



The Sirens Call

June 2014

issue #15



Crypto!

*Poetry, Short Stories,
& Flash Fiction
featuring Creatures
Unknown!*

*300 Word
Comparative Flash*

*Cryptid/Chimera
Creations from Artist
Michael Locascio, owner
of Dellamorte Co.*

*Interview with
Ken MacGregor,
Author of
'An Aberrant Mind'*

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Why Are We So Fascinated? An Editorial

Julianne Snow

Turn on the television these days and you're bound to come across a program chronicling someone's search for an unsubstantiated creature. Whether they're creatures of legend like Nessie in the loch, or monsters seemingly formed from pure imagination like reptoids or unicorns, civilizations have always had a fascination with discovering those that defy discovery. This is what the scientific community generally calls Cryptozoology—the pseudoscientific search for animals whose existence has not been proven.

But why are we so fascinated?

What keeps our attention so rapt when there's no real proof that any of these species actually exist?

If I had to hazard a guess, I would say it has something to do with our desire to believe we simply don't know it all. That there's areas within our world that remain hidden, and it's those places that help to keep some of the secrets of the animal kingdom from us. But is it something more than that? Are we so curious that we can't leave well enough alone? Has our thirst for knowledge grown to such a degree that we really need to know?

The unexplored locales are getting smaller as industry and science expand; heck we've been discovering new species at an alarming rate the past few decades. Most of these new species have been on the smaller side—plants, animals and insects that could have easily been missed as we trampled through the jungle in search of something else.

But if those species are so small we may have missed them based on that fact, why haven't we found the illusive Bigfoot yet? It's like he's the Hide-and-Seek champion for every year the competition's been run. But think about it for a second, at some point the creature we consider to be Bigfoot has to die – it cannot be immortal – so why have we never found any remains? With all of the sightings so close to human populations, surely someone would have stumbled upon a carcass or a skeleton. It's only logical that we would have discovered something at this point. You could argue we have—heck look at the footprints that have been documented—but how many of those have been proven to be fake? It brings up a lot of questions and once you ask a question, it can't be unasked. It will always be alive in someone's psyche.

So where does that leave us? Well, as a society we write books, make movies, and fill our spare time searching out the evidence that will finally provide us with concrete proof. But is that proof ever truly concrete even if we cast it? I'll leave that to you to decide. Just remember to stay frosty when you're out there—you never know what you'll run into!



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

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Cryptozoology – It's Not Just for the Kooks Anymore!

An Editorial

Nina D'Arcangela

I remember a time when even the mention of the term cryptozoology or crypto alone would discredit a scientist in the field of zoology or even biology, and turn them into '*that guy*'. Nowadays, entire television series are being dedicated to the field and '*that guy*' is offering up his or her opinion as respected hypothesis – and not that many people are making fun of them! Yes, I waited with bated breath for Leonard Nimoy to go 'In Search Of' all the wonders of our world and deliver to me untold secrets that had never before been revealed in my lifetime. But I have to tell ya, no one ever paid him to hike into the woods, hoot like a six-foot guinea pig from the bayou, and bang a tree with big stick... but wait, was that a return knock??? Honestly, who am I to say? Is it all fabulous fun? Hell yeah! Do I think there should be a show dedicated to traveling around populated North America doing it? Probably not. Call me a hypocrite if you need to – I'm fine with that.

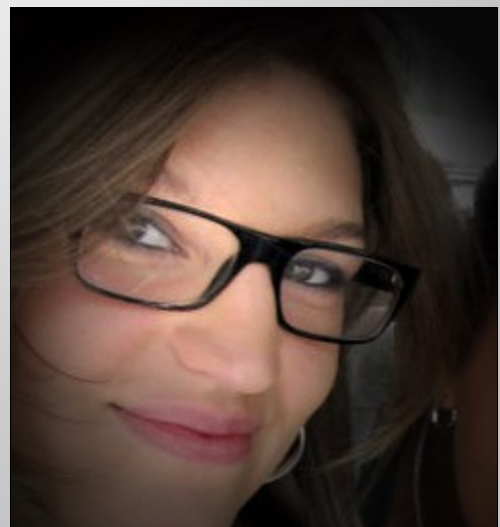
I believe many things exist in this world that we know nothing about; on its surface, below it, and in its waters. Do I have an open mind? Yup, you bet I do. Do I think an unknown apex predator is still hanging around in plain sight living where we live, sharing the same food and water supply we use, possibly even leasing the condo next door? Let's go with I'd love to, but logic and sound reasoning drives me to question the probability of that being likely, let alone true. Take that same scenario and move it to a remote, hard to reach, primarily uncharted area that isn't a natural habitat for humankind (minus the condo, of course), and you've got me yipping and hollering that I wanna go too! My imagination is as rampant as that of a small child; anything is a possibility given the right conditions. Am I heartbroken that modern science hasn't been able to prove the existence of Nessie or Ogopogo? No way – because proven or disproven, where will the next generation find inspiration for what might lurk the depths of some of the oddest bodies of water on our planet, or even just the vast ocean itself? I want young people to imagine what howls in the night on a barren desert plain, not tell them; wonder what might lurk deep within a cave system that is inaccessible, not show them; explore dense forest regions on foot looking for ruins, not just track them with satellite telemetry. Basically, what I want is for them to have the same opportunity to spend hours lying on their backs, starrng into the night sky, and become as fascinated with the wonders of what might be as I am. Then I want them to go out and give the next generation a gorgeously crafted, yet truly sick and twisted, imaginative world to try and outdo.

What's out there? Time may tell, or it may not. Would I even like to know, or would I prefer to imagine it for myself? The answer is both yes and no. But what I do know is, it's time for me to shed my human skin, head to the basement, and ingest my daily dose of dryer lint. Hey, I don't judge you! ;]

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

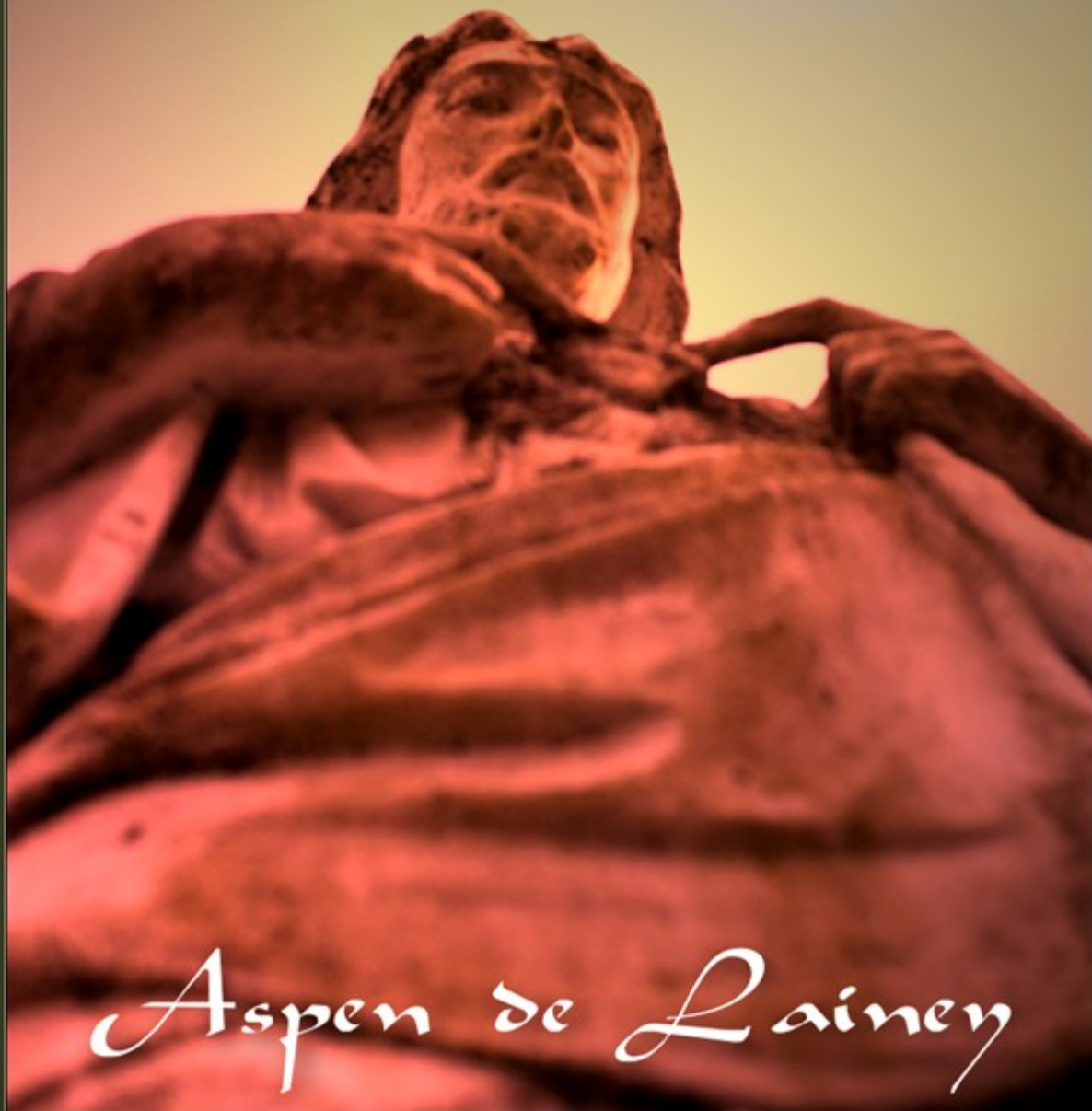
Twitter: [@Sotet_Angyal](#)

Blog: [Sotet Angyal, The Dark Angel](#)



All men are created equal, or so it is said...

NOT ANOTHER MESSIAH



Aspen de Laine

Available on Amazon

Some things should never be disturbed...



Available on Amazon.

Signed copies are available at clcraven.wordpress.com

The Tentacled *D Ceder*

The traffic had never been this bad.

Harry drummed his fingers alongside the radio.

"... new single. And if you are **still** gridlocked at Junction 9 on the M4, between the Bellingham and Sawbridge turnoff, then take heart, luvvies ... help is on the way. And now, here's Sandy with the weather ..."

Help came in the guise of a police land-rover and an officer in orange fluorescent coveralls, guiding the choked lanes of traffic so that they could filter round the scuttled hulk of the truck and onto the hard shoulder.

Gradually, the cars in front began to snake forward, and Harry was able to breathe again. That's good bloody news then, he thought, as he watched the registration plate of the Range Rover inch further away, through his windscreen. Damn, but this isn't, came the thought on the heels of the first, as the first patter of October rain mottled his vision. Sighing, he twisted the wipers on and grabbed a cigarette from the pack on the dashboard, averting his eyes fractionally from the Ranger.

When he turned back again, the rain was belting against the roof, shimmering like sealskin on the tarmac. But the Ranger had not progressed any further. Squinting through the wipers, he thought he could make out the driver hitting something next to him, but wasn't quite certain. In any case, he was more concerned about the nil progression before him, and the fact that he was going to be late. Again.

He beeped the horn once, twice, realising he was now joining a sudden blaring concerto of performing klaxons. He got out, cursing, huddled into the rain, rushing alongside the Ranger's cabin. Before him, the hard shoulder beckoned emptily, and the officer in orange coveralls began to stroll over.

Still, Harry bashed on the driver's door. The dotted wet glass showed a dim moon-face, startled rain-spotted eyes. Something shadowy huddled on the passenger seat. The driver unwound the window frantically.

"What's the problem?" said Harry, flinging secret glances at the curled form over the driver's shoulder.

"S'okay ... I think I stalled. Be moving soon."

Before Harry could make any distinct sense of the tableau within the Ranger, the driver wound the window back up and the officer had already strolled over.

"Stalled," explained Harry to the policeman before darting back to the Sierra van. He thought of calling the policeman back, of checking the shape in the passenger seat, and thought better of it. He was cold, bitter, and late.

Shivering, wet through, he eased the van forward, following the tail lights of the Ranger as they wound onto the hard shoulder.

Funny, he thought. The man had looked worried - shocked - almost. The shape on the passenger seat was still indistinct in his mind, but he recalled it was covered with a blanket. In any case, he had to get to work; there were three IBM's to service in Essex, a PRIME in the City. Being late again would merely piss **everybody** off.

Still, that curled puddle of shadow, that cringing shape...

They were moving more freely now, approaching the Junction 9 slip road. Startled, Harry saw sudden shooting darts of movement in the Ranger through the rain. The driver was punching the shape. Again. Again. Great, ferocious belts from his gloved left hand. The shape's head and shoulders had come up and were being pummelled all over the place.

It looked like a child.

Following the car ahead was not difficult. They were travelling the 'B' roads, long curving tracts bordered by huge brooding privet hedges. The limit was forty, yet the Ranger was wavering at thirty-five as the driver unleashed another looping, belting onslaught onto the thing/child on the front seat.

Harry hooted him three times, but this time the Ranger sped off. Rain rippled and shimmered and cleared - rippled, shimmered, cleared - as the wipers swept the screen. Now the Ranger disappeared, and Harry responded instantly, following it round the sudden bend in top gear, fighting against the van's sudden tail movement. Now he was in sight again - but then the road slalomed once more and Harry found that he had overshot his target, almost missing the blur of movement on his passenger side: a flash of metallic grey, a familiar shape resembling the Range Rover, worming its way down a side-road or wooded driveway.

He reversed alongside the tree-lined track winding into the farmhouse driveway. The Ranger's tail lights had blinked off and a door had opened, that was what he had seen. The door had, indeed, been left open: a forlorn black flap. Not hesitating, Harry turned into the rutted track and proceeded gently until the Ranger was once more just before him. He got out, and bolted urgently to the driver's door.

Empty. Except for the blanket, draped unceremoniously across the front seats. The material glistened faintly, and

Harry immediately assumed it was the rain, coming through the open cabin. But rain was not thick. Not thick like treacle.

Sounds now. Muted and distant in the rain.

"... *filth* ... *vermin* ..." Words filtered through, disjointed, wavering. Coming from the barn.

Harry steeled himself against the inevitable. Too late to call the police, he screamed silently, I think it's going to be too late for anything.

The first thing he saw was the tractor in one corner. Bales of hay piled like a giant's brickwork sculpture scaled one wall. Moist quiet air filled the place. But it wasn't really the first thing he saw. Oh no.

"Vermin!" wailed the driver, swinging the old scythe against the grey thing writhing on the hay-strewn floor. "You and your like are ALL THE SAME!" The grey wormy length was severed. From the girl, who was crawling blindly to the far wall. Hair was plastered sweatily to her face, which in turn was matted with a bloody paintwork.

He counted six, seven grey wormy lumps hissing in strange communion above her shuffling, painfully scuttling form. They were attached to her body.

The driver aimed again for the next tentacle.

"No!" Harry pounded forward. He stopped, between the thing mewling on the floor, and the man, scythe upraised, grinning a frozen mask of rage.

"Yes," he hissed, "**this** is what they've become. Can you see now? Hmm?"

The thing on the floor was hideous, somehow clinging to sheer blind life as it struggled soundlessly across. It turned, a mask of piteous fear dripping from its features. A girl's face, yet not; high cheekbones, sensual mouth, yet befanged, eyes glowering baleful red coals in all this dimness.

"You never saw what it did to the fox!" he wailed beseechingly at Harry. The girl hissed back, eyes flashing, her strange collection of tentacles coiling in the air. "Innards, sucked clean out. She was French-kissing it - yes - and sucking out its innards into her own foulness. Have you ever seen that? Hmm?"

"Jesus, I ... Oh Christ, what do we do, is there anything ..."

"Burn her," he said, scythe raised again. "Only fire truly purifies."

Harry gave a final glance at the creature. Briefly, he saw the red eyes glaring at him. Dimly, but not registering, he thought he saw a beseeching gleam enter its face, its strange vampiric features melding into a once bright little girl. Then the scythe whistled down, slicing its head in two, the beseeching look made symmetrical forever.

After the burning, Harry could only sit at the farmer's oak table, watching the flames in the hearth dance a miniature taboo in the alcove.

The farmer was smacking one gloved hand into the other, pacing up and down. "That was my third. Caught her out the back. The fox was after my chickens, you see," and he grinned, a moon-pitted feverish grin. Harry winced. "But **she** was after the **fox**."

"How ... how many are there?" Harry blinked along with the words, not really believing any of this was actually happening.

Pacing again, he said, "Who knows? Ten, twenty." He threw his hands up, a helpless gesture. "Managed to kill two others. One was with a rabbit. The other, a vole, squirrel ... ugh ... Animals, you see? It's the animals they go for, small ones mainly. They catch them, crawling on their foul bellies, through the leaves. They catch them, suck them out dry. Their tentacles ... Oh God, those **things**." He shut his eyes tight. Opening them brightly, he glared at Harry. "Horns as well."

"What?"

"Like antlers. Huge."

Harry reeled the preceding hour back in his mind. They had grabbed the thing between them, had draped the blanket round it, fashioning a make-do body-bag. In unison, they swung it beneath the barn roof before the fire, once, twice, and let go, and Harry saw the split head erupt from the blanket with the rest of the body, into the fire, and he remembered the budding lumps of bone beneath the temples, young horns, ready in the making. And then the burning, the stink of something that was flesh. Human flesh.

"I was going to drive her out, away," the man resumed. "That damned jam. Came back instead. Had to do it quick. Didn't know what she would do, untrussed as she was." He sat down suddenly, facing Harry. "What next? After the mice, the voles, the foxes, hmm? Do you think they would like **this**?" He peeled off his glove, shoving it in Harry's

face, eyes glaring. He pinched the flesh on the hand. "Nice pink skin, tasty flesh. Are your children safe, hmm?"

Harry blinked at that.

"Are they safe from this vermin? What next? How would they like **children**? What would they do to a small child?"

Harry thought of Stevie, on his bike. Cycling round the corner of the road, humming the Scooby Doo song on his breath, coming home for tea. His thoughts danced: a grey, flashing, jellied thing, bursting from the shadows, a vampiric snarl ... the sound of smacking, sucking flesh. Stevie's diminishing scream.

How many were there?

"They must be destroyed. They **must** be." Harry said it aloud, **meaning** the words.

And for six months they hunted. But they couldn't get them all.

Another jam.

Harry thought about the rusting archaic beast he was on his way to service, some feat of primal engineering. And now this.

He was getting too old for this lark. What with Stevie in university, and **another** tyke on the way. He smiled, features forming a gentle sallow curl.

Held up again. Same old demo. Anti-this and anti-that and let's all go home and do the same thing next week. All meet at Hyde Park Corner, last one there gets the beers. He saw the procession properly this time and a pang of guilt hit him.

Nothing to do but stop the van and enjoy the sunshine, he thought, guilt erased.

He got out, leaned against the driver's door, and lit the twentieth cigarette of that day. And it was only 1:00 pm. He put on his sunglasses - Mary teased him about looking like Don Johnson with them on, what with his grey stubble - and felt the distant burn of a cataract ease in his eye.

The whole of Hyde Park was filled with the procession, spilling out onto the Corner in all directions, down Oxford Street and Bayswater. He stopped along with all the other vehicles. Some were tooting amiably, others flinging insults at the procession.

"Suck on this!" yelled a man with sunglasses, head peering Kilroy-like over the Golf's folded-back roof.

Harry saw the object in his hand and winced.

Someone threw a bottle. A rock. A can. A **broken** can.

It hit someone in the procession, and Harry saw blood spill. The marcher's head had been badly cut, and two of the crowd supported him as they strode on. Harry glanced around for the ambulances he knew were not there. He read their placards, the hopeless gesture of their lost cause.

The air was a rain now. A pelting rain of blunt and not-so-blunt objects. The marchers strode on, oblivious. He saw some of them cringe against the onslaught.

The police formed a cordon along the sides of the road. Some of them were chuckling, having seen it all before.

Soon, the streets had cleared. Busses and cabs resumed their procession down Oxford Street. A school of Japanese tourists finished taking their pictures and scuttled into the park.

Sighing, Harry got into the van. Something caught his eye.

He went to it, wincing as his knees cracked. He picked the thing up in his hands, its cool gentle whiteness like a jewel in his palms. The bone of it was like smooth ivory, precious to his touch, broken and jagged at its base.

He looked back - into the sun, into Bayswater. The marchers were moving stolidly onward, back to their dug-outs in the hollows.

A distant memory occurred to him. A child's face gentle in its harmless vampirism.

A fox. A farmer who had lied - **lied** about the creatures that kissed foxes, kissed and stroked voles and mice.

Never biting. **Never** killing.

Always loving.

Eyes filling, he watched the procession, their horns raised in silent majesty, gorgeous tentacles swirling in the air.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - My name is D Ceder. I live and work in London as a software engineer. I have had approximately 20 stories published and broadcast on London radio in the mid-90s. These stories are now collected in my anthology, available on Amazon: <http://www.amazon.co.uk/One-Hundred-Other-Stories-Ceder-ebook/dp/B00CEFF4QE>. Three stories received Honorary Mentions in Ellen Datlow's and Terri Windling's Years Best Fantasy and Horror 1994-5.

Sustenance *Miranda Kate*

They pulled the sack loose from her head and pushed her into a cell, slamming the door behind her as quickly as possible. She heard a bolt slide across and the jingle of a padlock before it was snapped shut. She assessed the door with its dents and scratches, and gave it a shove. It didn't move, confirming what she already knew; she was locked up tight.

Argentia knew she was going to be in the dungeon a long time, and sighed. The idea of all that time exhausted her. She would much rather have been subjected to a public execution, but they weren't going to give her the choice.

Then she heard the weeping, quiet and low, broken only by sniffles, coming from the depths of the cavernous cell and she smiled. She peered into the musty darkness and caught the outline of someone huddled in a corner.

Argentia approached the emaciated figure, who upon sight of her stopped weeping, and started to back up against the wall in an attempt to get away from her.

Argentia was used to this reaction; it was why they had chosen not to execute her. No one was brave enough to physically manhandle her to the noose, and heaven forbid she should break free and run amok amongst the blood-thirsty crowd that would gather – no they weren't going to risk that.

She put out a hand as though to calm the figure, causing slimy extensions to break free from her finger tips and wriggle out towards the body, not allowing it to retract any further. She moved in closer, the smile on her face exposing her sharp incisors, which were visible even in the dim light.

She heard the victim mutter, "Mercy, Mercy" and she let loose a cackle. The hypocrisy of such a statement when they had already been locked up and left to rot struck Argentia as funny. The tendrils from her fingers wrapped round its neck to quiet it, and then her whole body shuddered as a party of scarab beetles let loose and ran onto the prey, burrowing into the flesh, the tendrils round its neck stifling its screams.

It had been a while since she'd had the opportunity to satiate them; they'd lived with her since her resurrection some several thousand years earlier. They sucked their quarry dry and left the skin to slump round the bones like a deflated bag.

Argentia embraced their return; their renewed energy giving her sustenance and reinvigorating her, giving her hope that it might be enough to see her through, until memory faded of her existence and her time came again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Miranda Kate adores writing Flash Fiction. Primarily a novel writer, flash brings out her darker side, allowing the disturbing elements to bubble and surface. Whether a side effect from years of reading horror, or just how she sees the world, she's not quite sure, but she enjoys it immensely.

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

Blog: www.purplequeennl.blogspot.nl

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CreateSpace, Barnes & Noble,
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The Eye Has It *Lori R. Lopez*

She never went straight home after school, taking the longest route possible ... dawdling by the dry creekbed; ambling fields or vacant lots with her eyes closed, pretending to be somewhere else, just to delay the inevitable conclusion of entering the house where she would be at her mother's beck and call. Make that whim. Better still, mercy — although the woman clearly had none.

She preferred to think her mom wasn't trying to make her existence miserable and couldn't help being 'under the weather' a lot. Marguerite had been diagnosed with Depression and General Anxiety the single time she permitted her kid to tug her into a clinic, and that was why she drank too much, and that was why she threatened to kill herself whenever the girl complained and defiantly criticized her.

The eleven-year-old was tired of being the grown-up in their relationship. She knew her mother was sick and needed her, relied on her. Sometimes she felt guilty for not being a better daughter. But it was so unfair. Why couldn't her family be like the ones on T.V.?

The girl was also tired of being Daphne Mallard. She didn't mind being called Daffy, because she was a little kooky, or at least her life was. The Daffy Ducks, however, were meant as insults.

Brooding, she roamed along a rural lane. The pre-teen had cut east across The Common, a tract of land by the town's outskirts. Marguerite, paranoid and dependent, preached not to go past that point. It was the rough side of town where no-accounts hung out. She suspected Daphne didn't really have to stay late at school most days, and fretted harm might come to the girl. Then what would happen to *her*? the woman appealed.

Daphne knew the warnings had nothing to do with concern for her safety. She would roll her eyes at the pleas, yet was spooked enough to avoid an eastern route. Until today.

Today she was so mad at her mother that she chose to do something reckless, against the woman's wishes. Anger and resentment had been building. And this time her mom went too far, calling the school to check up on her. Missus Miller requested to see her, then explained that Marguerite wanted to know why her child was being punished, or what activity was keeping the girl from her chores at home. The principal spoke to teachers and learned that Daphne wasn't there after hours. Why had she been lying to her family?

Squirming in the Hot Seat facing the principal's desk, the girl considered saying she liked to read at the Public Library (it wouldn't be false), but her school might contact the librarians, who hadn't laid eyes on her in a week, so she made up an excuse that couldn't be proved or disproved. She was visiting a stray cat with kittens. Another lie.

Daffy couldn't tell the truth, she was too ashamed, and bound by a shred of loyalty. Before leaving them, her father made the girl promise to take care of her mother. "Family is all you've got in this world," the man soberly stated. Then he left. Daphne couldn't blame him. Her dad stopped drinking and didn't want to be around Marguerite's 'toxic habits' (he yelled that once or twice during their arguments). He would send for his child as soon as he was established, the guy pledged. Four years ago! Daphne hadn't seen or heard from him since. Disability and Welfare supported them. Marguerite alternated from chattering about when he returned how happy they would be, like the old days, and condemning the jerk for abandoning them.

Sitting on the bottom of a plastic milk crate at a crossroads, the juvenile hugged herself. Daphne couldn't sort out whether Mom's depression had begun before or after Dad's departure. Did the drinking start first, then the fights? Or the fights and then the drinking? Or the fights followed by the depression? Being a victim of a broken home, she saw others as Real (normal) and Them. All she wanted was to be normal.

