublications.com for additional details and guidelines

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Writing for the Obscure An Editorial by Nina D'Arcangela

When we first decided on the idea of 'Obscure Ink' as a sub-genre for this issue of the eZine, I thought to myself this topic could and would be interpreted in so many different ways that we'd end up with a mélange of stories ranging from evil ink wells behaving in odd ways, to stories of horror involving rogue tattoos, to just the oddly bizarre tale that might not fit anywhere else.

What we received was a diverse and eclectic mixture of stories, though most of them seemed to take the less obvious route and were spun in such a way as to be unexpected. There are some great, fun little stories in this issue that left me with an evil smile after reading them, and a few others that were bizarre beyond a doubt, but with a beautiful little twist that wrenches the soul and pulls at your heart strings with their edge of the horrific versus the overt nature of a classic horror spin.

As odd as it may seem, I'm actually writing my editorial on the eZine issue before I write my submission for it. Normally I would comment on my own impetus for the story I wrote for inclusion (which by the way has to pass muster along with all the others to earn a spot in the pages you are reading – if my story sucks, they tell me!). But I'm torn, as I'm sure many of the authors were, with this seemingly easy-to-appease and innocuous topic of 'Obscure Ink'. The real question for me is, given the chance to write anything in a horror vein with almost any odd twist to it that I'd like to add, what do I want to write about? Am I having trouble because I don't have an idea? Nope! I'm having trouble nailing down my story because I have so many ideas that if written well, would fit wonderfully into this theme.

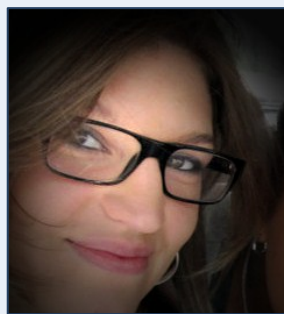
Here's how it's looking – it's the bottom of the ninth, there are two men on base with a heavy hitter at the plate; my star pitcher is worn out and our second stringer is on the mound. We're only leading by two runs, so potentially if this guy hits it out of the park, we're walking away empty handed. Do I let my second stringer pitch to this guy and hope he has the ability to strike him out, or do I walk the batter in the hopes that the next guy on deck is a weaker swing

with a better chance of boosting us into extra innings and a chance at actually turning this around for my guys and pulling off a win?

Found the baseball metaphor an odd one, did ya? Well, me too - that's how my thinker works. Basically do I take the easy route and bang out something nice and bizarre that is a fun read, or do I dive into one of the stories I'd genuinely like to write and take the chance that I won't be able to refine it in time to make publication? The baseball analogy is just a way to simplify things in my head and ask myself, where's the smart money sitting at this point? The still undecided, and hopefully included... Nina D

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

Enamored by the imaginatively woven tales of Edgar Allen Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, Ray Bradbury, H.G. Wells, Edgar Rice Burrows and Arthur C. Clark, magical worlds took form from their inspiration keeping her awake night after night reading by



flashlight under the covers, or nesting in a closet with the door shut. While willing to read just about anything that is well crafted, she has a soft spot for the darker side of writing in the Horror, Sci-Fi and Other World genres.

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DOG WORLD

JASON MCKINNEY

AVAILABLE IN PRINT AND DIGITAL VERSIONS ON AMAZON AND BARNES & NOBLE

Imagination An Editorial by Kalla Monahan

Imagination – what is it really? The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it as “the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality”. It also describes imagination as “a creative ability; and the creation of the mind, especially an idealized or poetic creation”. That’s all well and good, but what does it truly mean?

In *my* plainest of terms, imagination is that *spark* that alights deep within your brain when you read, hear, or see something you perceive to be fantastic. It’s what brings a book to life behind your eyelids. The mechanism that draws meaning from music and lyrics. It’s that *something* that keeps your mind working long after you’ve partaken of a visual medium.

Imagination is the key.

Take a moment to think about your dreams. Like me, I’m sure you’ve encountered a few indecipherable ones; the ones that defy all meaning, including the ones your friends attempt to grasp out of thin air. The truth of the matter is, it’s your imagination coming to play, whether you want to believe it or not.

There have been mornings that have left me wondering, asking myself – what the heck *was* that? Why did I have little people with talking faces on their stomachs, dancing the Tango to The William Tell Overture and sucking on grape lollipops? Bizarre might not even begin to adequately explain it...

But that’s the great thing about bizarre dreams and being an author – endless material courtesy of your subconscious!

There have been times where I’ve sat down at the computer and stared at the screen. As the seconds monotonously click away on the wall above my head, the screen remains devoid of words. When I’m faced with these moments, I start to transcribe one of those bizarre dreams that have haunted me recently. Within moments, the screen is full and it’s

enough of a boost to let me swing over to my current work in progress.

Ultimately much of my work has a bizarre thread woven into it. A left over remnant of that dream or an idea that has been lurking somewhere in my subconscious, awaiting its turn to be unleashed upon the page.

My contribution to our Comparative Flash feature is based on one of my dreams – I took a little bit of artistic license but in the end, I don’t think you’ll mind. The important thing to remember is that your imagination is your best weapon in the war of the words. Do what you can to foster it and your writing will thank you.

- Kalla



Kalla Monahan is sassy but quiet, preferring to use her writing talents to showcase other authors. As the Publicist for Sirens Call Publications, she

is slowly coming out of her shell and allowing other to read her fiction and poetry. Kalla’s literary loves include horror, science fiction and the truly bizarre. She has an extreme soft spot for survival fiction and you will likely find her devouring one of the many great offerings in that genre between reading submissions. Her favourites books include, but are not limited to *Seeing* by Jose Saramago, J.D Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, *Labyrinth* by Kate Mosse, Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The Forest House*, and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum.

Kalla can be emailed directly at kallamonahan@gmail.com or via Kalla@SirensCallPublications.com. Please visit her blog *The Bizarre Kaleidoscope*, <http://bizarrekaleidoscope.wordpress.com> and catch up with her on Twitter @KallaMonahan.



Sparrows by Adam Millard

'Oh, *Kayleigh!*' Lucy said, leaping to her feet and pulling the girl away from the soda-drenched picnic blanket. 'I've told you to be more careful.'

The girl looked apt to cry; her legs shimmered in the sunlight as a result of the clinging soda. Lucy began to wipe at her, somewhat irritably, and continued to reprimand her daughter.

'Go easy on her,' David said, pushing a cherry-tomato into his mouth. 'She's just clumsy.'

The look that Lucy shot him said it all. 'It's *all* the time, David,' she told him. Kayleigh stared up into her mother's annoyed face as she continued to scrub the stickiness from her legs. 'Look at the mess. There's *coke* in the salad, for Christ's sake.'

David, sensing his wife's chagrin, decided to remain silent. He pushed another tomato between his lips and turned his attention to the children on the opposite side of the field. They were playing on a rope-swing, taking it in turns to push. David was waiting for the rope to break – and it *would* – so that he could leap into action, rush to their aid. He hoped, in a strange way, it would break sooner rather than later; they would be leaving soon. The picnic was drawing to a close, and Lucy would certainly push things towards a premature end now that Kayleigh had spoilt the blanket.

'Pass me that,' Lucy snapped, jabbing a finger towards a rolled-up, green towel next to the woven hamper.

David tossed her the towel and smiled. 'You're really *pissed*,' he said, deciding that her strange mood-change needed to be addressed. He had noticed her temper worsening recently, and he was – in all honesty – growing tired of it. 'It's just a picnic. You need to calm down. For *fuck's* sake, breathe and take a chill-pill.'

That did it. Lucy, who had been rubbing salad-cream from Kayleigh's face, suddenly stopped. If looks could kill, David would have been dead twice over. There was no love for him in those eyes; only the sun and its incessant glare reflected there.

But she didn't speak; she didn't *have* to. Kayleigh was listening, waiting, seeing how this little scenario panned out. Their daughter had been present at a lot of their arguments – and there were a *lot* – and was accustomed to the warning signs. This, Kayleigh's expression said, was going to be a good one.

But it didn't have time to develop. If it had, it would have been momentous; marriage-ending, but something distracted David, and then Lucy was glancing in the same direction as her husband. And Kayleigh, who was expecting fireworks, followed their eyes with her own, and screamed as the children across the field were swarmed, enveloped, by something dark and ominous.

Lucy plucked her daughter up into her arms and placed a hand over her eyes. Kayleigh continued to scream, for the image was tattooed on her retina. Those boys swinging at the air, batting the birds away, trying to run away from the rope-swing and into the surrounding woods.

'Get to the car!' David yelled as he scrambled to his feet.

Lucy was up, though her legs were dead from kneeling for so long. She almost lost her balance, and would have gone over backwards had she not been carrying Kayleigh. 'we have to *help* them!' she screamed. 'Why are the birds attacking them? Did they do something to provoke them?'

David didn't know. If the children had somehow incited the sparrows then he certainly hadn't witnessed it. 'I don't know,' he said. He watched as one of the boys broke for the trees, only to be dragged to the ground by hundreds – *thousands?* – of tiny, brown birds. The boy started to scream, but was cut off as the host washed over him.

'Lucy! The *car!*' David said, hoping that his wife would – for once in her life – pay him some heed. The car was parked up on the verge a hundred feet from where they stood. David could see it, could see the luminous green dice hanging down from the rear-view mirror, and yet it seemed so far away,

impossible to reach.

They began to run; a family in fear. The sound of the birds behind them pushed them forward. The murderous song of a thousand sparrows. Were they feasting on those poor boys, or simply attacking in retaliation? In that moment, it didn't matter. What mattered was reaching the car.

David glanced across his shoulder, noticed that his wife had fallen back a little. 'Come on!' he bellowed, and that was when he saw the birds shift position. One second they were across the way, too preoccupied to take any notice of the escaping family, and the next they were up in the air, flying in a formation that was both beautiful and unnerving. Twenty feet, thirty feet, fifty feet up, and then they were coming, all of them, the pecked bones of three adolescent boys lay strewn in their wake.

'Shit, Lucy, *come on!*' David yelled once more. He was breathless with exertion and fear, and his words came in short, staccato bursts that were almost incomprehensible.

The birds were shooting through the air, their chittering enough to make gooseflesh rise despite the burning mid-afternoon sun. David looked to his left as a shadow appeared in his periphery. Sure enough, a swarm roughly the size of the car they were approaching – not fast enough – was flanking them. He gasped. Behind him, Lucy screeched at the sight of the nearing birds. David wanted to tell her to shut the fuck up, that screaming was doing nothing to help, but he didn't have the breath or the energy to waste.

Somewhere on the field – though David wasn't sure where as his eyes were trained on the glistening bonnet sitting over on the verge – a woman screamed. It wasn't Lucy, nor Kayleigh, so he assumed there was a spectator, or perhaps another victim of the sparrows' terrible rampage. He didn't want to look, and the sweat stinging at his eyes made it almost impossible to see now, anyway. A moment later and the screaming stopped; the poor caterwauling woman was being stripped to the bone by a hundred pecking beaks, her mouth stuffed with feathers as the sparrows attacked. It was *that* which silenced her; that and the fact her thorax had been hollowed out, the tiny flapping creatures already inside of her, eating their way out. Of course, David didn't see any of that happening, and thankfully neither did his wife and daughter.

They were racing for the car, silently praying, hoping that they made it in time.

'Daddy!' Kayleigh screamed. 'Daddy, I'm scared!'

Without turning, David said, 'Everything's going to be alright!' He wasn't sure whether it was a lie; hell, he wasn't even sure that she heard him. The noise coming from all around – incessant chirruping that was nothing less than hellish – stifled his voice. He was gasping for air, but there didn't appear to be any. His heart was beating so rapidly that he was preparing for the worst coronary imaginable, but he kept running, kept looking at the verge, at the car, at the birds flanking them on both sides. They were taunting them. They *had* to be. It would take less than a second for them to alter course, to swoop across and savage them where they ran.

Which is just what they did. David followed the dark formation on his left as they suddenly rushed across. He spun, watched as Lucy was snatched from the ground. Kayleigh, who had been pressed tightly to her mother's chest, spilled free and rolled over and over like a stuffed toy. David made a guttural sound in his throat; the sight of his daughter's mangled body rolling like that, as if she was a marionette and some sonofabitch had just cut the strings, worried him more than the sight of his wife being carried away over the field.

David plucked Kayleigh up from the ground. She was unconscious; something that he was somewhat grateful for. He turned, continued for the car. The birds to his right were relentlessly approaching. The ones that had been on his left were not missed, but David couldn't help but imagine the horrific tortures they were enacting upon his poor wife.

She was *gone*.

Kayleigh wasn't. Not *yet*, anyway. The car was just a few steps away, up on the verge. David began to clamber up the incline, his heart still threatening to explode inside him. He reached into his pocket with his free hand, the one that wasn't clinging onto the motionless dead-weight that was his daughter, and pulled out the car keys. He pushed the button on the remote.

The car's lights flashed twice to signal that the doors were open. David lunged for the back door, which was the nearest, and pulled it open just in time. The sound of a hundred birds hitting the door, like machine-gun fire – *thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk* – served to remind him how close he was, how close they both were, to being torn to shreds.

Kayleigh squirmed in his arms as he began to force her into the back of the car. She crawled forward, allowing him room to clamber in after her. He reached back and pulled the door shut, but not before several of the miniature demons flew in.

'Daddy!' gasped Kayleigh. Three sparrows were already slamming into her face, trying to peck their way inside. She was flailing maniacally, managing to push them away only for them to choose a different trajectory.

David plucked one of the birds from the air; it squealed shrilly. He could barely keep hold of it such was its crazed fluttering. Its beak was pecking at his knuckles, drawing blood, but he felt nothing, and when he slammed the bird into the closed window with everything he had left the bird ceased its spasms and dropped onto the back seat, dead.

Kayleigh was still fighting the two remaining birds off; the car was rocking so violently that David was disorientated. One of the birds landed, dazed, in his lap and was in the process of gathering itself back up when David brought his fist down onto it. Immediately, it ceased moving and stared up at its killer with glazing eyes. The third, and final, creature was lucky. Kayleigh was unable to do what she had just witnessed her father do, and had decided to opt for the more humane method. She reached across and lowered the window ever-so-slightly. She had the bird in her grasp, holding it tight enough to cause its eyes to bulge from their sockets.

'What are you *doing*?' screamed her father. 'Close the fucking window!'

She pushed the bird up to the partially open window and released it. It dropped out of sight, and Kayleigh frantically wound the window shut. Why had she decided not to kill it? The bastard could very well have been one of the ones that had dragged her mother off across the field.

David pulled her into a hug, held her tightly for a few moments before forcing his way into the front of the car. He jammed the key into the ignition.

The car was rocking once again, but this time it wasn't from its occupants' flailing. It was the birds, slamming into the doors, bouncing off the windows, thumping into the axles – and probably killing themselves in the process.

David turned the key.

