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#### From the Deep | Alisse Lee Goldenberg

There had been much talk about how the world would end. For years, there had been dire warnings of climate change, terrorism, and the need for gun control. But, for the most part, these warnings had been written off by those in charge as mass hysteria infecting the uneducated masses. Yet, truth be told, even amongst those claiming that the world's end was imminent, no one expected it to end the way it did.

Henry had lived his whole life in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. He loved the quiet island life. Yes, the winters were uniformly awful, and the summers felt unfairly short. However, the people were friendly, and he adored the community in which he was bringing up his young son, Peter.

That day, the day the world went to shit, Henry was sitting on the dunes of the beach, watching Peter wade in the waves. He felt the hot sun warming his body and allowed himself to relax. He ignored the angry tourists pointing out to him the signs telling him that he was not allowed to climb, lounge, or walk across the dunes. As far as he was concerned, those notices applied to them. He was a local. He was free to do as he pleased. This was his island. He saw Peter's golden curls glinting in the sun, heard his carefree laughter, and knew that all was well in the world. Henry heard Peter call to him, saying that he was going to play in the water. He smiled and waved at his son. The boy was a strong swimmer, and he was unafraid. Nothing bad could happen to him. Not on his island. Here, life was kind. Henry closed his eyes and lay back on the sand. He felt himself drift off a smile on his face, a song in his heart. Later that evening, he'd be taking his son to see a show at the Theatre Festival. Everything was just as it should be.

The octopus rode the wave to the shore. As he hit the sandy beach, he felt some of the moisture drain from his body. He flattened himself lower to the ground, sensing and tasting the sand as he dragged himself along, searching for what he needed. He heard the cries and laughter of those things as they watched. Those things that were destroying the ocean he so loved, ruining his home, massacring his children. To his right, more of his brethren joined him on the beach. Up ahead, he saw one of the two-legged beasts lying in wait on the sand. He pressed forward, oozing his way up the dune. He lunged forward with his tentacles, his suckers latching on, tasting the chemical makeup of the lotions spread all over this thing's pasty skin. The octopus wanted to pull away, disgusted by what he ingested, but he kept on, knowing that as it was in the water, so it was here. All that he consumed and absorbed only served to make his venom stronger. He continued wrapping his tentacles around his prey, knowing that the sweetness of his revenge would wash away the taste of the sunscreen.

Henry sighed in his sleep. His dream had taken a decidedly erotic turn as he felt the caress of something soft on his leg. He twitched on the sand, some of it making its way up his shorts, causing an itch. He opened his eyes and gasped in shock. An octopus had wound itself around his leg, and another was inching its way towards his abdomen. He yelped in fear and reached

down to pull it off. His hands gripped tightly, and he almost wretched as he felt his fingers press hard into the creature's soft head. He couldn't get a good grip on it. There was nothing hard to hold onto. He tried pulling on the tentacles, feeling the suckers bruising the flesh of his leg. As he sat there, pulling and prying the thing off of him, the second octopus slunk its way up the back of his shirt, positioning itself over his spine. Henry felt it, and screamed for help. The tourists on the beach looked at him and laughed. Not a single one of them wanted to get involved. Henry glared angrily at them, and his eyes widened as he saw what was happening. Dozens of octopuses had emerged from the tide. Each one, making its way towards one of the gawking people. He heard the scream as the first trail of blood oozed its way down the sand towards the water. Panicking, he looked towards Peter. His boy was bobbing in the water, confusion painted across his cherubic features.

The octopus on his leg clutched him even tighter. His beak emerged from the soft flesh of his middle. His tentacles trembled with joy and anticipation as the hard shell of the beak plunged into Henry's flesh, breaking the skin. The octopus greedily swallowed the hot flow of blood as it injected Henry with venom. Henry screamed and flew back into the sand, crushing the second octopus as it bit into his spine. He felt the burn as venom coursed through his blood stream. His muscles spasmed and twitched before rendering him incapable of movement. Henry lay on the dune, unable to scream or speak. His breaths came shallow, his heart began to slow. He lay there and watched as people screamed, octopuses crawling over their bodies, the red sand of the island painted even redder by their blood. He saw the snake like trails of their tentacles leaving swirling stripes over the sand as they ruthlessly pursued their prey. Dozens became hundreds as the creatures swarmed over the beach turning what had been a beautiful day into one of horror.

With his last ounce of strength, Henry fought to turn his head to look out over the ocean, searching for a last look of Peter. He saw the golden curls of his son's head bobbing along the waves. His breath hitching in his throat, one last time, he stared out at the ocean. Tears leaked out the corners of his eyes, disappearing into the sand of the dune. He watched as the last glimpse of gold bobbed once, twice, three times, before disappearing forever beneath the crimson waves.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Alisse Lee Goldenberg is an award winning author of Horror, Young Adult Paranormal Romance, and Young Adult Fantasy fiction. She is currently working on two series: The Sitnalta Series (published by Pandamoon Publishing) and The Hadariah Chronicles (published by Prizm Books). Alisse lives in Toronto with her husband Brian, their triplets Joseph, Phillip, and Hailey, and their rambunctious Goldendoodle Sebastian.

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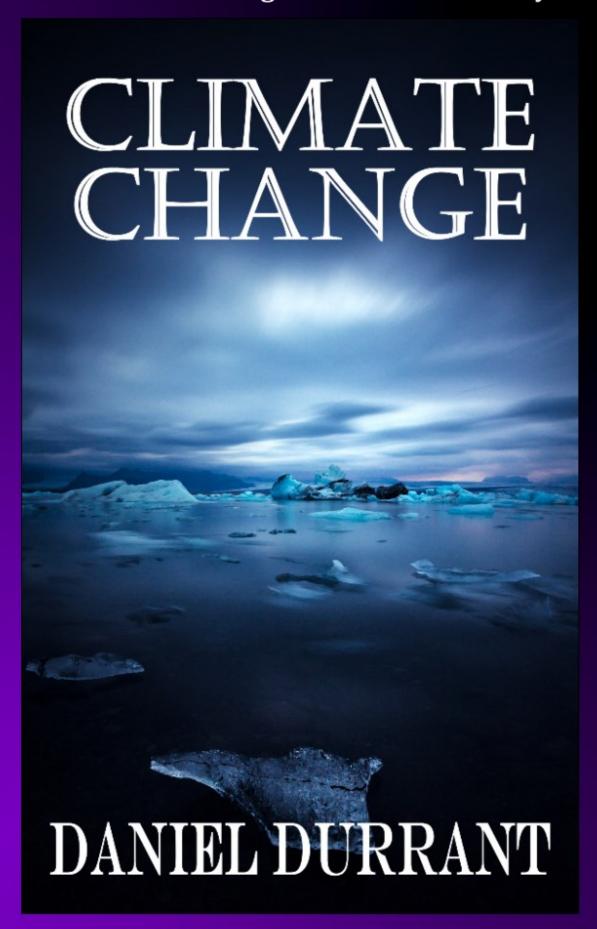






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#### **CODENAME E.A.T.** | Brian Rosenberger

(first published in Necon Ebooks)

The strikeforce stands ready, awaiting the General's command. Every day spent training for the mission. Stealth and surprise, their key to victory. Get in undetected. Get out alive. It's understood there will be casualties. There are always casualties. Every member of the Evasive Action Team understands the risk and the reward. They willingly lay down their life for the cause. There is no greater sacrifice.

Finally, the day arrives. The General barks the order — Attack, Attack, Attack. Time for war and the time is now. Six legs march in unison. Thousands of legs. No picnic is safe.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of As the Worm Turns and three poetry collections.

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#### **Cactus** | Stephen Crowley

I swivelled my head to and fro at the street garden life, how it dominated the lawns as the rain fell on my cold face. How they sway, stretch, happy as the droplets fell, growing, living.

My moments alive are somewhat limited now.

I pondered. If these horrible events stopped now, I still do not believe I could face trees or any plant for that matter in the same way again. Now, they are something else, benign, as twisted as the bark gnarls that stretched out - they see me.

They watch.

Those knotty branches just want to reach out and grab me.

Unthinkable just a few months ago. Twas a time when me, Harold Pinsley, would more likely start to hug a tree rather than want to chop it down.

Let's backtrack a little.

Now retired, taking care of my garden placed a daily smile on my face, never a chore. I love the greenery. I don't want to think differently even now. Honestly, I have no idea of how it started, how those bent and weather-beaten formations just one day decided – to kill us all.

Where did the anger grow in those fleshy protrusions? At what point did we seriously piss off Mother Nature and cause her to throw the biggest strop since time began?

And what about food - now we are talking. Perhaps my vegetable diet is one of the reasons why I stand amongst an endangered species now. Sounds silly. Sure it does, until quite recently. True vegetarian, me. I sought that next succulent plant, something unique. I have eaten just about every vegetable there is, certainly when it comes to what can grow in a typical british garden.