A car heading to town braked and a lady (a Real Person) lowered her window. "Are you okay, honey?"

Daphne nodded, scowling.

"Can I give you a ride?"

The girl shook her head. Finally the car resumed driving.

The principal made an exception by not sending her to Detention for lying, provided she go home when school ended and perform her duties.

Rising, Daphne booted a stone as hard as she could and silently vowed to be tardier than usual so her mother would actually have something to worry about! The rebel kept walking — on the wild side, precisely where her mom didn't want her to go.

She had never been this far, the girl thought, and glanced over a shoulder. Veering onto a dirt road, plodding aimless, she felt a sense of isolation from the uncaring world.

A decrepit warehouse loomed, surrounded by paved strips that had once been for parking. Graffiti marked the walls like modern hieroglyphs, a word gleaned from History Class. She liked words. Collecting them allowed her to

express the emotions suppressed and burning at her core, if only for herself. She had too many secrets in her life to risk having confidantes.

Daffy trudged the perimeter of the structure, crunching pebbles and glass fragments. She rattled the chained and padlocked entrance. A solid metal rear door was blocked from the outside by a stack of junk. *Weird.*

Passing a side of the building on a second tour, the girl noticed a flit of movement and paused. There was a small gap in the concrete wall. She stepped to a golf-ball-sized hole. It was dark. Timidly, stretching on her toes, Daff peeped into the shadowy confines. She squinted, unable to distinguish anything. Windows were high up, and covered by boards. Maybe it was a rat. Or a bird that squeezed in and couldn't find its way out. She turned to maintain her idle circuit, then froze. An eye blinked through the opening.

They stared at each other. A hoarse whisper interrupted the silence. "What's your name?"

Debating, she gave in and told him: "Daphne."

"I'm Dervish."

The girl laughed. "That's funny. And I thought mine was bad."

The eye vanished.

"Hello? I wasn't trying to offend you. There is a difference. I don't think folks should get so upset if it wasn't intentional."

The voice emitted, subdued. "It's a nickname. I liked to spin in circles when I was little. Yours is pretty."

"Why are you whispering? Nobody else is here."

Filling the hollow, the eye boldly examined her. "You never know. Watch your back."

Hesitant, the child tossed a quick look.

"What are you doing here, Daphne?"

A defensive tone. "Just taking a walk."

"Isn't this a bit remote? Do you always meander in the middle of nowhere?"

"Maybe I live nearby."

"Maybe? You do or you don't. Which is it?"

She held her tongue, reluctant to continue her fibbing spree.

"I didn't think there were houses in this area. You wouldn't be pulling my leg, would you?"

Flashing a terse smile, Daphne shook her head.

"You're probably wondering why I'm here."

The girl shrugged. She hadn't been, but now that he mentioned it ...

"If I told you, I'd have to kill you." The eye winked.

"Are you a spy?" Her curiosity awoke.

"What makes you ask that?"

"It's what spies say."

"Are you a spy?"

"No! I'm a kid!"

"I'm not a spy either."

"What are you?"

The eye regarded her, a cold inspection. Then abruptly shifted to a wandering eye. This orb peered askew rather than directly at her. "A stranger. You shouldn't be talking to me." The tone had softened.

"Well, you are kind of strange." The child smirked.

The eyes traded; a level gaze pinned her. The keenness made her retreat a step.

"You don't know the half of it." A throaty growl.

Daffy scrutinized all that was visible of the stranger. "So, do you live here?"

"It's more that I am here to not live."

"Huh?"

"It's complicated."

Her mind weighed leaving or staying. Daphne lingered. Whoever was in the warehouse, he fascinated her. Children were impressionable, adolescents too. She was divided, confused — poised between stages of youth, and yet forced to balance mature responsibilities. The girl craved conversation besides her mother's demands. He might not be a 'proper influence' (they harped on that in school), but he was certainly exciting. And mysterious. Daffy wearied of

pressure to do what was good for her. Parents and teachers thought they could protect kids by controlling them. She needed to be free... wanted to be bigger, an adult. Then nobody could tell her what to do!

"Get out of here," a benign voice urged. The lazy eye occupied the hole.

She ignored his advice. "What is this place?"

The opposite eye pushed him over. "You're a brave one, aren't you?"

"Not exactly. What do you do here?"

"Anything and nothing. It's empty."

"I wish I had somewhere like that — to hide from my mother."

The eye narrowed. "You wouldn't like it."

"You're wrong. It's perfect. I love doing nothing."

"You'd get bored."

"I'm never bored. I read books."

"Can't read here. No light."

"Then I'd walk around and around, feeling the walls, and imagine I was in the Taj Mahal... a palace...castle...cathedral... a garden with a maze."

"You'd have plenty of time for that. But it would be wasted time. You still wouldn't be doing anything."

Daphne's lips curled. "You don't understand. I'd be doing what I wanted."

The stranger yelled, "You'd be trapped! A prisoner!" The eye glared at her.

Scuffling. The indolent eye appeared. "You have a mother. Go to her! She'll be worried."

"That's what I'm hoping. The witch deserves it."

"I bet she's not so awful."

"You'd lose. Bet on the horses, not her. My father's wisdom." Daphne leaned a hand on the wall, a trifle dizzy.

"Go to your father then."

"He split when I was seven. He left me with her."

"Where do you like to be?"

"The library, I guess. They won't let me sleep there. Believe me, I tried."

"Go to someone you trust."

"I don't trust anyone! And I'm sick of orders! You sound like her. Quit hassling me, okay?"

"Sorry."

The eyes switched. A black iris glowered at her.

The droopy orb was blue, she realized. "What's the deal? Are there two of you?"

"No. We just don't agree."

"You argue with your own eyeball? That's crazy." Daphne grinned. "And cool."

"This isn't a game! It's a curse!" the grouchy eye rebuked.

"Can I come inside?"

"No."

"Can you come out? Can I see you?"

"No. Double no! You ask too many questions." The eye became shifty without changing color, darting briefly downward; then raised, intensely ogling her.

Daphne fidgeted.

"You could let me out," enticed the black eye. He waited for an answer.

The girl scraped the toes of her shoes on cement. "I'd like to, but there's a lock. And a bunch of stuff piled by the other door."

"You could remove those things, one by one," urged the glittering orb. "It would be duck soup that way."

"Watch the fowl language!" the kid flared. "I'm sensitive about duck references. My last name's Mallard. I get called Daffy Duck."

"Fine, it would be a cakewalk. Child's play."

"Who are you calling a child? I'm almost twelve!"

"Will you help me or not?"

"It depends. Why are you in there?"

"Like I said, it's complicated."

"I can keep secrets."

"You wanted to see me. Now's your chance," bargained the surly captive.

"Okay."

"The ayes have it," declared a triumphant voice.

"The eyes have what?"

A sarcastic response: "The vote. As in ayes and nays, yeses or noes. Not eyes!"

Nervously the girl wrapped a dangling string of her jacket's hood on a forefinger, binding it tightly until the tip was reddish-purple. Should she release him? She didn't know him. He could be demented, a monster. The blue eye was nice. They were both interesting. If she let them out, she might not see them again. It was the toughest decision of her entire life.

Blue Eye was back, his stare averted. "Let it go." A mild admonition.

She gaped at him in surprise.

"You're strangling it."

Daphne unwound the lace from her finger. He must have viewed it peripherally.

"I'm going to tell you why you mustn't let *us* go." The gentle voice conveyed that there had been an experiment. "Science can be miraculous, or maniacal, in its accomplishments. Some deeds are better left undone. We wanted to slip through the curtain, part the drapes of the cosmos and travel from dimension to dimension. The universe has so many layers and versions, an infinite array. We created a device to transport us between mirrors, which can serve as portals in the fabric. Such vanity we humans possess. Of course, something went wrong. There were multiple glitches. We've managed to determine that our D.N.A. was blended with a female No-See-Um resting on a mirror. And it seems we are unable to chart a specific destination, arriving at a bathroom mirror in this old building. It's possible we didn't even reach a parallel plane and are still in the realm of origin. Our birthworld."

Black Eye wrestled for domination. "What's the delay? I haven't had a decent meal in weeks — feeding on rats. I need nourishment. You made a promise. Are you a liar?"

The slack eye struggled to add, "Our metamorphosis also resulted in this Jekyll-Hyde condition. We convinced a wino who slept here to barricade the entrance he was using. I had hoped we would perish."

The girl's mouth hung ajar. "Wow." She loved Science Fiction. Only this was fact. She gulped in amazement. "Can't you crawl through the mirror and ... reverse the defects?"

"This isn't a fairytale!" spurned the dark side.

"It's worth a try!" retorted Daffy.

"Anyway," sighed the languid eye, "he cracked the mirror when we emerged as mutants."

"It isn't polite to point," snarled his alter-ego.

"What if you climb through backwards?" the girl suggested. "Nothing in my life makes sense to me. Perhaps you did reach another dimension — where logic is loony and looniness is ordinary. A cracked-mirror world."

The lazy eye winked at her. Or maybe it was a blink. "That might work!"

"But we'll need your assistance. Clear the door, so you can come inside."

Eager to join them, however fleeting, Daphne failed to discern that the black iris had extended the invitation. "Meet me by the exit." She dashed toward the rear of the building.

The girl began hauling off tangled pieces of a scrapheap, lugging boxes and beams, dragging chairs and tables away. Out of breath, she confronted the ultimate object barring the door: a heavy iron cabinet, orange-spotted with corrosion, too large for her to budge alone. Hands grimy, Daphne tackled it nonetheless, yanking and shoving. The metal case tipped then toppled, crashing. Dust billowed; the girl hacked, bent over in spasms of coughing.

The cabinet slid a short distance, yielding space for a rusty battered door to be pushed and a freakish figure to barge forth.

Unfolding slowly, Daphne caught sight of spiky insectile limbs. The girl faced a deformed mannish creature. A human arm jutted awkwardly from a ribbed and emaciated torso flanked by a corresponding fly leg. Antennas whipped on the crown of a bizarre earless head composed of skin and misshapen features. The eyes were the most normal aspect, yet the lazy orb communicated a depth of emotions, as if having a mind and heart of its own, while the disparate eyeball was evil.

Tears streamed from the blue eye. "Very sorry. I tried to prevent this," he wept. "A further unfortunate side-effect — we drink blood. Run. I can't resist, can't contain his appetite for long." A tender smile. "Thanks for making me feel human again."

Daphne's eyes misted. A pang of sorrow racked her slender frame.

Dervish's visage twisted as Black Eye (she couldn't think of him by the same name as her friend) commandeered the body. A needle-like mouthpiece protruded out of sneering lips. The hostile orb trained on the girl, whose last terrified thought would be of her mother — worrying how the woman was going to survive without her.

The creature rippled in a blur, capable of surging so fast he was practically invisible. The child was seized by human and fly digits. Then the personality modified; the drinking nozzle retracted, and the girl was cast to her knees. "Go home!" a voice howled.

The beast staggered to the jumble of debris and brandished a length of iron. Dervish stabbed the bar into his chest. The rod's sharp end pierced all the way through, sticking out behind him. He collapsed leaking blood. Twitching mutely, forlornly, in the throes of death.

Gasping, sobbing, the girl scrambled to her feet and bolted. Denim-clad legs churned; lungs heaved. The girl sprinted across a dusk-shrouded field, hurtling for a sanctuary that had seemed unwelcoming, intolerable. She desperately yearned to be there and swore a sacred oath. Daphne would encourage, support, badger, pester, insist that Marguerite seek help — from professionals. Together they would conquer the woman's demons. It wasn't as imposing, as hopeless and unimaginable anymore. And maybe then ... the girl's father would return.

It couldn't hurt to dream.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Lori R. Lopez is the author of CHOCOLATE-COVERED EYES, AN ILL WIND BLOWS, THE MACABRE MIND OF LORI R. LOPEZ, DANCE OF THE CHUPACABRAS, OUT-OF-MIND EXPERIENCES, THE FAIRY FLY, MONSTROSITIES, JUGULAR and more. A resident of Southern California, she pens a column of dark verse and is also an artist, designing her own book covers and illustrations

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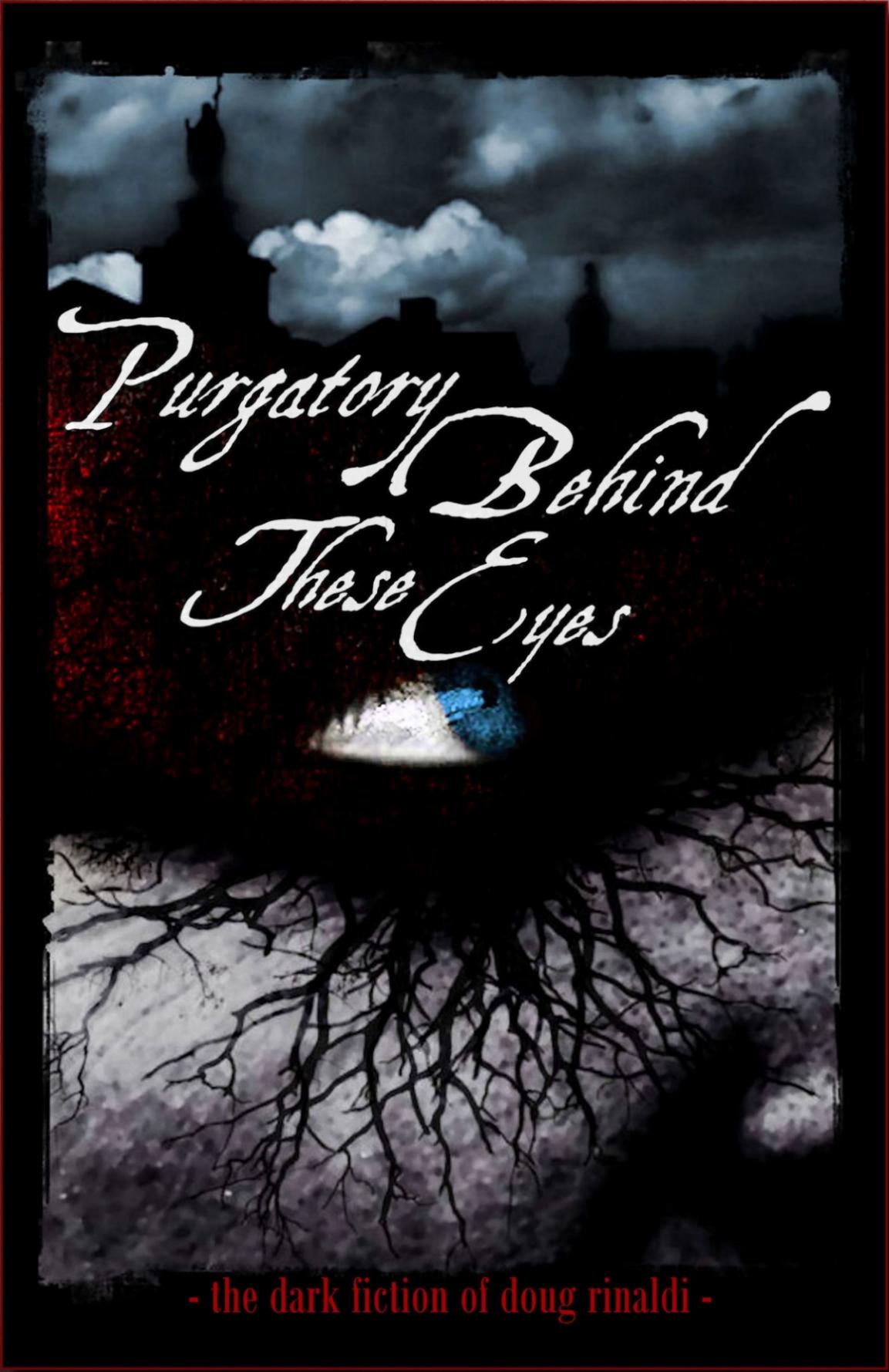
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Days with the Undead: Book One *Julianne Snow*

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Night Lover *Cora Ramos*

I'm not sure when it started—that comforting feeling infusing my thoughts at night. But it was the dark, jittery impulses underneath—the salacious whispers on heated breath that I ignored. While my boyfriend, Jay, had been there, I was able to dismiss them. But after he left me with little more than, “This is not working for me,” it all changed. The cool darkness that had hovered in the background of our love-making came forward in the crushing echo of emptiness that followed his departure. When I took cognizance of the ghost-like presence that lurked in the shadows and felt desire stirring within me, it took on physicality.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

When Jay skipped out, I missed the comfort of a lover next to me—the closeness, the sense that all was right with the world, if only for those few lingering moments while sex was good between us. Three months after his departure, I'd grown increasingly lonely and hungry for a man's touch, and that's when the fantasies with the dark, imaginary stranger began.

In late spring, the desert winds—the Diablos, railed through the canyons from the east, their hot, dry breezes exacerbating my neediness and stirring physical desires. That night, I was wracked with sexual hunger and could find no relief. I writhed in my night clothes and got tangled in the sheets until finally I ripped everything off and lay sprawled on the bed, tears of frustration skimming my cheeks.

And then he came to me.

At first, I had the sense of someone next to me—a strong, solid man whose hands hovered over my breasts and whose heat lingered between my legs—not moving—just waiting.

I might as well use my imagination to find relief.

I moved against him, wiggling onto his imagined heated sex, touching myself where I envisioned his hands were, urging this fantasy on.

But I didn't have to imagine long. A few nights later, his touch coalesced into physical caresses that lit up my body. He took me slowly, sweetly—comforting all those sad, lonely places, until I was filled and sated—and then he was gone. I basked in the joy my body felt and slept peacefully through the whole night, the first time since Jay had left, content that I had fantasized this ghostly encounter.

The next night was the same, and the night after that. I developed a fixation—for a touch that felt ecstatically real, that pleased me into a contentment I'd never felt before.

The best sex ever—but I want a real man that can satisfy me like this imaginary lover.

And with that thought, it began to turn increasingly rough until I was in pain.

Is this some sick, masochistic behavior I've sunk to in my fantasy? No!

When I realized this encounter was not my imagination, I tried to fight this dominating presence.

My body ached, hurt and fear clawed at me. What was happening?

This is not my imagination and I can't stop it.

This strong-willed man I thought I had created was turning me into a slave to his dark passions. He made me crave him while whispering vile things—even as I tried to fight him. I stayed up the next night—afraid to sleep, afraid of these increasingly rough visitations. But I couldn't keep that up. After three days, weakened and exhausted from lack of sleep, I finally had to lie down. Soon, his cool sensuous skin once again slid against me, enfolding me in his embrace—enticing and seducing me with sweetness—until the pain began.

I couldn't tell where he was touching me—or why my mouth was filled with the feeling of sex slithering around my tongue and down my throat. His body seemed to be all over me, around me, and then inside me—no longer on my skin but under it.

And then the increasing pain.

I fought to repulse this phantom-man taking over my body—tried to hold the thought, *Stop*, but my thoughts all shattered and burned to ashes, floating down, around and away. I was now totally under his control, vulnerable and unable to resist. This darkness he existed in was the sea I'd always been aware of, dormant until I'd called him forth. Now I was drowning in these waters of abandon.

Was this the incubus of myth and legend—nightly visitations from a symbiont stealing my life energy, my soul?

With that thought, his smooth body became like cool, soft snake scales that slid against my skin. I was totally overwhelmed by sensual desire and out of my mind with pleasure and pain. I orgasmed in an explosion of ecstasy until the world around me receded.

Then I saw him for the first time, not the man I had imagined, but a lizard-like creature wrapped around my body. I tried to scream and struggled to break free, but his stare took away my will and his grip stopped my panicked trembling. His firm, solid presence was terrible and frightening. In that crazy moment, the gaze from his fire opal eyes still gleaming with passion calmed me like a drug and I succumbed.

As I did so, he morphed and changed back into that original nighttime lover, a man who ran his fingers through my hair and nuzzled his lips against my ear, planting heated kisses along my neck.

I would never have a real man again. No human could satisfy me like this monstrous phantom lover. What did it matter whether he was an *incubus* or some shape-shifting alien lizard? The darkness had taken me over and I could no longer resist.

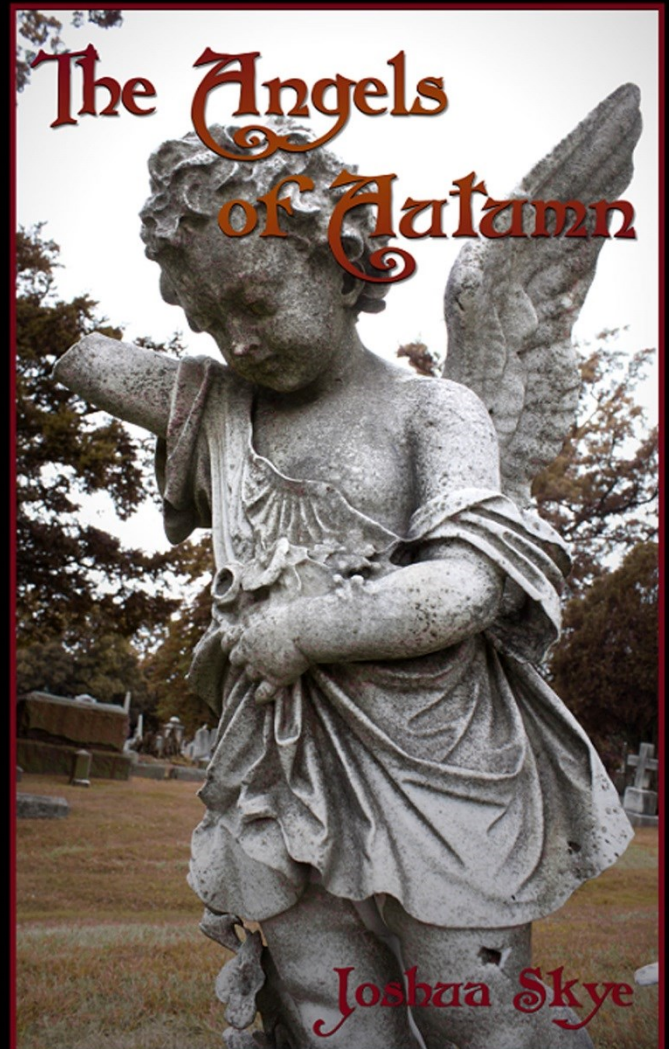
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Cora Ramos's short stories of mystery and suspense that straddle the edge, whether that edge is the paranormal, a deadly decision or the place where science ends and magic resides, can be found in the anthology, *Valley Fever*, *Where Murder is Contagious*. Her novel, *Dance the Dream Awake*, is a *paranormal romantic suspense*, a present/past life journey in the jungles of the Yucatan of Mexico.

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The Angels of Autumn *Joshua Skye*

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Yard Work *E. F. Schraeder*

The reputation of ten years as a landscape architect paid off and provided Jason a nice career that enabled him to be outside or drawing. Not being crammed into a cubicle was one thing, but it was the simple beauty of being outside that he loved.

So it was with more than a little embarrassment that Jason took to the last section of his own property that he hadn't sculpted into a naturalized wonderland. On the Northwest tip of his twelve acre estate, 'at the cusp of nowhere' as he termed it to his friends, was a spot of marshy land. The sloping valley dipped sharply just near the bordering property line, and it became the spot he overlooked. There was no reason not to ignore it. Far enough from his home, out of the sightline of his gardens, and completely engulfed in felled trees, it'd become a pit and he knew it.

"One foot at a time," Jason hollered to Mark, his one man crew.

Mark stood about twenty feet back, yanking on a pair of thick gloves. He watched Jason hopping up and over the logs, making his way toward him.

"Jesus, boss, didn't know your yard was such a mess," he said.

"Thanks, Mark."

"Seriously, if this was on the brochure—"

"Right, no one would hire us," Jason finished the thought.

Mark adjusted his ball cap and rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, I can see why you didn't want the whole team here. It's not much."

"It's plenty," Jason said. He eyed the land, his face drooped as he let out a sigh. "I hate fighting against nature, mostly. You know that. Integrate with the natural flow. And here's this," he waved his hand out, "slop."

Mark snickered. "Not much to work with, eh?" He glanced at Jason, waiting for instructions.

"What I was thinking is, move everything to an edge. Create a spread out woodpile, leave it be. It will decompose, but it gets it into a line. Gives a shape. But clear out this section enough to create a pond from that inlet," he pointed toward a creek. "It's wet enough, just all these branches clogged the source. I figure that's going to ebb some with water levels, but that's fine. It grooms the space by naturalizing it. Put in some specialty plants, block off the invasive species with a border. I can see it. You?" Jason was lost in his visionary daydream, hazard and trick of the trade. It'd just taken him some time to see what this spot of land could become. Once he imagined it, he knew it would happen. He'd make it happen.

"Sure. Piece of cake," Mark replied after a moment of looking out at the swampy wasteland. "So, move the logs," he added, smiling.

"Good enough," Jason patted Mark on the shoulder. He clomped ahead, his tan boots sinking into the mud. "Did I mention waterproof boots?" His foot sank deeper until he tugged it out, a sloshing sound erupted. "Deeper than it looks," he added.

"It's your equipment," Mark laughed. "Man, you really know how to spend a Saturday."

The next afternoon, Jason headed to the spot alone. Once the vision captivated him, he knew he'd work tirelessly to complete it. The ground swallowed his steps, each foot clogging into a squishing expanse of mud. The dark, seeping mud soon coated his boots and most of the lower end of his pant leg.

Each step sticking and slippery, as he pulled up one step, the mud below gurgled. The unevenness gave way to an awkward, unbalanced walk. Jason held his arms out, tugging his steps out of the clasping sludge as he moved toward a thicket of branches and logs. Slowly, he'd make progress. Slowly.

Beneath the clumps of branches sat piles of leaves, rotting logs, and decaying tree stumps. The whole mess was too wet and ugly to comprehend, despite his teasing vision of a quiet pond nestled in the valley.

The state of decomposition was inherently repulsive, every branch coated in thick slime, purulent crevices oozing with moisture and squirming insects rippling out of every visible hole. He hated the sight of it, and thought about crushing the nasty wiggling centipedes and beetles, but he kept his distance. And kept staring, like he was receiving a secret glimpse into a dank, shadow world. The sight of it was almost enough to make him wretch.