The car roared into life and then, with a dramatic splutter, died.

'No, no, no, no!' David was trying to hold it together in front of Kayleigh, for that was what father's do. They act brave in moments like these; they remain calm and tell everyone that it'll be okay, that nothing bad will happen.

But bad things would happen. *Had* happened...

The *exhaust*, David thought. They must have blocked the exhaust. That would prevent the car from starting. Those evil little bastards had forced their way into the pipe, wedged themselves in like feathered fucking parasites.

Kayleigh climbed into the front passenger-seat; her expression said it all. She had doe-eyes, terrified, seeking answers that her father couldn't provide. 'Why aren't we *moving*?' she managed through devastated breaths.

David relaxed, allowed his head to rest against the steering-wheel. 'We will,' he told her. 'We're just going to stay *here* for awhile.' He reached down and turned the dial on the radio. A few channels were still playing music, as if nothing remotely disturbing was happening outside. Perhaps this was an isolated incident; maybe this particular flock had just been having a bad fucking day...

'...have been reports of attacks coming in from all over the country,' a voice said. David moved his hand away from the dial; this was exactly what he was looking for. 'All we can tell you at this point in time is to stay indoors. If you can, block your windows and any air-vents. Use anything you can to barricade yourselves into your homes. I can't believe I'm fucking telling you this...this is crazy, but it's happening. If you've just tuned in then you probably have no idea what I'm mumbling the fuck on about, but there's...there's something happening outside...it's...it's the birds...they've all gone fucking nuts. We have reports coming in from all over the country. The birds are...killing people. I repeat, if you're out there....get indoors and stay there until further notice...and God help us all...'

David stared into his daughter's terrified eyes and smiled. He didn't know *why*; it just seemed like the most comforting thing he could have done in that moment. She didn't smile back. She simply stared out across his shoulder, at the thick, black clouds of birds as they swarmed over everything and everyone. The car continued to rock back and forth, the machine-gun fire of sparrows bouncing off the doors enough to drive them steadily insane.

And so they waited.

And the man on the radio continued to warn the country.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Adam Millard is the author of eleven novels and more than a hundred short stories. Probably best known for his post-apocalyptic fiction, Adam also writes YA horror/fantasy. His work can be found in collections from Angelic Knight Press, May December Publications, KnightWatch Press, Rymfire Books, and Bizarro Press. Adam is a member of the British Fantasy Society. You may contact Adam via Twitter as @adammillard, through his website at www.adammillard.co.uk, or via his facebook account: Adam.L.Millard





Clowning Around by Don McNevin

It is true one person's nightmare could very well be another's reality. Let's go for a stroll into Tommy Tompkin's 10-year-old mind shall we? Seems he is terrified of clowns! Imagine that clowns? Those age old funny creatures that brought us and now bring our kids laughter with their shenanigans? Now why would anyone have a reason to be afraid of such a thing?

Some things were just inevitable. Clara eating her glue during craft time, the Bandon's Doberman taking a huge crap in the building's foyer, and him having to go to bed.

"Tommy it's bed time." A hint of impatience coloured his mother's voice. He rolled his eyes hearing it.

"I'm brushing my teeth." He wasn't really. He stared at the pale face reflecting back in the mirror. There were bags under his dull eyes, almost looking bruised with the dark circles. He looked much older than his ten years. As usual his best efforts of stalling in hopes of avoiding being locked away in the dark with it were frustrated. His homework always seemed to be finished too fast.

"Come on son."

He closed his eyes, sighed, and set his toothbrush on the counter. What if he locked the bathroom door and just stood where he was. It wouldn't work. She could open the door from the hallway.

"You could tell her why you're scared of the dark."

"It's not the dark I am scared of."

"Yes you are."

"I'm not, shut up!"

"Tommy stop being such a slow poke!"

Feeling defeated once more, he set his toothbrush on the counter and left the bathroom.

He saw her waiting by his bedroom door, smiling. She was a pretty brunette. He'd heard the two men at the corner store saying she was still a good-looking woman, with only a few miles on her. She was very "doable" whatever that meant.

An image of his mother and the two men naked in bed flashed before his mind's eye. A voice not his own, like a slap, scorched through his mind.

"There you are Tommy boy, that's what doable means. And doable she is, wouldn't mind some of that myself!"

This is what it must be like to go crazy. Random thoughts and images, nothing seemingly connected. He was a television and someone else had the remote.

He walked like a condemned man, he lowered, and dragging his feet in hopes a last second pardon would arrive and save him. His small room smelling of Pine cleaners was a study in the bland. White walls, one or two small pictures hung when it was his nursery. No posters, they were considered gaudy wastes of money. A shelf holding some books, near the window. The blind pulled down behind sheer curtains. Near the closet door sat his chest of drawers. His bed was basically a box spring and mattress, with no head or footboard.

Tommy didn't have to look at it to know it would be sitting on his the bottom of his bed. It would be sagging a little to the right. It was supposed to be smiling. But he knew the expression was one of a promise. He knew the last thing it promised was fun. No matter how many times he'd hid the thing in his closet, under the bed or anywhere else in the house for that matter, it always ended up back on his bed.

He got in his bed, his mother leaned over and kissed his cheek, her breath smelling of wine and stale cigarette smoke. His arms locked around her neck hanging on like a person drowning. He felt dread dancing like drunk on his nerve endings. The room's overhead light winked out with a heartfelt, "Sweet dreams buddy." He heard his door close, sounding like the cell doors on television. He heard her walking down the hall her foot falls fading.

Silence.

The darkness settled on him like a weight, pinning him to the hard mattress. The only light he could see was the ambient glow of a sodium light leaking past the edges of the blind.

He clenched his eyes shut. His fingers would soon ache from strain of his death grip on the edges of his blankets, shivering as he listened to the darkness. His breath held at the tiniest creak of a floorboard. He didn't know why he couldn't have a night-light. It wasn't so much to ask. "Be a big boy now." His mother always answered. Well she wasn't in here with *this* thing. He decided in the morning the clown had to be "lost."

The silence died with a single drawn breath. It sounded like bubbling water. The air in the room changed, becoming thinner. He could taste something in the air but could never figure out what it was.

Tommy froze Each breath he took roared in his ears, each beat of his heart rumbled like a bass drum, he was sure he could hear his blood coursing through his body.

"Top O' the evening to yah Tommy boy." A wet wheezing breath was followed by a hacking laugh. "Oh, you're not still scared of me are you Tommy boy?" The insincerity of the concern in the voice oozed like mucous. "How can you be scared of the likes of me Tommy boy?"

Tommy Tompkins stared at the teardrop shaped porcelain face. The glass eyes, reminding him of marbles in the daylight, now shone with a white-green glow. The thickly painted red lips went from a wide smile to a threatening sneer, revealing yellow nubs of teeth. He was sure he could smell its breath, it stank like that rotting raccoon on the street. His hands tightened on the edge of his blankets under his chin, and closing his eyes he held his breath and swept his right foot fast across the bottom of the bed. He cringed as his foot hit it. Tommy exhaled with a loud sigh, at the satisfying thump the clown made on his bedroom floor.

"Tommy lad, I think you broke my fuckin' back."

A hint of a smile touched his lips before he managed to squeak out, "I fucking hope so!"

"Nope I was wrong!" The voice was at his ear, His head snapped to the right and he was face to face with the clown. He pushed himself away to the edge of the bed. He wanted to yell for his mother, but his mouth wouldn't open and now to make it worse he couldn't move. His face caressed by each cold putrid gasped breath. "Hiding me was bad enough but planning on getting rid of me?" Another wheeze, "Oh now aren't my feelings hurt! And here I was thinking I am your best pal!" the porcelain face stretched into that mind numbing smile. "If I could cry, you know I would!"

The clown's head tilted to the right, listening and then returned its full attention to him. "Your mom's a sleep she is. We're going to have fun, fun, fun!" The clown jumped to its feet, spreading its arms as it did. "Tah fuckin' da Tommy boy were going to play chase!" Its arms came in, its stubby finger hands folded under its chin. Its eyes blinking rapidly. "And Tommy," the clown paused and punched him hard in the chest. "I am it! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The punch was hard enough his vision dimmed, still holding his breath, he rolled out of his bed. He landed hard on his hands and knees. He looked at his bedroom door. "*Make it out of the room and you'll be safe.*" He pushed himself to his feet and tried to move his feet. No matter how hard he tried to run, his legs refused to move, his feet felt stuck in wet sand. He looked over his shoulder His eyes widened in panic filling with tears. He watched as the clown came closer and closer. His terror filled his every heartbeat and every breath he took ended in a groan.

Tommy turned his head and saw the door to his room. If he could reach it and open it, get out of his bedroom he'd be safe. He leaned forward, straining his shoulder as he stretched his arm forward. Stubby little fingers reached for the doorknob. His teeth clenched tight enough to make a crunching sound, his face stretched into a sneer of determination. Hope flared when he felt the cold metal of the doorknob

under his fingertips and just as suddenly died when everything shifted to the right and out of his grasp.

His eyes widened as the clown passed in front of him running along the wall, back arched, head almost touching its heels looking back at him laughing manically! "Too slow Tommy boy! Too slow!" Tommy heard the squealing of brakes as if in a cartoon.

The clown jumped off the wall and walked towards him. As it did yellow-green teeth grew, stretching and piercing the red lips, twisting over lapping each other. Dirty cracked fingernails stretched in to Raptor like claws. "Looks like I win Tommy boy! Yes I cheated and sure there is something to be said about that." From behind the clown's shoulders, black leather wings unfolded.

He saw they were torn in places, laced with scars in others. The smell of burnt things filled his nose and lungs. His head began spinning. The clown began to tower over him leaning forward mouth open, spittle falling like a poisoned rain.

"Do yah know who I am, do yah Tommy boy?" The clown's eyes glowed red, a sulphurous steam escaped from the corner of the ugly eyes. "Yah know what happens when I catch you?" the clown's mouth opened wider. Tommy swore he could see parts of people between the teeth. The gaping mouth started down on him.

With a gasp Tommy Tompkins sat up in his bed. The clown was gone. "Don't think about it, just do it!" Taking a deep breath Tommy lunged to the end of the bed. He saw the clown where it landed. His face a grim mask of determination he grabbed the clown. There was no doubting the "oh shit" expression on the clown's face as he lifted it and swung it down hard against the floor. The head shattered in a loud crash and spray of porcelain. He hit it again and again until the stuffing floated around him. He drew back and tossed the limp cloth body against the wall as hard as he could. And collapsed on his bed sobbing.

Sunlight streamed in the open windows. Instead of birds the rumble of buses and trucks. The "fresh air" was tainted with diesel fumes. A small radio on the kitchen counter played oozed an older country tune. He heard it only because his mother took a breath. Tommy sat at the breakfast table in silence. Still smarting from the dressing down he got for destroying the clown. He stuffed a spoon full of cereal in his mouth. He pulled the spoon out, holding it in a white knuckled fist. His lips blanched in a fierce frown. He crunched loudly, hoping it would drown out the sound of his mother starting again about councilors, priests, doctors and medications for behavior like that.

Tommy boy Tompkins swallowed his cereal, slowly setting his spoon down and looked at his mother. "Mom ole girl let's play a game of chase." His eyes turned as black as coal. "And I am it! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Don McNevin is a self taught watercolour artist and writer from Midland, Ontario. His short story, *When Spirits Speak* appears in *Pen Dragons*, a local writer's magazine. Don was a paramedic for twenty three years, and is currently a member of MacLachlan's company, a living history group that relives various time periods. His experiences are the current fodder for an illustrated historical novel he is currently working on. An interest in the paranormal has flourished throughout the years, and he has a completed novel being polished by beta readers. During his research for the book, Don got permission to sit alone in a crypt for several hours. A cat lover, Don tries to give back to his community when he can. Don can be reached via Twitter at @DonMcNevin or on his blog at <http://donswordspere.wordpress.com>.

The background of the entire page is a painting. It depicts a single lit candle standing on a small, dark mound of earth. From the base of the candle, several dark, vertical rays of light or shadow extend downwards, creating a sense of depth and focus. The overall color palette is dark and moody, with shades of brown, black, and a touch of yellow from the candle's flame.

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Bad Squirrel by Ken MacGregor

"Damn it! Squirrel's on the birdfeeder again!" Grampa was turning red. "I greased the damn pole, put on that metal high-hat thingie and cut away all the branches within thirty feet! How the hell is that little Tree Rat getting on there?"

I knew better than to interrupt. Grampa said he was gonna kill the damn thing this time. I went back to my book.

After a moment, I heard the front door bang open. This was new. I went to the window to watch. Grampa was walking around the house, wearing a light jacket and carrying a rifle. He looked calm, almost serene. He stopped at the corner of the house and looked at the feeder. The squirrel looked up from its meal and gazed back at Grampa. Time held its breath. Grampa raised the rifle to his shoulder. The squirrel twitched its tail, once, twice. Grampa released his breath and squeezed the trigger. The birdhouse exploded, seeds pouring onto the ground in a torrent. The squirrel was torn nearly in half. It lay amongst the seeds, its tiny, hand-like paws scrabbling for purchase.

"Gotcha," Grampa said. "Gotcha."

Grampa bought a new feeder and hung it in the same spot. He installed all the old precautions and some new ones. The birds began to come back. Grampa was happy again. Then...

"Damn it!" A squirrel was on the feeder, somehow slipping past the defenses. Grampa stormed outside and yelled at it. The squirrel looked at him, then slowly turned and walked around the feeder. When its side was to us, we watched from the window, we knew it was the same one. Two halves, barely held together with strips of furry skin.

Impossible. Awful. Grampa stared, his mind unable to accept what his eyes saw. The squirrel made a full circuit of the feeder and looked my Grampa in the eye.

It leaped.

Grampa jerked back in terror as the squirrel came at him. He fell. He hit his head on a paving stone.

The ER docs tried to save him, but they said his heart couldn't handle the trauma. Said it was "overstressed" by the injury. They said "cardiac arrest brought on by a traumatic brain injury", but I knew better. It was the squirrel.

These days, not too many birds use the feeder; sometimes a crow will come, unkempt things missing an eye or a foot. They never stay long. But we keep it well-stocked, because my children are starting to have children now. We keep the feeder stocked, I will tell them, because the squirrel is there every day, and probably always will be.

It's part of our lives now, though we may hate it. We will continue to do it. There are only four of us left (soon to be five), and we're survivors. We know how to live. We keep the feeder stocked. Keep the squirrel happy. And, for God's sake, don't make it angry.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Ken owns a sketch comedy company (Monkey Rampant, LLC) which has been putting on live shows and making short films since October, 2004. Ken lives in Ypsilanti, MI with his brilliant wife, Liz and astonishing children, Gabriel and Maggie. He drives the bookmobile for the local library and has an ever-increasing passion for reading and writing fiction. You can find Ken on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/ken.macgregor.3>



**DAYS WITH THE UNDEAD:
BOOK ONE**

Julianne Snow

Available through www.SirensCallPublications.com

Liquid Eyes by Nina D’Arcangela

A captive of this foul container that has held me so long, I cannot help but bubble and seethe with indignation. My influence a thing of great power; wielded properly it will bring a man all that he desires if he is worthy of controlling my more aberrant nature. A weaker man will crumble in my fist as quickly as a dried leaf finds itself ruined underfoot.