But, Cactae.

Hmmm. Now that turned a new leaf - no pun intended. Those hardy cactae that can flourish in the garden easily, just grow and grow into a succulent source of food. That was the plan, an edible cactus. A hearty and tasty meal with a different vegetable for dinner.

Then it started. Nature cast a shadow across the planet sending us right to the bottom of the food chain. The greenery began to consume just about every ounce of fauna around, then humans; they hit back, and now impossible for us to regain our higher position in the food chain. How? Simple.

They eat us. Why Not? We eat them.

When I bought the two foot fleshy cactus, I just wanted to whip up a tasty meal quite different for myself. Not my bitch of a wife. Nothing pleases her, Just zero, except several gins. As I stand here, staring at my cactus and intended source for some hearty meals, I continue to wonder at what force of nature I grew. And good food, a different taste for my palate.

The cactus held a sense of a solitary life, one to connect with my own. Just about to slice it up when the world just flipped over.

For me, this is how this new world started.

So, four months ago.

I purchased the sizeable critter down at the local garden store. Soon as I returned home, I picked a spot, right in the centre of the garden. Gloves on, I eased the cactus out of its pot and transplanted it into the soil and filled the hole.

Now, this may not come across as a big deal to anyone else. For me, no-one else in my street had grown one. And I smiled, lost in complacency even now at growing this thing - that literally changed my life.

In more ways than I imagined.

I recall how I smiled oblivious to the fact that soon a new world beckoned where humans no longer controlled the planet.

It unfolded.

A couple of weeks later. I slurped on my hearty stew. Maisie, my ever loving wife, plonked her handbag on a chair as she sighed before her first insult of the day. A daily routine: she gets home from work, time to pick an argument. No surprise that our children flew away as soon as they could so long ago.

"Stew again, any chance of you eating real food, rather than your slop?" Her face contorted with a bitterness that had wrecked her once smooth complexion.

"Good to see you too Maisie."

"Bin it. Suppose I either eat your shit or cook actual food." She spat upon her inspection of the bubbling saucepan: a mediterranean concoction of lentils, peppers and courgettes. "You may like being a vegan, but some of us actually like to eat food sometimes, Harold. Oh, but go ahead, just cook for yourself."

"It is nice, different to the last stew, try it. Guarantee you will be satisfied." I sniggered inside.

"Don't bother schmuck face. I'll eat out, again."

With that, she swung the front door behind her, not even so much as a glance at the events unfolding on the TV news worldwide.

Or my grateful face as she departed.

I glared at the television as the news spurted what could not possibly be true. I listened.

In many areas of London and in cities such as Manchester, Cardiff, Bristol, and within many other cities, reports are coming in of people claiming that various plant life has tried to...eat them. Of course, the events have been dismissed until this footage was captured and posted to YouTube today. We ask viewers to be cautious of who is watching, much of this footage captured in Hyde Park today is very disturbing.

My blood slithered through my veins like a fast flowing ice stream. Jerky mobile phone footage of a teenager running and screaming. Lots of people fled from the park area. Screams, cries for help. So many ran from something.

Then, it came into view.

Truly, my eyes lied.

Despite the shaky footage, I could make out tree branches as they grabbed people and tossed them upwards before a tight clasp, for consumption. The trees danced around, they pulled at their roots as the branches reached out like claws grabbing anyone within reach.

Scientists are baffled by these terrifying pictures. Frank Kosser, a professor of natural science at London Metropolitan University is with us now. Professor, what does the science world make of this footage?

The wise yet perturbed face of the Professor filled the BBC newsroom screen. I turned up the volume.

He spoke: At first, I thought of course, this is a farce, some computer generated hoax but there are now more than one thousand reports of them growing much faster, attacking residents, and feeding. Whatever is happening is escalating by the day. So far, just a few areas globally, but it is clear that this will become more ubiquitous in the days to follow.

"What is happening if this is no hoax, what conclusions should we reach due to this extraordinary footage?" The news reader asked, she barely hid the tremors in her voice.

The professor sank a little in his chair. "The prized author and researcher, Anthony D. Williams, once wrote: Mankind can only disappoint Mother Nature for so long. He spoke wise

words of warning. We have ravaged this planet, we have poisoned it for far too long. We have arrogantly thought we can outsmart nature. Now it is time for nature to show us, we are not as clever as we think. Given the way we have treated our planet, nature now wants a win, and is fighting back. Slowly, weather has worsened across the globe, we have witnessed climate change that is unprecedented. But one aspect of Mother Nature's creations has simply been waiting. Landscaping has changed our land, we have destroyed forests, scientists have experimented on plants to research plant parasites, germination. In so doing, we put humanity first. Now we must pay the price. And now the flora has no respect anymore for any living organism other than its own kind. Their intelligence has remained hidden from us since time began. What they are truly capable of, always buried in the earth. Until now. The human race will soon no longer be the dominant species...

I switched off the television unable to comprehend what I heard.

I ran sweaty palms through my hair and strode out into my garden. My eyes took in the street view: gardens with hedges, some with huge Piwon trees, many neighbours showed off blooming cherry gardens, and pink blossoms - all still, for now.

They waited, prepared.

A few months passed. At least one report of an attack daily in cities worldwide. Yet to reach my tranquille street though.

The cactus just wavered there in the brewing wind. And my first scary revelation. Over five feet in just a few months: long fleshy feathery and spiny arms attached to a thicker hard-walled trunk.

How?

Will take time to eat this, I muttered at the time.

Its prickly skin bulged, sometimes, the stems pulsated, as if it coursed with life. Each day, it just grew at a phenomenal rate.

As dusk fell, I watched more documentaries about the insane attacks worldwide. One realisation for sure, the professor so right - it escalated by the day. A news reporter asked a gardener about his venus fly trap, and why it lunged at him, almost said goodbye to her hand when she stupidly tempted the plant with an outstretched hand. Hundreds of people reported dead in cities globally, martial law declared in some countries. I mean, really, martial law declared to secure towns because of - homicidal vegetation. Another piece of footage showed the army as they advanced with flamethrowers and torched whole woodlands as nature lashed out at them.

Maisie burst through the door, just back from her local watering hole - sobriety out the window. Worse for wear, she clambered around then just stood there, stared at me with those bitter eyes. I felt the weight of her contempt in those eyes; even as the world around changed, she remained the one thing I truly despised.

A scream. Then another from outside.

"What was that?" I stood up.

"Sit down you pathetic excuse for a man." Maisie pushed me back onto the chair.

"Can't you hear that? Have you not been watching the news for weeks now? This world, of ours, something is wrong, people are dying," I gathered strength against this wicked woman, I pushed myself off the chair. God knows why I had hung around so long. "And as for you, think I have truly had it..."

She just cackled back at me. "You standing up to me now. Not going to go curl up into your sofa, wanna man up?" My blood boiled as this despicable drunk, my wife, barely able to stand upright threw more insults my way. "Mother fucking nature wants us dead, might as well enjoy our lives while it lasts. All you care about is that piece of shit garden you spend your hours in." She paused, eyebrows furrowed adding to the copious wrinkles, time had not been kind, "And that cactus."

"I have given up on interest." My heart cold, skin as thick-skinned as the cactus. "No more of you, I want you out."

She snorted loudly. "Really, this is my house you snivelling waste of space and..."

I cut in, "Wrong Maisie, my house, recall, I bought it. And in the event of a divorce, as per our little prenup, so many many years ago now, which in your so sober state you have forgotten, I get everything. You," I neared her, my eyes wide with hate, "get what you are - nothing."

Shrill screams for help again outside; think Jim wailed two doors down but I couldn't absorb it, Not now. Time to eject this hideous creature from my life.

She craned her neck in my direction, cold eyes. "Really."

With that, Maisie just headed out into the garden. I heard the shed door get wrenched open. The skies opened up outside and it poured. Then, through the kitchen window, I watched as Maisie approached the cactus - wielding an axe.

She swung at the cactus, an axe blow that buried deep into the trunk.

"NO." I yelled as I ran outside as fast as my aged legs could move.

She held the axe up, poised for another swing. Water seeped from an open wound on the cactus; another blow would be final.

"Stop Maisie, you crazy bitch."

"Oh, shut up Harold. You fool. The cactus hates you Harold, all of us."

"No Maisie," I walked towards her, one careful steady step after another, her enraged eyes felt like they stared right through me. The downpour soddened the garden soil, the cactus gash continued to seep more and more water as Maisie held the axe high.

"Say goodbye to it."

She took a swing.

A spiny stem clasped her wrist, preventing the blow, the axe fell as the spines tore most of her flesh away to the elbow; another prickly stem wrapped tight around her neck, a sickening crackle as I heard it break.