He took a step back, swatting at a sudden itch on his back. But he felt certain it was the trickling sounds sending tingling sensations through him, not anything real. The dark, seeping sludge gurgled as he yanked backwards, making almost a swallowing sound.

Jason frowned, surveying the slop of yard ahead of him, just as a flicker of soft light caught his eye. Something about the way the bright glow hit a cluster of moist leaves beneath a branch. It looked almost luminescent. A round

glow emanated for a moment from the pinpoint of blackness. Like a pupil. Yes. It looked strangely like an eye.

Jason leaned forward, hoping to inspect it more closely. In an instant the light changed, and the spectacle vanished. It was gone. He picked up a stick and poked it into the blackness where the glow had come from.

Nothing there. He jabbed the stick into the leaves a few times, hard, not sure why, but the gesture felt strangely angry. Sticks clicked and snapped as he stabbed into the mess. His movements grew increasingly sharp and determined, eyes focused on whatever lurked beneath. He flipped up chunks of composting earth and trees and plunged the stick into the soil, pushing into the moist depth toward whatever he'd seen.

Jason felt a surge of eagerness and urgency to discover something. A wash of pressure built in him as he became certain he'd find something awful in this marshy wasteland. Half expecting to spot a severed finger or bit of crushed bone, his determined rage continued to hack. He'd discover and identify something here, he could feel it.

Whatever it was, it needed to be unearthed. Jason's breath became raspy as he forced over stumps and continued his fierce chopping. His eyes glassed over as his effort quickened. Beads of sweat formed on his brow and trickled down his neck and shoulders. He would not be stopped. His rough, jagged motions continued to force up heaps of detritus and fallow earth. His deltoids bulged, and cruelty seemed to imbue his form as he lunged and stabbed forward, plummeting the soil deeper with each strike. Every gesture conveyed that he wanted to hurt something, whatever it was he saw. Which was nothing, of course, but a glimmer of sunlight on a hidden clump of rotting leaves.

A foul stench erupted from the decomposing, now disrupted pile, and Jason stepped back as if he'd been assaulted. His face contorted in disgust at the hovering odor of rot, though he knew he had been the aggressor here. He dropped the stick and kicked it away from him, as if distance would conceal his rage at the wet illusion.

Beneath his feet, more mud glued to the thick soles of his boots, his heaving steps clomping as he moved himself deliberately away from the strange moment, back toward the familiar rhythm of pulling branches and rolling logs into a neat line. "Straighten out this mess," he said aloud.

The eye burrowed. Nestled into the cavern from the cluster of branches, it deepened its hole and remained unseen. But it saw. Everything. It saw Jason.

Jason grabbed a branch with two hands and swung it across the heap, toward his growing log pile. It clunked against a tree and dropped. It'd leaked an oozing sap which now clung to his gloves, creating a sticky smear of thick fluid on the palm. His body wracked with sweat after only a few hours, the moisture in the air was almost unbearable. "One more hour," he said, glancing up at the sky.

That was plenty of time.

Jason's hand sunk into a half-rotted log, meeting with an eruption of black carpenter ants. In a blink they'd run up to his wrist. Dozens of them stuck to the sap on his palm, wriggling in confusion and dozens more piled over them, scattering up his arm and neck. He shook his arm harshly, hoping to rid them, but they were relentless. With one hand he swiped at them, but it only rubbed a thick line of yellowish sap across his arm, and their little legs squirmed under the assault.

"Shit!" he yelled.

They bombarded him.

From beneath, the unblinking eye swallowed the promise of the scene. It had waited long enough.

Jason felt like his head was spinning. He shut his eyes as a slippery, wet feeling engulfed him.

As he collapsed in the muck, he felt a strange, tingling. A stinging sensation burned his eyes. As his eyes fell closed, he listened to a soaking sound. The wet slicks made popping, ripping sounds, like something burrowing deep into the crevices of his boots.

But it wasn't his boots.

Massive grayish slugs inched along his skin, leaving thick trails in their wake. Their slow movements punctuated by brief turns of the antennae toward the rotting pile, where the eye commanded.

Entrance and inhabitation required fastidious effort. Resolve. The human body was a marvelous host. Full of caverns. And the distances it could travel surpassed expectations. The possible impact was thrilling. That this body in particular worked the land was an unbelievable advantage. It had been centuries since it'd left this acreage, and even then travel had been slow.

The opening was clear enough, a slit at the base of the neck: a good position for visibility, but easy to hide in the clump of muscle as a knot. The eye slid into place greedily glancing around before the work of closing began. Soon, the seams would be neatly erased by a team of insects. After a few days, it'd be positioned in a cluster of nerve cells,

metastasized into the fibers of the body.

"Hey bud," Michael chimed, arriving at a work site.

"Late!" came the reply.

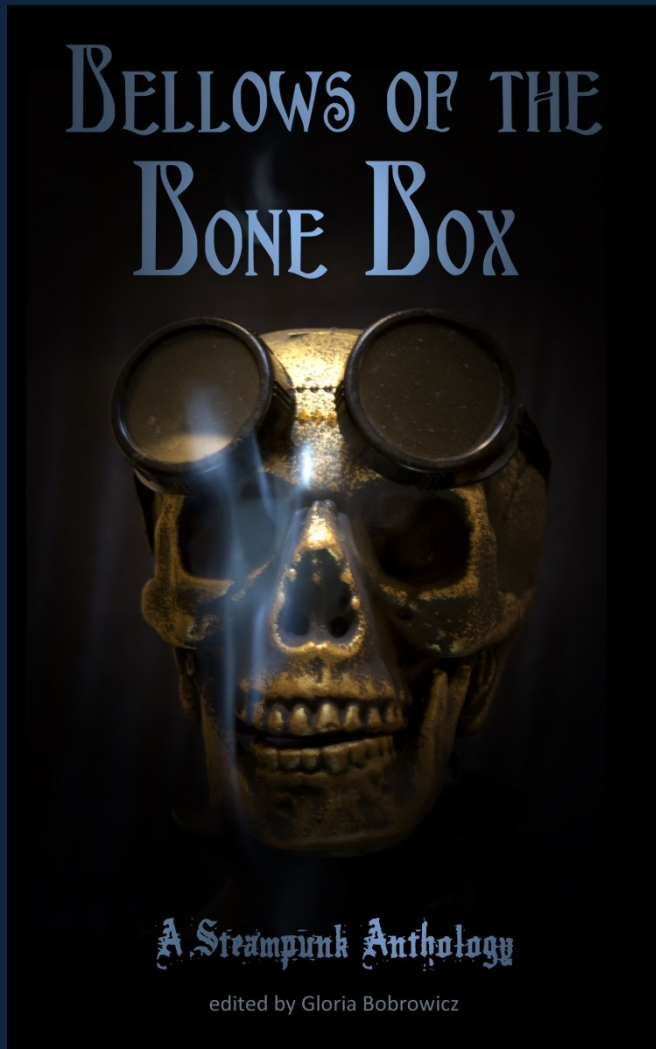
Michael shrugged, aware that Jason seemed hostile ever since that weekend he'd helped him at home. Like he hadn't done enough. He shirked it off. "Sorry," he called back, pulling a shovel out of the truck.

Aside from delegating less and being noticeably short tempered and angry, Jason had also become more focused and keen, as if he'd been consumed by the need to work, to get into every plot of land himself. Michael reminded himself not to take it on.

"Man's got his own agenda," he told the crew, and he encouraged them to blow it off as seasonal. The hectic schedule was booked and that promised excellent opportunities. Eventually, everyone seemed content to accept a slightly unpredictable boss as trade for reliable paychecks.

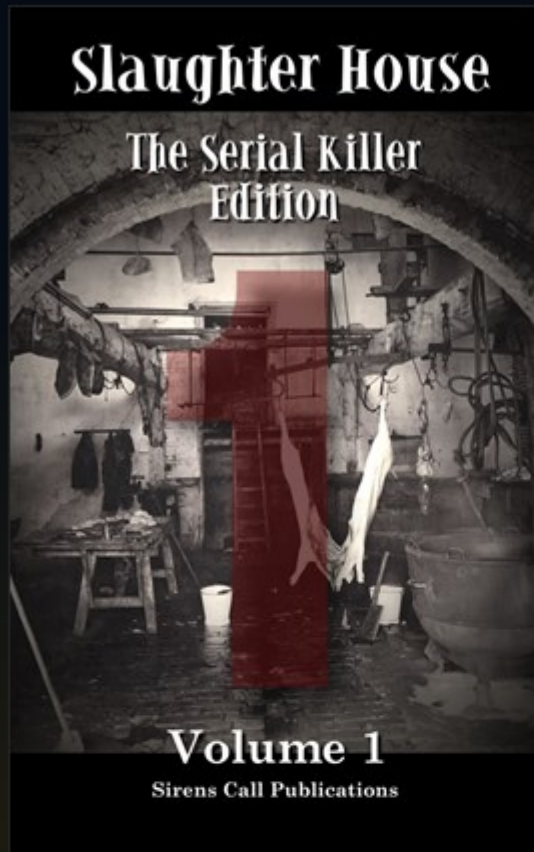
Jason would go on, it was true, but as something else. He had so much to consider. So much work to do.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - E. F. Schraeder's creative work has appeared or is forthcoming in Voluted Tales, The Kennedy Curse, Inner Sins, Dark Gothic Resurrected Magazine, Flashes in the Dark, Zombie Jesus and Other True Stories, Carnival of the Damned, Corvus Magazine, Haz Mat Review, and elsewhere. Her poetry chapbook, The Hunger Tree, was released in 2013. She holds an interdisciplinary doctoral degree in the humanities, plays the banjo, and is decidedly shy.

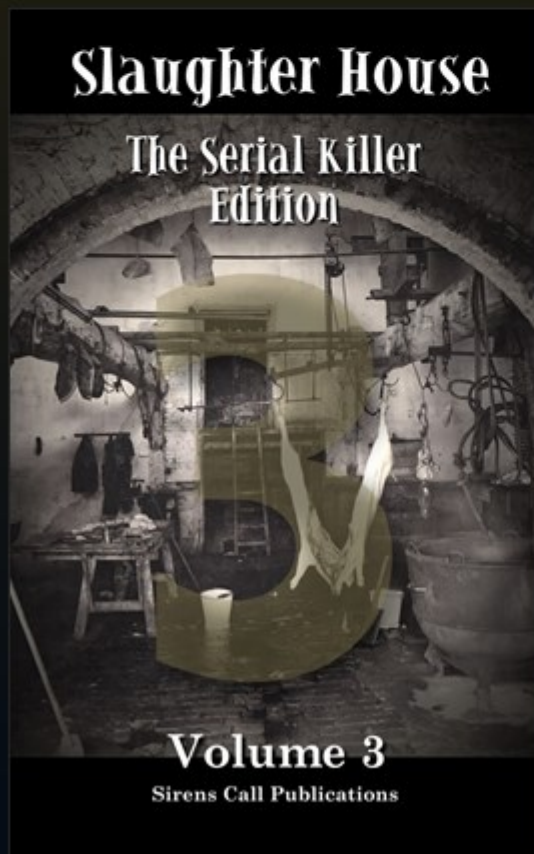
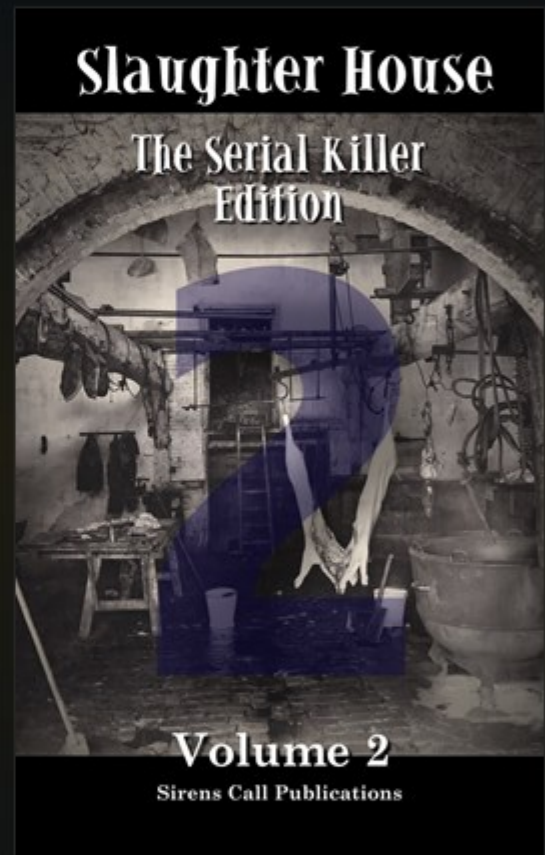


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Blink *Nina D'Arcangela*

I cower in the corner trying not to hear the scuttling sounds from the attic above me. The scratching of tiny claws, the beating of miniscule feet, the giggling of inhuman laughter – it's maddening. I don't know how much more of this I can take. Frozen in terror, I'm not sure I have the will to force my body to move. I shift slightly as my left calf begins to cramp. Silence – the noises above have stopped. Did they hear me? I should run; this may be my only chance!

Gathering my wit's about me, I lean forward placing one hand on the floor in front of me. Still nothing from above. Bolder now, I place the other hand on the floor and shift my weight. The damn wood betrays me as the old boards squeal. I freeze in mid-crouch listening for signs of movement from above. All remains quiet.

My crawl from the corner is agonizingly slow. What in reality takes only a few seconds, feels like an eternity to my pounding heart. I've made it to the center of the room. Pausing for a moment, I glance up toward the hatch that separates the attic from the bedroom.

My lungs suck for breath, my body begins to shake uncontrollably – I'm ashamed to admit I wet myself. The corner of the hatch is ajar; two sets of eyes blink down at me in silence. Then a fifth eye blinks open, quickly followed by its accompanying sixth. As I watch, a multitude of tiny gleaming orbs struggle to see through the slight gap. I stare in horror as the hatch lifts further to allow more of the beings a view of what's below.

The hatch now completely open, the small creatures stare at me from every available angle. I begin to wonder if they are harmful or not. One of them speaks, I can't discern if it's meant for me or not, so I continue to look upward in mute silence. A muffled reply sounds from farther back in the open space above. The first, turning its head, speaks again. This seems to excite those gathered around the hatch. They began to fidget; bouncing and bumping into one another, making a high-pitched keening noise. The one that was speaking turns and looks down at me. This time it makes no pretense of hiding its wickedly-long, slender teeth, or it's viciously hooked claws clearly intended to rip meat from bone.

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

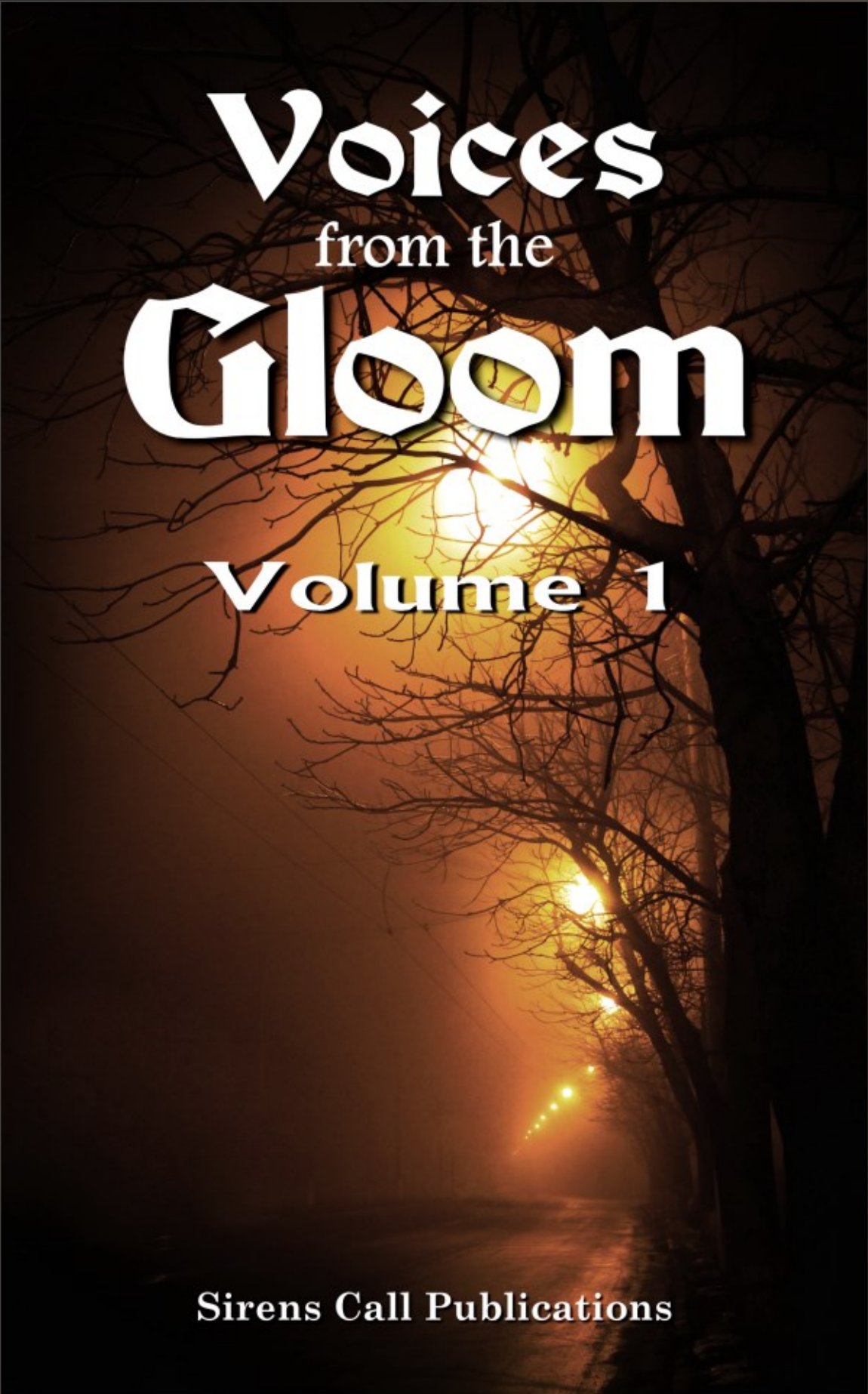
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Volume 1

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Big Grey Man *Alex Woolf*

I'm in the snug little bar of Cairngorm Lodge, sipping a Glenmorangie single malt by a crackling fire. I have a book open on my lap. I'm making notes on a pad, sketching out a plan for my article. There's no one here, apart from the lady behind the bar. She's watching something on a little television. It sounds like an American sitcom.

After a while, I saunter over for a refill, and to see if I can procure some local colour for my piece. The bar lady is perhaps thirty-five, with curly black hair parted in the centre and dangling messily around her face. Her lips are painted dark red. I see a tattoo creeping out of the top of her jeans when she turns her back to me.

"What can you tell me about the Big Grey Man?" I ask her as she shovels a couple of fresh ice cubes into my glass.

"What's that, dear?" she giggles. More than half her attention is on the television.

"Fear Liath Mor," I say, using the Scottish Gaelic name for the cryptid, and not at all sure if I'm pronouncing it right.

"Och, it's just stories," she says, with a glance at me. "I don't believe there's any such thing."

Her attitude is refreshingly down-to-earth. Usually, when I'm researching these stories, the locals are only too keen to play up the myth. She pours me a measure, and her eyes revert to the small screen on her right where New York actors are firing one-liners at each other to a laughter track.

I'm going to need something more for my story. Before you can destroy a myth, you need someone to believe in it.

"I heard there was a sighting recently," I remark as she hands me my drink.

The comedy switches to an ad break, and I get more of her attention.

"Aye, a father and son were climbing on Ben Macdui last month. Claimed they saw a giant figure on one of the peaks. But it was very foggy apparently, and it was probably just a brocken spectre."

"A what?"

"A brocken spectre – a shadow cast by the sun on a fog bank. It's quite common in the mountains."

"I see."

It was a different story last year when I investigated rumours of a giant scorpion haunting the Altamaha swamps in Georgia. To a man and woman, the locals all swore it was real, and every last one of them had their stories. They hated it when I exposed the man in the scorpion suit. Redmond his name was. Owned a failing hotel in the nearby town, so he had a vested interest in reviving a myth that had been dormant for almost a century.

Now I needed to find my Redmond here in the Cairngorms. Not someone dressed up in a Big Grey Man suit – that would be too improbable – but someone with enough of a stake in the story to be prepared to manufacture evidence. I'd seen it enough times. There was that guy, Chambers his name was, who was taking people on Bigfoot tours out in Bluff Creek, California, showing them the footprints he kept turning up – until I filmed him one night walking around in the giant fake feet. Then there was that other one who photographed a giant tentacle in Florida last year, claiming it belonged to the legendary Lusca. The newspapers only stopped paying for his story and his pictures when I showed them the studio where he'd made the papier mache appendage. They all had their hidden agendas, so it turned out – and I'm steadily making a name for myself exposing these fraudsters. I sell my articles to journals like *New Skeptic* and *Mythbusters*. Soon I'll have enough material for a book. They call me the Cryptid Killer, a tag I'm immoderately proud of, and I don't care that I've made at least as many enemies as friends along the way.

I return to my armchair by the hearth. There's a wind blowing outside. It groans in the chimney. The flames sputter. I knock back some whiskey and feel its fire flood my cheeks.

"I'll help you find it."

The voice comes from my right. I turn, startled. I had believed myself the only customer in here tonight. A man's head emerges from the bulging wing of an armchair a few feet from mine. He's got a very long face, solemn, with a heavy, serious mouth and eyes the colour of dark grapes.

"I beg your pardon," I mutter.

"The Big Grey Man," he clarifies in his posh-sounding brogue. "I heard you talking about him with Brenda."

I glance at the bar and then back at him, surprised he could have overheard us from such a distance. I suppose he's hazarding a guess – it must be the number one topic of conversation in this place.

"I encountered him once.... I can take you back there, if you like."

Aha!

I allow myself a smile.

"J. Norman Collie," he says, extending a hand. "Call me Norman."

We're close enough that neither of us has to rise from our seat to shake.

"Stanley Loxton," I say. "So you saw the Big Grey Man?"

"Heard him... I'm relieved to say I never actually set eyes on the thing... I was descending from the summit of Ben Macdui in heavy mist when I began to hear noises in the loose rock behind me... Every few steps I heard a crunch, and then another crunch, as if someone was walking behind me but taking steps three or four times the length of my own. I tried to dismiss it as a strange kind of echo. An aural hallucination. But I knew it wasn't. There was no relationship between my footsteps and the noises I could hear behind me."

The flames reflect in the dark, shiny parabolas of his eyes. I can no longer hear the tinny laughter from the television, only the wind in the chimney and the popping of the fire.

"It felt like I was being stalked by a huge and menacing creature... The terror built gradually within me until I could take it no more and I fled blindly down the mountain. I didn't stop until I reached Rothiemurchus Forest, five miles away."

He stares at the fire, mouth open. The flesh of his face seems to have shrunk against the bones, pulling his lips apart into a shape of terror. He reaches up and begins slowly rubbing the area between the top of his nose and his eye.

"Do you think perhaps you were mistaken?"

"I wish I could say I was. But I swear to God I heard those footsteps behind me as clear as I can hear you talking to me now. And there was no one for miles around but me – no one human at any rate."

We stare, both of us, at the flames as they flicker around the log, embracing and consuming.

"Tell me, Norman," I say. "Have you taken other people up the mountain?"

"No," he says. "I haven't been back since."

"So why now?"

He stares at me, and it's about then that I notice a trickle of blood appear beneath his left nostril. I watch it form into a thin, slow-moving stream heading towards his lip.

"Your nose," I say.

"Eh?"

"It's bleeding."

"Och, I'm sorry." He clamps a large white handkerchief to the middle of his face. "It happens whenever I think about it... about that day. Forgive me." He sniffs and wipes away the blood.

I'm intrigued. The man's fear appears genuine. You can't manufacture a nosebleed. Maybe he really does believe he experienced something up there.

"I have to conquer the fear," he says.

"Then take me up there," I say.

The next day, we climb Ben Macdui, J. Norman Collie and I. The sky is close and wet, merging with the peaks, coating the dark rocks in steamy drifts. The grassy slopes are clustered with heather – dry brownish purple like old lavender. "Calluna vulgaris," Collie calls it, and it sounds like a sexual disease. I can see waterfalls, high up on the mountain tops, thin white streams gushing down the black crags. And bouldered creeks and rills, webbed with mist. I follow his tall, Barbour-coated figure up a steep, narrow path. There's no sound at all, but our breath and the scrape of our boots.

I'm here because I want to prove this man and his story a fake. But also because, like all skeptics, deep down I really want to believe. I began like every kid, as a wide-eyed believer in the Tooth Fairy and Santa Claus. And when those childhood gods were taken from me, I turned bitter at the world. If I ever heard of something inexplicable, I'd pull and pull at it until it fell apart, and then I'd chuckle – a low, bitter sound – scorning the naivete of others.

We rise out of the grass and heather to an empty plateau of large grey stones and brown moss. In the dense mist, everything is smudged and faint as if seen through wet glass. Through the blur I can make out a distant cairn and wonder if it's the summit. Our feet make hollow-sounding clunks on the loose rocks as we stumble forwards. And the wind tugs at my jacket and whispers in my ears. Collie has slowed. His gait is stiff and hesitant. Then he stops.

"What is it?" The words jerk out of my throat, and I realise I'm trembling. This place is so strange. Dead as the Moon, yet it doesn't feel quite empty, and the mist cloaks far more than it reveals.

He points to about ten o'clock. "Over there," he grunts, launching himself in the new direction. He's ten yards from me and already fading into the consuming whiteness before I lurch after him. For the next quarter of an hour, we move across the featureless rubble, and I see nothing ahead but his dark shape plunging through silky curtains of mist. If I lose him now, I'm done for. And all the while I'm getting colder, and thinking of the clenched look of his face last night, the blood streaming from his nose. Then he stops again, very suddenly, and I fall against his back, unaware how close I am on his heels. My heart is thumping hard against my ribs.

He staggers, breath whistling from his throat. I feel a bony hand clutching my thigh as his boots scrabble for purchase.

"Careful, lad," he wheezes. "You nearly sent me over."