So sit here on this desk, in this vial of ground glass and ornate silver filigree I do, waiting to serve the current reigning member of this Yakuza household. I remember a time before modern day when men of honor ruled, men whose word was unquestionable, whose cruelty was of necessity not desire, and whose control was absolute. Now those I serve understand only one thing – money. Money equals power. Notions such as dignity, pride, uncompromising fortitude and not only the respect of, but for the common people, are long since forgotten. Brutality, force, and the need to exert control is all that is left.

Yet still, I sit here waiting to be called into service. The Matsumiro family has held sway over me for generations, and I have served them loyally. Captured during a period ruled by men of greater fortitude than these, I graciously yielded to this crystal prison with its blurred view and stopper of lead having lost a wager I willingly conceded to. I am not bitter; harbor no grudge against those who confined me. I have been an essential part of so many dealings that have improved the family’s stature, that I myself feel a pride in what the Matsumiro clan of old have accomplished.

Now a young whelp with his disrespectful underlings has been passed the ruling seat by means of marriage to the last oyabun’s daughter. His favored kobun, his most trusted aid, the son he never fathered now married to his only legitimate daughter. Swearing to uphold the code of jingi, and keep the name of the Matsumiro family untarnished, this usurper of tradition pays both it and me no regard.

My dim view through the clouded glass of this vessel forces me to bear witness as these arrogant fools congratulate themselves on having cheated yet another. I serve, I listen, I wait – a time will come when I am no longer the captive, when Amanozako will once again be free to wreak havoc from the mountainside.

“Shit-bag had it coming. Who the fuck does he think he is having the balls to try opening a club here – in my territory, rubbing my nose in it. And I’m supposed to look the other way because he has money. *Gaijin*, they never fucking learn.”

Laughing, the other tosses back his drink and agrees, “You’ve got that right. Fucking foreign scum think they can buy their way into everything. Not here – we’ll gut the mother fuckers and eat their goddamn innards as an example if we have to! I’m gonna grab another drink, you want some?” he asks.

Glancing up at Niko, Haru raises an eyebrow and asks, “Eat their goddamn innards? What are you, some kind of friggin barbarian?” Shaking his head in mock disbelief, he says, “Sure, you can top mine off too, but not much, I promised Ayame an early night tonight. She wants me to say goodnight to the kids before they go down for bed. She thinks I’m not spending enough time with them.”

As he unstoppers my well and dips the fine silver point of the quill into the ink that contains me, I slide gracefully onto the writing device along with the dark fluid.

“She *thinks*... since when do you give a shit about what she thinks...”

“Fuck. Shit – goddamn it!”

“Sorry Boss, I didn’t mean to disrespect your wife.” Niko answers in a flat tone as he drops into one of the chairs, drink in hand.

“Don’t be an ass, you know I don’t give a shit what she thinks; I give a shit what her father’s money thinks, and I have to play nice so her *chichi* doesn’t get upset.” sucking at the side of his hand, he continues, “It’s this goddamned pen – I just fucking stuck myself with it.”

Yes you have, haven’t you!

“Why don’t you try using a ballpoint like everyone else, it’s the friggin 21st century and you’re still writing with that thing from hell and bottle of shit that each Matsumiro *Aniki* has used since, Christ – when? Before the fucking Edo period. Did you remember to ask its permission before you stuck your wick in it? Fucking thing looks like it’s made from bone with that freaky ass silver tip.” The jack-ass laughs.

“Shut the fuck up Niko, you know it’s tradition to sign in this ink – the other houses won’t acknowledge it if I don’t. You should learn to use a quill yourself if you’re going to sit in my seat one day. At least it’s not a friggin brush and kanji,” Haru replies as he finishes signing in both his blood and my ink.

“Whatever you say Boss-man.” Niko smirks and takes another drink. “No shit, you really did stab yourself good with that thing, you’re bleeding all over the friggin contract. I guess the fuckers can’t say you didn’t put your blood, sweat and tears into the deal. Well, your blood anyway. Mostly their sweat and tears.” He laughs from behind his glass.

“Ha! You’re real fucking funny. Now sign the bottom as my *wakagashira* and then you can deliver it tonight.” Haru holds out the quill in mock challenge, but Niko takes a standard pen out of his pocket and leans over the desk.

Is this Haru the only one left in the family who follows the old ways? He is the only one who opens my vessel, who holds any regard for the power its ink contains it would seem. He boasts with the other fool, but his respect and fear is healthy. Perhaps the time to wander back to my mountain has not yet come.

“Fuck man, that’s really bleeding, put something on it.” Niko says as he picks up the contract.

“Yeah, I know. This damn thing is sharp as hell.” Haru says as he reaches forward putting the quill back in its box; paying little attention, he knocks the ink well to its side cracking the glass.

“What the... Ah, shit! Ayame is gonna scream her fucking head off when she sees this.”

“Now you did it bro, you’re fucked. Not only is your wife gonna hand you your ass for ruining that fancy ass shirt she gave you, but you’ve got ink all over your hand.” Niko mocks as he tucks the signed paper into his pocket.

Trying to wipe up the dark fluid spreading across his desk, Haru laughs and tells Niko to get his ass moving.

“Hey, I know when I’m not wanted, I’m outta here. But seriously, have that hand looked at – you don’t know which scum bag before you scratched his ass with that sticker you use to write with.”

“Out!” Haru shouts jokingly, as he watches Niko heading for the door. “And Niko, stay away from those women tonight. We don’t need any more trouble with this asshole than we’ve already had.” He receives no reply, “Hey, you hear me?”

“I hear you. Fucking relax already. But if he offers me one after I hand over the agreement...”

“Then you’ll say no thank you and go visit one of your own whore houses.” Haru answers in a tone that isn’t nearly as light as earlier.

“Alright, alright, don’t have a shit fit – save that crap for your wife. Maybe I’ll visit *her* later when my business is done.” He says with a smirk.

Cracking a smile, Haru tells him to get the hell out again while tossing the cracked well into the trash.

Too late, not only did I work my way into his flesh with the first prick of silver, but he was foolish enough to crack the vial that held me for so long. My vow of servitude now broken with it!

Just as Haru wipes the last of the ink from the desk, his wife Ayame knocks on the door frame and asks if she can enter.

“Of course you can,” he snaps at her, “since when do you need to knock if I’m in my office alone!”

Unsure of his mood as he’s always behaved kindly in the past, Ayame enters and says hesitantly, “I

thought I heard Niko's voice, I wasn't sure if you'd finished your business or not. But it's getting late and the children are ready to..."

"Oh, for fucks sake, I know I'm supposed to say goodnight to the children because you want me to. Give me a goddamn break! I'll be there as soon as I can."

Taken aback by the angry retort, Ayame stares blankly at Haru, then notices his ruined shirt and the residue of spilled ink on the desk. "Haru, your shirt, it's destroyed, and is that father's vial in the trash? You know how important..."

"Yes, I know I ruined the damned shirt you gave me," he cuts her off mid-sentence, "I also spilled the fucking ink well and broke it! I stabbed my hand with that antique piece of crap your father has me signing papers with – you want to cry over that too!" Frustrated and angered beyond reason, Haru unthinkingly runs his hand over his face and through his hair.

When his hand drops to his side, his wife is staring back at him in shock. Taking in his full countenance, she chuckles softly, her chiming mirth evolving from a subtle laughter into full blown hysterics; she is nearly bent double howling with amusement by the time she regains her composure.

Tired and aggravated, but somewhat amused by her antics, Haru asks her what is so funny. Instead of answering, she simply points and starts laughing again.

"What is it? What's so funny?" He starts to laugh despite himself.

"Oh, Haru, you have no idea what you look like, do you? Come and see for yourself in the washroom." They both walk into the adjoining bath to have a look.

Ink – my ink – is smeared through his hair, down his face, all over his shirt and hands.

"Ah, I look funny, is that it?" he asks lightly with a hint of tightness to his voice.

"Yes, my dear – you look quite funny smeared in ink." She smiles as she replies.

With a swiftness neither of them expect, he backhands her across the face and snarls "Don't fucking laugh at me bitch!" Ayame falls to the floor. Not sure whether to cry or lay silent, she stares at her husband of seven years as he rages.

"I'm your husband. No! *I'm your fucking lord and master*, you don't have the right to laugh at me! I should rip your goddamned throat out for disrespecting me that way. Fucking whore!" he screams, face red, neck muscles swollen, fists clenching and unclenching as he leans over her.

"Haru," she begins in a pleading tone, "Please, I meant no disrespect. Are you alright? *Danna*, my husband... you've never behaved this way before, we've laughed together so often, I meant no offence. I only wanted to go with you when you said goodnight to the children." She's rambling and knows it, but can't stop herself, she's afraid to stop speaking. "I came in and you rubbed your face smearing the ink on it and..."

"And that's when you started fucking laughing at me!" he screams as he begins to kick her in punctuation with each word, "You" *kick* "just wanted to stick your fucking nose" *kick* "in my office and tell me" *kick* "what to do just like your fucking" *kick* "father!" He continues pummeling her until she stops whimpering like one of Niko's new whores who needs to be broken; taught to behave.

Barely able to breath, and nearly inaudible, she whispers through bubbles of blood and saliva "Haru, please – the children will hear..."

"Oh, I'm so sorry! You're worried the children will hear?" Haru puts his ink stained hands to his lips in mock horror, "We can't have *that*, now can we?" His voice begins to rise in volume once again, "We can't have the fucking children finding out what a pretentious fucking slut their mother was can we!" He roars, "Did I say *was*, my sweet Ayame! I meant *is*, at least for the next few moments of her miserable spoiled life!"

Grabbing Ayame by the hair, Haru pulls her over to the shower stall and turns the water on, cranking

it to full scorch. “Did you want to help clean me too, Ayame, my helpful little whore of a wife?”

Screaming and thrashing with the unbroken parts of her body, Ayame has no strength left to fight her way out of his grasp as he holds her delicate face under the steaming spray. “Don’t forget the fucking soap my love, how else will we ever scrub away your filth!” he maniacally rants as he uses the harsh square bar on her already blistering face. Tossing the soap aside and reaching with his free hand, he snatches the bristle brush from its hanger and finishes cleaning the torn and ragged flesh from her once beautiful face. A face now so hideous and ruined that even her precious father wouldn’t know her from the common trash littering the city streets.

Watching the blood and ink swirl together down the drain, he barely gives his own scalded hand a thought as he says to the corpse of what was Ayame, “Let’s go say good night to the fucking children together, shall we my dear?”

Wet from the shower spray, covered in ink and the fleshy remains of his prized wife, he drags her limp and mangled body through the halls by her ravaged throat. *I haven’t had that much fun in years... I do believe I have found a well worthy of my mischievous nature – at least until the old oyabun has it hunted down and slaughtered.*

Now, to see about the whore’s children...

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

Enamored by the imaginatively woven tales of Edgar Allen Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, Ray Bradbury, H.G. Wells, Edgar Rice Burrows and Arthur C. Clark, magical worlds took form from their inspiration keeping her awake night after night reading by flashlight under the covers, or nesting in a closet with the door shut. While willing to read just about anything that is well crafted, she has a soft spot for the darker side of writing in the Horror, Sci-Fi and Other World genres.

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





On the Bridge by Ryan Kelly

"Where are you taking me?"

"I can't really tell you right now. But it's not much farther, just keep walking this way."

"Why not?"

"Why not what?"

"Why can you not tell me where we're going?"

"I just can't, but you'll see soon enough."

"Fine. And slow down, will you? What's the big rush?"

"I guess you're right, there's no rush. My apologies."

"Thanks. Didn't mean to nag you there, it's just you've been practically running since we left the house. It's been a chore keeping up."

"Sorry."

"It's okay. So how close are we to our destination?"

"Actually, we're taking the next right where that stoplight is up ahead. It isn't far after that."

"The next right? But that would take us to the North River Bridge. Is that where we're going?"

"Yes."

"Why couldn't you have just said that from the start?"

"I don't know."

"And why are we going to the North River Bridge at this time of the night?"

"Listen, I hate to be a jerk, but you need to stop with the questions, all right? Like I said, you'll see soon enough."

"Jeez, sorry. It's just you've been acting kinda odd today. You're like detached or something, and then you start getting mysterious on me. You okay?"

"Honestly, no."

"Well what's up? Another bad day at work?"

"Every day is a bad day at work. I've accepted that."

"Have you been feeling lonely again? I'm telling you, you'll find the right person someday. And don't worry about work, you just--"

"Don't waste your breath, okay? You've been telling me the same things for months, and they're not going to do any good. Not at this point."

"What do you mean not at this point? And I don't say those things just to say them, I say them to try to help you."

"I know. I know."

"All right then. Let's head home, what do you say? It's late, and you'll feel better in the morning after a good night's sleep."

"I can't, the bridge is just up ahead, only a hundred feet or so."

"Fantastic. And you know what? It's still going to be there in the morning, no point in seeing it now. Come on, let's turn around."

"I said that's out of the question."

"Why?"

"You'll see."

"Tell me why!"

"No."

"Do it!"

"No!"

"Do it or I'm going home! I don't understand why you need me out here!"

"I'm going to jump off the North River Bridge."

"Wait, what?"

"We're here."

"Stop it, this isn't that funny. I'm too cold to find this prank humorous. Can we go home now?"

"I'm not kidding you."

"Hold on--"

"I said I'm not kidding you. I'm ending it all tonight."

"No! You can't!"

"I am."

"Come on now, you ha- Hey! Get down from the ledge! We can talk this out!"

"In all fairness, you and I have been talking this out for a while. Every day, in fact. And I just don't feel like living anymore, simple as that."

"Please don't."

"I know you don't want me to. You have been the best, closest friend I have ever had, and I'll miss you. I thank you for always being there for me, including right now."

"Trust me, please don't do this."

"It's okay, it's better this way. Just go on without me."

"You don't understand, I can't."

"Sure you can. You got a good head on your shoulders, and you're a nice person. You'll be fine."

"No, you really don't get it."

"Don't get what?"

"If you die, I die too."

"What?"

"If you throw yourself off this bridge, I'm going with you."

"No, you don't need to do that for me."

"I wouldn't be doing it for you because *I am* you."

"What are you talking about? How can you be me?"

"Right now, and this may seem unbelievable, but you are the only person standing on this bridge."

"I'm what?"

"You're alone on this bridge."

"You're crazy; you walked with me all the way here."

"I know you don't realize it, but I'm just in your mind. You've been talking to yourself the whole way here. You talk to yourself all the time."