I fell back into the wet grass, whimpers, lips trembled, I stared at the horror before my eyes.

I could only watch as it consumed her, the spines withdrew every drop of blood, not a drop spilt, till her pallid skin tightened against the bone. Then the rest of her, every bone crackled under the sheer force of the prickly stems as it pulled her carcass into the soil before it buried her body deep beneath the roots.

I cried out in terror, yet I also felt released. I could hear screams all over the neighbourhood. Shattering glass, and shrill yells then a sudden silence.

Mother Nature now snapped at my front door.

Then it felt like a thousand nails just stabbed me, I bolted upright and scurried to the doorway.

Each blade of grass strained in my direction, my blood smeared across them.

And now.

Here I stand, in my once pleasant garden, no longer in a peaceful world. I stood still as I accepted my destiny, too old to run, reminded of the Anthony D. Williams quote.

I knew my happy moments were short lived. As I peered at each blade of grass stretching in my direction, as the neighbours' trees strained, snap, snap, as they uprooted themselves slowly.

Even my cactus, nature had other plans for my pride and joy.

I just stood there, eyes shut, the rain pitter-pattered on my face and weary eyelids.

Ahead, I could hear the cactus, slowly, surely, it wrenched itself from the soil.

Now, it came for me.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Stephen Crowley writes short horror stories from micro-fiction length of 1000 words up to short tales reaching several thousand words. He is based in Leeds, England. Inspired by early horror movies and great authors including Stephen King and James Herbert, Stephen spends his free time honing his writing style. For some time, Stephen has entered global flash fiction and short story competitions.

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#### No Through Road | Reena Dobson

Vid strode out of the cabin and slammed the door behind him. Hard. The windows shuddered in protest as the noise echoed up angrily into the surrounding hills.

All this claptrap about ghosts and evil spirits. Who in their right mind still believed in that rubbish? Besides stupid, inbred locals. And of course his darling gullible wife, Lettie. Vid let out his derision in a short laugh.

He couldn't believe Lettie was buying into anything the dumb cabin owner said. But there she was, listening with wide eyes, gushing one "Oh my God" after another. Almost, Vid's eyes narrowed and his fists clenched reflexively at the thought, as if Lettie was challenging him.

Vid glared up at the grey sky. This stupid weekend getaway had been Lettie's idea. He'd only agreed to it because she had suggested the idea in front of his boss. His boss would've called him a wuss and more if he hadn't said yes. Now he was stuck in some dead-end place, in the middle of nowhere, hours from civilisation, without any phone reception and a decrepit box of a TV with no channels on it. And the only other human being for miles around was the dumb cabin owner.

Vid popped the boot of the car. Lucky he'd stopped at McQuaine's Liquor Supplies on the way and stocked up on booze. Lettie hadn't wanted him to, he could tell, but she knew better than to say anything. Vid permitted himself a grim smile. He fished a can of beer out of the cooler box, slammed the boot down hard and walked away. Lettie's dumb idea for this dumb trip, she could load and unload the car by herself. That'd teach her.

Within 20 metres of walking, the cabin was buried in an avalanche of swelling bumps and hills. If Vid hadn't been standing on a sealed road, he wouldn't have believed anyone lived around here.

He looked around with a sneer. It was a real godforsaken hole. There was the single road beneath his feet cutting through the grassy hills. But in every direction, on every horizon, trees massed and gathered at the edges of the grasses. Like a huge army under a sombre sky, coiled in waiting, watching silently for the command to attack.

Vid scowled as a small breeze slunk around the back of his neck. "If I had my way," he spoke loudly, "I'd get some civilisation happening. Bulldozers, builders, landscapers, mobile phone towers, a couple of pools and get a proper holiday resort happening. Yeah, and a spa! The rich bitches love all that crap!"

He mimed a machine gun at the silent line of trees from his left all the way around to his right. "Yeah. All of this. Gone." He nodded, feeling slightly better. He took another swig of beer and started walking again.

The road under his feet didn't stay sealed for long. Roots and lines of grass and weeds began to carve through the road like veins, until there was only the faintest memory of tar by the time Vid reached the tree line. He stood, hands on hips to glare at the battered wooden

sign at the end of the road, which had crude, hand-carved letters weathered into near-nothingness: 'No through road'.

Beyond the sign, the trees stood close together, dark greens and browns; trunks, branches, bushes, foliage, vines and tendrils cloistered close and prickly. Damp earth, rotting bark, moss, and a vague stink of mildew tickled at his nostrils. Leaves shuffled and murmured all around Vid, and he felt the weirdest sensation he was being watched.

He turned away. A cold wind trickled down his spine. The leaves hissed and whispered loudly at each other. An unwelcome spray of goosebumps spilt onto Vid's torso, and his belly constricted. He suddenly felt small as the trees and sky loomed very big. Exaggerated whispers of ghosts hid in his thoughts. He felt very far from home, far from anything familiar and averted his gaze to scowl at the ground. He would head back and tell Lettie exactly what he thought of her idea to come here. Yeah, that's what he was going to do.

But then he paused.

Vid doesn't get scared. Vid makes people scared. Vid never walks away. His Dad's voice yelled in his head, like it always did when that churning began in his gut. His Dad's advice had always been spot on.

Vid threw his shoulders back and turned to face the forest. He drank the last of the beer noisily. "No. Screw this. You know what? I'm coming back here. With bulldozers. All this..." He forced a grin onto his face and made a rude gesture with his fingers, "...virgin land is gonna be mine!"

He crumpled up the empty beer can and hurled it into the trees, where it was silently swallowed.

But the gesture wasn't enough. Vid had to make his stamp. Now. Prove he was a man. He stepped beyond the sign. He kicked at leaf litter, yanked aside some vines, heaved two large decaying branches aside and tramped down on ground cover; he was starting a path.

"It's gonna be a through road soon enough!" Vid took a couple of swaggering steps in the cleared space, bluffing his confidence back.

Leaves rustled angrily around him. Vid ignored it. He swaggered some more, forcing a sneer to his face. The rustling increased.

Above Vid's head, a branch cracked soundlessly from a tree and crashed onto his right shoulder. Vid dropped to the ground, sliding head-first down a small incline. The branch, thicker than his thigh, pinned him down in a cruel one-armed hug. Dazed, Vid stared up at a looming canopy in black-green. Pain crashed into him a split-second later and his heart thudded like a machine gun in his ears.

Vid flailed and twisted in useless, animalistic panic. Eventually, he subsided, panting and exhausted, the realisation sinking in heavily: he wasn't freeing himself. His arm was still pinned; he now realised his feet were tangled in vines, and weren't quite touching the ground. Pain

sank through his body in a flood and loamy air filled his nostrils again. Vid's face contorted and a blubbering sound spilled out of his mouth with saliva.

Lettie. Lettie would find him. He wasn't far from the road. And there was only one road. Only one road, one way. Even she would know where to look for him. She had to find him. Lettie, his saviour. He spat out a sobbing laugh.

Suddenly thinking she might be right there, Vid screamed for help as loudly as he could manage until his voice dried up into a choked rasp. But he had barely heard himself, as though the forest was absorbing any noise he could make.

Vid bashed the ground uselessly with his free hand, raking at leaves, air and soil, whatever was in reach. His fingers felt and closed around a branch and he clutched it like a life-line. Only then did he realise it was a vine, not a branch. And it was punctuated with evil thorns. He tried to let go, but the vine arched and plunged deep, vicious bites into his arm and wouldn't relinquish its hold.

Vid cried, his body dry-heaving and shuddering. "This is stupid!" He gibbered the words out loud. He wasn't clutzy like this; Lettie was!

Cold fear scraped over him like ice when he first felt and then saw tendrils reaching out and tapping around his imprisoned body like scientists pawing over specimens in a lab. Vid knew with a sudden stomach-churning certainty: the forest was alive. It was doing this to him deliberately. Terror sank into his pain and Vid shivered violently. What stories had that dumb cabin owner told? He couldn't remember. Ghosts? No, spirits. Evil, malevolent ones that chewed up humans.

As if recognising that Vid now knew, the forest threw aside all pretence. Leaves shuffled eagerly and the canopy leered down in anticipation. The wind sighed, whined and laughed softly. The trees seemed to move closer.

Vid thrashed furiously. The vines tightened tenderly around his legs. Splinters, one after the other, began stitching themselves through his body with agonising care and burning precision. Tendrils followed, blooming through his body under his skin.

Vid wailed and a tendril tapped eagerly into his mouth. Vid bit down frantically and spat the green worm-like texture out of his mouth and clamped his lips tightly shut. Other tendrils took its place, tapping teasingly, caressingly at his ears, his nose, his eyes. Bark, decomposing and mildewed, bloomed on his head like bacteria.