I see now that we're at the top of a cliff – black rocks tumbling into cloud beneath our feet.

"More than a thousand feet, that drop," says Collie.

"Sorry."

"That's the second time I almost fell off Lurcher's Crag," he adds. "First time I was in a state of pure panic."

"This is where you heard it then?" I ask.

"Aye... Somewhere hereabouts anyway."

I look around. There's nothing to see but rocks and drifts of ashen haze. He's also glancing about nervously, breathing hard through his nose. Then he starts staring hard to our right, towards a point further up Lurcher's Crag. There's nothing there. But I'm thinking that if he's sensing something, it's probably not with his eyes.

The wind has dropped. It's so quiet now. I don't like it here, and neither does he. But I'm sure we'd both struggle to explain why. I can already hear the derisive laughter of my skeptic friends as I try to tell this story. I've done nocturnal swamp stakeouts, and trekked remote northern forests. I've dived in search of lake monsters and hunted deathworms in the burning dunes of the Gobi, but I've never felt this... oppression. The air is thinner up here perhaps, but can that explain the crushing in my chest, the straining whistle of our breaths in the surrounding silence?

He glances at his watch. *For God's sake, why is he looking at his watch?*

"It's here," says Collie, still fixated on the same patch of fog. "I can feel it watching us."

I follow his gaze, even though I don't want to. It feels strange, *really* strange – like a dream when you know something bad is about to happen. I try to force my skeptic brain to take note of the physical conditions: the wind, the light – and my own semi-freaked-out state. But there's something here, he's right. It's no longer just a feeling. I can... I can see... a shadow, darker and denser than its surroundings.

My fist closes tight on something soft and waxen. Vaguely, I realise I'm clutching Collie's coat sleeve. A whining sound. Is that me? I wish we could run, but the moment for that is gone. We're stuck here now, we're part of events. No longer in control.

The fog slowly parts and the shadow congeals into something solid. A figure. Human in shape, but not... Not big.

It's a man. A bearded man in a coat.

He appears for a second, then fades back into the mist.

I'm mystified – and so relieved I want to cry

"Let's go," yells Collie. He yanks himself free. I turn towards him in time to see him stumble backwards. As he does so, something falls from his pocket – it looks like a small, dark red tube. He snatches it up from a cleft of rock, but I grab it from him and squeeze it between my fingers.

Blood, fake blood, drenches my hand.

"You rubbed your nose," I say to him. "Last night, you rubbed your nose, and then it bled."

"Let's go," says Collie. "It's the Big Grey Man." But his fear isn't persuading me any more.

"That was a guy," I hiss. "Just a guy. Who is he? Your friend?"

Collie seems to crumple before me like a collapsed balloon, his face tight with misery. "Business partner," he says. "We own the lodge you're staying in."

"You're my Redmond," I murmur.

"What?"

"Never mind."

"I know who you are," says Collie. "You're the Cryptid Killer. If I could have convinced you this thing was real, we'd get the tourists back for certain. We'd have been financially secure for years to come. Are you sure I can't entice you to –"

I never hear the rest of his offer, for right then the air is ruptured by a scream, loud and sudden enough to drive my fingernails clean through the skin of my palms.

Collie stumbles further backwards, his eyes bulging from his head like ripe fruit. He's staring at something over my shoulder.

"No!" he screams. "No! No! No!"

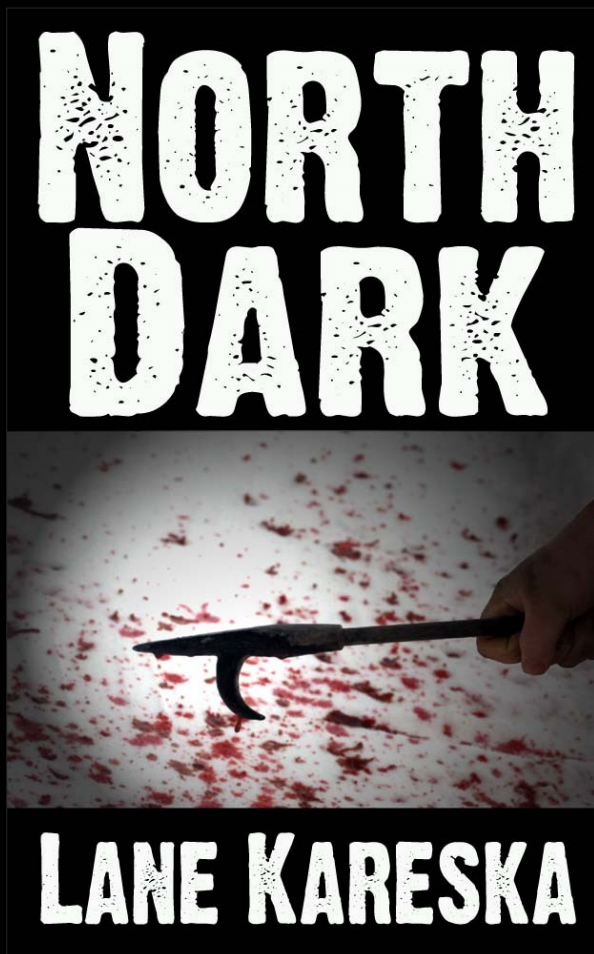
He's still repeating that word as he loses his footing and falls over the edge of Lurcher's Crag. The echoes of his screams rise up to me as I watch his body disappear through the clouds. And right behind me I can hear a deep grinding sound, loud enough to make the rocks shudder.

I start to run.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR- Alex Woolf has been fascinated by cryptids ever since his dad told him about a scare he once had while out rowing on Loch Ness. Alex has written over 60 works of non-fiction (including one about cryptids). His fiction includes *Aldo Moon*, featuring a teenage Victorian ghost-hunter, and *Soul Shadows*, a horror novel about cannibalistic shadows, which has been shortlisted for the 2014 RED Book Award.

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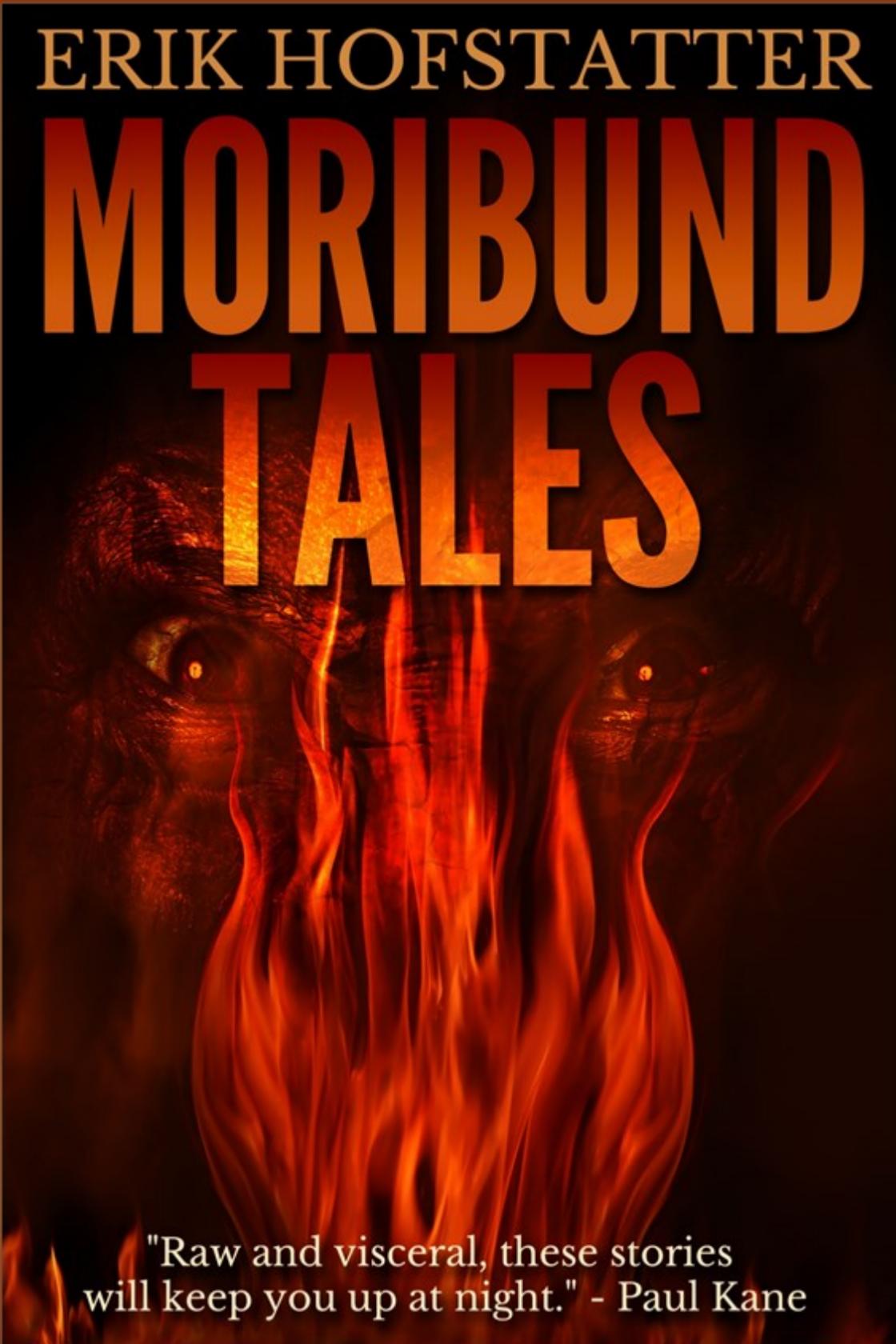


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Jersey Devil *Nicholas Paschall*

Scott sniffed as he shouldered his rifle, crouched low in the high reeds of the mighty Mullica, eyes scanning the horizon for any sign of his elusive quarry. He and Mike had been out in the chill of the Pine Barrens for the past two hours, having witnessed the sunrise some thirty minutes ago as they waited for signs of activity amidst the duck community so prevalent in this river.

"Why haven't they flown yet?" Mike whispered to Scott, his long hair tied back in a loose ponytail, his white knuckled grip on his shotgun belying his frustration at the whole hunt altogether. "Should we try the duck call again?"

Scott merely shook his head, eyes still facing ahead. Beyond the reeds to the opposing shore of the Mullica, a stand of high grass and mossy tree trunks offered a breath of darkness in the dawning light of the crisp autumn morning. Without a word, he raised his gun and took careful aim. Mike quickly pulled his own shotgun up shoulder-level, searching the opposing coast for whatever it was his friend had seen.

Nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

Mike squinted his eyes and calmed his breathing, examining every shadow and rock, looking for whatever had crossed into Scott's crosshairs. The only sounds to be heard were the faint buzzing of the cicada and the gurgling of the river before them, along with Scott's almost rhythmic breathing as he stared down the sights of his rifle.

"What is it?" Mike hissed. "A deer? Quail?"

"No." Scott said slowly, his word punctuated by the high crack of his rifle firing in the calm morning air. A gaggle of birds flapped away from the trees surrounding them. A loud keening noise, one reminiscent of an injured elk, sounded throughout the woods, along with the trampling of grass as whatever Scott had shot began to retreat deeper into the woods.

Scott slung his gun over his shoulder, leapt to his feet and sloshed through the ankle deep water to a series of slippery stones that allowed the hunter to cross the wide river with practiced ease. Mike followed along, hot on his trail. The two of them had hunted in the Pine Barrens of Southern Jersey their whole lives, save for when Scott had been called away to serve his country in the Second Gulf War. While he'd returned a far more somber individual, his love of hunting always seemed to bring about that old cheer that Mike remembered from when they were younger. The grizzled veteran seemed more like his old self when he was out in the woods with his friend, ready to bring home some fine game to prepare.

Crossing the river with ease, Scott stopped some ten feet into the woods, dropping down to a knee to study a set of tracks that Mike had never seen before. Widely spaced and set deep in the moist earth, they looked like horse tracks if not for the fact that whatever left them was clearly bipedal. Mike gasped as he caught sight of a spattering of gore plastered to a knotty pine close by, red flesh mixed with black, smoking blood.

"What the hell did you shoot, Scott?" Mike asked, moving closer to the stained trunk. "Whatever got hit, got hit solid. No way is it going far like this."

Scott looked up from the tracks, one hand carefully tracing the edges of the hoof prints. "Let's finish the job."

Scott led Mike deep into the Pinelands, down steep hills and over streams, stopping only to analyze the occasional print left behind by their elusive quarry, or to take stock of a smear of blood left against a tree trunk or dribbled onto high grass. Two hours died to the hunt, until finally Scott held his hand up in a fist, a sign Mike had been taught to mean "Halt."

Squatting low over a creek, a red skinned creature sat no more than twenty paces away from the two hunters. Great leathery wings sprouted from the creature's mid back, folded up like bat wings, while the creature's brow bore a pair of curved horns. Long hooked fingers were slowly digging into a bloody wound in its side, searching for the bullet that has pierced it's leathery hide, a sneer on its horse-like face as it winced from the exploring fingers.

"What in the hell is that?" Mike asked in hushed tones. The creature's head spun to look at the duo. Mike realized his voice was obviously not as hushed as he'd thought.

Scott quickly shucked his rifle from his shoulder into his hands as the demonic creature screeched, turning and leaping through the air with wings unfurled, mouth spread wide to reveal rows of jagged, uneven teeth. With careful aim and perfect timing, Scott squeezed the trigger blasting the creature directly in the face, blowing away the monstrosity's skull in a shower of gore and blackened blood.

Mike walked over to look at the still twitching corpse, staring at the long equine legs and the tail ending in a heavy red spade... he'd never seen anything like it before in his life! "What is it?"

With a simple ka-chick of his weapon, Scott turned to look at his friend. "If there's one thing I learned going through the hell of war Mike," Scott said as he moved toward the downed beast, "it's how to recognize another Devil when I see one."

"Devil? You mean you've seen one of these before?" Mike sputtered, shocked at the very idea.

Scott pulled a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, tapping the red package in his hand thoughtfully. "Yup. Just saying, you seen one Devil, you've seen 'em all. These bastards are a right pain in the ass over in Iraq."

"So how did it get over here?"

Scott smiled. "Well we're in the neck of the woods the Jersey Devil calls home, and I just killed me a Devil..."

Mike looked at Scott like he was mad. "Are you saying that is the Jersey Devil?"

Scott looked over his shoulder with a feral grin. "It was."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - A horror/fantasy writer that has been at it for two years professionally. Nicholas Paschall has been published in eight anthologies, including *Demonic Visions*, *Dark Moon Digest* and *Tales of the Unseelie Court*. He is a recurring columnist at *Dark Eclipse Magazine* and maintains his own blog which he updates weekly. His upcoming works are *Demonic Visions Four*, *Pandora's Box* and *Sulfurings*."

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Love Struck *Tim Wellman*

"They ain't nothin' out yonder 'ceptin' that old goat," the old man said, and smacked the back of his granddaughter's head. She had been pacing back and forth through the old house and looking out the windows for the last hour and it was starting to annoy him.

"I'm tellin' ya, old man, there's something out there and it's gettin' closer ta the barn right now," Susie said. "Right as we're a speakin', it's a creepin'." She pointed through the torn wire of the kitchen screen-door and narrowed her eyes so she could see better through the glint of the porch-light. The evening had faded quickly as a storm brewed over the Ohio River and headed directly for Wayne County. The rain would be welcome to break the oppressive heat and humidity of August in West Virginia, but she didn't like the way it had darkened the woods behind the house so early in the evening. "I seen that thing out there, and I'm a swearin' on my momma's grave."

"Well, ain't nothin' I can see," he said.

"Ya cain't see nothin' even in broad daylight," she said. "And I got proof; I heard that woman at the Motor Vehicles sayin' ya was too blind ta be drivin', but she let ya pass 'cause you was friends with her dad."

"Ya sure are gettin' snippy," he said. "My eyes is good enough ta see everything I want ta see." He patted the child on her head. She was his, now, he figured, since his daughter had died down in Mingo County when her little car met up with a big coal truck and left her in his care; and though he didn't figure on a twelve year old girl in his life at his age, he wasn't unhappy she was. She brightened the old place up after twenty years of just living 'good enough'. Though she brought a new world with her, he was trying as best he could to understand it, and understand her. But he still couldn't see what the hell she was talking about. "I thank ya's been on that inter-web thing again at school and got all spooked inta believin' in monsters. Just like last month when ya told me there was pixies in England."

"This thang ain't no damned pixie, Grampa," she said, and shivered. "What I seen... and, mind you, seen it with my own eyes... was one a them bigfoots, sure as shootin'." She shook her head and pointed. "He was right in there, and then walked over closer t'ward the barn past them milkweeds and the tractor rake."

The old man pointed with the barrel of his poke-stalk twelve-gauge. "Right in there?" He tried squinting and then put a hand over his bad eye and looked again. He still couldn't see anything except the trees and a few chickens scattered about the bare ground. "That's 'bout where the well pump used ta be, ain't it? So it's prob'ly that old salty water a seapin' up and attractin' the whitetails."

Suddenly something huge and black moved from the treeline and crossed the bare ground and stepped behind the corner of the barn. Susie was silent. She simply pointed with her mouth open, looked over at her grand father, and then looked back. "Ooh..."

"All right," he said. "We might just got us a problem ta deal with."

"Ya think?!" She stepped behind him and looked around. "That ain't no deer, old man. We gotta do something!" She started jumping around and punching the air. "Gotta whack 'im good! Comin' 'round here and messin' with us Adkins; he's askin' fer it!"

He pulled off his old B&O railroad cap and scratched his bald head. "I reckon we..." He was at a loss for words and ideas. "Well, if we..." Still nothing.

Susie took off running through the house. "I gotta get my camera!" she yelled. "And a baseball bat! And we still got that old machete?"

The old man suddenly felt very alone and backed away from the door. He had seen it; he was certain it wasn't an illusion or shadow or anything other than a huge, hairy, hulking beast out there and it seemed to be getting closer. "Susie?"

She touched his back and he jumped all the way back to where he had been standing before she took off. "Got my camera!" she said. "Let's go!"

"Go?"

"Yep, we gotta go document us a bigfoot," she said.

"Thought you was lookin' fer a machete so ya could kill it?" he said. "Losin' yer nerve, girl?"

"No!" she said. "Just ain't no use bein' stupid 'bout it. I need me somethin' with a longer reach, anyhow."

He moved his head around so he could get a clear view through the holes in the screen. "How ya figurin' we're gonna get 'im?" he said. "That damned thang could squish you like a bug."

"Yeah, but I figure that shotgun could blow a big ol' hole clean through 'im," she said. "And I'll whack him with somethin' when he's down. I'll need ta take pictures so I can send 'em in ta that website! Then we get rich, you get personal grooming lessons and new glasses, I get a truckload of video games, the end."

"That simple, huh?" he said. "I'm thinkin' we go out there, he grabs us, bends the gun in half, eats us both, the end."

"We gotta do somethin'," she said. "I seen TV shows and you gotta do somethin', 'cause doing nothin' leads to him reaching through your windows, grabbing ya, and dragging ya off to a love nest out in the woods. You wanna be that thang's girlfriend? 'Cause I don't!"

"Well, I guess I could go out there and take a quick look-round," he said. "You can stay here."

"No way!" she said. "I might be little fer my age, but ya know I'm as strong as you are with your bad back and neck and, well, bad ev'rythang." She pushed him forward and forced him through the doorway and out on to the old rickety wooden back porch. They both bounced on the old, rotting planks until they reached the single stone step, and stopped when their feet hit the red and yellow clay ground. "Just keep that gun pointed that a way."

"Pointed at what?" he said.

"Anything nine feet tall and hairy that wants ta marry me," she said. She sniffed the air. "You just let one, grampa?"

"That ain't me," he said. He sniffed. "That's comin' from out near the barn." He started walking, slowly, one measured step at a time as his granddaughter held on to the back loop of his overalls and studied the area for anything unusual. The sky was nearly dark with clouds and created odd shadows and movements as they rolled past, so almost everything looked unusual and out of place.

There was a loud grunt and they both jumped. "He might just be in the barn, now," she whispered. "I *think* that came from in there and it ain't your old mule; I can see her over there." She pointed across the yard at the mule, grazing, but the whites of her eyes were showing. She was scared, too. There was another grunt, louder than the first, and they could hear a chicken crying out, panicked, then nothing, silence. "I think he just got hisself a snack. That there's five bucks he owes us."

He looked at the small, delicate face framed in long straight blonde hair and smiled. He could hear the fear in her voice, even though she was trying to be brave. He wondered if she could hear the fear in his voice, as well. "We got this covered, right? Ain't no good come from lettin' a damned chicken thief get off without payin'."

She nodded and smiled, but as they both turned back toward the barn, there he was, only a few feet away from them, blood dripping from his huge gorilla-like mouth and his massive arms outstretched and threatening. Susie screamed so loud the creature actually took a step back, but then roared at them, spitting saliva and chicken blood all over them. The old man acted the only way he knew how. He scooped up Susie in his arm and took off running for the house. Susie was looking over his shoulder. "He's just standin' there! No! He's comin', now! Run faster, Grampa!"

The old man was running as fast as his skinny old legs would take him and one foot hit the stone step and the other was halfway across the porch in a single stride. He yanked open the screen-door, nearly tearing off its hinges, and darted inside and Susie literally jumped out of his arms as he spun around and lifted his gun.

The beast was coming fast. He seemed to stop just before he got to the porch, but then took a big jump and landed only a foot from the screen... and instantly fell through the planking. He growled and grunted, but he seemed stuck and very confused.

"Blast him, Grampa!" She put her fingers in her ears and squinted.

The old man braced himself and pulled the trigger and the buckshot caught the creature in the arm with an explosion of blood and fur. And though stunned, the glancing shot just seemed to make the monster even angrier and more determined to break free and get inside the house. "Shit!" he shouted. "I cain't aim good 'nough ta hit 'im in the head!"

"That's 'cause yer blind!" she yelled.

He looked back to make sure the girl was safe, but she was gone. "Susie?! Ya hidin', girl?" He was fumbling to break the gun down and load another shell but his hands were shaking so much it was proving difficult and he had already dropped two shells. "Ya ain't gettin' us, you furry bastard!" But as he looked toward the beast again, there she was, standing outside, behind the bigfoot and getting closer.

"Hey buttstink!" she yelled, and as he turned around, she swung an old wooden two-by-four she had picked up by the front porch and it landed solidly across his back, with several old rusty nails driving themselves into his flesh and bones.

He let out a blood-curdling scream, and then began to wobble, lost his balance, and fell over backward, his pinned legs tearing up several planks and freeing him from their trap. But he was in no mood to continue the attack. He laid on the ground, bleeding profusely, his eyelids blinking and he almost seemed to be crying.

Susie quickly made her way around him and across the busted porch and through the door. She grabbed the old man around the waist and wouldn't let go.

He patted her on the head. "Ya okay?"

She nodded.

"Good. Ya's grounded the rest of yer god damned life!"

She nodded and they both watched as the beaten animal pulled himself up on all fours and began to crawl away, eventually managing to get to his feet and stagger into the woods.

"Ya think that got him fer good?" she said.

"Don't know," the old man said, as he finally got his gun reloaded. "But I need ta get myself a double-barrel or somethin' if the wildlife 'round here has started fightin' back, I know that much!"

"You thinkin' he'll be back, then?" She stepped closer to the screen and peered out, searching the woods."

"Not tonight," he said. "But I wouldn't bet agin him showin' up again after he's healed up."

Susie suddenly turned around. "Shoot! I forgot to take pictures!"

"Shoot, there goes my groomin' lessons, I reckon," he said with a chuckle. "Didn't need no damned groomin' anyhow. And I ain't blind!"

Suddenly there was a loud clap of thunder that brought a hard downpour of rain and made the lights flicker, then go out. They were in the dark. "Ya goin' on ta bed early?" she said, after a long pause.

"No. No, reckon I'll sit up a while and think," he said.

She nodded. "Me too. Just do some thinkin'. I'll dig the candles outa the kitchen cabinet drawer."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Tim Wellman is an award-winning steampunk author living in West Virginia, with several bestselling novels, all available on Amazon. He was a Creative Writing major at Marshall University, and editor of the college literary journal. He is also a published comic book artist and tribal folk multi-instrumentalist musician.