"What? Are you telling me the truth?"

"Yes. Look around, there's nobody else here. It's just you."

"Not true, you're right... wait, you just..."

"I just what?"

"You... Oh my God. But I can still hear your voice like you are a different person. How is that possible?"

"Listen, you are mentally ill, quite severely I might add. And I can try my best to explain all this to you, but first you need to come down from there. You need help, and killing yourself is not the answer."

"No, no, no! How is that the truth? I have talked to you every day for as long as I can remember! And not once did you mention the fact that you are just a manifestation of my psyche and not a real person!"

"Since I am a part of your psyche, part of your mind, whatever I tell you or don't tell you is completely under your control."

"Whoa, hold on. You trying to tell me you aren't real, that I created you in my mind, and I that control you?"

"More or less. Come on down from that ledge, and we can talk the rest of this out."

"That's ridiculous. I think I can tell the difference between a real person and one that is imaginary, and you are very real."

"I'm not, you created me, and the more you talk to me, the more real I become to you. You need help, therapy or something, anything!"

"No way, you are full of it. This is just some ploy to get me to not kill myself. I'm flattered, truly I am. But I got news for you! Keep your lies to yourself, and live your life to the fullest without me."

"Please, no! I'm not going to go on! I'm going to die with you! You have to understand, you're just talking to yourself right now!"

"The only thing I have to do is jump off this here bridge."

"No, don't!"

"I have too."

"No!"

"Goodbye."

"See! I'm falling with you right now to our deaths! To your death!"

"Wait, I jumped! How can I still hear you? I left you on the bridge!"

"I told you! I'm--"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Ryan Kelly, a native of Massachusetts, is entering his third year of college as a full time student. "On the Bridge", which was inspired by his interest in psychology and the human psyche, is the first of his works to be published. He plans on continuing to write more short fiction in the years to come.



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Toe Jam by Maggie Doonan

Edward didn't like nicknames. He was always correcting people whenever they let one slip but no one ever took any notice, not even his parents. It was like some people couldn't stop themselves. He'd seen his birth certificate; Edward Timothy Stanton was stamped clear across the top of the page. There was no 'Eddie' or 'Edwina' like Gary Freedman called him. He used to wish his parents had picked a different name, like Darren or Jeremy. Something that didn't squish up so easily. He didn't bother wishing anymore, now that he was older. He had figured out why they'd picked this one after a while. He had been named after his grandfather, the one who lived out back in the granny flat. Except for their name, though, Edward didn't think they had anything in common. For one thing, his grandfather loved nicknames. He introduced himself as Grandad Ed and made everyone call him that, even if they weren't in the family. The mashed up words made Edward's tongue feel furry so he tried not to call his grandfather by anything. This wasn't too hard to do since his grandfather hardly ever had company and did most of the talking anyway.

He did feel bad for his grandfather sometimes. He was much older than anyone else Edward had ever seen. The skin on his grandfather's face folded over on itself so much that sometimes Edward wondered if he could see out. He was so old that Edward was sure he was senile. Peter Linder, who hung out at the monkey-bars at recess, said that his Poppy had gone senile. Peter said that last November his Poppy crawled under the coffee table and didn't come out for three days, and was throwing oranges and potatoes at the TV like they were grenades. His mum had to put him in a Home after that. Now the nurses put all his food through a blender, even his sausages and steaks.

Edward had grimaced at this information even as he was convinced. His grandfather didn't throw anything, but he had been making up things that didn't make sense for as long as Edward could remember. Things like how he had been a detective who had travelled the world; from 'India to Antarctica' he would say. Whenever Edward asked what a detective was doing in Antarctica, his grandfather would just get all wet around the eyes and mumble 'I was looking for something'.

When he was younger, the stories would gush out of the old man like a tap turned up full-bore and Edward would have to close his eyes against the sprays of spit. His grandfather would grab his arm and squeeze tight enough to leave red marks. He'd make Edward look down as he kicked off his slippers, would point with his free hand at the stump where there should have been a wrinkly big toe. The nub was always angry, mottled red and yellow as if the separation of toe from foot was recent. The sight would make the strings in Edward's neck shiver. Then his grandfather would hiccup and he would stare at the floor until the foot had returned to the slipper.

Mostly his grandfather's stories would drift in and out of each other, but the one about what happened to his big toe would never change. There would be a blizzard; his grandfather would be about Edward's age (no matter what year). In the storm he would come across a gypsy's caravan. His grandfather's voice would go soft when he would describe the man waiting inside, sometimes too soft to hear, not that it mattered. Edward couldn't ever remember anything except the bit about the man's black braided beard, tied with a red ribbon, and that was because it was seemed so ridiculous; only girls have braids with ribbons. The man would offer him a hot chocolate and after swigging the whole drink his grandfather would pass out. When he woke up, the storm would be over, the caravan gone as well as his big toe.

His grandfather's dentures would grind noisily at this end. Eventually, his hold on Edward would loosen and he'd wobble over to the closest chair. He'd stare at the wall and wouldn't say anything and that's where Edward would leave him.

He didn't know if his parents had any idea that his grandfather was senile. He had never seen his grandfather tell either of them any of the stories that Edward had heard. He guessed that if they did

know they would have probably put him in a Home by now, like Peter's Poppy. His parents barely saw him anyway, especially in winter. The old man hardly left his flat, locking himself inside as soon as the chance of snow was suggested.

This winter Edward hadn't seen his grandfather since the channel nine weather man said to expect light frost the week before. Staring at the sealed flat from the back porch, he scuffed his sneaker on the wood and glanced up at the 4 PM dusk. It hadn't snowed since before he could remember. Shaking his head, he dropped down the steps and walked down the alley between the house and the neighbour's fence. The steel gate stuck to his fingers a little as he swung it open. Peeling his hands free, he rubbed them together before shoving them into his jacket pockets and kicking the gate shut behind him.

His house was at the bottom of the street and from his letterbox he could see the Give Way sign at the intersection at the far end of the road. The streetlights were on and a couple of cars ducked in and out of driveways. A football game could be heard from a nearby living room. The orange corkscrew curls of Gary Freedman snagged Edward's attention a few houses down. The boy skidded his bike back and forth in front of his house, streaking the pavement with burnt rubber.

Fingering the coins in his pocket, Edward reconsidered his need for a snickers bar. He wasn't really up for one of Gary's 'Edwina Gay-ton: Dear Diary' routines today. As he watched, though, the boy's mother appeared at the front door. The tinny snap of her voice drew a long whine from her son before he dramatically slumped over his handlebars, steering the bike into the garage. As soon as the door had rolled down Edward moved, trotting quickly past the Freedman's house, a smirk tickling his lips as the picketed yard was left behind.

The sun had set by the time he reached the Seven Eleven a couple of blocks over, the temperature sinking with it. Grabbing the snickers, Edward paid the pimply attendant and stripped back the wrapper before he was through the automatic doors. The cold bit at his face as he leaned against the shop wall. Normally, he took his time with the chocolate bar. He would make small, precise incisions with his front teeth and then let the chocolate and caramel melt in his mouth before swallowing. It could take Edward twenty minutes to eat a snickers, but the chill that had started to reach past the lining of his jacket spurred him on. He was licking the smeared chocolate from his thumb and index finger in less than five. Scrunching the wrapper into a ball, he took a shot at the bin and missed. Pushing off the bricks he turned towards home, screwing up his face as a breeze tugged at his hair.

Hands fisted in his pockets, Edward had been walking for a minute or so when leaves of ice began to fall around him. Slowing his pace, his eyes widened as the flakes mingled with the clouds of his breath. By the time he reached the corner of his street, the snow was dropping steadily, thickening on the ground, filling the gutters and blanketing trees. Ahead of Edward the houses looked like Christmas cards without the coloured lights. A cruel wind curled around the houses and cut through his clothes, making him shudder and hunch over. The snowfall grew faster, heavier. Lifting a hand to shield his face, he leaned into the rising gale and kept walking, snow crunching beneath his shoes. He glimpsed the Freedman's blue fence just as the street was consumed by a swirling haze.

The glow of the streetlights withered and, staggering forward, Edward's chest squeezed painfully. He couldn't make out anything anymore through the sheets of ice. His fingers were numb, his nose and ears were burning. Each step was harder than the last as the snow rose around his ankles. Squinting in the white, he spotted a glimmer of yellow. Moving towards it, an unfamiliar outline emerged from the storm. It took him a moment to recognize it as a caravan.

Red flags flew from curving wooden edges, thin-spoke wheels almost as tall as Edward stood still, half-buried in snow. Hesitating before the caravan, fragments of his grandfather's stories echoed through his mind. The lantern swung loosely above the door and he could see the warmth spilling from

the gaps between the door and its frame. Edward stumbled to the side as a violent gust knocked him about, the wind shrieking as he righted himself. Pushing through the sleet, he reached for the caravan, slipping on the first step then half-climbing, half-falling up the rest. Collapsing through the door with a grunt, he landed face-down in a pile of strawberry cushions.

The howl of the storm was silenced in an instant and, as Edward lay prone, warmth enveloped him. An ache spread through his limbs as circulation started to return. Fuzziness smothered his thoughts as he eased himself up after a minute. Pausing on his hands and knees, he looked about the caravan. Shelves atop shelves lined each wall and jars of all sizes and shapes covered the skinny ledges. Moldy-green liquid filled the jars and floating in the fluid were indistinct objects, one or two in some jars and up to what must have been forty or fifty in others. At the far end of the caravan a man sat straight-backed and cross-legged. Edward's heart throbbed as his gaze followed the rope of pitch-black beard, stumbled over the red ribbon, swam over the sickly tone of his skin. In the man's hands was a large mug and Edward could see the tops of pink and white marshmallows. The smell of hot chocolate wafted around him. The man smiled, small teeth flashing.

"You are cold. Here," the man offered the mug. "This will warm you."

Edward stared at the spidery fingers wrapped around the mug. The creases of his grandfather's features drifted in and out of focus. The heat in the caravan made it hard to hold onto a thought. Stretching across the small space, he took the mug from the man. Sitting back on his knees, he gripped the porcelain tightly, the sweet smell drawing his face closer to the mug. The marshmallows bobbed and bounced in the chocolate. The cold still clung to his bones and the hot chocolate promised to warm his insides. His grandfather's misery felt like a mirage.

"Drink." The word was a murmur, blurring into the background.

A jar gleamed in the corner of his eye as he lifted the mug. Dark shapes moved listlessly behind the glass. The rim of the mug pressed into Edward's bottom lip, the hot chocolate quivered then slid over the rim, pooling in his mouth. The marshmallows butted his nose as he swallowed lazily, the heat unfurling from his gut. As he took another long gulp of the hot chocolate, one of the objects in the jar drifted against the glass. Edward's throat shuddered as the bulbous piece of meat and nail came into focus, gliding over the glass before dissolving back into the green depths. Another toe followed, smearing itself against the glass, lingering longer and allowing no doubt. Darkness chewed at the edges of Edward's vision as he lowered the mug. The silence was humming when he raised his gaze to the man crawling towards him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Maggie Doonan is an aspiring Australian novelist who is currently in her third and final year of a Bachelor of Fine Arts: Creative and Professional Writing. With an affinity for the gruesome and creepy, Maggie's work has previously been published in online alternative literary magazines, and she hopes to one day become a somebody, anyone really, in horror literature. Maggie can be reached at margaret.doonan@connect.qut.edu.au



The Answer in Darkness by C.M. Saunders

The shards of light awoke him from his nightmare. Only then did he realize that the shards of light were, in fact, bolts of pain penetrating his murky subconscious. His eyes snapped open. He was in an unfamiliar place. A dark place that smelled like the grave. He tried to move, but could not. Evidently, he was lashed to some kind of contraption.

The pain radiated in white-hot waves from the fingers of his left hand, and even though he couldn't crane his neck enough to see what was happening down there he didn't really need to. The sickening tugging sensation that lurked beneath the hurt and the brutal sounds of snapping bone told him that his fingers were being

crudely amputated. The hollow throb in his other hand reeked of collateral damage already sustained.

It was coming back to him now. The bar. The girl with the crazy eyes and black hair. Her sordid promises. Drinking from her flask of vodka, and then...

Another finger was wrenched away bringing him back to the present and he let out a hoarse, strangled cry. "Why are you doing this to me?" He demanded of the darkness.

"Why not?" came the terse reply.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - After graduating with a degree in journalism, C.M. Saunders worked extensively in the freelance market, contributing to numerous international publications including *Fortean Times*, *Chat*, *Its Fate!*, *Bizarre*, *Urban Ink*, *Enigma*, *Record Collector*, *Maxim*, and a regular column to the *Western Mail* newspaper. Since returning to dark fiction he has had stories published in *Screams of Terror*, *Shallow Graves*, *Dark Valentine*, *Fantastic Horror*, *Unbroken Waters* and several anthologies. His novellas *Dead of Night* and *Apartment 14F: An Oriental Ghost Story* are available on Damnation Books while his latest, *Devil's Island*, is out soon on Rainstorm Press.

His latest short story, *The Art of Lucid Dreaming*, is featured in the new anthology, *Torn Realities*, from Post Mortem Press: <http://www.postmortem-press.com/torn.php>.

And please take a look at his author page on Amazon... <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Christian-Saunders/e/B0034QAX0E/>.



The Beast's Logic by Carola Kickers

"It must have been happening very gradually. I can't find any other explanation for it. But, please let me first introduce myself: My name is Andreas Lehmann. More precisely, Chief Inspector Lehmann. I've been working at the Criminal Investigative Department in Cologne, Germany for more than 30 years now, but these unusual incidents have been accumulating during the past couple of years. It's as if a wheel has begun to spin faster and faster. It began at the turn of the century. Now-a-days, it's happening all over Europe – even all over the world! Mind you, only in the so-called "civilized" countries such as the USA and Europe. New horror stories reach our ears almost every day. Oh no, I'm not speaking about natural disasters or threatening nuclear meltdown. According to my calculations, human beings are the catastrophe. But let me start from the beginning:

We didn't give any credibility whatsoever to the increasing killing sprees or family tragedies. We only ever received information from other commissariats when either one or the other perpetrator was on the run in our region, or had accomplices here or the facts of a specific crime bore similarities to our cases. Being situated in Cologne, we were not always directly involved. The connections between the individual cases were not immediately apparent. And the tabloids ultimately distorted every murder in order to make the front page. I would never have caught onto the truth if I hadn't re-sorted out the facts while cleaning out my desk at the office one evening. The case involving a killing spree in Cologne-Ehrenfeld area was more-or-less closed, the result of a hopeless student/computer freak flipping out. At least, that's what we'd believed. Those violent video games should really be prohibited!