Lying there half-suspended, limbs trapped, blood soaking into the soil and his eyes and mouth screwed shut, Vid realised he was becoming part of the forest's consciousness. He saw what they saw. A great grey sky overhead growing steadily darker; rich damp earth wriggling and living beneath; the grassy hills which had been brutally stripped bare of their rightful trees and which were slowly being reclaimed; animals who tread through with caution; and puny humans who had learnt to keep their distance.

In the distance, Vid saw Lettie get into the car, unclip her hair, wind down the window and drive away. She was smiling like he'd never seen her smile.

Vid opened his eyes and mouth and screamed out all of his fury and disbelief. The forest allowed him his last useless shred of anger; it picked up his scream and sent it echoing outwards into the sky and hills.

Then a tendril whipped into Vid's open mouth and strangled his tongue with glee, and the forest fell upon him in earnest to cannibalise him whole.

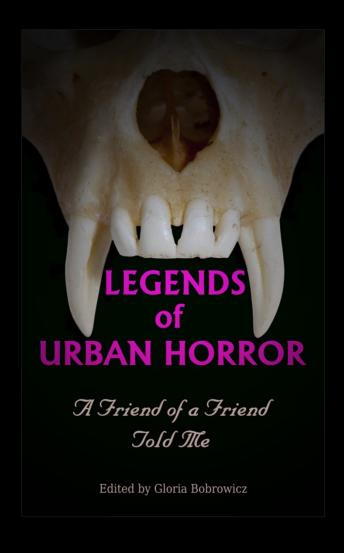
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**: Reena Dobson began pursuing her creative writing with a vengeance when she realised the world was never going to stop and give her the time to write. She now writes in the margins, in trains, in sunshine and under cover of darkness. When she's not writing, she's dreaming about what she'll be writing next.

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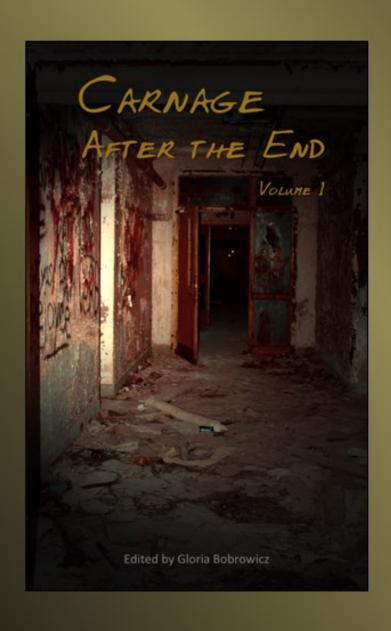
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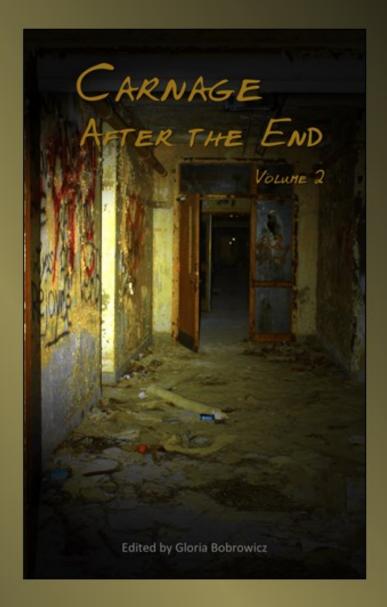
### Legends of Urban Horror: A Friend of a Friend Told Me

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In a world where society has collapsed and terror lurks around every corner, no one can be trusted and nothing can be taken for granted...





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#### The Red Plague | Matthew Wilson

In the hottest August in living memory, the ladybugs came out. No, we didn't go to Rhyl because it was new or exciting, it was just the cheapest bit of coast that Mom could afford. So soon after the divorce, she figured her two boys needed something to take her mind off the change of atmosphere.

Honestly, Philip and I were just pleased that there would be no more shouting matches. The chance to play arcade machines and walk the beach were just bonuses of a bad situation.

Until the ladybugs came. Locals told us there was an annual explosion of the little devils. The warm air and an abundance of food made them multiply worse than rabbits. They lay as thick as red snow upon the ground and I felt so bad of how a single footstep would crush dozens, I started staying in the little hut more and more.

I didn't like their raisin sized red shells, bulging painted white eyes and twitching mini - jaws.

Mom kicked me out. She hadn't paid £42.50 for the weekend for me to stay in and play video games. I'd better get some sun on me before we headed home! I don't remember exactly when the screaming started. On the beach, children grabbed handfuls of scuttling ladybugs and threw them at one another for devilment, drains overfilled with the things and in an already losing war; pest controllers walked the streets with leaf blower like things blasting the things back to the sea.

I daren't buy an ice cream for fear 100 of them would stick to it, attracted by the sweet smell of sugar. We had to cover our mouths with scarves to stop breathing them in when they fell like blood rain. A great breeze collected them as easy as rust coloured leaves and threw them at us for spite.

It began at 5 o'clock. That's when I noticed the stabbing pain in my leg. They were not my favourite thing in the world, but I'd never been scared of bugs — that was strictly a girlie thing. Phil and I had stuff to do and no army of aphid eaters was going to get in our way. They were harmless. In all of history as many people had died from ladybugs as meteorites. As long as we covered our mouths while we walked, things were fine.

Until one of the devils bit me. It felt like a small dog had sunk its fangs into my shin. I yanked my trouser legs up and saw an angry red bump appear like a contained outbreak of chickenpox.

Philip laughed at my pettiness, thinking it a ploy to attract some passing pleasant looking girls. Then he screamed too when two of the things nipped his ear lobe, dangling there like strange jewellery and we ran for the nearest building like fire was falling from the sky.

Old men were as effective as crushing the things with their walking sticks as a fool draining the ocean with a bucket. Some had heart attacks and others dived for the water. The bugs waited on the water like red oil freed from a canister and entered their ears and mouths when their small heads broke the surface like a flesh coloured island.

"How can small teeth hurt so bad?" Phil moaned, throwing off his shirt as we staggered drunk on ladybug poison into the arcade. His back was as bright red as his favourite football shirt. He looked like he'd fallen asleep on the beach and been badly burned by the sun.

The things had lost their laziness now and didn't just let the wind flutter them down to

the ground. They flapped their wings and followed the scent of flesh. They covered men and women from head to toe, going for the softest part of the body. The eyes.

"We gotta lock the doors," the arcade manager said. He didn't have to ask twice for volunteers.

"There are people still out there," I said but he didn't care. To make doubly sure, he snapped the key off in the lock when the doors sealed shut.

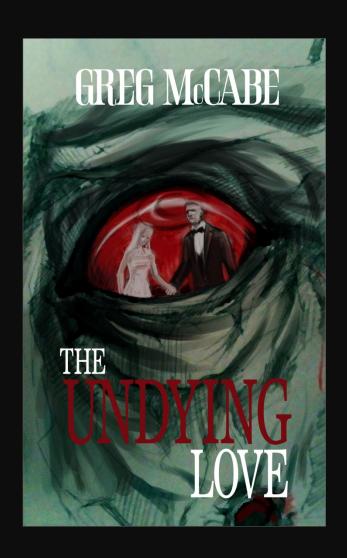
"Not for long," the manager mourned and thankfully he was right. The screams did not last long.

"Hell of a holiday," Phil said beside me as for the first time since we were very little we held hands.

And watched the ladybugs fall like raisins from the sky.

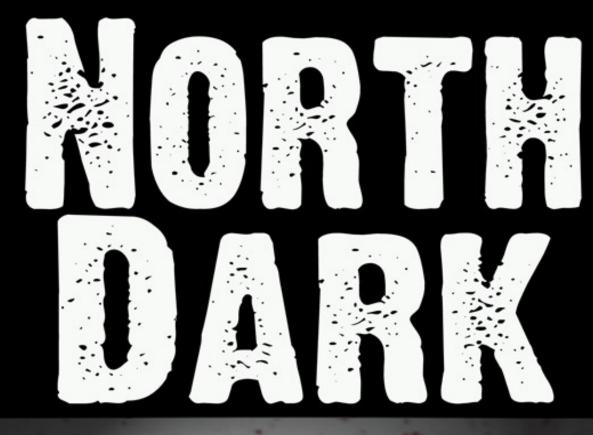
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Matthew Wilson has had over 150 appearances in such places as *Horror Zine, Star\*Line, Spellbound, Alban Lake, Apokrupha Press, Space & Time Magazine* and many more.