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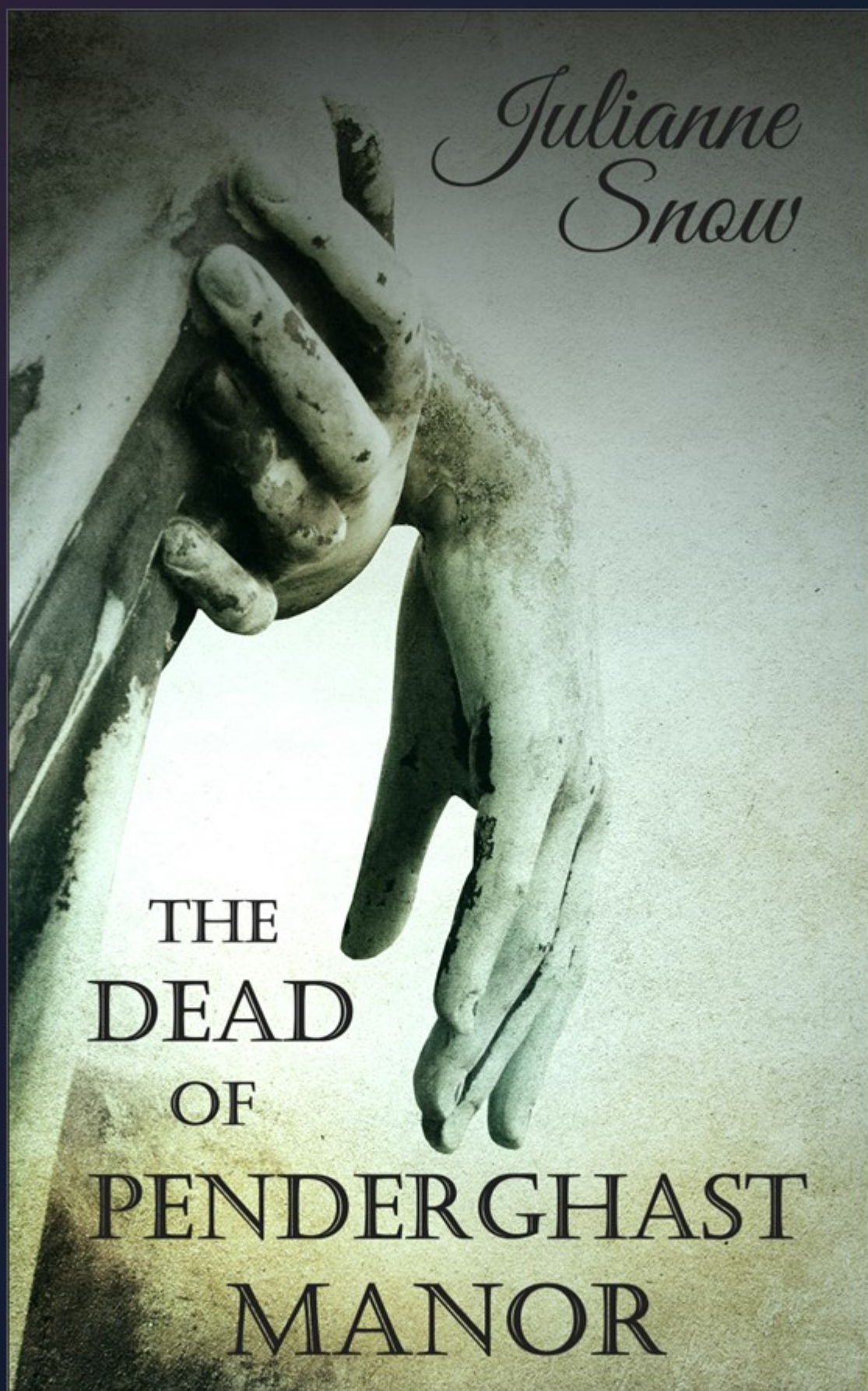
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Cicadidae expandentes morbis *Mathias Jansson*

From the sewers rose an unbearable sound
Terrifying echoing through the street
Driven people insane with insomnia
After a couple of days they started to crawl up
Black cicadas spreading throughout London
With a golden pentagram gleaming on their backs

The science surprised to see such a species
Nowhere on earth were they to be found
After days of investigations and tests
They came up with a fantastic conclusion
Deep down in earth they had been living
Feeding on salt and sulfur
With a lifecycle of six hundred sixty six years
From egg to grown up cicada
They had crawled back to the surface
To feed, breed and then go back to sleep

A clever girl made the calculation
Travelled six hundred sixty six years back in time
To the year of the Black Death
And then panic started to spread in town
As the dark ulcers started to appear
The terrifying sound of the cicadas
Was once again mixed with the screams of fear

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines as The Horror Zine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock and The Sirens Call. He has also contributed to over 50 different horror anthologies from publishers as Horrified Press, James Ward Kirk Fiction, Source Point Press, Thirteen Press and others.

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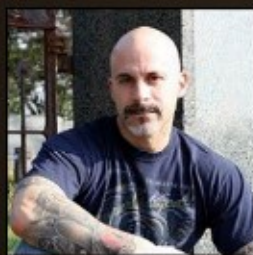
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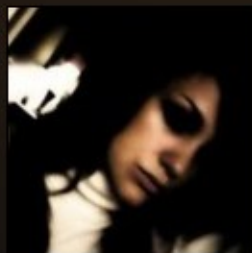
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Hiding in the Dark *Kevin Holton*

Curl your tongue
Around my broken body,
Black-lipped wretch.

Prove you're not afraid
To taste bile bursting,
Oozing along your teeth
Stained with years spent
Hiding in labyrinthine
Corridors beneath earth.

Hear me, odious beast:
Chase me into the light,
Dare to kill before my kind.
Your thousand eyes,
Embedded in scarred flesh,
Leave you helpless.

Go on, drag animals
Deep into your endless lair;
I know you.

Cowardly pit fiend,
Terror of small animals
And bedtime stories,
Darkness holds you
Captive.

The Kraken *Kevin Holton*

Tentacles curling up around the hull,
Breaking a naval fleet, ship by ship,
Makes me wonder what pleasure
Can be found in destruction.

Whale-eating, ocean-ruling,
Yet you devour my meager people.
What is man, that you should fear us?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Kevin Holton is a fiction writer and poet with a love for horror, science fiction, and all things dark. He has published over a dozen short stories, several poems, and a book review, with his work appearing in *Pleiades*, *TAB*, and numerous popular anthologies such as Sirens Call Publications' *Slaughter House: The Serial Killer Edition - Volume 3*. He is currently at work on his second novel.

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Spider, Spider *Denzell Cooper*

Spider, lonely spider on the wall,
Weaving your silver strands across the sun,
Waiting, waiting, patiently for flies to fall,
One by one.
Death: you amble-creep,
And grant each living corpse your poison sleep.

Born of darkness, dark wings blindly flit,
Caught in your silver strands across the sun,
Panic, panic, tight into your cloth she twists;
Her fate is spun.
Death: you skitter-slip,
And leer upon the morsel in your grip.

*Spider, spider,
Lick your lips,
Feast your thousand eyes.
Closer, closer,
See me squirm,
Take me by surprise.
Please, take me by surprise.*

From hidden glands her screaming fire leaps,
Burning your silver strands across the sun,
Biting, biting, tearing flesh with dagger teeth,
Then lifts her wings; is gone.
Dead: you falter-fall,
And land in smoke and ruin on the floor.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Denzell Cooper lives in Cornwall, UK. By day he works as a training consultant, while his evenings, weekends and late nights are dedicated to producing stories and poems that investigate the darker side of our world. His work has appeared in the anthology "Mental Ward: Echoes of the Past", Sirens Call Publications and Mad Scientist Journal, among others.

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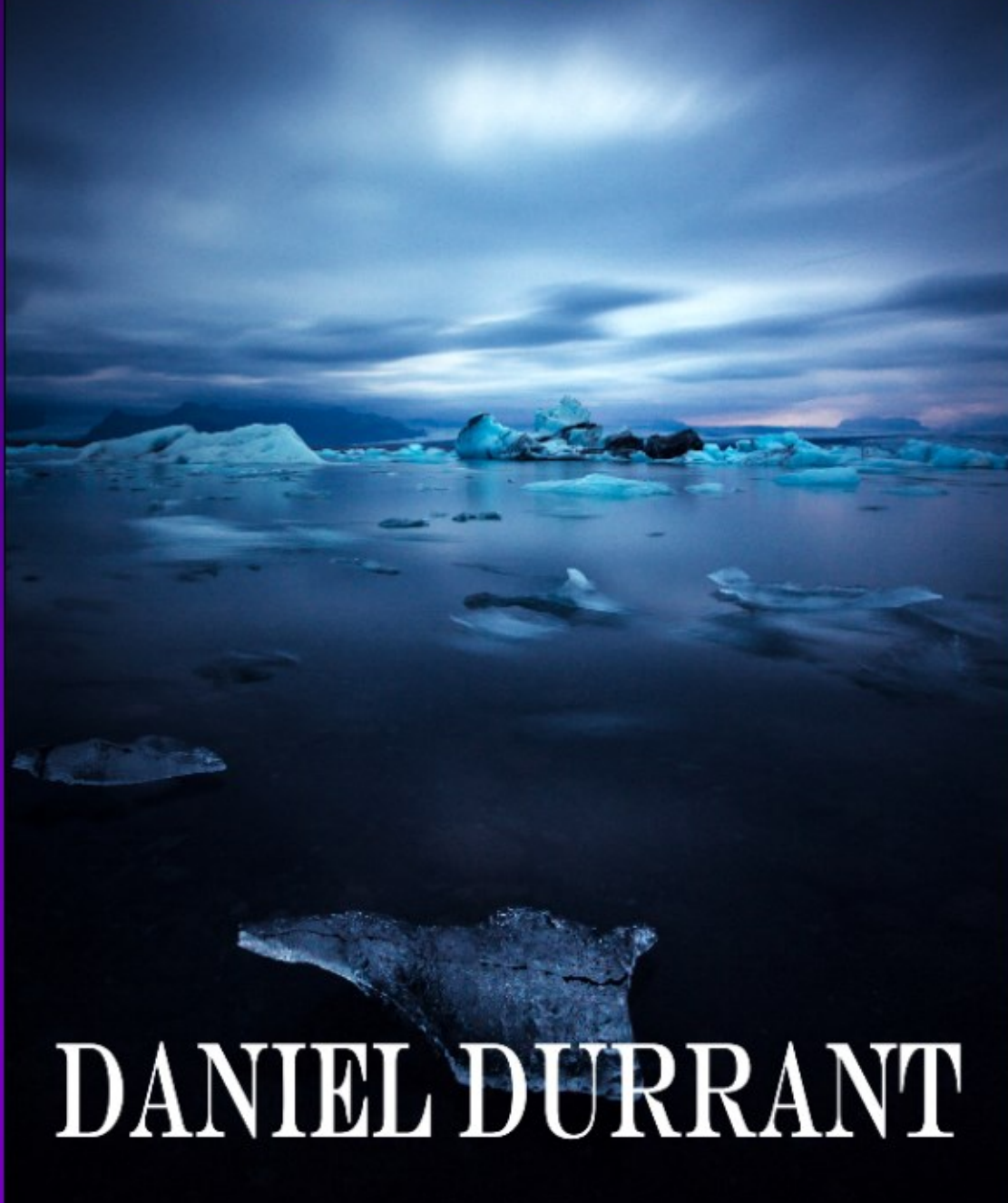
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Mirror Image *Lori R. Lopez*

The beast was born a mere splinter
Fractured off a shattered looking-glass.
It grew from shard to handmirror,
Reflecting the zits and hairs and warts
On the aspects of viewers who held it
To inspect themselves for flaws
And discovered many more defects
Than were noticed the day before —
Becoming hideous in their own eyes.

The creature enlarged to the size of
A dresser mirror, displaying the vanity
Of its preening owner, presenting a jaded
Image increasingly distorted and grotesque;
Sprouting humps and spots in the worst of
Places, fashioning a monster that only the
Woman could behold, but that she would
Physically turn into, transformed by
An attitude of self-hate and loathing.

Then the mirror moved on to its next
Shape, a tall narrow full-length model
Attached to a closet door, where a female
Would stand in profile and squint at the
Magnified and overly exaggerated fun-house
'Dementions' of her fanny, which seemed
Bigger and bigger with every outfit tested;
At last ballooning to a blimpish eyesore
Of a posterior, jutting from a slender frame.

Chortling darkly, the sinister glass gremlin
Shifted to coat the sides of a dance studio,
Where slim ballerinas pranced and twirled
Or posed with feet in the air, always noting the
Reflections, examining their style to check for
Lines and flow, the perfect extremes of grace
And poise, the purest form; that delicate
Swan-like distinction between beautiful and
Ugly, judged by a harsh set of standards.

The goblin showed them atrocities, a garish
Spectacle in which dainty pirouettes were spun
So fast the dancers twirled to mere stick figures
Honed down as if by a mechanical grinder.
And leaps landed on the feet of frogs, throats
Baggy and croaking, eyes bulbously flitting,
While tongues unreeled to snatch a passing fly.
A dipping bow would tip to a handstand,
Then a series of goofy acrobatic cartwheels ...

Followed by rolls and tucks and tumbles,
Rendering the ballet troupe into a goggle
Of strident blatting honkers that flocked
With the dignity of geese to caper clownishly
And then contort, stretched until their limbs
Were spaghetti, their heads huge in comparison,
Bodies rotund like pears, out of all proportion!
A puddle of silvery spite, the creep would infect
A building's exterior and mock the world going by.

The menace bounced their insecurities back
In their faces, exemplifying the deepest horrors
And most critical versions of themselves imagined,
Warping their scrutiny to manifest the visions they
Most reviled. And thus the abomination remained
Along a well-traveled street visited by countless
Numbers of the human population, planting seeds,
Cultivating monsters. But the broken mirror's bad luck
Wore off in seven years; cracking, the goblin split
apart.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Lori R. Lopez is the author of CHOCOLATE-COVERED EYES, AN ILL WIND BLOWS, THE MACABRE MIND OF LORI R. LOPEZ, DANCE OF THE CHUPACABRAS, OUT-OF-MIND EXPERIENCES, THE FAIRY FLY, MONSTROSITIES, JUGULAR and more. A resident of Southern California, she pens a column of dark verse and is also an artist, designing her own book covers and illustrations

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Sanatorium, mental ward, psychiatric hospital - they're all the same. Places where the infirm, the crazy, and the certifiable go for treatment... Or what passes for 'treatment'.



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An Interview with Artist Michael Locascio

Sirens Call Publications has been featuring artwork by Michael Locascio, owner and artist at Dellamorte & Co. throughout this issue. So we decided to sit down with him and ask him a few questions. But before we get to that, let's take a moment to get better acquainted with him...

Michael Locascio began sculpting as an apprentice at a bronze monument studio in the Cathedral of St John the Divine in NYC. He was classically trained and continued working there while attending NYU. After graduating, Michael took a position sculpting action figures and collectables at MacFarlane Toys, later going freelance and working for various companies including DC Comics. Several years ago he began a side company of dark art and home décor, called Dellamorte & Co.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Michael! What mediums do you work in? Is there a medium that you've always wanted to try but just haven't gotten around to yet?

Michael Locascio: I started out working in oil based clay and terracotta. When I began working in toys and collectables, I had to switch to harder waxes, since the pieces were smaller and highly detailed. For fun I experimented with mixed media pieces, using bones and wood or metal found objects. It is a very different technique from modeling in clay from scratch, but something I wanted to try out.

SCP: What are some of your main influences?

ML: A watershed moment for me was visiting Italy when I was a teenager and viewing the renaissance sculptures in person. From Donatello to Bernini, that experience got me energized to pursue art seriously. I had the privilege of returning in college through my apprenticeship and I spent a summer with an apartment and studio in Florence. I was able to immerse myself in art history and travel to many cities and towns.

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

ML: Sculpting for commission commercially, I was lucky to work with some artists who I admired a lot, like Alex Ross and Brian Bolland, and on properties I enjoyed, like Neil Gaiman's Sandman and the video games World of Warcraft and Resident Evil. Working conventions now with Dellamorte, I've been able to get to know new artists, and I am currently collaborating with Abigail Larson and Fyodor Pavlov on some projects.

SCP: What do you do when a piece isn't coming together in reality the same way it does in your head?

ML: It is often the case that one's imagination is more vivid than what can be created. What I find works best is to set something aside and look for inspiration - either through reference material or just something to get the creative juices flowing again. I also have some trusted friends who I can show my progress to and get some feedback.

SCP: As writers, we sometimes suffer from 'writer's block'; is there something similar to that in the artist world? If so, do you ever suffer from it? How do you combat it?

ML: In some respects working on commission is easier, since there are deadlines and art directors monitoring your progress, you usually have a clear-cut design to work from with reference. It is less straightforward when I am working for myself, since I need to be self-motivated, and I am fully responsible for the piece from concept to finished details. I tend to keep multiple projects going at the same time so I can switch off and revisit them with fresh eyes. I also keep a list of new ideas, so when I have free time or I feel stuck on a piece, I can try something new.



SCP: Where do you find your inspiration?

ML: I draw a lot of my inspiration from mythology and legends, as well as other literary sources. After many years of working from strict reference on licensed properties, it is liberating to create pieces according to my own whims. I've always been drawn to dark themes and there is definitely an element of the gothic in my work. I also visit museums and galleries when I can, and I am always looking at art and photography online.

SCP: What influences your work?

ML: I try to balance the macabre or fantastical elements in my art with my classical sensibilities. When I was younger of course I was influenced by comic book and fantasy art, then as I matured I focused on fine art and the old masters. It came around full circle in my years making collectables for comics, video games, and movies. I think the pieces I make for Dellamorte & Co. speak to both traditions.

SCP: What is your favourite piece that you've completed? Why is it your favourite?

ML: I'm fond of two of my more recent pieces- a statue of Cthulhu and one of Titania, the Fairy Queen. They are both intricately detailed and represent literary works, but quite different in subject matter since one is an elegant female nude and the other a tentacled monster. I really enjoy the freedom in my work to create such varied projects.

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

ML: At some point I would like to work on a very large piece- I started my sculpting career in a bronze monument studio and it would be great to go back to that kind of work.

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

ML: It's difficult to say since I appreciate so many different artists, but some of Bernini's pieces, like the Apollo and Daphne really blew me away seeing them in person.

Thank you Michael for taking the time to answer our questions and for allowing us to feature your work in this issue.



One Photograph: Two Points of View



Globbies *Nina D'Arcangela*

When they first started to appear, we had no idea where they'd come from, only that they seemed to be everywhere. A novelty pet, their small round bodies looked like nothing more than a cleverly disguised ball covered in rubbery grey-speckled skin. The five-footed evolution was miraculous; they were damn near impossible to knock over. The single ocher colored eye atop the head was a little disturbing, but the more you played with one, the more endearing it became.

Like every other household, we had them – one for each of the kids, plus a mommy and daddy so their 'Globbies' wouldn't be frightened. We ended up with six of the little critters roaming the house. Just like puppies, we made sure the children put them in a box at night, and they seemed content enough to snuggle into one large ball with six eyes that stared out of their make-shift home. I'll admit, after tucking the kids in, it was a bit disconcerting to glance into the box and watch as all six eyes rotated as one. They seemed to watch every move as if waiting for something.

After a few weeks, we noticed the children were becoming more listless. They had small nip marks on their hands and ankles but swore nothing bit them. Turning off the light one night, I saw nine eyes in the box as they rotated to watch me. I strolled to the back deck to ask my wife if she'd gotten more when I noticed the sand, it was puckered with hundreds of holes; and more were forming as a new Globbie popped out of each crater. I later found out my wife was one of the first to succumb to the neurotoxin they produced. By the time word spread, global domination was imminent.

The Event *Julianne Snow*

They came from the sea, leaving evidence of their arrival in the sand. Millions, perhaps even billions of them in an organized display of power and existence across the beaches of the world. At first no one truly understood why they chose to reveal themselves to the human world, their existence having been so well hidden in the depths of the oceans. But nevertheless, they came, dragging their scaly tails, and smiling through their reptilian-like mouths. Their grasp of our languages was astounding, further evidence they had been planning their relocation for quite some time. We had no real idea what their agenda was, but in time it all became very clear.

Governments gathered to discuss the event—each of them worried about what a collective show of force would do to their popularity in the polls. So far the veritable army hadn't displayed any aggression, only asking for equal rights as a sentient race on the planet from the shanty towns that had been hastily built to house them. Pro-inclusion groups sprung up like weeds, picketing the steps of all the major governments, demanding those rights be granted. How could they have known? How could any of us have known?

New laws and charters were drawn up, public opinion amounting to more than common sense. They were not deemed a threat by the scientists and consultants at the UN, so it only seemed fair as the reams of information flowed freely between us and them. They helped us to understand the sea better than ever before. But with it came a hefty price. Only a few years after they walked out of the water, they'd found a way to turn the tables, enslaving us. Now we serve them. And when our bodies cannot work any longer, we become dinner.

From the Deep *Laura Jamez*

It didn't know what had happened. One minute it was relaxing on a rock beneath a sun filled sky, the next it had woken in a crate far too small for its body. Trying to move was pointless, the walls pinning its tentacles to its body left little room to manoeuvre. The crate moved with the current beneath the sea reminding it where it was, where it belonged; it had been a mistake to surface, the land walkers didn't know that it meant no harm.

Without warning the crate began to tremble as it was buffeted from beneath, the seabed alive with tremors. A large fissure opened below the crate blasting out hot air, which, mixed with the water, caused bubbles of heat to hit all sides of the crate disintegrating it within minutes.

The creature stretched out its ten tentacles and gently rolled in the heated water, relishing its freedom. Joy filled its soul as it swam through the water, neatly dodging the blasts of bubbles coming up from the seabed. Crashing through the surface it bobbed amongst the powerful waves pondering its next move. It spotted a large fishing vessel being buffed from all sides and moved through the surface towards it.

They thought it a monster? Well it would show them what a true monster was.

It cut through the waves like butter, approaching the vessel from the port side and bobbed along-side it, latching on with its tentacles. Within moments it had pulled its body level with the deck and watched as the land walkers shouted instructions at each other, trying to stop their precious cargo from being swept overboard.

It slithered over the deck reaching out to grab the nearest one, his screams drowned out by the sound of crashing waves all around. It crushed its prey, feeling the flesh burst, relishing the sound of crunching bone, before tossing the dead husk over board.

The water on deck allowed it to move with speed and soon it caught more crew members. It took it's time killing and when its work was done, it worked on crushing the boat until nothing was left.

Satisfied with the destruction it had caused, it sunk slowly beneath the water dancing through the turmoil of broken wood to the calmer currents below.

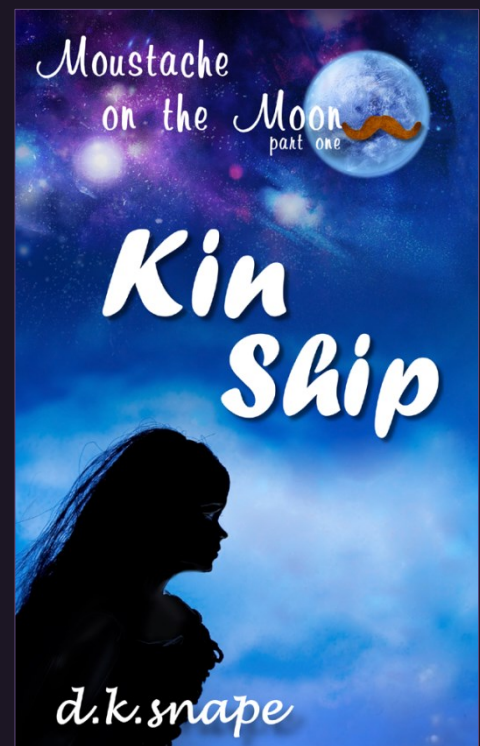
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Laura Jamez, a mother of two from Dunfermline in Scotland, has been obsessed with horror from an early age. She is currently involved in producing an anthology of horror tales in time for Halloween. One of Laura's aims for 2014 is to appear in every issue of The Sirens Call: halfway and still on target.

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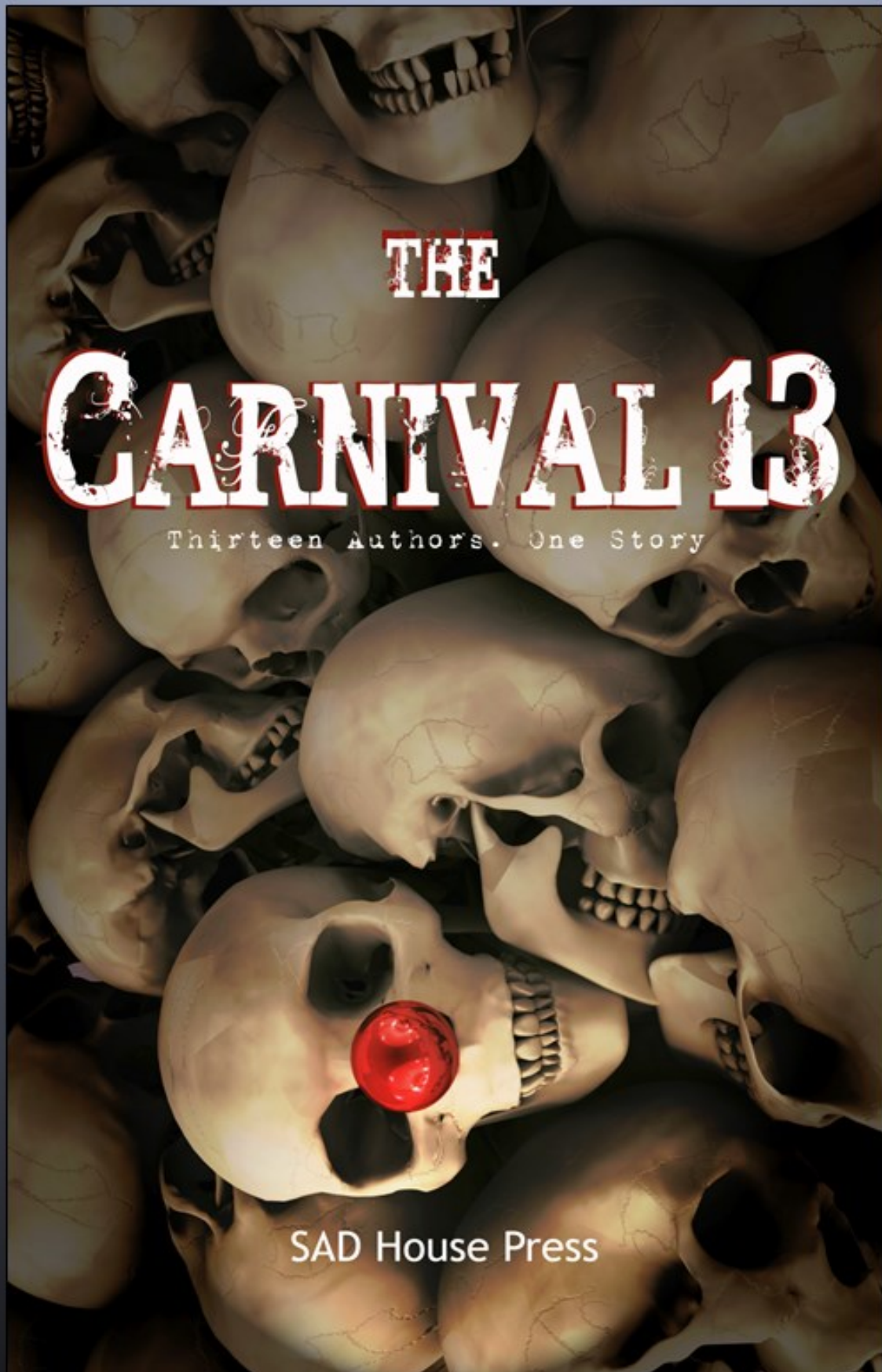
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Kin Ship: Moustache on the Moon – Part One *d.k.snape*

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Night of the Deer Woman *Maynard Blackoak*

It began as a typical evening, combing my thoughts for an exciting activity to occupy the approaching night. Living far removed from the nearest city, a long drive held no appeal to me. Television only offered a mundane passage of time, not at all the excitement my spirit craved. No! I needed exhilaration. I needed to experience the sudden rush of adrenaline. I needed to make a trip to the one place all the locals feared and avoided after the setting of the sun. I needed to set foot on the hostile grounds of Mount Pleasant Cemetery or Mount Hell, as some had come to refer to it.