I initially noticed in three different cases – all murder cases mind you – the similar license plate numbers. It could have been a coincidence. Ultimately, we were dealing with three unrelated crimes within the Cologne area: A family father who had shot his children while they were sleeping. A second case involving a jealous lover who had broken into his girlfriend's home and then raped and stabbed her to death. The third case involving a homeless person, who suddenly appeared at his favourite kiosk at the main train station and attacked and killed the owner with a broken bottle. What could cause people to do such things? Believe me; public officers have long ago given up asking that question! For us cops there is no doubt that these types of breakdowns build up during a long period of time. Maybe we were deceiving ourselves here?

At first I didn't give any real consideration to my new findings. My instincts, however, told me something else. In order to support my budding suspicions, I half-heartedly searched the archives regarding the cases within the last couple of months. Suddenly, I discovered one puzzle piece after another, the entire picture revealing an atrocious concept. But whose plan? I'm not exactly what you would call a religious man but I still remembered bits and pieces from my religious studies class. The problem was though. Nobody would believe me! Would you, if I told you that in each one of these cases, a car with a license plate containing the number 666 was involved? Would you? You see, you're laughing too! Not just any car, mind you. All different models. The kiosk owner, for example, owned a small, ancient Fiat with the license plate number: K- ... 666. The girlfriend who was murdered by her lover owned a black Corsa and the homicidal family's father, a silver-coloured Mercedes A Class with the same number combination at the end. Well, are you still laughing now? I don't even blame you. However, my investigations continued. I seized other cases, searching systematically in the criminal investigation department's databank. I always stumbled upon the same pattern. Sometimes it belonged to the perpetrator, at other times, the victim. But, always a combination of numbers which included the triple 6. That couldn't possibly be just a coincidence. There were just a few exceptions which my suspicions didn't apply to. Too few! I decided to expand my investigations.

Since that day, I've always kept my eyes and ears open whilst underway. A notebook was always beside me on the passenger seat. Guess what I took notes about? Right! The number of people driving

around with similar license plates in Cologne and the greater area was stupefying! So I drove further. To Duesseldorf, Krefeld and alongside the entire Lower Rhine. On the weekends, I drove an endless number of miles on different autobahns. In no time whatsoever, my notebook was bursting with information. They were everywhere. At night, when I came home to my empty apartment, I often stared at that book for hours. The TV program had long ago lost its appeal.

I decided to obtain all the lists of the registered license plates within Germany for the last five years from the licensing authorities. I soon had a mountain of CDs on my desk, which I meticulously went through, one after the other. Obviously, I couldn't say a thing to my colleagues. That would have cost me my job and my career. That was the only thing that I still had after my wife, Petra, had left me two years earlier! This job is my life, got it? Even if it does sometimes turn my stomach when I'm at the scene of a crime.

So I continued my studies in my living room, organized a large bulletin board and pinned a map of Germany onto it. Then I began to compare the solved killing sprees with the registered cars involved and marked those places with small pins. Red for familiar victims, green for spontaneous episodes and yellow for school assassinations, which were – thank God – very seldom. Please don't ask me what I thought to achieve. I didn't know. At any rate, I'd sacrificed my sparse spare time for this unreasonable research.

At one point, I'd gazed at the bizarre pattern made of pins and began to recognize tiny pentagrams. Now you really think I'm nuts, don't you? The longer this crazy idea developed in me, the worse it got. And I didn't even know what to do with my findings.

Then that thing with Petra happened: I coincidentally met up with her one day in the city centre while on duty. She hadn't noticed me as she strolled hand-in-hand with her sophisticated new boyfriend – a blond gigolo – through the pedestrian area. Petra carried a couple of bags embossed with expensive boutique lettering. And all that from my money! I followed them this time not out of professional, but personal curiosity. They disappeared into an underground garage of a well-known department store. I hesitated at first but then entered; neon lights flooded the cement floor and somehow reminding me of a jail. The divorce from my wife was such a dirty affair, that I would have gladly treated her to that type of domicile. I hid behind the columns and in the shadows, so that the two of them wouldn't find me. For a short moment, memories assailed me when I saw the two of them in front of a fancy black Alpha Romeo – a brand-spanking new convertible Sportster, just the kind that I would never be able to afford after the alimony payment was deducted from my paycheque. Petra was loading the shopping bags onto the backseat of the car. Her lover didn't budge an inch from her side. When she turned to him, embracing and kissing him passionately, I clenched my fists. A raw rage encompassed me at that moment, over which I had almost no control. Not until the motor bellowed and the echo of the bare walls resounded did I awake from the trance and noticed my right hand clutching the butt of my gun! Appalled, I stared as the Speedster roared away. The license plate boasted a number from the Duesseldorf area and ended with 666! You just can't imagine how terrible I felt.

I went to the very next bar in the old town and indulged myself in a brewski. I know, it's not allowed while on duty, but I was desperate. Once I'd finally gotten a shot down the hatch, things suddenly became crystal clear to me. I ran home, sat down with my laptop and began to add everything that I could find about the said number to my own research. A passage out of the Revelations Chapter 13 especially captivated me:

I saw another beast coming up out of the earth... He causes all, the small and the great, the rich and the poor, and the free and the slave, to be given marks on their right hands, or on their foreheads; and that no one would be able to buy or to sell, unless he has that mark, the name of the beast or the number of his name. Here is wisdom. He who has understanding, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. His number is **six hundred sixty-six**.

Don't you understand? Implemented into our modern lifetime, this means exactly the same! How can we be as easily programmed from evil, if not in real life? Through something that we automatically and unconsciously register, while apparently doing normal everyday things such as driving to work or travelling on holidays? Something that we desperately need in order to be mobile and independent now-a-days? Something that we don't immediately replace, that we even – dare say – nurture and cherish? Isn't such a license plate much easier and less obvious than, for example, a tattoo? Stop laughing and wake up and smell the coffee! I beg you; we're talking about human lives here! How many times do I have to repeat myself? Listen to me! You can easily check it yourself! Get the numbers from observing the traffic! And would you finally let me out of the god-damned cell!!! WOULD YOU JUST LISTEN TO ME FOR A MOMENT?!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Born in Krefeld/Germany Carola Kickers followed the literary traces of her grandfather Hardy Kickers who became known as a composer and author of regional novels in the 1940s and 1950s. Therefore, it was obvious to found at first a music publishing company which takes care of the nostalgic hit treasures which are very popular in German Rhineland until today.

Presently, the author lives in Kempen on the Lower Rhine and is mainly writing Mystery and Dark Fantasy short stories and novels. But also children's stories and some crime stories are put to paper by her. Since 2010 she uses the pen-name Carol Grayson. Some of her short stories have been published in German anthologies. Several of her stories won awards.

The vampire novel series "LUX AETERNA" - The adventures of the vampire Jason Dawn - is published in German only up to now and includes so far 6 volumes. Meanwhile, an exclusive marketing has been built around the Jason Dawn Saga such as the tailor-made garments, perfumes or ornaments of the characters acting in the Saga. Carol can be found on twitter at @Carol_Grayson, on Facebook at www.facebook.com/carola.knickers, and on her blogs <http://carolgrayson-darkromance.blogspot.de> and <http://jasondawn-luxaeterna.blogspot.de>



One Photograph ~ Two Stories

Comparative Flash Fiction



The Slip by Nina D'Arcangela

The texture of the brass dials a thing so fetching, feel them spin, with a tick and a click, tightening ever so slightly as the prize is nearing.

Nimble fingers twist knobs, first left, then right, and back yet again. Feeling for the slightest shift, as slowly they spin.

A tick, a click, the slip. The first dial is set. How these tired tips work at gaining entry, their art lost to time, man's arrogance a false sentry.

These fingers you see, they are for hire, they spin, they click only for the most discriminate buyer. What lies beyond the beauty of this contraption of brass, these fingers care not – their job only to spin, to click, to find the – slip.

Ah, the slipping of the final pin into place, pride to be had for a task well done. These fingers find no pride being named thief, only in the triumph of yet another breach.

Never touching the treasures concealed inside, the gift is in the spinning, the clicking and the glorious sound of the decisive slipping as the lock disengages, and the tomb readies to release.

The thrill done, the game complete, the mastery of infiltrating the impenetrable is what these tired digits did seek. Their desirous splendor being the one called to task, no other hand as capable on the brass.

These fingers, they are old, and worn with time, slowly they reach out and gentle the slide.

A slight pop, the pressure released, the door opens a mere chink, allowing for those who would have the briefest of peeks.

The thrill these old finger have felt now past, gone on this final releasing of brass. This buyer untrue with intentions corrupt, these fingers have felt for the final time the tick, the click, the magnificent slip!

Two Four Five by Kalla Monahan

Two. Four. Five.

Such things numbers are. Who thought of them? What do they really mean?

The concept is something that we inherently understand and accept... but –

Two. Four. Five.

Behind these three numbers lay my prophecies. One cannot possibly comprehend the weight of this. The crushing, blinding horror that envelops me at the sight of them.

They represent a box, built into a wall of boxes. A repository of fear and horror segmented and locked away within my own mind. Each one has a number and a corresponding combination which will unleash its contents upon my broken mind.

What triggers the combination to unlock is different with each one. A smell, a whispered word, or a sequence of events. One is even triggered by a recurring nightmare, of that I know.

Two. Four. Five.

The contents are locked away for good reason, as what I see is what you get.

I am a soothsayer; a teller of fortunes. There is one slight catch, however, my fortunes are delivered to you only if the conditions for its release are met. It's a game of chance, per se; will some gloriously wretched soul be bathed in the horror behind one of the little bronzed doors? Or will an unspeakable terror smite the psyche of an innocent. Not even I know the answer.

Two. Four. Five.

It is an interminable game, waiting. One minute you believe the coast is clear, that a fortune will not come to fruition. The next, your mind becomes achingly aware of the turning dials, the subtle hammering of the tumbler as it spins.

Then...

Red-eyed, albino midgets surround a feeble woman, their milky hands scraping at her flesh. Revealing the cogs of her existence which lay below her corporeality. A new foreboding ensues from two four five.

RULES – 300 words; no more, no less.

Using the selected photograph as inspiration

The Girl and the Ax by Candy Schibli

"Axes are for chopping wood," said a boy sitting on the end of a slide. "The long handle is for holding the black square at the end."

This is how the playground conversation began. "You're dumb," yelled the girl that hung from the swing. "Stupid boy don't you know anything? I know a man that grabbed an ax to kill. At least that seemed to be his first will. He was first outside chopping wood as you said. I heard the crackling splits from the force of the ax's head. The door to the right of him was open wide. That's how I could see him outside."

"Okay, then," remarked the boy. "So, what happened next?"

The girl's expression became quite perplexed. Her lips cocked sideways, her eyes squinted shut.

"Then," she explained, "the peace turned amuck. He stomped into the kitchen. His leather boots pounded the floor. He fiercely

yanked open the basement door. From the wall he grabbed yet another wooden ax. Hearts raced and pounded. The still air cracked."

The boy gasped. He was taken aback.

"The man raised his arms." The girl began to tear and asked the boy gently, "do you know this kind of fear?"

"No," exclaimed the boy in an heir rather curt. "But go-on, finish the story," he continued to blurt.

"Fine," whispered the girl. "I'll go ahead. The man raised the ax to the woman's head. She shrunk into the sofa, her eyes bulging, red like fire. Just in, like, a second he seemed to change his desire. With an impish grin, he tossed that ax on a whim. Still, the scene played out just as grim."

The girl clasped her neck as though feeling pain.

"He strangled her throat; it's an axing all the same."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Candy Schibli writes short stories and flash fiction. She lives in Washington, D.C.. Her writings are largely psychological thrillers and tales of horror. Read more at lifeincandyland.tumblr.com.





ADAM MILLARD

THE
SUSCEPTIBLES

The scary thing is, they could always see YOU...

AVAILABLE FROM AMAZON

What Will Come by L.E. White

"Tall White Chocolate Latte for Mikayla."

I had to leave a tip, considering how cute he was. All tall and tan with dark brown eyes. He smiled at me and said, "Thank you," but then he turned back to the steamer. No flirting with the barista for me today so I went back to my table.

The latte was way too hot to drink so I took out my birthday present and ran my hands over it. It was a journal, bound in real leather and stitched together with a coarse string. There were glass beads set into the case and it was beautiful.

Emily had found it at a yard sale and cut the used pages out of it. There were only a few missing so I would be able to keep this for a long time since it was thick. The timing was perfect too because I was almost finished with my last journal. This gorgeous book had waited for two whole days and now I was going to initiate it.

I dug out my favorite gel pen, looked at it, and then looked back down at the journal. I felt like I needed one of those old feather pens, the kind that I would have to dip into a little bowl of ink. That didn't matter though, I loved this pen and just because it didn't match the book didn't mean that I wasn't going to use it.

The pages were soft, like that old paper that was made from skin, and I ran my hand down it as if petting my cat. The top of the page had a gold line across it and thick black cursive letters in the header that asked, "Would you like to share your day?"

Dear Diary,

Yes, I would like to share my day. Today has been wonderful. After my birthday two days ago the whole world is still smiling at me. Good things are happening all around and I can't wait for tomorrow.

I got an A on my biology test which means that I'm going to pass. If it weren't for Emily I wouldn't have been able to do it, so I need to remember to get her a thank you gift for helping me study all weekend.

Emily's mom said I can stay over this weekend so I know that I will get two or three more days away from my mom and three meals a day over at

her house. I hope her mom makes chili and her dad makes ribs. I just wish my parents had dinner together the way that Emily's family does.

It is kind of sad but my show cow for the fair died. The vet said it was some sort of heart disease so there wasn't anything we could have done for it. I'm sad that it died but happy that I don't have to show it in 4-H. I don't know why dad still makes me show cows when I told him I don't want to, but now I don't have to this year.

The last really cool thing that happened today was that Brian sat down by me in the library. We didn't get anything done but it was so much fun talking to him. That and he is so hot! I think I may have a sun burn. I heard he dumped Ashley and if that is true then I will make him mine. Just need to talk to him again tomorrow and suggest that we could work on the project at the library on Thursday night.

Goodnight my beautiful new diary.

It took me most of the cup of coffee to write it all out. I didn't want to make any mistakes on the first entry of such a great diary and I don't write that fast anyway.

As I took the last drink of my coffee I looked at the journal again. Thinking that maybe I could draw something in it too, I pulled the book back in front of me and that was when I noticed that there was some sort of stain on the page.

"Great," I muttered as I tried to wipe whatever it was off. Wiping it didn't do any good but at least the ink was dry and I didn't smudge any of the words.

It wasn't a stain though and the more I looked at it the clearer it became. It was one of those three pointed Tri-something-or-others with a circle around it.

I decided to ignore it and put the book into my bag before taking my cup to the trash by the counter. I was hoping that Mr. Coffee behind the counter might say something, but he didn't even look up.

A woman walked in to order. She was tall and had a big black purse. The three pointed thingy in the circle was the clasp of the bag. I stopped and

stared at it. What were the odds of something like that anyway?

"Can I help you?" She had noticed my staring.