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# The Undying Love by Greg McCabe

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LANE KARESKA

#### **Poison** | Calvin Demmer

Merrick had taken over the business from his father. He hated it. He slammed the pickup door, and cursed beneath his breath when he saw the business' name on the side of the vehicle. Dayton's Gardening Services, it read. He entered the yard of the old Victorian-styled home, glancing at its turrets and bay windows, and made his way to the backyard.

The backyard was impressive in its size—but not to Merrick, as size just meant more work—and it stretched out all around him. The yard had its own fruit and vegetable areas to his left, some trees towered in the far back, and all sorts of flowers bloomed to his right. Merrick walked towards one of the wooden chairs on the deck overlooking the back yard. There was a small cactus plant in a pot alongside the chair. He kicked it over.

"That lazy son of a bitch," he said as looked over the yard. Merrick had realized that the yard looked a little too good.

The house had been purchased by some company, who did not want the impressive backyard. In fact, Merrick had an idea they planned to level the house after leveling the yard, and he could not blame them. He'd grown to hate nature, even though it kept him with a job. There had been an obstacle in the sale however, the old owners, an elderly couple, had wanted the plants and some of the trees to be moved to a place where they could continue to live or be given to people who would want them.

That had been when Merrick had gotten the call from the company. He had assured them all the plants and trees that could be saved, would be. That had been a lie of course. Merrick had played this game before and he had never lost. He knew the company didn't really care what happened as long as the sale went through smoothly. And he also knew that the couple would never check up on the work, they never did. The idea of preserving some of the plants they had worked hard on was just a way for them to feel better about selling their beloved home.

Merrick had a way to get rid of these types of yards quickly and reasonably effortlessly. The previous day he had sent his employee, Diego, to spread some of the special home made poison he had concocted. This poison would weaken roots and branches and start the process of killing all plants and any other life in the yard. In two days, a team of his guys would come and clear out the remains.

Merrick snapped his fingers. Just like that and the problem backyard will be gone, he thought. But things had not gone to plan. The yard was lush and full of vigor. He could not see any vegetables or fruits lying on the ground; he could not see the yellow tinge the plants should have had by now. He realized Diego had once again forgotten to do his job.

Feeling the frustration rise within, Merrick made his way back to his pickup. The only saving grace was that he had all that was required to do the job himself. He would sort Diego

out later. He returned to the backyard, placing everything down on the deck. He reached for a long blade that he sometimes used to cut down irritating branches and vines.

He made his way to an area of flowers, ignoring the orange gazanias and the pink coneflowers. A large bush of deep red roses had attracted his attention. He swung the blade, and it glided through the air. The strike was pure, and a rose, now under the spell of gravity, fell to the ground. Merrick of course, had many hours of practice with the blade. He also found that taking it to a few flowers every now and again was a great stress reliever. Merrick continued, and soon roses began to pile at his feet.

He heard a loud crack from the far end of the yard, behind some of the trees. He paused, to look at the area where the sound had emanated from. Nothing showed itself and he attributed the noise to a branch breaking, which made him grin. He was however done with the rose bush and started jumping around the other flowers, imagining himself a ninja on a mission as he sent other flowers to the ground. There was no goal as there had been with the rose bush, now he was intoxicated with joy, and took aim at whatever took his fancy.

The crack sound came again, and Merrick got a fright. He stopped his actions, and listened, while feeling his hand clench the blade's handle even tighter. He heard rustling, like something moving through the bushes at the back of the yard. He could not see anything with all the trees so near to one another. He spat at the ground, annoyed at having been startled by some little critter.

But the annoyance didn't dissipate, it grew to anger. Merrick looked at the blade in his hand. "All right you brave little shit, let's see what you got," he said aloud.

He left the area where most of the flowers were, and walked over the lawn till he reached the path that led towards the back of the yard. The trees stood tall and all sorts of bushes had begun to grow free on the ground. The blade dangled at his side, as he raised his ears, hoping to locate the critter. He heard the rustling, but it was quick to determine the exact direction it came from. He didn't hesitate however, and marched with intent into the back area of the yard, ducking below the branch of the first tree he passed.

\*\*\*

Merrick was surprised how wild everything looked, it hadn't seemed that way when he checked out the place a few weeks back. If one forgot they were in the backyard of someone's home, they could be forgiven for thinking they traversed a forest. He looked up, and could still see the blue sky above. He turned around, but the house and backyard had become obstructed by the trees in his wake. He walked on, but had to navigate carefully over the low growing bushes, as the path had ended a few steps ago.

Insects began buzzing around his face and he tried in vain to swat them away. The spicy earthy smell caused his nose to itch. Why did I ever agree to takeover from the old man, he thought, I hate nature.

He started to notice a dirt path beginning to form along the ground, and decided to follow it. He hadn't heard the critter again, and had even considered leaving it. The poison would get it after all. Then he cursed, realizing he would need to come this way again when he started spraying the poison. Should have brought the gear with me, shit, he thought. The frustration caused him to push on; killing the critter would help ease another shitty day.

Merrick knocked away some branches, and was hit by a strong citrus smell. He entered an area surrounded by tall sloping trees. In the middle was an orange tree, the path thinned and made its way all around the tree. He took a step toward the tree.

An ominous chill shot down his spine. He heard the rustling. He scanned the area around the tree, but there was nothing. "Tricky one," he said. His cellphone rang, causing him to jump on the spot. He launched into a tirade of expletives as he checked who was calling. It was his ex-wife; he killed the call, added a few choice obscene words to finish his tirade, and looked at the tree. He had noticed the time on his cellphone and realized he needed to get going.

"Alright you little shit," Merrick said aloud. "I don't where you're hiding but you won't escape the other surprise I'll have for you in a few."

He had decided to go back and begin the process of spraying the poison. But he couldn't resist temptation and decided to grab a couple of the oranges. *No point in them all going to waste,* he thought.

When he reached the deck, he prepared the sprayer and poison. He started from one side of the yard and made his way down. He decided to do a crisscross pattern through the trees and bushes. And still Merrick could not shake the feeling that the plants had grown wilder than what would be possible since he had last inspected the place.

Every now and again he would have to use his blade to make his way through. And it wasn't until he heard a clink sound, caused by hitting the fence around the yard, that he realized he had made it from one side of the yard to the other. *That's odd,* he thought. He wondered why he had not run into the area where the orange tree had been. He had wanted to give an extra dose of the poison to that area to make sure the critter found its mortal end. He shrugged, relegating missing the area as a fluke. He didn't have time to search for it either; he hoped to hit a few balls at the driving range before heading home.

He packed up, knowing that in two days he could send some of his employees to clean up the remains, and then he could collect a nice check. As he climbed into his pickup, he made a mental note to ask them if they found any small animals lying around. He started the engine, the oranges he'd taken sat alongside him. *They do look good*, he thought.

\*\*\*

Merrick was sprawled out over a sofa in his lounge. He reached for a glass of orange juice on the coffee table. He couldn't help but laugh; he'd used the oranges from the home he'd been to earlier that morning to make the juice. Not only was he being paid to clear out the backyard, but he also got something to quench the thirst. "Ahhhhh," he said as he took a sip.

He reached for his cellphone. It was time to deal with Diego. His neck began to itch the more he heard the phone ring. *Pick up, Diego, you lazy S-O-B,* Merrick thought.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Diego?"

"Ah, yes, Mister Dayton. How are you?"

"Listen Diego, the Rubbec Company's property. You were meant to have started killing all that shit yesterday already?"

"I did Mister Dayton. Yesterday morning just as you said."

"Don't bullshit me. I was there this morning. The damn place looks as healthy as a young forest. I can accept a slip up here and there, but lying, I will not stand for that."

But Mister Dayton, I was there. I sprayed the whole yard, everything. I even used a bit more of your stuff just to be sure. That place should have been as yellow as the sun today. Just like when I did the Wendell place."

"I know how the place should've looked, Diego," Merrick could feel the heat rising up from his neck. He would not be lied to. For someone to think him a fool, and for that someone to be an employee, that would not stand. "Listen, Diego. You're fired. Come in and get your shit tomorrow."

"But Mist-"

Merrick killed the call. Labor was easy to replace, there were always desperate people out there. He tossed his cellphone towards his feet, and reached for the glass of orange juice, only to notice the color in the glass seemed off.

The orange juice had turned green. He could feel a knot in his stomach, and then a sharp pain ripped through his core. It almost felt as if something was growing within. He tried to reach for his cellphone at his feet, but some strange liquid blocked his eyes. He inhaled the copper smelling stuff and realized it was blood, *his own*.

Merrick toppled off the couch and tried to scream, but blood started to come up his throat. The pain was immeasurable. He squirmed on the floor as his insides felt as if they were being mangled with a big blender. He couldn't see past the blood curtain before his eyes, but he could feel something moving within his own brain. The pain was unlike anything he could have imagined. And then it was gone.