Situated along a mostly forgotten, dirt road in a heavily wooded and largely unpopulated section of Pawnee County, Mount Pleasant was the final resting place of many early settlers of the area who had braved the harsh conditions existing in the untamed wilderness to carve out a life for themselves. The first aspect that strikes visitors upon entering its smallish grounds are the many diminutive crosses interspersed amid the larger gravestones, commemorating the final resting place of infants whose meager immune systems had been unable to combat the inhospitable ravages of disease and extreme weather. Their presence, though eerie and grim, filled the heart with a deep, abiding sadness, not only for the life that had been taken away before given a chance to live, but also for the heartbroken parents whose expectations of a blessed event had been dashed upon the whims of a cruel reality.

Once the eyes are able to see beyond the interred infants, the next thing that casts a macabre specter is the neglected state of the cemetery itself. Broken and overturned tombstones, many thickets of weeds, of such height and thickness, as to render each step blind and perilous, and piles of cow manure were left to bear witness to the years of abandonment that had led to Mount Pleasant's current state of dilapidation. Overall, it had become a sad testimonial of those brave souls who had managed to overcome great odds, conquering an unforgiving land.

My plans set in my mind; it was time to persuade others to participate in my quest for adventure. My girlfriend, Gaynor, had been easily sold on the idea, while it had taken a great deal of cajoling to convince Ned and Christy to join us. So it was that four intrepid souls, or should I say, two intrepid and two less than enthusiastic souls, ventured out into the utter darkness of the night to tempt fate and chance the angry spirits of Mount Pleasant Cemetery. As we began our journey, not one of us held even an inkling as to the horror that lurked in the dense woods surrounding the creepy graveyard that night.

Approximately one quarter mile from the cemetery, we encountered an elm tree that had toppled onto the road. Needing to clear the road before the journey to the cemetery could be continued I exited the car and examined the downed tree with a studious gaze. Its trunk, having apparently snapped just above the ground, did not seem out of the ordinary. However, its battered condition was. Its dense, thick limbs appeared to have been pulverized into splinters by something extremely powerful. Off to one side, there was a circle with a strange symbol in the middle of it, both seemingly carefully arranged in branches. In my mind, I believed the bizarre sight to be a prank by high school teens hoping to add fuel to the legend of Mount Pleasant Cemetery. Inside my soul, a little voice screamed the circle and symbol to be some manner of warning.

The road cleared, we finished the short drive to the cemetery. Though I was certain it was imagined, the darkness seemed much deeper and more foreboding, as we approached. All along the dirt road, we had heard the hoots of owls and the screeches of red-tailed hawks flying in the night in search of a meal. The nearer we came to the tombs, however, the less the sounds of wildlife were heard. Upon arriving at a gap in the barbwire fence that surrounded the graveyard, an eerie stillness permeated the dense air, invoking a sensation of dread that gripped each of us in its frigid and clammy grasp.

Passing through the spot where the old and rusted barbwire had snapped years before, we stepped inside the ominous confines of the derelict cemetery, each of us reflecting a different level of fear in our facades. The first sight we observed were three tiny crosses under an old cedar tree, marking the graves of infants that had died shortly after birth. After taking several moments of respectful silence, we pressed on deeper inside the cemetery.

The waxing moon was near to full and bathed the decrepit tombs in a pale yellow glow. We had made our way to the center of the cemetery when, quite abruptly and for no apparent reason, a moderate sized tree toppled, landing with a thud, breaking its limbs and branches, and scattering their fractured remnants over several graves. I studied the stump of the fallen tree, examining it with an intense stare, thoroughly scrutinizing it for an explanation. Much to Christie's dismay, Ned began walking toward the area where the tree came to rest. Gaynor, sensing a hostile presence lurking nearby, began urging us to be cautious and vigilant.

"Dammit, Ned!" Christie shouted with an agitated comportment, noting that Ned had refused to heed the warning. "I know you heard Gaynor. So quit being an ass, and get back here with the rest of us."

As Gaynor and I moved near Christie, I called out to Ned. "Come on back, Ned. Gaynor is usually spot on with this type of stuff. She has some kind of paranormal radar that picks up on weird shit."

"Just a sec, Jake. I just want to take a look to see if I can tell what made that tree fall," Ned replied with a modicum of worry showing in his voice.

Arriving at the scene of the toppled tree, he inspected it for a few seconds. "There's some deep hoof prints embedded in the tree. Something strong and heavy must have kicked it over."

Just then, the sound of brush and leaves rustling in the woods caught their attention. Ned, his face alive with fear, turned and began returning to the rest of us. Before he had taken his third step, a figure, cloaked in the shadows of the night, emerged from the trees. Gaynor, Christie and I, startled by the unexpected appearance, took a few backward steps. Ned turned his vision toward the figure, and stood gazing in a near enchanted state.

"Relax," he instructed us, keeping his eyes fixated on the strange form, "It's just an Indian girl."

"An Indian girl?" Gaynor, Christie and I queried almost simultaneously in puzzled voices.

"Not just any Indian girl," Ned stated with desire ringing in his tone. "She's hot. I mean smokin' hot. This chick has it all in all the right places."

"Excuse me, Ned," Christie shouted in an icy tone that sent shivers hurtling down my spine, even though I was not the object of her ire.

"Chill out, Christie. It's not like I gave you a ring or a promise of marriage," Ned responded in a snide manner. "Besides, I'm just looking...and well, maybe drooling a little."

Gaynor flashed a castigating stare in his direction. "You're disgusting, Ned."

Abruptly, the girl stepped out of the shadows, and into the illumination of the moon. She was indeed, just as Ned had spoken of her. Her skin was smooth and golden brown. The only article of clothing she wore was a buckskin skirt that covered her from the waist down. Despite my best efforts, I could not help, but to gape upon her unearthly beauty and pert breasts. I felt myself being drawn to her, such as if an unknown force compelled me to know the touch of her flesh. Then she turned her head slightly, allowing the moon's light to catch her eyes. A yellow glow flowed from her orbs, taking me aback, and breaking the enchantment in which her beauty held me.

With a tantalizing gesture of her hand, she motioned for Ned to come to her. His head, at first turned toward Christie, cast a befuddled stare, such as if caught in the designs of an inner quandary. Gradually, his eyes returned to the beautiful Indian girl. His gaze fixed upon her in a near hypnotic manner. As if persuaded by a mesmerizing and uncontrollable force emanating from a deep-rooted desire, his feet began carrying him toward her in slow, yet deliberate footfalls. Once he had neared her, she reached out, and taking him by the hand, led him into the woods.

Distraught and heartbroken, poignant tears began trickling down Christie's cheeks. "How could he do this to me?"

Gaynor slipped a compassionate arm around her, offering a sympathetic embrace. "To Hell with Ned. You're better off without him. He's just a pig."

"Like all men can be, including you mister," she added, glaring at me with a spiteful expression.

"Don't lump me in with Ned. I didn't do anything," I protested through a perturbed expression.

"Yes, you did!" Gaynor exclaimed, as her spitfire temper began to surface. "I saw you gawking at her like some love sick puppy."

I opened my mouth to argue, but held my tongue. She had spoken truthfully. I had indeed gawked at the lovely, Indian girl; even though I had struggled against doing so with every fiber of my being. There was just something in her presence that had captivated me, preventing me from turning my gaze away from her that is until I observed the unnatural, yellow glow in her eyes.

"Honestly, Jake. You men are all alike. Show them a pretty, young girl and a pair of naked breasts, and they can't see anything else."

I gathered my thoughts to deliver a witty retort, but before I could muster a response, Ned exited the woods, running at full speed with a horrified demeanor and shouting in a terrified voice. "Oh God! Oh God! Oh God! She's not human."

As he ran through the tombs toward us, the Indian girl leaped from the woods, bounding high into the air, passing in front of the nearly full moon. The illuminating rays framed her body for a brief instant, bringing to light an incredible truth that was as graceful as it was horrific; below the waist, the Indian girl appeared as a deer, albeit with only two limbs. Her flight through the air was as smooth and elegant as it was deadly. The hooves at the end of her powerful legs struck Ned in the back, as he fled, sending him tumbling to the ground.

"Please...Oh God...Please no...Don't hurt me," he beseeched the girl with his hands pressed together in supplication, as her leg poised to stomp him.

An amiable grin crept along the contours of her lips, giving the impression for a brief instant that she would spare him any harm. Then her faced suddenly waxed with rage, such as if a bitter memory had surfaced in her thoughts. Her leg came down, driving its hoof deep into his face. The grisly sound of bones cracking and the gruesome sight of blood spraying filled our visages with revulsion and our thoughts with terror.

"I know about this Deer Woman," Gaynor offered, turning her eyes away from the grotesque sight of Ned's battered and bloodied face. "I've heard the old legend, of an Indian maiden that had been taken into the woods, raped, beaten and then left to die alone, many times since I was a child."

I turned toward Gaynor, wanting to know more of the old legend, but the immediate danger dissuaded me from seeking details. Realizing there was nothing that could be done for Ned; I grabbed the two women by their hands, and began escorting them out of the unfriendly confines of Mount Pleasant Cemetery as quickly as possible, while Deer Woman finished her vicious assault on Ned.

Along the way, Gaynor finished recounting all she knew of the Deer Woman legend. "The Indian maiden died, surrounded by the deer of the forest. The man who had brutalized her had been discovered and brought before the tribal elders. Inexplicably, they refused to punish him. This angered the Indian maiden, preventing her from finding peace in the afterlife. She returned to the earth as Deer Woman, a beautiful and alluring woman from the waist up and a deer below the waist. She lures weak men into the woods with the promise of sex, and kills them by stomping them to death with her powerful legs and hooves."

"So if I refuse to follow her into the woods, she won't kill me?" I inquired, hoping I understood the legend correctly.

"I'm not sure," Gaynor replied, turning a fretful expression toward me. "Regardless, I don't want to chance it."

Nearing the car, the sound of thundering hooves, pounding the ground with their heavy footfalls, caught our attention. Hastily we jumped into the vehicle and began to drive away. Looking out the back window, I could see the dark form and the glowing yellow eyes of Deer Woman giving chase. Closer and closer she came, closing the gap between us with every lofty bound. I urged Gaynor to accelerate, hoping that the car was capable of a higher rate of speed than the powerful legs of Deer Woman.

Despite driving at an increased velocity that made it difficult for Gaynor to keep the car from fishtailing off the loose dirt road, the gap continued to lessen. I believed before too much longer, she would be upon us, wreaking havoc with her hooves. We passed the bizarre circle and symbol constructed of broken branches with Deer Woman only a few feet behind us. I cringed, and braced myself for the impact of those mighty hooves crashing through the top of the car. After several, agonizing seconds of anticipating an assault, I was bewildered when it never transpired. Craning my head around, I noticed Deer Woman standing on the other side of the circle, glaring in our direction with those yellow, glowing eyes. It was then that I realized the smashed tree in the road and strange circle with the symbol inside it had been her warning to anyone who dared to consider entering her domain. Once we had exited her territory, she had felt no need to continue her pursuit.

In the weeks and months that followed, I had heard of other bizarre incidents that might or might not have been an encounter with Deer Woman. In all honesty, I had never given much attention to the idle stories of strange creatures lurking about in the area, believing them to be merely campfire fodder, fabrications whose only merit was to frighten the gullible on an eerily dark night in the woods. Since my own encounter with the unknown, I have become more attentive to the old legends and tall tales of the elders, for I now believe behind every legend there is at least a shred of truth and in every tall tale, there existed a very real brush with the inexplicable. The lasting remembrance of my lone experience with Deer Woman has become the embodiment of that belief.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Maynard Blackoak is a freelance writer living in the backwoods of Pawnee County, Oklahoma. He draws upon the sights of neglect and unusual sounds around him for inspiration. A bit of a recluse, he can often be found strolling through an old, forgotten cemetery or in the woods among the twisted black oaks and native elms under the light of the moon.

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The Start of Summer Vacation *Gloria Bobrowicz*

It was the middle of June and tomorrow was his last day of school as a junior, completing his third year at Lincoln High. Jimmy was excited final exams were over and his marks were excellent. He was hoping to get into his college of choice on a football scholarship, but just in case that didn't work out for him, he wanted to ensure his grades were very good. He went to sleep that night excited about all the fun things he and his friends planned for their last day of school and the hiking trip with his girl afterward.

As Sandy was getting ready for bed, she thought about tomorrow and was excited about her last day of school. She couldn't believe how fast time flew; she'd just finished her sophomore year of high school. Having only moved here last September, she felt fortunate to have made some exceptionally good friends and to have been dating Jimmy for the last six months. She and her friends planned to skip fourth period, have an extra long lunch, and map out their summer shopping excursions. She was really looking forward to summer break. Jimmy was picking her up tomorrow morning. He'd recently got his license and arranged to borrow his mother's car for the day. The plan was to go for a hike after the last day of school.

Mrs. Martin, Sandy's mom, heard a car horn beep out front and looked out the screen door. "Sandy, haven't I taught you anything? Where are Jimmy's manners? He needs to come to the door and get you."

"Oh Mom, that's so old fashioned, nobody does that anymore," Sandy replied as she grabbed her purse.

"It wouldn't be if someone had taught that little shit some manners," Mrs. Martin mumbled. "What time are you going to be home tonight?"

"I'll be home by midnight, Mom. Love you," Sandy gave her mom a peck on the cheek before racing past her and out the door.

Sandy jumped into the car and gave Jimmy a big hug and kiss. "One more day and we've got the summer to ourselves."

"Speak for yourself," Jimmy replied. "I'm working at my dad's hardware store this summer. He said I need to start saving spending money for college. Dad said he'll pay for tuition, board and my meal plan, but I have to buy all the extras on my own."

"Oh poor Jimmy, my heart bleeds for you. That's more than fair. I've got to work my way through college and apply for student loans. My family can't afford to pay my way. Quit whining and drive us to school. It's our last day before summer vacation."

"You're right, Sandy, as usual. You sure do have a way of calling them as you see them. That's why I love you so much," Jimmy blew her a kiss.

Jimmy parked the car and walked Sandy to her homeroom. He said, "Have a great last day at school with your girlfriends. I'll meet you after school at the car and we'll go hiking like we planned, okay?"

"Thanks, you too Jimmy, see ya after school."

After school let out for the summer, Jimmy and Sandy met at the car and decided to stop at the grocery store to pick up some snacks for their hike in the nearby woods. They bought pretzels, potato chips, two submarine sandwiches and put them into the trunk. Sandy spied a cooler and asked Jimmy if he brought soda or water since he didn't pick up any at the store.

Jimmy looked around and quickly opened the cooler to show Sandy a six pack of beer.

"Jimmy, where the hell did you get that?" Sandy whispered.

"Don't worry about it; consider it part of our celebration hike to start our summer vacation," Jimmy whispered as he slammed the trunk closed.

They arrived at the spot they'd agreed upon and set out their picnic lunch. They each downed a couple of beers and started to catch a buzz. They left what they didn't eat on their blanket, put on their hiking boots and off they went. After hiking for a couple of hours they got pretty tired and Sandy wanted to stop and rest. Just as she sat down, she heard a noise in the bushes. "What's that?" she asked, more than a little worried.

"Probably some wild animal wanting to eat you my dear," Jimmy joked.

"That's not funny Jimmy," Sandy pouted.

As they rested they heard a low growl, then saw a set of yellow eyes watching them. Without a word, both teens scrambled to their feet and began to run.

As they ran, they tried to hold hands, but the brush was too thick. Jimmy pushed Sandy out in front of him and tried not to stumble over her as they flew through the woods. Whatever it was that chased them was making a hell of a racket, and gaining ground quickly. Turning around, Jimmy saw a massive wolf-like creature bearing down on them. It had the same yellow eyes they'd glanced through the brush, but also bore a set of enormous tusk-like teeth that resembled fanged incisors. It pounded the earth with its massive paws as it gained on them until he could feel the vibrations quake below his own feet. Those paws ended in wickedly sharp talons he hoped never to meet.

With his hand still on Sandy's back, he yelled at her not to look, to just keep running as fast as she could. She could hear the rasp in his voice that told her his asthma had begun to kick in.

"Jimmy Kendle, don't you dare quit on me. You hear me? You keep running too, no matter what!" She started to slow.

"No! Don't slow down, keep going," he wheezed.

When his hand left her back, she prayed he was digging in his pocket for an inhaler. "Jimmy, I hope to god you've got an inhaler on you," winded herself, it was all she could do to keep going.

"Jimmy?" No answer. "Jimmy!"

She heard barely a groan before the slamming of the creature's jaws. Terrified to stop, but unable to ignore what she'd heard, she turned just as the beast tossed Jimmy's body into the air and its powerful jaws sliced him in two.

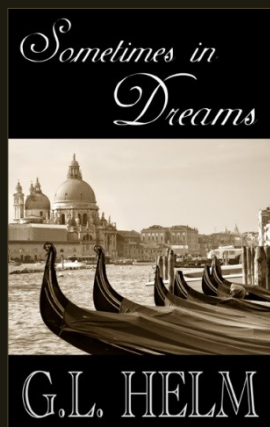
She turned away and vomited as the monster used its dew claw to scrape Jimmy off its incisor before it began to devour him. The sounds of tearing flesh and bone being crushed were too much for her; she began to run again, guilty she'd left Jimmy behind, but too frightened to give up her own life to help.

"Oh God, oh God, I can't believe this is happening. Don't look back, don't look back," she told herself as she started to feel she couldn't go on anymore. Sandy had to slow down or rest for just a moment, her lungs were on fire. She leaned against a tree and listened; nothing, no noise at all. It must have eaten Jimmy and forgotten about her. With a stifled cry, she thought, *if I'm really quiet maybe I'll make it out of these woods*. Sandy hid inside a bush and tried to slow her breathing. Her breath came in ragged, heaving gulps; she remained hidden for a long time. When she thought it was safe, she peered out then started to run again. Within minutes, something grabbed her hair and yanked backward. The last thing she saw were yellow eyes and the tusk-like teeth.

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

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G.L. Helm

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John Evers only wanted recognition... How could
he know evil was only a snapshot away?

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GREG MCWHORTER

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In the Clearing *Jon Olson*

George Sutherland followed Francine McKenna farther and farther into the forest. His priority, when he joined the Nova Scotia Bigfoot Hunters Society and agreed to join Francine on a short expedition, was to get in her pants and saw the expedition as good a chance as any. One tent for the two of them.

“Come on,” Francine said looking over her shoulder and smiling. “Pick up the pace back there.”

Her red hair was pulled back into a tight pony tail and although her cheeks were red from the excursion through the woods, George could still see her freckles. He couldn’t help but smile back.

“Easy for you to say,” George said adjusting his backpack straps. “I’m the one carrying all of the heavy shit.”

“I can give you the lighter one if that one is too heavy for you,” Francine said. “I bet the team would love to hear about that.”

George increased his speed, trying to catch her and looked up. Clouds were slowly covering the blue sky that had been present earlier in the morning when they first parked on the side of the logging road. Blue jays were chirping in the trees and suddenly flew out, catching George’s attention. He didn’t see the root catch his foot and he fell forward.

Francine laughed.

“Are you okay?”

“Fuck sakes,” George said, pushing himself off the ground. “Where is the rest of the team anyways?” He tried not to sound too annoyed.

“Matt and Ryder had to work and Beverly’s out of town visiting family. They’re going to regret not coming out on this one.”

“So exactly why are we out here? Why this particular area?”

Francine looked at him. “You mean besides living up to the NSBHS’s name?” She took out her cellphone, opened some files and handed it to George. “An old friend of mine, Bryan who works as a harvester for Triple L Lumber, sent me these photographs.”

The first few photos George flipped through consisted of large footprints in the ground and the last few were shots of reddish-brown fur snagged on tree branches.

“Those pictures were taken by different employees all within this eighty hectare plot,” Francine said. “They all reported experiencing a strong, foul odor like a combination of a skunk and wet dog as well as hearing loud grunts and sticks banging against trees. All classic evidence of Bigfoot.”

George frowned. “I know that I’m still relatively new to the group but we get dozens of emails from people with pictures like this, claiming to have seen Bigfoot. What makes these more special or significant?”

“There’s also been some other strange things going on up here. If you scroll to the end of the photos, you’ll see one that’s not related to Sasquatch at all.”

There were four impressions in all, with two distinct prints. There was a smaller pair with what looked like three knuckles followed by a larger pair. The larger ones were further out to the sides and had small indentations that reminded George of bear claws.

“This area has also had a large number of people go missing in recent weeks,” Francine said. “So what do you think?”

“It kind of looks like whatever made these was running,” George said. He handed the phone back to Francine. “The way they are laid out reminds me of the way a gorilla runs.”

“Show me.”

George undid his backpack straps and slid them off of his shoulders.

“Like this.”

He squatted down and then pushed off with his knuckles, landing on his feet and repeated for a few feet so Francine could see what he meant.

She looked at the pictures, then at the slight impressions George had made in the ground and back to her phone.

“I can see it,” she said. “If we can find more evidence of this we may have something new for the cryptozoology books.”

George didn’t know what cryptozoology meant and he sure as hell didn’t believe in Bigfoot but seeing Francine excited and smiling at him helped him believe that he had a chance with her.

It was sore from the struggle its previous prey had put up.

It could still smell the thick, almost skunk-like scent of the Sasquatch it had just feasted on. Unable to see, it

relied on its sharp sense of smell to seek out prey and it was about to move on when it picked up on something else. The smell was faint, almost covered up by Sasquatch's, but it recognized it immediately.

Humans.

They trudged on, venturing deeper into the forest. The air was cool but humid as summer was refusing to hand its reigns over to autumn. There were still a few mosquitos buzzing around, with George occasionally swatting at them.

"I've always enjoyed the smells of the woods," Francine said. "It smells alive."

"The bugs have always kept me away from walking amongst the trees," George said. "Fucking things."

"They don't seem to be too bad now."

George realized that he hadn't heard the high-pitched buzzing in his ear for a while. It was then that he noticed that the birds didn't seem to be chirping either.

The woods seemed quiet.

They walked in silence and in the pit of his stomach, George thought it felt wrong. He opened his mouth to mention it but knew it could ruin his chances. The trees started to thin out, making walking easier. Eventually, they entered a clearing and were immediately hit by a strong stink.

"Holy shit, what the hell is that...?" George said covering his nose with his hand.

Francine gagged.

"It's kind of smells like a skunk," George said.

He looked at Francine and even though the smell was bothering her, she seemed excited by the prospect.

"Witnesses have reported Sasquatch having a skunk-like smell," she said.

"Or it could be a skunk."

"No, this is different. It's really thick and seems to have a wet dog scent to it."

Although he smelled it too, George shook his head. "To me it still smells like a skunk. Maybe a dead one but a skunk nonetheless."

"Let's go find the source," Francine said and took off into the clearing.

The clearing was roughly the size of a football field. An assortment of bushes had sprung up sporadically with a few small spruce trees here and there amongst the tall grass.

George started after her and immediately felt his body break out in goose bumps. He stopped and looked around. Something about the clearing made him feel very uneasy.

"Maybe we should..."

He was cut off by Francine yelling with excitement in her voice.

"Oh my God! George, get your ass over here! Hurry!"

She was standing near the far tree line, waving her arms frantically.

"Did you find the skunk?" George asked as he got closer to her.

Near the edge of the clearing was a body lying on its back, its arms jutting straight out to the side. It was covered in reddish-brown fur that fluttered in a gentle breeze except for the face which was clean shaven. The eyelids were open slightly but the eyes had rolled back into its head with a wide, flat nose sitting just below them. Its mouth was slightly agape, showing its yellowed teeth.

What was lying in front of them was the body of a Sasquatch.

It could tell it was getting closer; the human scent was everywhere and very faintly it could hear their voices. Its pace quickened.

"I don't fucking believe it," George said.

"Do you know what this means?" Francine asked. "Get the camera out."

"I still don't believe what I'm seeing."

"You can don't believe all you want later," Francine said slipping the backpack off of her shoulders. "Get the camera out and start shooting!"

George's eyes, and brain, were still trying to comprehend exactly what they had stumbled across. He slid the backpack off his shoulders, letting it fall to the ground.

"Hey, come on. Pay attention to what you're doing. I'm going to give the rest of the team a call." She took her cellphone out of her backpack and began dialing.

George squatted down and began unzipping his backpack, but didn't take his eyes off the body. It was well over nine feet and the beast's frame suggested that it was powerful.

His hands found the camera and he pulled it out. He turned it on, shifted his eyes from the body to the LCD screen and began taking pictures.

"Damn it," Francine said. "I can't get a signal here."

As they walked closer to the body, George zoomed in on the Sasquatch's arms and noticed a puncture wound on each one. The fur and skin seemed to have been almost pushed to the sides. A hole, roughly the diameter of a pencil penetrated through the tissue underneath.

"I really can't believe that this is lying right in front of us," Francine said. She knelt down beside the Sasquatch and held her hand out, hesitating to touch it. "This is incredible."

As he took a few more pictures, George noticed that ground around the body looked beaten down. A lot of the tall grass had been snapped, like it buckled underneath something heavy. There were a few clumps and many separate strands of the Sasquatch's fur scattered around the area.

To him, it looked like a fight had taken place.

"Why now?" George asked.

"What do you mean?"

George lowered the camera and looked at her.

"Why now? Why after all these years of no one being able to produce or find a body do we stumble across one in this clearing?"

"Someone had to find one," Francine said. "Why not us?" She took her backpack off and began rummaging through it.

"It doesn't look like it died from natural causes," George said. "So what killed it?"

It could tell it was near the clearing due to the trees' smells fading into nothing more than background scents. The Sasquatch odor was still there.

The humans' scents, however, were strong. A male and female, both of them nearby in the clearing.

Despite the meal it made out of the Sasquatch not too long ago, it was ravenous.

It entered the clearing.

George frowned. "Something isn't right. Would Bigfoot have had any natural predators?"

"I'm not really sure," Francine replied. "But, if I had to give an answer, I would say no."

"So, I'll ask again. What killed it?"

They both thought back to the strange tracks in the picture on Francine's phone.