"Um, I love your bag?" I was so glad that I hadn't just clammed up when she spoke to me. If my dad were here he just might have been proud that I hadn't frozen up like a rusty trap.

"Oh," She said, looking down at it, "Thank you. I just got it."

"The buckle is really nice. I think I've seen it before."

"It's called a Triquetra. It's old Celtic art."

I nodded and smiled and walked away. It was pretty but not that pretty. However, I just couldn't leave. The fact that the picture matched the purse seemed crazy. I went back to my table and sat down to look at the journal some more.

The woman sat down on the other side of the store and pulled out a scratch off lottery ticket while I looked at my journal. I was about to open it when she gasped and slapped her hand to her chest.

"Are you all right?"

She didn't answer right away. Instead, she turned and looked at me with her mouth hanging open. The guy behind the counter came around to check on her.

"I won," She whispered. "I won."

Then she jumped up and screamed, "I won", before doing a little circle dance and grabbing her stuff and darting out of the shop.

Mr. Coffee turned to look at me with a grin on his face. I shrugged and then he frowned. "I don't know how much she won, but if she did that well, she could at least have left a tip, right?"

The next night I was sitting in the same shop with the same drink and a very different attitude. The new barista was working today and my coffee tasted awful. There was nothing cute to be redeeming about this guy and the nasty old woman who ran the place was training with him tonight.

The entire day had been a pain in my ass and it

was all thanks to Stacey Phillips. That stupid ho bag was Brian's ex-girlfriend.

I pulled out my journal and looked at the top of the page. "Would you like to share your day?" was across the top of the page and I couldn't wait to start writing. The words in my brain were burning spots in my mind and I had to get them out.

Oh, I'll share my day. Just be ready for what you are about to have written on you.

Stacey Phillips is a bitch. That seems like a good place to start.

This morning, I ran into Brian in front of the school. He opened the door for me and we were walking together to the lockers. He asked how I was and we started talking about stuff. He walked me all the way to my locker and stood there talking until he brought up the game on Friday. He asked me if I would be there and then said he hoped I would be. That he would like to see me there.

I felt so stupid because I know I blushed. He was about to be mine and I couldn't wait.

So he leaves and I head to class. As soon as Emily got there I told her what had happened and we were laughing about it until the uber-bitch walked up and stepped between us. Stacey had heard me and told me that if I didn't stay away from Brian she was gonna kick my ass.

Emily told her to take off and since everyone knows that Emily has a black belt, Stacey left but she spent the rest of the day being a bitch. She tried to have one of her posse pants me in hall in front of Brian and she threw food in my hair.

I hate her. He left her and she needs to get over it.

"Oh great, the slut is here."

I looked over my shoulder to see Stacey, Amy and Heather coming through the door. They walked up to me and Stacey grabbed my hair. "So you did wash the ketchup out. I'm surprised you bothered."

"Leave other customers alone or you will have to leave." The old lady manager said. It was a quiet night and she had been watching the door.

"I don't drink your stupid coffee anyway."

Stacey said, turning on her heel. She gave my hair a solid pull before letting go.

After they were out I picked up my cup and took another sip. The old woman was giving me the evil eye but I was a paying customer and I hadn't done anything. That meant that she wouldn't say anything to me, but that didn't stop her from glaring every time she turned around.

I opened my journal again. Looked at what I had written and then added one line.

I wish she would just hurry up and die.

This time, another symbol appeared behind what I had written. It looked like a shark's fin in some water. I closed my journal and switched to history homework while I finished the god awful latte.

"I wondered how long I had to wait before you finally crawled out of that hole," Stacey said. She had been waiting at the bottom of the escalator with her friends. I was outnumbered three to one but we were in the mall so she couldn't do too much.

"Leave me alone," I said, walking into the pet store.

"I don't think so bitch," she said as she came after me. "I want to make sure that you understand Brian is mine. You aren't going to touch him."

"He broke up with you. Sounds like he doesn't want you touching him and I understand why."

"You leave him alone, Whorewell."

"My name is Orwell and he probably dumped you for being too stupid to get people's names right."

She stepped up and slapped me; a quick, open handed hit that made my eyes flash and water.

"You girls stop that in my store!"

She shoved me backwards so that I tripped over some dog food to fall on my ass before turning to leave.

One step was all Stacey took before her heel broke. It made her step sideways and when she tried to recover her toe caught on the garden hose that was lying across the floor. It was just like a cartoon, she flew forward with both arms waving and crashed into a display of fish tanks.

Stacey hit the twenty gallon tanks like a truck and put her head through the thin glass. She had been bent over a bit, almost running towards the wall as she tried to catch her balance. Now that she had stopped falling forward her weight shifted and her body recoiled from the impact. She fell backward, putting her on her butt and pulling her head out of the tank.

Out of the tank, and over the shattered glass still in the frame.

Blood spurted out like a squirt gun. Great blasts of it while her friends and I screamed. The pet store guy ran around the counter to try and help but before he could do anything the blood had stopped spurting on its own.

I was surrounded by a huge mess. Red splatters were almost everywhere. I found myself looking at a sticker that was on one of the tanks that hadn't shattered. The sticker showed company logo, a blue wavy line with a red sharks fin sticking out of it.

I looked at Stacey and rested my hand on my bag. I could feel the journal inside.

I had shared my good day with the lottery lady.

I had shared today with Stacey.

I wondered just how many pages were in my journal.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Leonard is a writer living in southern Indiana with his wife and four children. He is currently working on his first novel. Connect with Leonard via his blog, <http://leonardewhite.wordpress.com> or on Twitter: @leonard_white



The Widows of Ware by Lisa Flanyak

The town of Ware was situated on the outskirts of a national forest in the Pacific Northwest. In this humble community most everything was kept to a minimum. No need for the hustle and bustle of the larger cities such as the endless strip of road filled with various fast food chains and retail stores. Nope, just a tiny market square right smack dab in the center of it all. When it came to dining out you had the Redwood Diner. That's it, but the food was so tasty there that nobody cared to search for something more desirable. About two hundred homes comprised the town and each looked exactly alike. From the tops of their chimneys to the ends of their cobblestone driveways. To look at them from the outside, it would appear as if no one had it better than the other here.

The residents of Ware led a rather monotonous existence. For the better part of the year they would go about their daily routines without much distraction. However, that all changed as Halloween drew near. That's when the town took on a new life. Both children and adults became abuzz with activity. Children rejoiced in choosing the perfect costume to wear. Once selected, mothers got busy cutting and sewing. Fathers lunged into a decorating frenzy. Halloween was their time to shine; to break out of the box and be different than their neighbor. Yards became temporary graveyards with unsavory characters such as Rusty Bones and Ghoulish Gus buried there. Trees became hangouts for ghosts and bats. Patios became the final resting place for pumpkins, where they'd stay until they decayed. Yep, Halloween was big business in Ware. So far, no one had dared to monkey with that tradition.

As with most things in life there were exceptions and Ware was no different. Here, those exceptions were defined as four elderly women known collectively as the Widows. There's the widow Curtain, the widow Ross, the widow Dane and the widow Huff. These women, who rarely left the comforts of their own homes, met every Friday night at the widow Curtain's place. Here they'd sip hot tea, munch on bear claws and talk to their dead husbands. It just so happened that this year Halloween fell on a Friday. Bad news for the widows, who loathed the holiday.

As darkness settled in the four women gathered at a window in the den. Their pasty, withered faces were cold and expressionless. They watched as the children and adult chaperones poured out of their homes. The shrieks of delight sent chills down each widow's spine. The widow Curtain turned to her friends. They formed a circle and grasped one another's arthritic hands. They closed their eyes and chanted:

"Oh, what a fright! It's Halloween night! Halloween night!
Our journey has been a long haul,
no longer welcome at all.
We followed the book to the letter
in hopes we feel better.
There's not much we ask,
we wish to join in the task.
Have those frozen in darkness spring forth with life
be fueled by revenge, animosity and spite.
And give the townspeople of Ware
a delightful scare!"

What began as a warm and calm night changed not a moment later. The clear, dark skies became

cloudy. A fog rolled in. The air began to cool and a slight breeze stirred the fallen leaves. In the excitement, no one noticed that the witch decoration smashed against the side of Miller family home had started to move. The witch peeled herself off of the siding. She fell to the ground and landed with a thud. She twisted and bent until back in shape. It wasn't perfect. Her left foot pointed south and her nose was pressed against her cheek but it'd have to do. She took hold of her broom and mounted it. She pointed and zoomed skyward. The broom zagged when it should have zigged and the witch ended up smashed against the side of the house two doors down. The broom crumbled into pieces. A defeated moan escaped her lips.

As Mrs. Rodgers answered her front door for a lone candy seeker, she was confronted by a furry beast that looked a little too much like the real thing. Her mouth dropped open and before a scream could escape she threw up the candy bowl, slammed the door shut and turned out the porch light.

Down on Krinkle Street, two teenaged boys rounded a corner and met up with a wobbly skeleton trying its best to stay upright. Their sneakers squeaked as they came to a sudden halt. The boys exchanged frightful glances. One noticed a pumpkin sitting on a fence post. He snatched it up and hurled it at the skeleton. Had there been eyes in those sockets, no doubt they would have widened in horror. The pumpkin connected with the skeleton's ribcage and all the bones dislocated and fell to the pavement. The boys high-fived each other and hustled down the street.

Along the way, the boys watched as Mr. Jacob and Mr. Jerrett pulled the stuffing out of a scarecrow they had pinned to the ground. They witnessed Mrs. Seymour pick up a moving severed hand and drop it into a boiling cauldron on her front porch. Down at the Carter home, the ghosts unhooked themselves from the tree branches and headed for a crowd of trick-or-treaters. Across the street, the hanging bats did the same and set their sights on another group.

The boys joined in as everyone fought off the swarm that had gathered. The majorette twirled her baton and sent a few bats for a loop. The cowboy aimed his gun at a ghost and hit his mark. The magician pointed his wand and made a handful disappear. The ninja utilized his nun chucks and knocked a few bats out cold. The entomologist swung his net and caught a few more. All worked together until every last decoration had been defeated. They all cheered in victory.

Minutes later, the back door of the widow Curtain's house creaked open. The widow Curtain was the first to hobble in. She moved at a snail's pace over to the couch and crashed into it. Her left foot pointed south and her nose was slightly askew. Next to drag herself in was the widow Dane. Hay was entangled in her hair and her clothes were tattered. She fell into the recliner. The widow Ross crawled in next. Every bone in her body ached. Lastly, the widow Huff entered. She held onto her right red and swollen hand. Both women collapsed onto the floor next to the couch.

Nope, it would be best not to mess with tradition in the town of Ware.

Lisa can be contacted on Twitter at @leeflan, or via her Facebook link: <https://www.facebook.com/#!/lislisflan>




Artist Steve Cartwright

It's well known that an artist becomes more popular by dying, so I'm typing this with one hand while pummeling my head with a frozen mackerel with the other.

I've done art for several magazines, newspapers, websites, commercial and governmental clients, books, and scribbling - but mostly drooling - on tavern napkins. I also create art pro bono for several animal rescue groups. I was awarded the 2004 James Award for my cover art for Champagne Shivers. I recently illustrated the Cimarron Review, Stories for Children, and Still Crazy magazine covers.

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WWW.ANGELFIRE.COM/SC2/CARTOONSBY CARTWRIGHT



I Win by Sarah Cass

"It's your fault we're here." I snapped in hushed tones. Too long we'd been kept from seeing each other. They said it was for our protection – from each other. After all, I wanted to kill her.

With a dumb stare she tugged threads of hair out. The idiot would be bald soon.

"If you had kept your mouth shut. Stupid bitch." The hiss hardly left my lips before her laughter shrieked out. It blasted my brain with the shrill echo.

"Oh, you silly little bird." The electric smile that drew me into her wicked schemes lit up her features. The insane pecking at her head ceased.

"I'm not silly. You're the one that made us do it."

"You're the one that got us caught." She jerked toward me, menace in her stance. A low chuckle carried through the stagnant air. "We'll get out of here. I have a plan."

"Your plans are no good." I whipped my head around, not sure who could be listening. The spies were everywhere. "They're going to hear."

"Relax. You keep acting like a fool and they'll listen." She sighed, studying her nails. "I miss nail polish. Look at these rough edges. Looks like I've been biting them."

I frowned at the jagged edges of my own cuticles. Biting my nails was a long-standing habit. She just loved to dig at me for it. "God I hate you."

"Oh I hate you too, honey. From stem to stern. How I ended up with you I'll never know. Maybe I was supposed to help, but you're such a weak little fruitcake, there's nothing I can do."

"I'm not weak."

"Oh," her perfect lips puffed out in a mocking pout. "Of course not. You keep your mouth shut when the world crumbles around you. When the bad comes, you run and hide. Because you're smart enough to hide from danger – not because you're weak. Keep telling yourself that."

"I am not weak." My fists clenched. I couldn't stand the battering blows of her teasing any longer. The put downs I'd lived with forever. "I'm not!"

"Yes you are, idiot. Why on earth do you think I'm here? No wonder you hate me – I'm perfection to your wretched soul. I am everything you never could be. I win. I always do."

A scream worked its way up from my belly and before I knew it I punched her hard. Glass shattered, sending shards flying as blood spilled from my hand.

They were coming. I heard the shouts, saw the white clothed spies rushing to unlock the door. I had little time to shut her up.

I grabbed a shard of mirrored glass and drew it across the throbbing vein in my neck to silence her scream.

The spies wouldn't be fast enough. Not this time. My fingers grew numb but I pulled the sliver of death up my arm.

Everything grew dark, cold.

But the very best part was the silence.

I won.

She died before I did.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Sarah Cass is mom of 3, wife to 1, living in a place she fondly refers to as 'Hickville'. Writing is an escape from a life of Midwest humdrum and family chaos. While her tales span from romance to creep – one central theme runs throughout – mental disorders. Psychological distress fascinate and entice – the darkness of the mind opens a realm of story possibilities at every triggered synapse. When she's not torturing her characters, she can be found sharing her life and writing at her blog, Redefining Perfect - <http://redefiningperfect.com>.

NOW I LAY ME DOWN
TO REAP



EDITED BY GLORIA BOBROWICZ

COMING SOON

Tennessee Fog by J.R. Bingham

The cabin set nestled against the eastern Tennessee mountainside. Long before the sky lost the last of its light, shadows closed in around the wooden posts of the front porch and flickered across the oak floor, past empty, side-by-side rocking chairs, and projected oblong patterns along the tall windows. From slanted support beams, spiders twitched wiry legs as they spun and dangled from silvery threads of cobwebs.

A short gravel driveway lay in the front yard. Rick steered his apple-red Chevy into the spot and cut off the engine. The cabin was completely surrounded by woods. He liked the isolated feel and was happy that here is where he'd chosen to lodge for the night.

A sauna of warm April air pressed against his face as he stepped out and pivoted around to the trunk to pull out his suitcase. Birds whistled and chirped as though to welcome him. Hidden in tall grass and bramble of bushes, insects joined in with crackling and buzzing sounds.