Darkness was all.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Calvin Demmer is a freelance writer, currently residing in South Africa. When not writing, he is intrigued by that which goes bump in the night and the sciences of our universe.

Amazon: http://www.amazon.com/Calvin-Demmer/e/B00P96CDYQ



#### Nettle Milk | Donna Cuttress

There was a rip in the palm of her hand from forefinger to thumb pad. Blood ran onto the plastic cover of the map. She held it still, pressed her scarf against it and raised her arm in good first aid fashion, waiting for it to clot. Sitting on a large rock at the side of the path, she dropped her bag. It felt wet beneath her, cold, but she needed to sit. Everything felt damp, the trees, the valley, always in constant shadow, never warming. Gnats buzzed around her face, she spat one from her mouth and began batting them away with the map. Lauren was glad this area was going to be flooded for the reservoir, she couldn't wait to hand in her report. 'Drown it all,' she'd write on it.

She examined the ancient, cracked trunk of the tree to see what she'd cut her hand on. Lauren had rested, stopping on the descending path, just touching the bark, breathless, needing something to lean against. It had ripped her hand open. Searching, she looked for what had hurt her. Long nettles had grown around the base of the tree, taller than she had seen before, so she gently pushed them down with her boot to get a better look. There was nothing. No rusty nail, or jagged branch. No glass shard or animal bone set into the trunk. She'd heard about country people doing weird stuff like that, but there was nothing.

Lauren peeked under the scarf. The blood flow had ceased. Reluctantly she carried on. That sick feeling returned, the dread she'd felt getting out of the car. She'd only come here because the surveyor's initial report was so sparse and he wasn't answering his calls or emails. That claustrophobic, cloying feeling swamped her, surrounded by this gloomy scene.

How could those do-gooders want to stick a preservation order on this hole?

She looked at the map again. Huge red circles were drawn onto it, showing the areas that would be flooded; a rundown village and some depressing woodland. A deep valley that no one could farm, had no nearly endangered species of any kind, what was so special about this place? Struggling one handed, she grappled with the handle of her pack, and threw it onto her shoulder. Her ass felt wet from the rock, she pulled at the damp patch on her trousers.

"Fucking place!" Lauren muttered, stuffing the map into her pocket and began on the path again, wondering when was the last time she had a tetanus shot. There was no romantic dappled sunlight or blue bells tinkling in the undergrowth. This place was dank like a bog.

The perfect place to dump a body...

Lauren began to walk quicker, grabbing the map again. She wanted to reach the centre of the circle, the 'x marks the spot', to fix the point in her head where the demolition work would begin. It was quiet, no birds singing no streams babbling, she could only hear her own breathing and the clopping of her heavy new boots on the muddy path.

She saw a yellow pole emerge, the marker the surveyor said he had left, and almost ran toward it. His email had been skeletal, terse almost. Bland details about the soil and vegetation. He never came into the office and asked not to be contacted regarding the reservoir, citing

other work commitments. They had assumed he wanted nothing more to do with the dig because he had been gotten at by the protesters who lingered outside their building.

Lauren stopped at the pole that was slowly being camouflaged with nettles and thorns. She stood on the overgrowth to expose the yellow painted metal. It sprang back up immediately.

"So this is it. The future site of the reservoir."

Her voice sounded strange, she swallowed the bitter taste left on her tongue. Coughing up what she thought was thick phlegm, she spat it out hitting the toe cap of her boots. It was thin white water. It ran from her sinuses as she quickly wiped her nose on her sleeve. Stringy white mucus hung from her face.

"Jesus!"

She wiped her face on her tee shirt and stepped away from the pole to look for her bag. It had gone. Disappeared. Looking around her she wiped her hands on the legs of her trousers, shifting the scarf bandage. The wound on her hand had stopped hurting, it had almost healed. She dropped the scarf to get a better look at it. Flies began to settle on her hand, she shooed them away, and looked it closely. She was sure she could see spidery thin lines under her skin; green, hair thin, imitating her spindly blue veins. She wrapped the scarf around it again thinking it was infected, denying what she had seen. She would take her photographs of the valley before it was flooded, and get to a doctor. This place would end up at the bottom of a reservoir, rotting forever and she was happy.

Her hand began to itch; she scratched it as she searched for the path which had melted into the undergrowth,

"So this is the end of the line?"

She wrestled her camera from her coat pocket, and searched for some daylight. The tree canopy blocked out almost all of the sun. Lauren wondered how anything grew here. The first sting, an irritation, a small nip of a wound on her shin, made her stop. It felt like a razor cut. Nettles and bracken lay across her boots, limp and dead looking. As she scratched her leg she thought about her mother. They had been clearing their overgrown garden, when she was a child. Complaining neighbours had been too vocal behind their net curtains. Lauren had been stung by the nettles that hid under the shrubs, her mother had searched frantically for a dock leaf to rub on those raised lumps on her hands.

"You've got to watch out for those things Ren, they reach out for you when you pass them. One sting is bad, many would kill you, sting you to death. Especially when they weep. Big white tears, like acid," she had muttered while Lauren watched her palm turn a vivid green from the leaf. An old wives tale she had laughed at then, but as she scratched her leg now she wondered.

Did they reach out for you? And where's a dock leaf when you need it?

She wanted to leave and turned back the way she had come, but the path had completely dissolved into the greenery. She tried to stand on the vegetation, but the growth was too thick and seemed to be swelling in size. She was being stung, thorns ripping at her coat, she stopped and grasped the yellow surveyor pole clinging to it like a buoy at sea.

"Don't panic, they're just nettles, and thicket. Just plants!"

She looked for the path again. Her hand had become sweaty holding the camera. The pains in her leg became severe; she felt her veins almost popping from beneath the skin. The floor of the forest was moving, stealthy, snake-like about her.

She dropped the camera into her pocket. Flies had begun settling on her face, sticking to the sweaty beads, crawling into the crevices of her eyelids. She shook her head, smacked at the air to move them.

There was a shift in the scene. Something definitely moved. She tried to see but the flies were everywhere and sweat ran down her forehead into her eyes. She had to calm herself, her breathing was becoming too fast. Was she in shock? She was going to pass out, only she couldn't she'd be lost in this undergrowth, in these woods and no one would know, no one would come for her. She gripped the yellow pole, the only marker in this green wilderness, the only thing to stand out.

Surely they'll see it and find me!

She collapsed onto the ground, dizzy, almost tripping, staring up at the imaginary faces that watched her from the trees. Ancient, grotesque faces, merged with leaves and branches, watching her, staring at her. Her breathing became shallow and she passed out gasping for breath, fearful of the stings and rips of the thorns.

Lauren awoke, sat cross legged, stooped over, groggy with such intense pain she could not move for it. Her eyes were so swollen, she could barely see through them, her hands inflated, skin stretched to splitting point at the knuckles.

It's a reaction, a bad reaction to the cut, I need adrenaline, or something.

She sat in a small circular clearing, on a smooth, flat stone surrounded by the nettles and bracken, thorns and thicket. She touched her bare feet. Where were her boots? Her feet had been stung especially on the sole, she tried to stand but the pain as the blisters burst exposing the raw skin was too much. The forest had hobbled her, bound her feet so she could not run. She screamed, loud and guttural. Unable to stand properly, unable to take her chances and run she shouted, her voice still feeling thick, as her throat constricted.

"I'm glad you're getting flooded! I'm glad all this will be gone, buried under water. You'll be gone, drowned."

Who was she shouting at? She spat out the white milk that had began to gather at the back of her mouth and under her tongue. She wiped it from her eyes as she cried in anger. It ran down her nose, burning the minute hairs and her septum raw. The blisters on her hands began to weep, she tried to wipe them on her jeans but the pain was too severe. She was a

prisoner here. The woods had captured her. This was it. She sat perfectly still, it was the only way the pain would cease, and watched the blanket of nettles in the dim twilight, slowly begin to weep thick white drips from the tips of their leaves. Jagged edged and lethal in numbers, they cried opal coloured drops that would burn her skin. Collectively, the forest waited for her to move, daring her. When nobody came after shouting and screaming, when there was no one to wipe her white tears after crying for so long, she forced herself to stand, yelling in anger and pain, shaking, trying to see a way out and thought about taking that first step. But the ground shook, trembled and gently moved toward her. As the last rays of dim light faded she felt the bitter taste of the nettle milk in her mouth. Stinging leaves forced their way up from her stomach, scratching her esophagus, spilling from her mouth. As she convulsed backward, she felt the swollen palms of her hands ripple. Her veins pumped with the white liquid that engulfed her lungs and began to drown her. Lauren had been poisoned before she even reached the inner depths of the valley and the forest. The canopy of the woods dropped lower, the ground vegetation slowly covered her, like water over the stones of a river bank, ensuring she would become just another layer of the rotting hummus of the copse.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Donna Cuttress is a speculative fiction/horror writer from Liverpool in the UK. She has worked with Sirens Call Publications before in their Women in Horror Month ezine editions. She has also had work published by Crooked Cat, Firbolg and Solarwyrm Press. Her work for Kace Tripp publishing is due for release soon.