"Do you think those tracks could've been made by whatever killed it?" Francine asked.

George opened his mouth to answer but saw Francine's eyes open wide in fear. Suddenly, something slammed into him and tackled him to the ground, landing on his stomach. George struggled to turn over but something stung him in the back. Within seconds something was in his bloodstream, paralyzing him.

Although he could not move, George's head remained facing Francine's direction.

The thing that tackled him was already making its way towards Francine. It was hairless and running just as he had acted out earlier: running on its knuckles with its fingers curled underneath, like a gorilla.

Francine screamed and ran. The creature, however, was too fast for its prey and tackled her to the ground. Two stingers shot out of its palms into Francine's back, just beneath her shoulder blades.

When she stopped moving, it turned its head to George.

There were no eyes; only nostrils constantly flaring and a mouth running vertically up its face. A large plate-like feature jutted out along its back, protecting most of the torso.

The creature began dragging her back to where George was lying. It released her and using the claws on its hands, cut into her forearm. George watched as it dug its hook-like teeth into her flesh and then the mouth opened, tearing tissue away from the bone. A penetrating sheath shot out of its mouth into the bone and as it began to ingest Francine's marrow, George met Francine's eyes one last time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jon Olson, when not working at his full time job as a Security Checkpoint Coordinator at the Halifax Robert L. Stanfield International Airport, is an author of horror and dark fiction. He is also a proud member of Pen of the Damned. He lives in Eastern Passage, Nova Scotia with his wife, daughter and four cats.

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Skin Catherine Connolly

Skin on skin, silky smooth in the dark. Tongue tips caress. She is blonde and lissom, picture perfect cliché who knows it, long legs scissored around him, as they begin their dance in the dark. They are faceless in the dim, in their nondescript room with instantly forgettable furniture, where before they were nameless – deliberately so. All the easier to walk away, after the event. Their slow build has become burn; the spark kindled from smoulder over the course of the night, as they toyed with it, passing it back and forth. Now they play upon each other. He kisses her neck; feels her pulse quicken slightly as she shifts to grant him access. Turning. Yielding. Fingers at his shoulders, signals signposting the way. She lets out a breath. Turns back toward him, tresses tickling his bare shoulder, as they, too, touch, tempt and tease. Her smile says she know how it will go; holds promise at its edges. It is in the curve of her raised eyebrow; the heat in her eye.

He knows how it will go, as he feels her heart beating faster beneath his palm and runs a finger across her lips. That they two will dance. In the dark. The nails curved slightly into his skin tell him so. He reaches for her, to catch her lips with his, to pull her closer in, though she is his already. This is how it will go.

He breathes her in, as his mouth touches hers; his tongue a taste test, getting the feel for her; of her. This is the moment. He senses the change as it happens; the realisation. Her fingers have found the spot – the one he took care to hide from her, until they lay in the dark. Until she could not see. Still, she has discovered as she explores – the puckered slough; the rough ridges behind his back - a harsh contrast to the skin surrounding it. The place it starts - the change - once it sets in. No hiding it from tentative touch. Now, hesitation sets in. The pause as she realises simple has departed and she is in the company of complex. Still, she reaches in again, for him, with which his appreciation for her grows. He thinks he likes her, which is helpful in the circumstances. He intends to know her better. All the way; in deep.

Now his kiss is harder, as he tells her, to stay still; his hands at her wrists, though she is pliant beneath him, the hold not strong. He breathes out; long steady breaths, into the mouth open below him, lips parted. Deep into the receptive throat - into the heart of her. She makes no sound as it happens. He knows she is not able. He has been here before. *This* is how it goes.

Sense loses itself amid sensation, as it happens; before she comes back to herself, stretching languorously. Satiated; not spent. Unlike the body slouched across her, which she moves to one side, seeking not to disturb, though she knows he will not stir. That is *not* how it goes.

She observes the dried husk before her. The desiccated remnants far removed from the humanoid shape she knew so well. Intimately once; each now dulled digit, cloaked in dusky powder, resembling dust. He will be missed; at least by her. This is her penance; dues paid, to that before the now. Homage to her then.

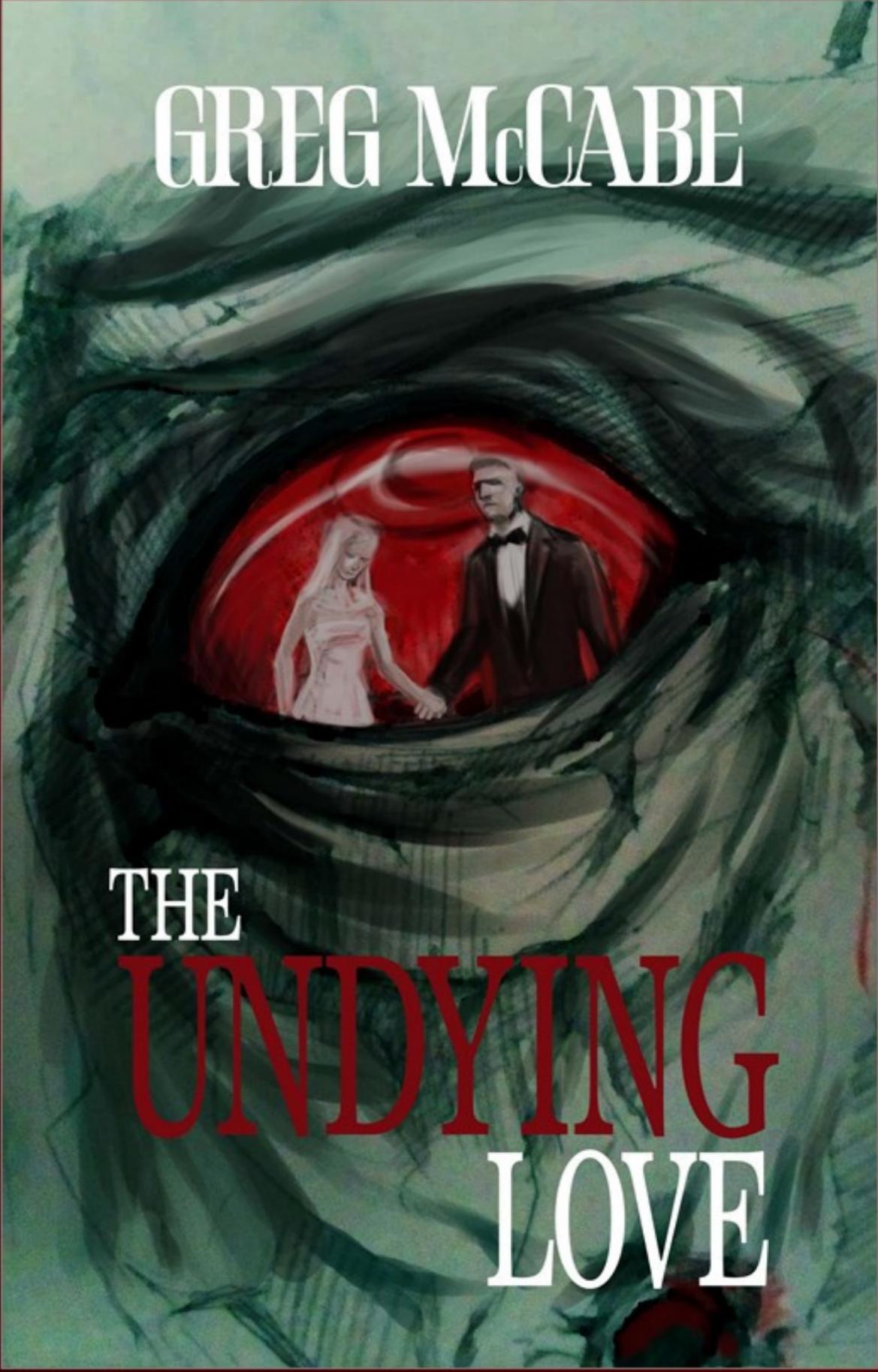
He crumbles easily; after, when she places her hands on him. Runs them over what was once the face and neck of a living counterpart. Flakes disperse across the sheets, coming to rest upon them. The body is as easily disposed of, with a series of caresses; a gentle touch. Little is left now of what once held form and feature. It takes but one large breath outward to drive the skin from where it lies; a parody of snowfall, across the empty room. She watches the dust motes fly, float, then settle, as they, too, end their dance. Takes a step forward, testing the balance; the new distribution of weight, to which she is not yet used. Skin from skin, in the dark.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Catherine Connolly resides in the North West of England amidst an ever increasing number of books and competing story ideas. She is a member of The Poised Pen writing group and contributor of flash fiction and poetry to their third anthology *Half Baked*. Her story *Journey's End* has recently been published at 1000 Words.

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GREG McCABE



THE
UNDYING
LOVE

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The Maiden and the Unicorn *Magenta Nero*

Sister Rita did not mind kneeling in a puddle as she scrubbed dirt from between the stones; the library was her favourite place. Large old volumes lined the wooden shelves. Their colourful silk covers and gold embossed spines glittered in the dim light. Old manuscripts of vellum lay in delicate curls behind locked cabinet doors. She wondered when she would be permitted to hold such treasures and pour over their ancient words.

On this fateful morning she had noticed for the first time a small door open at the rear of the library. She stood up slowly, her knees aching, drying her hands on her robe as she stared. The soft flickering glow of candles illuminated the tiny room. It was an alcove, narrow and low. Sister Rita hesitated but she couldn't resist the temptation, and she stepped inside.

A simple altar stood in the alcove. It was crowded with fresh flowers; an ornate brass tabernacle set with precious stones was placed in the centre. Behind the altar a painting hung on the wall. Within its gilded frame the Virgin Mary was depicted sitting under a tree, a strange white creature was sprawled at her feet; its head on her lap. The creature had a horse's body and a goat's head with a long single horn. The expression on the Virgin's face was one of sublime joy as she looked down at the beast, like a mother gazing upon her newborn. Sister Rita stared at the painting in disbelief. Why was this sacrilegious painting here? Was this some kind of pagan altar? And what sacred substance was contained in the tabernacle? Surely the consecrated Host would not be placed here, in this dark little room, before this diabolical image? Sister Rita took a step back, suddenly frightened. She would be severely punished for trespassing here. She wanted to hurry away but the image held her, mystified. The more she stared at it the more three dimensional it became, encompassing her until she felt she was standing within it. She could hear the rustle of a river nearby. Sunlight danced around her, glittering through the lush greenery. The Virgin Mary lifted her pristine gaze from the slumbering beast. She looked directly at Sister Rita and smiled. Sister Rita was blinded by a white hot flash and then she fainted.

For three days and nights after her vision, Sister Rita lay in the infirmary, feverish and delirious. Slipping in and out of vivid dreams, she was aware of an old crone keeping vigil beside her. Muttered prayers carried her through realms of peace and pain. Frequently she sat upright in terror and clutched for the crone's withered hands. Reassured by the coarse touch of crumpled skin, she fell back into her reverie. She knew the crone was Sister Anna. She could make out her tiny, bent frame, her bushy white eyebrows and the single yellow tooth in her ever smiling gums.

Slowly Sister Rita recovered, her fever passed and her appetite returned. In her ancient croaking voice, Sister Anna began to tell her a story.

"Many years ago, many, many years ago, you know I'm not good with dates!" the old woman chuckled and squeezed Sister Rita's hand. "One day, not far from here, a young girl was picking olives when the Holy Virgin Mother appeared to her. The Divine Mother said, 'Follow the river to its heart in the mountains. There you will find a beautiful white beast. If you are pure of body and soul the beast will not harm you. It will lay its head in your lap and allow you to take a tiny piece of its horn.'"

Sister Anna paused for a long time and they both sat in comfortable silence. Sister Rita began to fall asleep when suddenly Sister Anna resumed talking.

"The young girl was successful at her task. The horn of the creature is made from alicorn, it cures all evil, all disease. The girl returned to her village and devoted her life to serving the Holy Virgin Mother and to protecting the secret of the Unicorn. Aided by the alicorn she became a great healer. Pilgrims from all over Italy, from France, Spain, even Germany, came to receive her blessing. Her name was Saint Alissa, the patron saint of our order. She was the first maiden to charm the Unicorn. The truth is lost in legend and folklore now. Nobody believes alicorn exists, let alone that we possess it within our walls. The sacred alicorn is very powerful and priceless. We must never reveal our true purpose, our true ministry. The Unicorn may remain silent for many years, disappearing into fantasy. But always he returns, a sign is given, he beckons a maiden. I was the last. You are the next. When you are called, you must answer."

Sister Anna chuckled with delight. Sister Rita was uncertain that she had understood correctly or even if the conversation had taken place at all. Her head was throbbing. Once again she relived that electrifying moment when the Holy Virgin Mother looked directly at her, the impact of that exquisite, terrifying smile. She closed her eyes and hoped for peaceful sleep.

"Quiet!" shouted the Abbess and the gaggle of excited nuns fell silent. "Well Sister Rita, it seems a holy mission has been given unto you," she smirked. "Through your suffering and devotion to our Holy Virgin Mother you have

cleansed the stains on your pitiful soul. Travel safely, Sister. Be brave. Remember even our Lord Jesus Christ stumbled in the wilderness, taunted by the Devil, but the almighty Holy Spirit within fuelled His divine purpose. May the Unicorn look favourably upon you. May you deliver to us the sacred alicorn."

The Abbess resumed her seat at the head of the table and poured herself a full goblet of wine.

"Amen," chimed the nuns then they dove into the fine banquet spread before them.

All were relieved of duties this evening and services were postponed. Sister Rita's departure marked a rare and holy occasion.

At sunset Sister Rita was escorted to the convent gates. The rowdy gang of nuns sobbed and wailed, rejoicing and lamenting at the same time. To be sent to charm the Unicorn was a perilous journey from which only the most pious returned. Each nun hugged her profusely and wished her farewell. Even the Abbess, the wine getting the better of her, gave her a stiff squeeze.

"Go child! Go now!" urged Sister Anna as Sister Rita clung to her.

Sister Rita was pushed out of the gates and down the narrow dirt road. The nuns began to sing an ancient hymn. Sister Rita didn't dare glance back as the gentle voices of her sisters faded in the twilight. The undulating hills in the distance were bleeding hues of orange and purple.

After several days walk Sister Rita reached the base of the mountains. She set up camp in the foothills, stopping for a while to gather her thoughts. The nuns had packed her ample supplies and the commoners she met along the way were eager to show their hospitality to the solitary, young nun. She looked up at the slopes of rubble looming before her and she knew her journey would become more arduous now. Kneeling all day and late into the night, she prayed for courage and direction. Nearby she found a river, frothing with fresh, clean water, and she remembered Sister Anna's words... *follow the river to its heart in the mountains.*

One morning while bathing she realised it was the first time she had stood naked and free in open air. The cool water beaded off her skin, the sunlight blessed it with warmth, the breeze touched her without recoiling. She examined herself in amazement, her nipples pert and pink, the fur of her sex thick and dark. Her body had metamorphosed beneath her heavy robes without acknowledgement. She rubbed the closely cropped stubble on her scalp, the first thing they had done was cut off her long, thick hair. She began to weep, first in grief and then with elation. She cried for the little orphaned girl who had been sold to the convent and she cried for the young woman who had been released. Cast out from the only home she knew, into a foreign wild land, with an impossible task to fulfil. The idea that she need never return to the convent sparked like a tiny diamond, no one would ever know what had become of her.

She dared to walk naked, feeling mischievous, and enjoyed her blissful solitude. She sat motionless, watching birds and mimicking their song. Hours were spent weaving flowers into wreaths that crowned her head. She took delight in the dirt that smudged her skin and caked under her fingernails. In the evening she was building herself a small fire when she was startled by trickles of blood crawling down her inner thighs. She had begun menstruating. She did the unspeakable and touched herself, the blood on her fingertip was dark crimson. A red trail appeared as she dragged her fingertip along her arm. She dipped into the innermost blood again and again until her arms, legs, and torso were covered in lines, dots and spirals. She began to dance around the fire, ecstatic, and the flames grew in response. She danced until she dropped. Her fingers seeped into herself, the sensation of wet warmth overwhelming, her body shuddered and curled. She lay on the grass looking up at the first stars to break through the dark and everything was bathed in heavenly music. She heard it in the flickering flames, in the whispering trees, and deep inside her, from the source of life.

In the morning she woke with vague memory of the night before. Had she been bewitched? Had she gone insane? Blinking into the stark morning blue, the words of the Abbess echoed in her head *Remember even our Lord Jesus Christ stumbled in the wilderness, taunted by the Devil.*

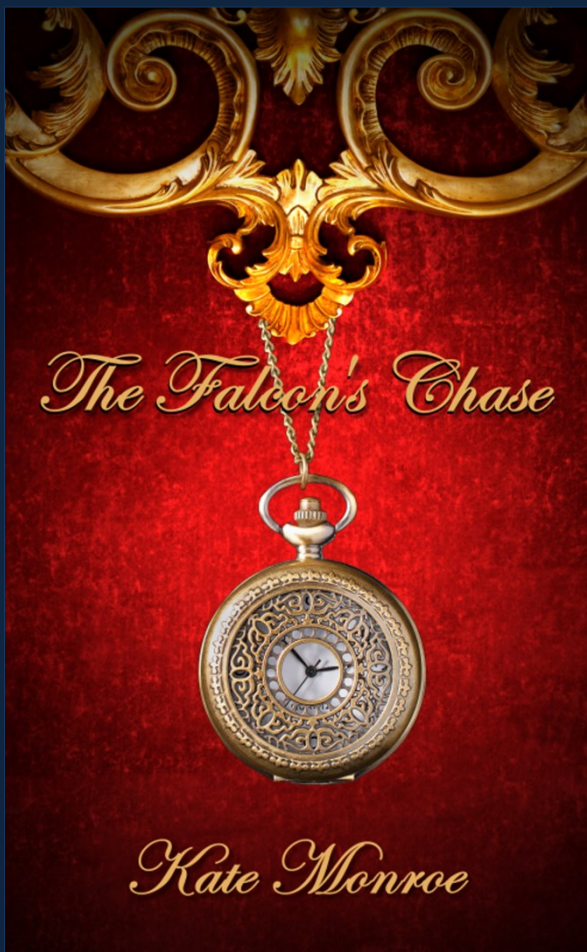
She had transgressed. She had defiled. Shame fell like stones from the sky and buried her alive. She rose and walked down to the river to wash off the dry blood. She knew what she must do. The Virgin Mary herself had smiled upon her and chosen her for this task, perhaps it was not too late to redeem herself. Donning her robe and with rosary in hand, she began the trek up the mountain. She walked without rest. Through scorching midday sun and cold dark night she stumbled forward, her bones burning with fatigue, her bare feet scalding raw.

Sister Rita was roused by gusts of tepid breath caressing her face. She had collapsed at the base of a large tree, weak with cold and hunger. The creature nudged her impatiently; it lapped at her with a long, thick tongue. She squinted at the huge shadow looming above her, rays of sunlight erupted behind it. The Unicorn reeled on its hind legs with a high pitched whine. It was an ear shattering shriek that etched deep into her skull. She stared at his savage, raw beauty, his incomprehensible being. His yellow eyes glared back at her with malice and scorn. In this extraordinary moment terror turned to insight, she had been fed a lie. Sister Rita saw her true transgression. Quickly she kneeled and clasped her hands in prayer. She prayed, for the first time in her life, without doubt or guilt. She honoured the only truth she had ever known as she pictured herself, naked and free in the forest, adorned with her own blood. She could hear the rustle of a river nearby. Sunlight danced around her, glittering through the lush greenery. Enraged by her audacity, the Unicorn lunged. With a casual thrust he pierced her chest and pinned her to the tree behind her. Its horn was a monstrous sword and it slipped through her with ease. For a moment they were eye to eye before the agony burst from her in screams. With a slow, cruel drag he splayed her open. Tracing a seeping wound down her torso until, with a graceful flick of his neck, he released her. Sister Rita dropped to the ground, torn in two like ripe fruit. Her entrails leaked in a gush and pooled at the hooves of the Unicorn.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Magenta Nero is a fiction writer, poet and visual artist. She loves to spin dark tales of fantasy, horror and erotica. She is a contributing writer to Pen of the Damned. Magenta was born in Italy and currently lives in New South Wales, Australia, with her partner and two young daughters.

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The Falcon's Chase *Kate Monroe*

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Utopia Road *Jessica Grafer*

He walked over to the signpost and put his cigarette out on the base. Sooty mist pressed in all around him and he pulled his coat tighter. He looked up at the signpost again. Utopia Road. *Such a pretentious name for a road*, he thought. Utopia. The most perfect place on Earth. The sun finally sank down beneath the horizon. He shook his head, gave the post a good, swift kick and made his way down Utopia Road.

It seemed like any other street. At any other time, on any other day it might have been just a road. On this day, at this moment just after sundown, things begin to change. When he looked at the white, clapboard houses they seemed to waver and flicker before his eyes. He stopped and closed his eyes tight. He wasn't ready for this yet, but he really didn't have a choice. He opened his eyes back up and started walking again. He was coming up to a lovely little home, white picket fence, tulips lining the front walk. As he passed the house it flickered and when his vision cleared the nice house was gone. In it's place now stood, an abandoned, weather beaten one. The fence mostly broken, the white paint all but gone. Out of the corner of his eye he could see something move behind the windows of the house. He reached his right hand inside of his trench coat and grabbed the butt of the sawed off. The weight of it in his hand was only mildly comforting. He didn't have many shells and the noise of the gun would only bring more.....whatever they were. He didn't have a name for them yet. Mutated, angry things. Long claws and at times even longer teeth. They hid in the shadows and crept silently waiting for a chance to strike.

His watch said 8:05. Five minutes lost already. He didn't want to get stuck here. In this 'other' place. He wasn't really sure what this place was yet, so to be stuck here would be a nightmare. It's bad enough he had to come back for the locket. He promised the girl he'd get it to her mother though, so that's what he meant to do. There was the house. He could see what was left of the girls arm sticking out from underneath the porch. The dark was falling quickly now. Hastening his steps he lopped over the wreckage of small fence and was at the side of the house in two long strides. Up to this point it has been quiet. He might get out of here without a scrape. Something gold caught his eye. The locket was hanging on a nail from a porch board. It was hanging as if someone had placed it there gently. After a day of picnicking perhaps or a date with a sweetheart, that ended on this very porch with a kiss under the light.

He had to stop dreaming and get the fuck out of here. He gave a small shake of his head and stepped forward to grab the locket. As he moved forward his coat hooked on a rusty nail and made an awful screeching sound. He froze for a moment and saw the shadows start to move in the house. A horrible high pitched whine began and he knew his cover was blown. He didn't have to worry about being quiet anymore so he leapt forward ripping the board out as he did and grabbed the locket. He shoved the locket into his pocket and swung the gun up to smack one of the monsters in the face as it bounded down the porch. It screamed as its teeth flew out and sick smelling saliva flew hitting him in the face. It felt like it was burning but he couldn't tell if it really was, or if it was just the fact that this disgusting smelling, dirty stuff was all over his face. He wiped at it with the sleeve of his coat and headed back across the yard.

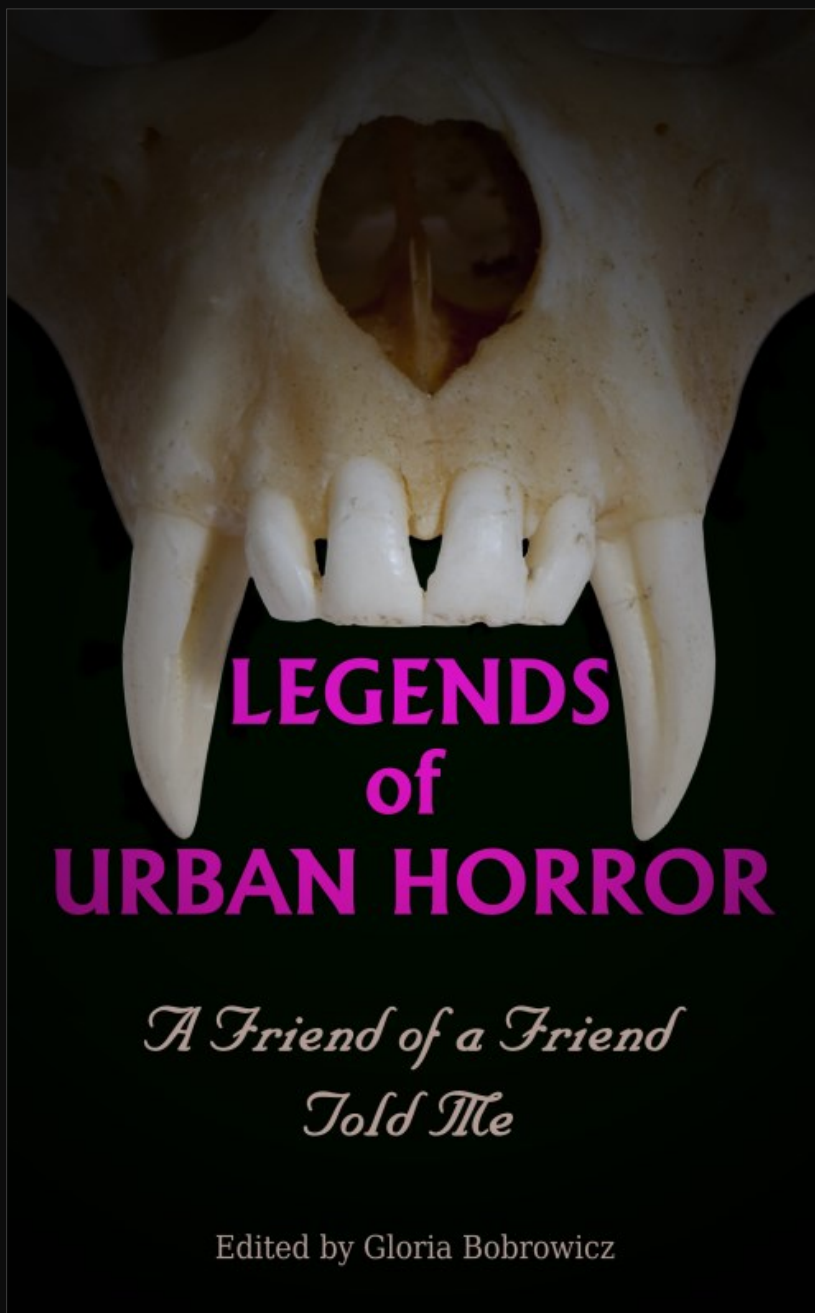
Running as fast as he could he leapt over the fence. Almost. His foot caught the edge and he fell sprawling out across the dirt street. He rolled over and caught one of the beasts in the throat with his gun. It fell back gasping for breath, making strangled choking sounds. Conor scrambled to his feet and began to run again. The pounding of something coming up hard and fast was getting closer behind him. He would not look back. He could finally see the signpost. He felt as if his heart was going to burst out of his chest. If he had to go any farther he might explode. Just a few more feet. He felt a sharp scrape on the back of his right calf. He screamed and threw himself forward landing on the asphalt of Main Street. Just past the Utopia Road sign. He waited to be mauled and when it didn't happen he allowed himself to turn around and look. All he could see was the idyllic city street of Anytown, USA. Pretty cookie cutter houses with the white picket fences and flowers.