His ears were still popping as they adjusted to the pressure-change. It was a small price to pay to enjoy this kind of weather. Back home in Ohio, it had been cold and rainy. Rick was glad that his book tour took him south to warmer climates. Five bookstores here in Tennessee had him slated to appear for book signings, followed by thirteen in North Carolina, seven in South Carolina, and nineteen in Florida. His book on winning the economical battle God's way had really caught fire in the southeast.

Rick took a moment before mounting the porch steps to take in his surroundings. Night was fast approaching. The sky had taken on a dark-purplish tint, like bruised flesh. Billowing clouds looked gray, dirty. Perhaps he wouldn't escape the rain, after all.

The air smelled clean, unpolluted, perfumed by ten dozen species of wildflowers. A crackle of thunder forced him up on the porch and to the front door. He set his suitcase down and reached in his pocket for the scrap piece of paper the clerk had given him at the rental office downtown. He got it out and entered the numbers written on it in the lockbox. There was a click and then a whirring sound as the deadbolt retracted.

The inside looked even better than the exterior. Rick set his suitcase down by the couch.

"How nice is this," he marveled.

To the left, a leather loveseat set angled in front of a solid oak coffee table. Back a few feet, along the wall, was a leather recliner. Directly ahead was an electric fireplace, and built into it was a flat-screen, high-definition television. On top of the mantle set the remote control. To the right set a pool table, and beyond that, a kitchen nook with stove, refrigerator, sink, countertop, and four wall cabinets.

An L-shaped bar separated this area from the Jacuzzi. And at the rear of the cabin, a queen-sized bed was sandwiched between two nightstands, both with lamps and one with an alarm clock. A dresser rested against the footboard. To the right was a vanity with mirror, sink, and modern sconces. And to the right of it was the entrance to the bathroom. Along the back wall was a circular window that looked like a porthole. It was streaked with mud. Rick peered outside.

"You've got to be kidding me."

Not only was it odd that the place looked spotless except for this window, but beyond the backyard lay a cemetery with about a dozen headstones, all gritty and chipped and weathered, with weeds sprouting all around and rubbing against the surface when the wind blew. He hadn't noticed it on the drive in.

What a lovely place to build a cabin by! Rick thought.

Obviously, the small graveyard had existed here before the cabin was built. Rick figured it must have been a family burial place.

Rick moved away from the window. The boneyard didn't frighten him. The only things he feared were the critters roaming in the woods. Snakes or bears. Perhaps he could write a short article about

his experience so far in this neck of the woods.

He had just settled on the couch with his laptop when he heard a loud, rumbling engine outside. Crossing the room, he looked out the kitchen window and saw an old rusty red truck coming up the narrow dirt road. It turned off behind the cabin.

"Who in the world...?"

Thinking it to be the caretaker, but still curious as to what he would be doing here this late, Rick walked to the back window and looked out.

The truck ambled onto the grassy mounds and stopped in front of the tombstones, blocking most of them. The engine silenced and a thin man in blue jeans, cowboy boots, and a white T-shirt stepped out. He had just two patches of gray, puffy hair running down each side of his head. Rick considered going out to see what the man was doing, but decided to just wait and see.

The man moved to the back of the truck and let down the tailgate. There was a hollow sound as the man reached in and dragged a heavy tombstone across the bed and lowered it to the ground. He then reached in and brought out a shovel.

I hope the next thing he brings out isn't a body! Rick thought.

That was highly unlikely. The man was probably just replacing one of the decrepit tombstones.

The man slammed the tailgate shut and then looked at the cabin. Rick recoiled, hoping the stranger hadn't spotted him. With a pallid face, piercing blue eyes, and bright lips, the man looked creepy.

Rick sat on the bed and looked at the door to make sure it was locked. The deadbolt was latched in place. The dude outside was probably harmless, but Rick didn't want to take any chances. He no longer had plans to go out and converse with him.

Rick got up and peeked back outside. The back of the man's head could only be seen beyond the truck. Rick didn't know if he was digging or what. He didn't hear any sounds of the shovel striking the ground.

Rick touched the cell phone in his pocket. He considered calling the cabin rental agency to complain about the man's presence, but thought better of it. He didn't like to complain. It seldom did any good, anyway. Rick was the kind of person who, if he didn't like the service, he simply didn't use it again. And then he would complain about it to others.

A loud clap of thunder made Rick jump. The man stopped whatever he was doing and looked up as rain began to fall. Then he came around to the bed of the truck with the headstone in his hands and lifted it over the tailgate, laying it down like a sleeping baby. Then he went back to get the shovel, dropped it beside the tombstone, and hurried into the cab. The engine roared to life and then the truck was backing up onto the road. Rick watched as it inched down from where it came before disappearing out of sight.

Very odd, Rick thought. *But I'm not going to let it bother me.*

Indeed he wouldn't. This evening would be spent writing. Perhaps something in the Tennessee air would make his writing even better.

He had written half of the article when his eyes shut and his head began to sag. He jolted himself awake and tried to focus on the warm laptop. But his eyes went shut again and he caught himself right as his head began to droop.

"Okay. Time for bed."

As he brushed his teeth in front of the vanity, rain began to pound on the roof.

That will be nice to fall asleep to, Rick thought.

He shut off all the lights and got into bed. All he could see was the glow of the alarm clock.

The next thing he knew, something had torn him from his sleep and caused his heart to beat very fast. He bolted upright in bed. A heaviness had settled into his chest, and sweat slicked his whole body. His

eyes widened. Someone was pounding on the back window.

He got out of bed and grabbed his cell phone off the bar. NO SERVICE, the screen read.

The pounding grew louder, and Rick felt certain the window would shatter with a coughing sound any minute.

He moved through the dark to the back window and looked out.

Lightning flashed and, through the mud-streaked glass, Rick saw a zombie staring back at him. Its face was pasty and wrinkly. Its eyes were a solid white. It had long hair that looked thin and gray.

Rick screamed but no sound came out.

I must still be asleep. This can't be happening!

The zombie stepped back and stumbled. There was movement in the shadows beyond.

Rick leaned forward, eyes straining.

There was a host of them, all stumbling among the tombstones. Rick couldn't see them very well, but could see their slow, staggering forms.

I want to wake up now.

Perhaps someone was playing a gag on him. Trying to scare him. After all, there was no way this could be real. But ... who would do such a thing?

There were at least seven of them out there. Two staggered towards the road. Three headed towards the woods. The other two split off into different directions, moving to each side of the cabin. Rick watched until they all disappeared out of sight. They seemed to have just disappeared with the quickly-passing storm.

He rushed towards the light-switch. His fingertips brushed it ... then fell away. Perhaps the zombies didn't know he was inside. If the light came on and they were still around, then they would know for sure and try to get in.

He stood in the dark, waiting. He'd only taken a few items out of his suitcase. He could just cut his losses, grab his keys, the suitcase and laptop, and make a mad dash for the car.

Slow pounding on the sides of the cabin made him jump. They hadn't left and now they knew someone was inside.

Something like a whimper escaped him. He raced towards the loveseat where his laptop still lay.

Low, mournful moaning arose outside. The pounding grew louder and faster.

He'd have to move faster. He left the laptop and just grabbed his keys from off the coffee table. He dashed towards the door.

Slow, heavy footsteps sounded hollowly on the front porch.

"No," Rick breathed, eyes widening.

A zombie collapsed against the front door. Rick could only stare in speechless horror. The thing had on shreds of old wartime pants and no shirt. Its skin looked purple and had drawn tightly over brittle ribs and bones. The arms were nothing but bones with a few flaps of flesh that had become infested with maggots.

Rick thought he could knock the thing down easily and run to the car. The thing's glassy eyes locked onto Rick's hand as he reached for the doorknob.

Just then, more of the zombies staggered up beside the porch. His hand slipped from the doorknob and he stepped back. Fending off a flock of them might present more of a challenge than he could face.

I hope they don't go for my car!

They all moved up onto the front porch, their footfalls thumping on the hollow, creaking floorboards. They leaned against the front door, pounding and pushing against it. One tried wiggling the knob only to find resistance.

Rick didn't think they had enough strength to break in. He suspected he might be strong enough to shake off all of the creatures, but he didn't want to take their threat too lightly. They could bite and claw and tear and close in on him, carrying his bloody carcass off to feast on for days. Or their bite might turn him into one of them. He would roam the Tennessee hills forever, dead and yet never dying, just a foul-smelling decaying thing with no thought but to haunt and feed on the living.

This was all against what he believed. For the first time, his thoughts fastened on God.

He switched on the porch light. The zombies recoiled from the door as though blinded. Then he turned on all the interior lights and knelt beside his suitcase. Frantic hands reached in. Out came the Bible. Rick flipped to the Gospel of John and began reading as loud as he could. There was the sound of shuffling footsteps of those moving in confusion. And then Rick heard nothing else but the sound of his own voice declaring the Word of God.

He read for a good hour, the Spirit of God giving him boldness and authority. He finished another chapter and looked outside. The porch was empty. Fog was rolling down the hills, blanketing the ground and hovering over the car. Rick's heartbeat quickened as he looked for any signs of movement. There were none.

Here was his chance.

With just the open Bible in one hand and his keys in the other, he swung open the door and sliced through the heavy fog. A smell of sweaty, rotten flesh hung palpably about. The air had become sweltering.

He hit the unlock button on the key fob. The responsive clicking sound caused a wave of relief to rush through him. He was so close to getting out of there now. He pivoted around the front of the car and had just reached the driver's side door when someone came up behind him and bumped into him. Rick screamed, and half-turning, not really looking at anything, lashed out with a foot that caught the figure squarely in the stomach. The thing made no sound, but did stagger backwards. Rick pulled open the door, tossed the Bible on the passenger's seat, and hurried in. He locked the doors and jammed the key in the ignition.

Whatever had grabbed him leaned against the car. Rick looked over and saw the pallid face of the man who had driven out in the truck, the man who had come with the tombstone and shovel. He held up the tombstone and Rick saw that his own name was etched on it, along with today's date.

"I don't think so!" Rick said angrily, and started the car.

He backed up into the fog. His foot went heavy on the gas. The Bible slid off onto the floor. Something told him to pick it up, but he ignored it and pressed even harder on the gas.

There was a loud crash and Rick jolted forward against the steering wheel. The air bag deployed and the doors automatically unlocked.

"No, no," Rick said.

He looked over his shoulder and saw that he had collided with the creepy man's truck.

This is not real. It's not really happening!

The man came out of the fog, a leer on his face. The zombies closed in around the car, yanking the doors open and crawling in.

Rick's screams echoed throughout the mountains for a long time. Then there were only the sounds of things moving slowly, stiffly, throughout the early-morning, Tennessee fog.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - J.R. Bingham writes from Piqua, Ohio and is 34. Recently married, he has enjoyed writing since he was a teenager. His short stories have appeared in several publications, including *The Ultimate Unknown*, *Outer Darkness*, *Cabal Asylum*, *Christian Courier*, *Necrology Shorts: Tales of Macabre and Horror*, and *Tuck Magazine*. He enjoys reading, going to church, and watching baseball. You may contact J.R. Bingham through his web site at <http://jrbingham.weebly.com>, or via his facebook profile <http://www.facebook.com/josh.bingham.77>

CHILDHOOD NIGHTMARES

A dark, atmospheric photograph of a dilapidated room. In the foreground, a metal bed frame stands on a dusty floor, with white fabric or sheets draped over it. The background shows a doorway leading to a brighter area, with peeling wallpaper and debris visible on the walls and floor.

Under The Bed

edited by Kate Monroe

Now Available

The Veil by Spyder Collins

"They must never see," Paschar said as he shielded the eyes of the wandering.

"But why conceal the glorious Kingdom?"

Paschar allowed his hand to slip as the girl turned her head towards him. "They will come and they can enter Heaven without judgment." He spoke.

"I don't understand?" She replied.

My young apprentice, there is much for you to learn.

Paschar opened his wings and offered shelter to the young angel. He held her tight as he rose to the veil.

"Teach me," she said as he let her down atop a nimbus.

He smiled gently, before lowering himself to a nimbus as well. He peered at the angel curiously. "It is not the lesson."

"I should understand the veil if I am to be a part of its guard." She refuted in a hurried and curious tone.

"Perhaps there is truth to your observation." Paschar replied.

"Then you will tell me?"

"It is such a painful tale to tell." Paschar floated away as he spoke.

She followed, not disrespectfully, assuring she maintained proper distance. "Please?"

"Very well," Paschar conceded. Truth be told, he was eager to recite the tale once more. For it seemed each time he spoke its truth, his guilt lifted ever so slightly.

In an age before the ages Heaven and earth were revealed as one. There was the Kingdom of our Father and the place He held as His. This place was the place His children would inhabit, in time. In the time before time, His angels walked the garden which would become the Cradle.

You see, we once shared the same garden as man, beneath the Kingdom known as heaven. We also inhabited the heavens as that is the place for angels. A place where we could watch those who were our loved ones we wished to remember.

My place was within the clouds that shielded the palace of the coming King. I was young and eager to serve. The beauty and serenity of heaven played to my eagerness. It calmed me and made me better appreciate the virtues that so many take for granted.

Soon I would learn of my calling and soon the views of heaven and the creations of His grace would take on a vision one could never imagine.

This is the time I would find my tutor, the angel Battue. He was a brutal angel, one that parted from the mosaic of the two worlds and wished to make one his own. It was his freedom, he claimed to me.

"What did you think? Were you scared?"

"At the time fear was not an emotion one felt in the arms of God. I only listened and followed his tutelage. After all he was an elder angel."

Paschar looked on as the young angel approached. She offered a smile and asked. "Would you continue, please?"

"I will."

We spoke as two for the last time. As well it was the first time.

"Paschar, this place is beyond Heaven and thus beyond His control."

An odd look filled the Paschar face. "Heaven is just there," he claimed.

Battue followed the bone thick arm to the finger that pointed stiffly above. "Indeed, you can see the Kingdom. You can hear the trumpets and even feel the warmth from the light, but Heaven is still removed from the Cradle."

Paschar allowed his arm to drop. Looking up at Battue with a gaze of innocence he pondered his question aloud. "What do you suggest?"

"A clandestine movement, one that will bring the Cradle to me and forsake my Lord,"

I was young, naïve and held great consideration for Battue as I was given to him for my lessons. He was a thunderous angel. Bigger than any other angel I had ever encountered, perhaps I even though, larger the Father, though I would never explore such a thing.

Battue challenged men of great will to embark on journeys to reach the Heavens. Not for reasons of love, but for darker reasons. He, Battue wished that man and God would confront one another. Not as a soul entering the gates seeking judgment, but as a child set to challenge the authority of his father.