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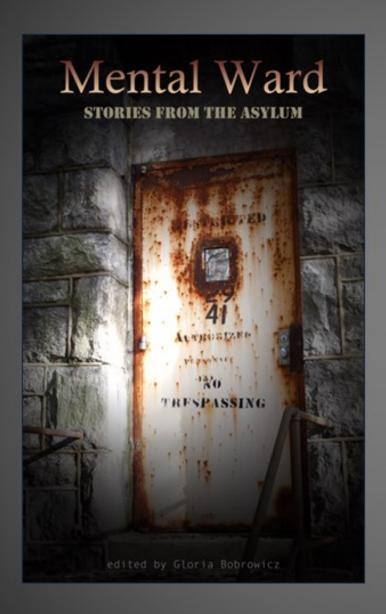
Blog: donnacuttress.wordpress.com

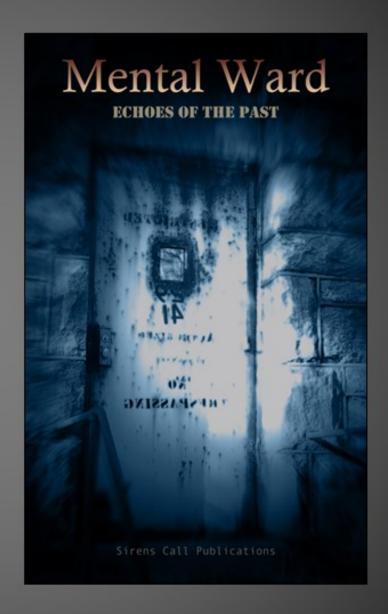
## Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed

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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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#### The Purge | Cinsearae S.

Many called it an act of God. Others called it 'Hell unleashed'. Then, there were those who simply knew what was going on in a more *spiritual* sense. It looked like something from out of a horror movie, completely illogical yet terrifying. It hit hard, harsh, and unyielding; the events spanning a length of merely three days, in every region of the planet.

Trees' roots exploded through the ground, rising up from the earth, piercing through the humans' feet, locking them in place if they were standing close enough. Branches and vines violently thrust themselves into human bodies through every available orifice, breaking bones, cracking skulls, tearing and rupturing human organs and skin, blood smattered on every twig and leaf, the defiled bodies becoming no more than grisly decor suspended high on every limb, left to rot in the scorching sun, to be picked at by carrion birds, or to become a warm, wet home to thousands of insect larvae.

Those that were on water fared no better. Swamps and marshes became soggy graves for victims of algae; the slimy plant life stealthily coasting on the surface of the water, sliding up boats, capsizing them, coating people in green mud and sludge, invading their mouths, choking them, while lily pads or other large-leafed foliage would slap themselves over human faces, suffocating them, reeds or roots pulling them down into a cold, waterlogged darkness forever. Those that lived in areas where carnivorous fish dwelled had no chance of escaping bloody deaths in the ocean if they happened to be in the water for recreational purposes or capturing fish for food. Barracudas, sharks, piranhas and more all took part in the watery genocide of any foolhardy humans. Coastlines ran red for days, remnants of flesh, skeletons, and half-eaten corpses floating listlessly around or washing up on beaches.

The earth itself would open up in the most obscure of places or the most populated, unexpectedly and without warning. Gaping holes either acres or miles wide swallowed humans whole, forcing them down into darkened, pitted depths they would never climb out of. Volcanoes erupted, melting humans in their bright-red lava wakes, burning and blackening their flesh. Earthquakes sounded, cracking the ground, collapsing buildings, breaking paved streets and highways; humans buried in the rubble of their own creations. This, in turn, caused tsunamis of astronomical heights to take out entire coastal cities and towns, continuing to wash hundreds of miles inland. Humans were crushed under the water-weight; homes, vehicles, bridges and structures slapped away as easily as a leaf blown away by the wind.

Those who took to the air, thinking they could escape the insanity on land, were attacked by all winged creatures great and small, birds willing martyrs as they clogged the engines or tangled the propellers of all flying machines, making humans plummet to their fiery deaths. Insects would swarm those same metal contraptions by the thousands, making their way inside through every crevice, driving the humans insane with their buzzing, stinging, and flying haphazardly around, all their swatting and batting at them futile.

It is known that causalities will happen on both sides of a war, but this would be a war the humans would not win. Mother had awakened, fed up with their parasitic, lecherous behavior, always taking without replacing, leaving filth everywhere without having the courtesy of cleaning up after themselves. Mining, fracking, dumping, spilling---always leaving messes behind, all because of their greed. Mother was tired of their ignorance, lack of discernment,

laziness and selfish attitudes.

Once, humans respected and revered Her, felt their connection to Her, knew they could not *exist* without Her. But how can man respect the one thing that gives him sustenance when he cannot even respect himself or his own kind? Now they were soulless, materialistic and vile, no more than dirt that needed to be washed off.

Purged.

She *demanded respect*. If the little puppets running amok on Her body refused to behave, then they needed to be punished until they learned their lesson.

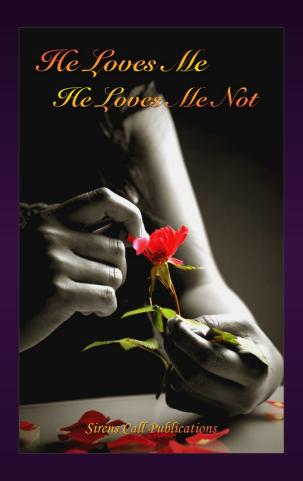
It was time to bring balance and begin to heal the wounds humans had inflicted on Her. Some would take hundreds of years to restore, but She had time.

When all is said and done, when buildings are built and razed, when man has come and gone, Nature will *always* remain constant and eternal.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Cinsearae S. is editor/publisher of Dark Gothic Resurrected Magazine and a cover artist for Damnation Books. She enjoys bringing her creepy flair to the world by creating creepy dolls and zombie babies on Etsy.com (search: MistressRae13). A big Vincent Price fan, she loves classic horror movies. Halloween is her favorite time of year and she keeps her house decorated year-round.

Twitter ID: @Cinsearae

Author website: <a href="http://BloodTouch.webs.com">http://BloodTouch.webs.com</a>



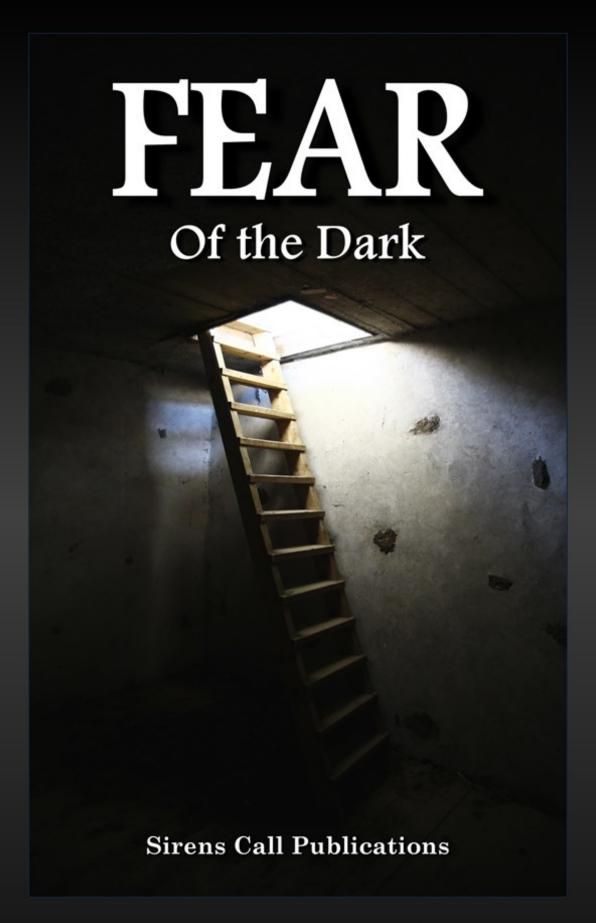
## He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not

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# Bent Metal



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#### The Hike | Brian Rosenberger

Herman was bored. Since losing his job, he was bored a lot. He missed the routine—going into work, performing the same functions, dealing with the same problems, seeing the same familiar faces, and then coming home to begin the cycle anew the following morning.