Conor sat on the street breathing heavily. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the gold locket. Claire was inscripted across the front. As he ran his thumb over the name he thought he could hear the howls of anguished defeat of some beast in a far off land.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jessica Grafer is an early education teacher in Illinois. She supplies television show reviews and recaps for several online websites, including Beingfans.net and DarkMediaonline.com. Jessica enjoys a myriad of genres but her fancy lies in the science fiction and supernatural realms.

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Lookout Point *Craig McGray*

Billy had been trying to get Peggy-Sue up to 'the point' since senior year in high school. She had been one of the cheerleaders for the High Point Eagles and wasn't allowed to fraternize with 'dirt boys'; a really shitty slang term used by the snooty teens to describe farmers in the hellhole known as high school.

Once high school was over though, those class distinctions became irrelevant: the prom queen ended up single and pregnant before her twentieth birthday; the captain of the football team put on at least fifty pounds and lost half his hair; and the hard-working dirt boy ended up parked at Lookout Point on a rainy night with his hand buried up an ex-cheerleader's way-too-tight sweater as he fumbled with a god-forsaken bra clip that might as well be welded in place.

"Slow down, Billy," Peggy-Sue panted, as she tried to get the words around Billy's probing tongue.

Billy pulled back and sat for a second, both of them breathing like they'd just run a fifty-yard dash. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she cleared her throat. "I'm just not that type of girl. I don't want people to talk, you know?"

Billy almost laughed. He knew of at least ten other guys that had rounded the bases with the self-proclaimed saint, Ms. Peggy-Sue Anders, on their first try; he'd even seen the pictures to prove it. The fact was, people did talk, and she *was* that type of girl.

"Come on, Peggy, it's just us out here. Ain't no one else gonna know."

Peggy sat back with a demure, doe-eyed pout. "I know how guys are, you'll be bragging to your friends about everything we did the second you drop me off."

"What? No, I'm not like that." His eyes flicked to his smart phone that he'd placed on the dashboard. His plan was to tap 'record' as soon as things got hot and heavy while Peggy was too distracted to notice. "I promise. Scouts honor." He held up two fingers and kissed them before placing them on his chest; a playful grin tugged at his lips.

She thought for a second and smiled back at him. "Well, as long as you promise, I guess we can mess around a little more." She leaned over and reached into his lap, grabbing his package.

Billy grinned and picked-up right where he'd left off, with a handful of tit and an overly ambitious erection.

The 'messaging around' caused the inside of Billy's banged up Ford Explorer to steam up.

Billy had finally freed Peggy-Sue from her bra and sweater and had begun working his way up her skirt when she stopped him and pulled away again. "You hear that?"

Billy exhaled in frustration and sat back, "I didn't hear anything. There's nothin' out here but us."

"What if it's Doc Baker?"

"Who?"

"You know, Goatman Baker. You 'member the stories about the Bakers that lived up here in the woods. She caught him messing around with one of the housekeepers. She chopped him up with his own ax and fed him to their goats."

"Bullshit."

"Really, they even say some people seen him up here. A few years back, a couple of kids went missing during a camping trip. They never found them, just a bunch of hoof prints and some blood was all that was left."

"Get outta here. There's nothing out here, certainly not some fucking Goatman." He pushed away a strand of hair that had fallen in front of her face; she smiled and bit her lower lip. "Now, where were we?" He leaned in, and continued to grope Peggy as the two made their way into the back seat. She lay on her back as Billy clumsily climbed on top of her, accidentally pulling her hair in the process.

"Ouch."

"Sorry," he mumbled.

Peggy closed her eyes for a moment, partly to try and enjoy what was going to happen, but mostly so she didn't have to see his face as it twisted with a false sense of accomplishment.

Her eyes flicked open, her body tensed, and a breath caught in her throat. Billy saw the look on her face and gave himself a mental high-five.

And then she screamed.

Her legs came up and pushed Billy off; he landed hard on the floorboard.

"What the..." He clawed his way up as her screech nearly deafened him.

He turned and looked in the direction she was staring. A lump formed in his throat, then he began to scream.

Fiery eyes, close-set and foreboding, peered through the fogged window. Cavernous nostrils flared with heaving breaths that clouded the outside of the glass. Billy and Peggy clamored to the front seats.

"Lock the doors!"

Peggy, still wailing, scrambled into Billy's lap. "What the fuck are you doin'? I can't see!"

"What is that thing?"

"How the fuck should I know?" Billy shoved her toward the passenger seat and cranked the key hanging from the ignition; the engine roared to life. He slammed the truck into reverse, but the SUV's bald tires couldn't find traction in the mud, and with each spin, they sank further into the wet ground.

Peggy, having finally gone quiet, scanned for the eyes of the beast but saw nothing.

"Shit!" Billy tried again to rock the Explorer loose from its murky trap, but the damage had already been done; they were stuck.

BANG!

Billy looked through the windshield to see a gigantic ax crash through the hood.

BANG!

Peggy lurched to the back while Billy froze as monstrous hands worked the ax loose before bringing it round again, this time it smashed through the windshield.

Reeling from the shock, he turned to climb into the back with Peggy, but as he did, searing pain bit into his calf. He twisted and looked back to see his leg trapped in the teeth of something inhuman. Peggy was screaming again but Billy tuned her out, hearing only the crunch of bone and tearing of his own ligaments, tendons and tissue as what looked like a mix between an animal and a man gnawed on him. Werewolf was his first thought, but as he frantically kicked at the thing with his other leg, he noticed horns at the top of its head, like those of a goat; fucking Goatman Baker!

He kicked again, unable to break the beast's grip and watched in horror as his foot tore free from his leg and the creature devoured it in one gruesome gulp.

He turned and pulled himself into the backseat; Peggy's screams came back into focus as the truck shook violently. Peggy, still naked from the waist up, tried desperately to open the locked door as the beast forced its way through the windshield, but became wedged in place as its massive shoulders took up the full width of the Explorer's frame.

Peggy finally unlocked the door and shoved it open. In her frantic state, she spilled onto the ground. After finding her feet, she started to run but remembered Billy's foot being grotesquely torn off; she turned back to drag him from the wildly thrashing vehicle. They both fell as the monster fought its way out of the truck. Once freed, it leapt from the hood and stood towering over the couple. Its breath billowed in the cool Maryland air like a steam engine chugging uphill. Reaching over, it hoisted the ax onto a shoulder.

Peggy and Billy scrambled behind a nearby tree, Billy's nub of a leg dragged lazily through the mud. The thing stood eerily still, it waited and watched; baited them with false hope.

Peggy couldn't bear it any longer; she stood and attempted to flee deeper into the woods, but she never had a chance. Easily seven feet tall, covered in matted hair, and well over three-hundred pounds, the thing strode quickly after her; its powerful legs propelled the massive creature at an incredible speed. It blew past Billy in a blur leaving a musty, thick odor in its wake.

Tortured cries filled the air as the thing ripped sinew and muscle from bone. It indulged in a ravenous feast of soft, tender flesh while Billy sat silent, paralyzed with fear.

After a few minutes, heavy footsteps squished into the mud behind Billy.

Pushed back against the tree, Billy turned to find the towering beast. It wore a mask of gore while its massive chest heaved from its recent efforts, and the ax hung from a deformed hand by its side. By this point, Billy's body temperature had dropped from blood loss and the onset of shock; he sat in a haze and quivered in the chilly night air.

The creature crouched before him, lowered its face to within inches of Billy's. It snorted a noxious breath, spattering Billy's face with crimson mucous. The thing then backed away, straightened to its full height, and hoisted its ax to its shoulder like a baseball player stepping into the batter's box; the full moon overhead cast a wicked silhouette.

A clap of thunder rolled in the distance and Billy closed his eyes. Eventually, cold rain began to pelt his face. He thought of his mother and father, his younger brother, and of course, the sweet handfuls of Peggy-Sue's tits.

What seemed like hours, but were mere moments passed before he heard a massive thump, like a boulder being dropped from the sky.

His eyes fluttered open and darted back and forth as he tried to clear the raindrops from his vision, he squeezed

them tight before opening them again.

Billy scanned the area for the beast but found no sign until he looked to the end of his bloody stump. It was there that sweet Peggy-Sue's terror-filled eyes stared back at him. Her globes bulged from the sockets of her severed head as it rested lopsided in a puddle at his one remaining foot.

About The Author –Craig McGray lives on the east coast of Florida with his wife and two beautiful daughters. Craig writes horror and dark fiction because the whispering voices in his head tell him to. Craig is a member of the writing group Pen of the Damned and his work can be found on Amazon.

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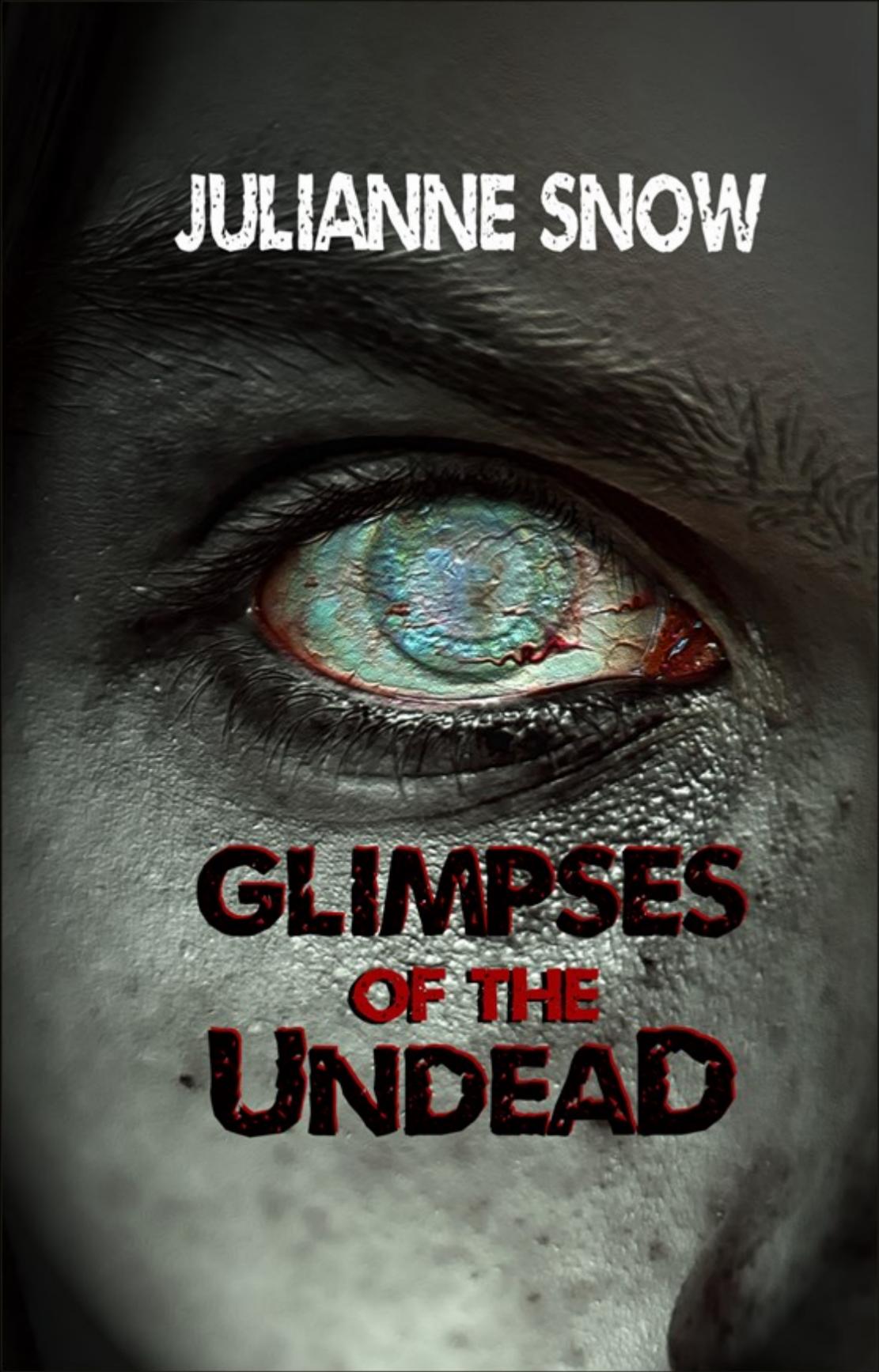
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A Creature Stirring *Ken MacGregor*

Currently featured in his collection *An Aberrant Mind* published in 2014 by Sirens Call Publications

Julian set down several bags of presents and unlocked his apartment. He lived on the top floor of a nineteen story building; his floor had eight apartments. Julian opened his door, and was hit by a smell, strong, sharp and musky, wild and strange.

Julian dragged in the bags and searched his apartment, turning on all the lights. He found nothing. Probably, an animal got into the ventilation shaft and died. He poured himself a glass of Merlot and sat on the couch to wrap the first present. It was a toy unicorn, white, with a gold mane, tail and horn. It was ten inches tall. Julian's sister, Alice had two girls, Georgia and Nell. Nell was going to explode when she opened this.

Julian had learned how to wrap presents neatly from an ex-girlfriend. Sara was an artist, beautiful, creative, smart. He was infatuated with her. But, she was neurotic. It didn't last. Sara wrapped presents like the professionals at the fancy stores, all perfect corners and flat sides.

Julian finished his wine and stretched his back. Half the bottle was gone, and half the presents were done. Suddenly, Julian heard something moving over his head.

He looked up at the vent in the drop ceiling. He couldn't see anything from the floor, so he dragged one of the kitchen barstools over and climbed on it. It was dark in there, but Julian thought he saw something moving. He studied it, hoping his eyes would adjust to the darkness. He raised himself on his toes, cocking his head to look through the slats.

Bang! Something hit the vent right above his face; he fell off the stool, more embarrassed than hurt.

"Fuck!" He yelled. "Bastard." Julian gave the vent the finger.

Julian sat back down on the couch. He poured another glass and drank some. He looked at the remaining presents and scowled. He had lost interest in wrapping.

Julian drank some more wine, and glared up at the vent. Stupid animal. The smell was getting worse in here, too. Have to call the super.

Julian finished the wine in his glass, a little buzzed. He got up and went to his bedroom. He peeled off his clothes and crawled into bed, trying not to think about the animal in his ceiling. He was drifting off when he heard movement. He opened his eyes and glowered at the ceiling.

"Seriously? You're following me? Give me a break." Julian pulled the covers over his head. A few seconds later, he pulled them down. The scratching was louder now. Julian sat up, the blanket sliding down to his waist. The light was off; it was hard to see. He sat very still in his bed and listened.

He heard it again. Julian grabbed the bedside lamp and turned it on, pointing it at the ceiling.

He watched, heart thudding in his chest. In the ceiling, the vent cover dropped half an inch. Julian gasped. Then, it was pulled back up suddenly. Julian scooted back to the headboard, keeping the light trained up there.

The vent cover exploded down out of the ceiling, along with drywall fragments and dust.

"Aah!" Julian screamed. He trained the light on the floor, but there was just the metal vent cover, one corner bent from the fall. Julian got off the bed and held the lamp like a sword. He took three steps, felt a small tug from the lamp and the light went out.

"Shit!" Julian dove across the bed for the other lamp. He did not want to be in the dark. He was almost there when something thudded to the floor. He froze, listening. Julian could hear breathing. The musky smell filled his nostrils.

Slowly, he felt for the other lamp, edging his body across the bed. His fingers found the bedside table, then the base of the lamp, and finally the switch. Behind him, something climbed onto the bed. Something heavy. The bed springs creaked, protesting the weight.

Julian was scared as hell, but he had to know.

The light came on, and Julian looked. The thing was long and sinuous with six short legs and a massive head. It looked like something out of mythology; some Dark God's pet. From its mouth came a large, black tongue, not forked, but like a human tongue, only longer. It licked Julian, tasting his chest. The saliva made his skin tingle and burn.

"Please," Julian said to it. "It's Christmas. For God's sake, please."

A buzzing invaded his head, an angry wasp's nest in his brain. He heard/felt/thought a voice.

"Beg me," it said. "For your life."

"Please don't kill me," Julian said. "I'll do anything. Please."

The beast pushed Julian down, pinning him to the bed with its weight. It lay across him, its face inches from his own. It looked into Julian's eyes. Its eyes were gold; they caught the light and it swirled in their depths. Julian saw intelligence, and hunger in those eyes. Even so, they were beautiful. Its mouth stretched, and with horror, Julian realized it was smiling.

Julian grabbed the eight bags by the handles, pulled them out, and closed the trunk with his elbow. He walked up the path to Alice's front door. She, having seen him coming opened it right away. Julian grinned at her behind his sunglasses. She grinned right back.

"Merry Christmas, big brother," she said, hugging him awkwardly between the bags.

"Merry Christmas to you," Julian replied. He stepped inside and put down the bags. His nieces came running up for hugs, and he grabbed them both at once.

"Can I get you something," Alice asked him. Julian nodded and followed her to the kitchen. "Coffee, maybe?"

Julian smiled at his sister, took off his shades and gazed at her with his gold eyes. He licked his lips with his long, black tongue. Alice felt an awful buzzing sensation in her mind.

"Beg me," he said to her. "For your life."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Ken MacGregor's work has appeared in over sixty anthologies, magazines and podcasts. Ken is a member of The Great Lakes Association of Horror Writers and an Affiliate member of HWA. Ken's the kind of guy that, if he found himself stranded somewhere with you, would probably eat you to survive. Ken lives in Michigan with his family and two unstable cats.

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

website: ken-macgregor.com

An Interview with Author Ken MacGregor

Sirens Call Publications recently released Ken MacGregor's first fiction collection titled *An Aberrant Mind*. With such an eclectic collection of tales, we wanted to take a moment and prod him for a little information about it and his writing. But before we get to that, let's take a second to get to know the man who is Ken MacGregor...

Ken McGregor is a few years shy of fifty but still believes he's in the neighbourhood of twenty-six. He just celebrated his thirteenth wedding anniversary with his ridiculously supportive wife whom he has two children with; they're seven and four, and inspire a pride that threatens to burst from his chest (Editor's Note: Anyone else flash to Alien with that visual?). Ken drives the bookmobile for his local library and it's a job he genuinely loves. He has ten tattoos above the waist and maintains he's not done getting them either. Ken is into physical fitness, healthy food, books, and beer...

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Ken! What made you decide to become a writer?

Ken MacGregor: I don't know if it was a decision so much as a natural evolution. I wrote (and published, actually) my first poem in fourth grade. It inspired two other students to write similarly themed poems and all three were printed in the school's newsletter. After that, I occasionally wrote stories and poems, but never did anything with them. While Liz (my aforementioned supportive spouse) was studying law in St. Louis, I joined a sketch comedy company. After the first couple of weeks, I started writing for them. By the time I stopped doing sketch comedy, I had written over 200 sketches, more than half of which were performed on stage. Back in Michigan, I acted in a horror film with the incredibly talented team at Lion Belly Media. Brian, my co-director on the horror/comedy short I wrote *The Quirk and the Dead*, said he wanted to make the scariest short film of all time. So, naturally I tried to write the script. That didn't pan out, but Brian suggested I send my short stories to publishers so I did. That was three years ago. Now, I have a book of my stories and 25 titles on Amazon.

SCP: Tell us about *An Aberrant Mind*.

KM: The title comes from the fact that the stories within don't have much in common – many are horror, sure, but there's a science fiction piece and a detective story, too. I wracked my brain trying to find a title that would encompass the vast diversity of ideas within. Nothing really seemed to fit. I thought to myself *the only thing these have in common is they all came out of my weird brain*. Since 'a weird brain' isn't a terribly interesting title, I paraphrased it. The clown on the cover nicely illustrates the content, too: strange, twisted, likely evil but kind of funny, too. And, there is actually a clown in the book, though he's a minor player. When I had about fifteen stories published, I had three offers from publishers to do a story collection, which was quite flattering of course. Based on my experience with them, I chose Sirens Call Publications. Not only are they professional and supportive of their writers, but are approachable and happy to field all the ignorant questions I, as a beginning writer had. I have learned a lot since 2012 when several of the stories in this book first appeared, and much of it was helped along by the editors at Sirens Call Publications.

SCP: What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about *An Aberrant Mind* before they read it?

KM: Read it with caution. I don't pull any punches. There's some graphic violence and gore, but that's not what I mean. One story in particular, "A Lesson Learned from Archie" upsets me so much that, when I read it aloud at a Con, I cried. And, I knew what was coming. I wrote it. So, yeah. It gets brutal.

SCP: What is your writing process? Do you consider yourself to be a planner or a pantser?

KM: You know, I'm a little of both. But, if I had to pick, I'd say pantser. I do research when writing about something with which I am not familiar, and I occasionally plot out a story, but mostly I sit at the keyboard and make stuff up.

SCP: What is the hardest challenge that you have faced as a writer?

KM: I'm trying to get up the gumption to write a novel. I've made a few false starts on two of them. It's daunting, facing the idea of putting down that many words. The longest thing I've written, aside from a feature screenplay was only seven thousand words. There have been other challenges as I've learned the publishing process, but that one remains my nemesis.

SCP: In your opinion, what sets *An Aberrant Mind* apart from other books of the same genre?

KM: Most of the stories in this collection are laced with humor. I mentioned I have written sketch comedy – I'm naturally inclined to find humor in almost every situation. So, even as I'm writing about the disemboweled corpse trying to bite through Jerry's steel-toed engineer boot, Shelly, hiding behind Jerry has a sudden attack of flatulence and both crack up. Jerry, kicking the undead thing in the head with his other foot says, "Oh my God, Shelly! You're so gross." That's not in the book. I just made that up. Also, I have tried to do things no one else is doing: undead squirrel, homicidal food, the unfortunate end of Father Christmas. I have tried to create characters you can believe in, whom you grow to like and then heap catastrophic abuses on them. 'Cause it's fun.

SCP: Are you reading anything right now, or have you read anything recently that is worth mentioning?

KM: *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* by Neil Gaiman. I read that a few months back and, like all of his work I loved it. If you haven't read Gaiman, go out and get one of his books. *American Gods* is one of my all-time favorites. *Good Omens* (with Terry Pratchett) may well be my favorite book of all time.

SCP: Who are some of your favorite authors? Favorite novels?

KM: Well, we just covered Gaiman, but I also love Stephen King and Gillian Flynn. There are many, many others, too. I love to read. I love a good story. Since I started writing, I've encountered some amazing talents – writers who, like me, are struggling to get our stuff out there. I've read some brilliant work by people I had never heard of, but you better believe I watch out for their names in future publications.

SCP: How do you define success as a writer? Have you been successful?

KM: If you asked me this a couple of years ago, I would have said getting paid regularly to write. But, now that I've been getting published for a couple years I know that's not it. I've made some money, but that's not success. That's gravy. Success is when a reader takes the time and makes the effort to seek me out. When they tell me they enjoyed something I wrote. When I've made a connection, touched someone with words. There is nothing like that feeling in the whole world. If I never get paid to write again, I'd keep doing it, just for the chance that might happen again.



SCP: Do you have words of wisdom about writing that you want to pass on to the writers out there who are just starting out?

KM: Yeah. Pay attention. Not just to the world around you, as that will make your writing better, but also pay attention to publishers' guidelines; listen to writers who've been doing it a while; heed the advice of your honest beta readers (and ditch the ones who feed your ego or insult you without anything constructive). Read books that are on shelves right now – that's what people want to read. Read outside your genre; write outside your genre. If you have a chance to help another writer, take it – we're all in this together.

SCP: What should readers walk away from your book knowing? How should they feel?

KM: I like to think readers will learn a little something in each of the stories. They all have odd little details I threw in because they fit the character, or the situation, or both. Things I find interesting work their way into my fiction and I hope the readers find them so, too. As far as how they should feel – I hope they feel satisfied. Entertained. Maybe creeped out a bit. If I can make you laugh or cry or shudder - if I can make it a little harder for you to sleep at night, well then I've done my job. Thanks.

Thank you Ken for taking the time to answer our questions. If you're interested in learning a little more about *An Aberrant Mind*, here's more information...

ABERRANT is defined as unusual, abnormal or different. The stories in this book not only differ from most of what you read, but also wildly from each other. A retired school teacher takes on an elder god and his minion; a werewolf picks fights with sea creatures; a neighbor's lawn may be eating people. Twenty-two stories: scary, funny, weird and different.

In these pages, you will find darkness and fear, revulsion and terror. Mixed with it, however is quite a bit of humor. Sometimes both happen at the same time. So, open it up, join Jim as he fights off zombies with a potato cannon; witness the bloodbath reunion of the first man and his homicidal son; enjoy the monsters, the demons and the deranged.

A word of warning, though: you may never eat a bagel with lox again.

***An Aberrant Mind* can be found online at all major retailers including:**

Amazon:

[US](#), [UK](#), [Canada](#), [Australia](#), [Germany](#), [France](#), [Spain](#),
[Italy](#), [Japan](#), [Mexico](#), [India](#), [Brazil](#)
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ABERRANT is defined as unusual, abnormal or different...

An ABERRANT MIND



KEN MACGREGOR

Available on Amazon, CreateSpace, and Smashwords

Credits

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Gloria Bobrowicz
D Ceder
Catherine Connolly
Denzell Cooper
Nina D'Arcangela
Jessica Grafter
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Featured Artist

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Featured Author

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