"Now I should have known better. Frankly, I should have been damned for my action. His grace and forgiveness was the only thing that kept me from the fate Battue faced." Paschar looked away from his young apprentice. Ashamed by his telling, the memory hurt him so. It was cleansing however and something the young angel wished to know.

"You helped the one you call Battue?" She asked.

The two floated atop the nimbus to the veil, but did not enter. "I did." Paschar replied. Looking into her eyes he mustered a solemn smile. "It is my labor."

"Will you tell me what you did?" She asked with a child-like innocence.

"I will."

At this time, when the veil did not exist. We could look down upon the earth and see all of humanity, and they could look up and see us. As well they could lay eyes on our glorious Father as he sat atop His throne. It was a time of serenity and bliss. It was a time I long for, but one I know can never be again.

I am to blame in part for that. As it is my second labor.

Battue embarked from his nimbus to all parts of the world. I followed his direction and set out as well. We covered the globe in a matter of days. We spread his message to the four corners and beyond. We played on the weakness of man, curiosity. We told them of opportunities to reach the great clouds and step foot on God's domain as living flesh.

The plan was not without its fallacies, however.

"What did you say to them?"

"We told them that they could in fact reach His Kingdom, before death. That they could lay hands on God as men, not as souls as one cannot touch God, it just isn't possible. But as a man perhaps, Battue speculated."

Silence fell between the two. Paschar wondered what the young apprentice was thinking. His shame must have been all too apparent, for at the moment she answered his wonder.

"You were tricked. You needn't feel so harsh about yourself."

Paschar lifted his mask of shame for a moment to allow a smile to shine through. "I thank you. All the same I should have known better."

"Perhaps," she began, "but you were young and easily influenced."

He nodded thoughtfully and continued his tale.

Battue raised the interest of many men. They yearned to realize his dream and reach Father. The question arose, how. It seemed my tutor left the means from his plotting.

The men, they began to stir. Their anger became vocal and Battue feared they activity would raise the interest of others and even perhaps God Himself. As he fumbled about his nimbus, I could see the worry. I felt a sudden sadness for him. He seemed childlike upon his nimbus. A large child lost in a dream of turmoil.

I looked down at the men. They stared up at us, still ranting and cursing the tease of Battue. Then as sudden as they began the words spilled from my mouth like a fountain of knowledge.

"Build a tower to the Heavens."

The men quieted. I could see their thoughts stirring upon their faces. In a chorus of happiness they replied to me. "We will!"

"Did Battue thank you for your revelation?"

"He did not. In fact he took credit, as it was always his plan."

The two remained on their nimbus. The veil remained closed and they waited. Paschar did not feel shame any longer. He felt relieved somehow. He had recited his tale before. But this one doesn't judge, she only listens and wonders.

"The men you evoked, they built the tower?"

"They tried."

"Tell me."

Battue and I watched as the men erected a great tower. It was possible to reach heaven, it was very possible. As I watched the idea struck me. How horrible it would be for man to mingle with the creator. As they do not understand, nor do they see the Kingdom for what it is. They will only see its riches. They will overlook the serenity and life everlasting.

It was at that moment that I felt the betrayal of Battue. He spited God in his actions and I was party to the sin. As I watched the tower move skyward day after day, my heart grew heavy.

"What troubles you, Paschar?" I recall the question.

"The men do and their journey here." I replied to him.

"It is our will."

"The only will is that of God." I said.

I felt the wrath of the angel Battue at that moment. He struck me across the face with a clenched hand. As I held my face, rocking the tears away he spoke words that were unholy.

"There is no will as there is no God other than me."

I never spoke in his presence again.

"You were struck by an angel?"

Paschar looked away. His eyes roamed the landscape beneath. There were no people where they perched. "Yes, and I still bear the scar, it is yet another labor." He turned to her, pulling back his bronze locks to reveal a hideous scar just beneath his ear.

"I am sorry you have endured so much."

Paschar reached out and touched his apprentice's hand. "You are a good angel. Thank you."

She smiled and replied. "Please complete the story. I am curious did man ever reach the Kingdom?"

They did not. They built and worked feverously. Each day they grew more desperate in their anticipation. Hungry in the motives and wicked in their thoughts all the while Battue grew prouder of his

accomplishment.

I do not recall the time, but the men were struck down. I tell you this, a piece of the tale I have never told. The men they did reach heaven. They indeed reached the Kingdom. I know this because one of them laid hands on me before God sent them away.

As I watched the men scatter, I felt fear. It is a feeling I have not felt on His Kingdom. That time I did, and again I have not felt it. I stood as did Battue. We both turned to the brilliance of God. I knelt and wept as an angel in His Kingdom. I did because I knew of my sin.

I felt the heat of Battue as he was ignited in the presence of God. I shuddered as I waited my fate. The cries of Battue were epic and the fear I felt turned to horror. I am not certain of Battue's fate, but I vow that he was fallen and I was spared.

He never spoke to me. He never punished me outside of the labors I must endure. They are nothing compared to the treason on His grace I proposed. He forgave me, nonetheless.

"So now Heaven is hidden behind the veil."

"Yes," Paschar replied.

The veil parted and the call of Heaven called the young angel. Swiftly she moved within the arms of heaven. "I am sorry."

"This is the reason Heaven cannot be seen. As man will strive to reach her and upon her he will inflict havoc." Paschar moved back on his nimbus causing a greater separation between himself and heaven.

"I understand." She replied.

"It is my labor to maintain the veil. To remain outside of heaven until such time as He grants me peace."

Paschar returned the apprentice's gentle smile. "Your peace will come." She said as the veil closed.

"Tomorrow," she hastened to say as the veil sealed.

Paschar floated to the veil. He reached out and rubbed the very fabric of heaven. The angel's warm presence remained and somehow he knew in time he would reenter His Kingdom.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Spyder Collins hails from various parts of the globe but most recently calls Colorado home. He is mostly a ghostwriter of fiction and recently penned a horror script for CBS films. Spyder is an avid lover of manga, anime and the world of comics. He is often at the local Panera Bread with his laptop either typing away on a new tale of horror and mayhem or simply enjoying a good read.

Look up Spyder in various dark seedy corners across the web or in print. Of note is his novel 'Augur of Armageddon' and Dark Vigil - Revisited or his latest appearances in Fantastic Horror and Gothic Times. You can contact Spyder through Razor Thin Studios on twitter at <https://twitter.com/#!/RazorThinStudio> or on facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Razor-Thin-Studios/255721817832832#>

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Jason McKinney: The Interview

We sat down with Jason McKinney, author of *Memoirs of the Walking Dead*, and *Sheriff Teddy and the Mysterious Egg Thieves* and picked his brain about writing, facing criticisms and his newest book *Dog World*.

SCP: Why in the world would you consent to turn your life over to the written word?

JM: I think my answer is the excuse I use whenever I mess up: It seemed like a good idea at the time. Seriously though, I've always wanted to give my life to the written word and losing my job four years ago gave me the perfect reason to surrender myself to the bliss of storytelling.

SCP: Now that you're a published author, how hard was it to get there?

JM: Getting to where I am now was extremely difficult. It has been a time, energy, financial, and soul taxing experience, but well worth it. The key to seeing your work published is the same as getting anywhere in life; you have to believe in yourself and your work, and push forward no matter who or what may be for or against you. I realize that sounds clichéd and tired, but it's very true.

SCP: How do you find the time to write amongst all of the other things going on in your life?



JM: I can usually stick to my schedule, but that doesn't always work with how hectic life can be sometimes. When that happens I carve out time to write whenever I can. My youngest daughter has phonological dyslexia and I take her to speech therapy twice a week, my wife volunteers assisting elderly women with various needs, my son is a Private First Class in the Music City Young Marines and has many obligations around the tri-county area, and then there are the various honey-do lists my wife makes for me. I've found that if you want time to write sometimes you have to carve out chunks with a jackhammer. Where there's a will to write, I will find a way even if it's in the middle of the night. Regardless, I have a very fulfilling, if not stressful, writing and home life.

Jason McKinney

SCP: What is the biggest hurdle you've had to overcome in your journey?

JM: The biggest hurdle I've encountered to date is the blank, confused stares, and sometimes snickering from both my extended family and some of my wife's family. A little support would be nice, but at the end of the day you have to believe in yourself, say to hell with the rest, and go ahead.

SCP: What genres do you find yourself gravitating to?

JM: Horror and juvenile fiction mysteries are the genres I feel the most pulled toward. I began writing juvenile fiction six or seven years ago then my wife urged me to pull the idea for *Dog World* from mothballs and run with it. Even though I'm known for horror, I find writing both genres very satisfying.

Writing horror satisfies the part of my personality that likes to be scared, grossed out, and afraid of what resides in the dark. Writing juvenile fiction mysteries fulfills not only that part of me that likes making my children laugh and guess who the villain is, but also the ten-year-old inside of me.

SCP: When someone criticizes all of your hard work, how do you choose to handle it?

JM: I try to receive all criticism with an open and objective mind, knowing that the person giving the criticism is trying to help make my craft as good as it can be. I whole heartedly welcome constructive criticism. Not to say that I always agree with all of it because each individual has their own writing style that they have to stay true to and sometimes people critique things in the way they would have written it. I listen carefully and take note of all their suggestions then I study the notes and decide which piece or pieces of advice will help my work. This a bit harder to do when someone is nasty in their criticisms and I may have to cool off before I can listen to it objectively. But I still listen and take notes on their credible criticism while trying to ignore the nasty I'm-being-a-jerk-just-to-be-a-jerk way the person is presenting it. Well, I ignore the nastiness and then stalk whoever it is for a week before jumping out of their bushes and scaring the life out of them.

SCP: Tell us about *Dog World*? What's it about?

JM: The stage for *Dog World* is set in Iraq during the summer of 2005. It begins with a patrol being ambushed by lycans, which is the prelude to their attack on the forward operating base of one of the books heroes, Captain Paul Demarti. But the attack isn't limited to Demarti's base. Various werewolf offensives have been simultaneously launched on numerous outposts across the country, heralding the beginning of a werewolf dominated society.

After the attacks, survivors are reassigned to the US for study and "debriefing" and along the way they find out just how far up the werewolf infiltration goes. Make no mistake; there are sympathetic werewolves that want to assist the human race and some that just want to be left alone in addition to the ones that are hungry.

It all climaxes with the werewolves coming out from hiding and initiating their final solution to the human question. In short, it is a holocaust the likes of which the world has never seen.

Without giving too much away, the proverbial big bad wolf is a villain of unrestrained evil that gets exactly what he wants in the end.

SCP: If *Dog World* was made into a movie, what would you want the theme song to be? And who would you want to perform it?

JM: If *Dog World* was made into a movie I would love to see *All These Things That I've Done* be the theme song and for the original performers, The Killers, to perform it. It opens the narrative in the book and I think it would work well in the film.

SCP: What do you consider your best piece of fiction?

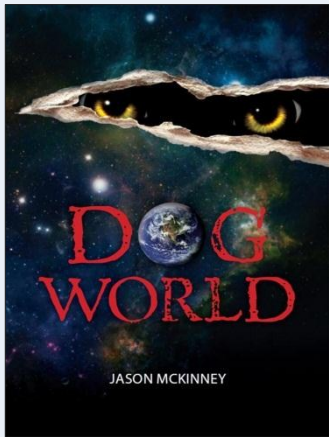
JM: Don't laugh, but I think my best piece of fiction to date is the third story in my *Sheriff Teddy Mysteries* series, *Sheriff Teddy and the Plutonian Invaders*. It's got adventure, comedy, and inept aliens. Well mostly comedy and my son says it's the best story I've ever penned. It was also the most fun I've ever had writing.

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SCP: If you could have written one piece of already published fiction, what would it be? And why?

JM: Robert Heinlein's *Job: A Comedy of Justice* is hands down my favourite piece of literary work. I love Heinlein and *Job* is the type of story that I would love to be known for. Heinlein has political, religious and social observations put in a mostly comedic setting that makes one think and examine their own life. To me that is a true masterpiece of writing.

JASON MCKINNEY lives in Madison, Tennessee with his wife, three children, and seven pets. Most of his time is spent chained in the kitchen, but occasionally the author is unshackled so he can write. He wasted twelve years of his life as an accountant, then grew tired of balancing other people's checkbooks and decided to follow his inspiration. *Memoirs of the Walking Dead* is his first published novel. Also available is his werewolf apocalyptic novel, *Dog World* and his children's novel of a canine sheriff in Nebraska, Sheriff Teddy and the Mysterious Egg Thieves. You can find his books on Amazon.



***Dog World* is a post-apocalyptic werewolf novel set against the backdrop of the US presence in Iraq. It's been heralded at a fast-paced thrill-ride with a stunning climax that will leave you wanting more. The following is an excerpt from *Dog World*.**

It's their world now. T.S. Eliot was only partially right in saying that the world would end with a whimper. There was a whimper and there was blood, screaming and searing pain. By 2006, human civilization had all but fallen and been replaced by a lycan one.

Mankind would never have known of it if not for September 11, 2001. It wasn't a lycan in any public office or in a cave in some God forsaken country that started it all. Lycanthropes, being as clever as their four legged brethren, had only to wait for their prey to make that one careless, bumbling move that would herald the lycan rise and the human fall.

With the US military invading Iraq two short years later, it was only a matter of time before the lycans took advantage of the world chaos and infighting to forward their final solution to the human disease. A large portion of werewolves had long viewed humans as an over breeding, careless mealtime mess. With the humanity of certain lycans long since discarded, mankind became nothing more than a herd that needed culling as much as it needed order and control.

With the post September 11th's human mentality of, "You're either with us or against us", there raised an opposite yet similar train of thought. A long suppressed lycan thought held another sense of purpose; "You're either with us or you're food".

Most lycan victims were simply a food source with the exception of a few being chosen for membership. Being a biped wolf and a consumer of human flesh came with choices. Who could I turn to be like me? Who would be the tastiest yet could I stop at one bite? What could I do to stop myself? Why

was I changed? Questions left newly changed lycans to choose between a life of ceaseless hunger and hatred or to coexist among humans. Those who chose the former rather than the latter became ever watchful for signs of an ancient werewolf Illuminati of sorts, the Aberration.

For too long, the Aberration and their lackeys watched and waited, using the wolf's natural patience as its greatest asset. Still, the need for new blood to be introduced into the pack would force the sometimes random and sometimes specifically targeted humans into joining. Those that refused perished. With each new acquisition the need to instill selective feeding, hunting and training in concealment became increasingly paramount. To draw attention to the lycan nation would cause humans to discover they existed beyond myth or in dusty drawings on a library shelf, museum or on the silver screen or fictional books. Once the plan was put into motion, the Aberration could act without fear of reprisal.

The lycan contagion that vexed mankind's dark side for centuries stealthily progressed its endgame to overrun the planet. The lycans against humanity would use war as a means of spreading the contagion. With each bite the virus grew to a battle of brother against sister, sister against mother, mother against father and so on.

Interested in picking up a copy of Dog World? Find it on Amazon



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