He'd been with the company seventeen years. Seventeen years in the same department. Herman programmed credit card machines, Point-of-Sale devices. Seventeen years of punching buttons and boxing the machines for shipment. The equipment occasionally changed with improvements in technology but the job remained basically the same. Faces came and went in the department; he was content. Then the company decided to outsource Herman's department. So much for company loyalty. They offered Herman a thank you for his years of service, a less than generous severance package, and a don't-let-the-door-hit-you-in-the-ass good-bye.

Herman promptly switched all his personal accounts previously with the company to that of their biggest competitor. He'd be damned if they were getting any more of his business.

The old routine was gone. Since his dismissal, Herman struggled to find a new routine. So far it consisted of breakfast, a few hours in front of the TV, a light lunch, hunting the job boards, dinner, more TV, and then resuming the humdrum cycle in the AM.

As far as routines went, it sucked. Bored out of his mind, he tried volunteering to stay busy, walking dogs. He'd sent in a few applications but was still waiting to hear something. The waiting was the worst.

He was putting on weight too. His former position required some movement. During peak season, it was like a day at the gym, lifting and moving boxes, prepping them for shipment. Too much time at home and too little exercise had caused a pronounced softness in his middle. Herman was depressed. Bad enough to be unemployed at his age; he had no desire to be both depressed and fat.

As a result, he'd started hiking. Now after he woke up around 9 AM (Herman saw no reason not to sleep in; it was one of the perks to being jobless), he'd hop in his car, make the 10 mile drive to the local national park, and hit the trails.

Herman enjoyed hiking. It cleared his mind. Herman could walk in peace and contemplate life. The trails were usually empty. Most people still had jobs to attend. A few joggers, people on horses, people walking their dogs, and fellow hikers but never a lot of traffic. Not like the weekends, when you had to avoid being trampled by packs of teenagers eager to improve their cross-country time. Herman had developed an almost stealth sense; he could side-step out of their way. Good thing too as the runners provided little warning of their advance.

The sun was shining when Herman arrived. Not a cloud in the sky. Only a few parked cars. He did a few preliminary stretches, deep knee bends, adjusted his headphones, and hit the trail. Today's musical accompaniment was Bruce Springsteen. Herman became a fan of *The Boss* late

in life but had really grown to appreciate the honesty and realism of his lyrics. He kept the volume at a minimum, no need to blast his eardrums. He preferred an audible level that allowed him to understand the lyrics. Plus, it allowed him to hear others coming up from the rear.

The trails were especially deserted. The last few days had seen a lot of rain. Herman assumed most people thought the trails would be too muddy. They were right. In places, the trails were still very wet. Good thing he thought ahead and wore his dirtiest shoes.

Because the ground was so muddy, Herman opted to follow a different trail. There was no way he could hike his normal path without losing a shoe in all the muck.

You'd sink in that stuff like quicksand, he thought to himself. He had no desire to gunk up his car. The Honda was dirty enough.

He didn't mind a new path. His only concern was he wasn't sure where this trail came out. No worries. It's not like he had any appointments. He didn't even wear a watch anymore; nothing to keep track of. He could always double-back if he was becoming lost. The last thing he wanted was to appear on the news — Lost Hiker Rescued by Search Dogs.

Herman saw a printed notice tacked to a tree. Once a month, a group of volunteers cleaned the trails, picking up trash, and removing debris. He'd seen the signage before and made a mental note to look into it. Maybe he could meet some new people. Networking never hurt.

Herman sensed someone was behind him. A quick backward glance and he stepped out of the way. A young woman in pink sweats passed him. Her dog, tail wagging, traveled in her wake. Herman smiled and received a courtesy wave. Cute. The dog wasn't bad either. Some kind of terrier. Herman was no dog expert. He was a butt connoisseur and that was one damn fine female rump.

The woman seemed more intent on exercise than making contact. That was pretty common. Usually just a nod or a hello. No long conversations about the global economy or the shrinkage of the bumble bee population. Understandable, Herman supposed.

Two, maybe three years ago, a woman had gone hiking and was raped and murdered on these trails. Decapitated, if Herman recalled the headlines correctly. The maniac had killed her dog too. Herman shuddered and tried to put such thoughts out of his mind.

The trails wound through actual Civil War battle sites. Plenty of ghosts if you believed in that sort of stuff. Herman didn't but still wondered if her ghost haunted these trails. At least, she'd have company. He was surprised no one had attempted to host some type of Ghost Tour along the trails. Tourists seemed interested in that kind of stuff. Some of the locals too he supposed. TV loved it. Herman recalled reading an article about a company that offered official Bigfoot sightseeing experiences—fur, feces, and footprints. The only way he'd pay for that is if a money back guarantee was offered. Probably not even then. Who in their right mind would

want to see Bigfoot? It's not like you'd wind up discussing who's going to win the GOP nomination, current movies, or new places to eat, Herman thought.

Herman passed a trail marker. The blue arrow indicated this way to the Unknown Soldier's grave. There were a few monuments and markers along the trails, even a pair of non-functioning cannons. The markers made for some interesting reading and the cannons were a popular picturing taking spot.

The trail was flanked by trees, tall trees blocking the sun, providing lots of shade. It was going to be a good hike, Herman decided. Mud or no mud. Maybe he would see the pink, jiggling jogger again.

The Boss was singing Working on a Dream when Herman sensed movement behind him. Not wanting to block any joggers, he stepped to the side. A quick turn revealed no one. He resumed his pace and again sensed something. He turned to look, taking off the headphones.

Nobody there.

He surveyed the scene; it was not uncommon to see deer in the woods. Nothing. Not even a squirrel or chipmunk. Come to think of it, Herman didn't hear any birds either.

From the corner of his eye, Herman caught movement on the ground. At first, he though it was the wind.

There was no wind.

He took a few steps, bent down to investigate. Just a pine cone. They littered the forest floor. Herman always thought of the cones as tree poop.

He chucked it into the woods, bouncing it off a tree.

Herman quickened his pace. Working up a sweat, he paused to wipe his brow. Herman was no botanist; the trees all looked the same to him. Pines most likely. He remembered collecting wildflowers in high school. His teacher, Mr. Buffy, liked to show Disney films during class. Buffy also doubled as the baseball coach. Herman must have watched "The Natural" a dozen times. It beat dissecting worms and frogs.

Back on the move, it wasn't long before he again sensed movement. He stopped, rubbed his eyes, not sure what he was seeing. It looked like grasshoppers jumping. But no grasshoppers were that big. Maybe toads but he'd never seen toads that could jump that high. He was no biologist either.

One of the jumping objects landed about a yard from Herman and rolled against his shoe.

Just a pine cone.

He stooped to pick it up.

"Ouch!"

He dropped the pine cone and looked at his hand. Blood dripped from his fingers.

"What the hell!"

He stomped the pine cone. The cone leaked a liquid green.

One of the cuts on his hand was pretty deep, bisecting the middle finger.

Herman didn't have time to inspect his wound too deeply.

More pine cones were jumping. Six. Then a dozen. Then more. When one bit his knee, he stopped counting and took off, fleeing the brown missiles.

Someone must be throwing the damn things but what would make them bounce let alone bite, Herman thought. He glanced behind him. With each jump, the cones seemed to be gaining ground, like they were collecting kinetic energy with each impact. Herman quickened his pace.

Poltergeist, Herman thought. He'd seen the Tobe Hooper film a few times, always squirmed at the maniacal puppet scene. But there's no damn Indian graveyard here.

He ran like the Devil, gasping for breath with each step. Hiking was a poor substitute for jogging. Herman had no endurance.

"Damn it," he swore to himself. Too many beers and buffets. How long could he keep up this pace? Not long enough was his fear. His heart thundered in his ears, his lungs aflame. He felt like he was going to puke from exhaustion. Even his fucking ribs hurt. He rested on a fallen tree. The forest was full of them. It was a graveyard of trees. One of the branches could have been part of a skeleton. Hesitant, Herman touched it.

Just a branch. Thank God.

"Help," he screamed as loud as his lungs allowed.

If he could only make it to his car, he'd be fine. Figure out what the heck was going on. Contact the authorities. Get a news crew out here.

Killer pine cones. Crazy. That wouldn't even make for a bad B movie.

He screamed again. This time it was answered by an all too familiar sound.

Gasping, he ran like Hell followed on his heels.

He ran nonstop. Ten minutes. Fifteen minutes, bordering on forever. Finally, he arrived at an open field. A field he recognized. The car couldn't be more than a quarter mile away. Most of it uphill.

Herman ran for his life.

He was getting close, so close, when he tripped on an unearthed root and went sprawling into brambles.

"Mistake," he grimaced.

Dusting himself off, he kept moving. No real damage although his elbows, scuffed beyond recognition, might never be the same.

He ran, ever wary of treacherous branches and roots.

Halfway up the hill, he heard crying. Stick to the trail, don't stray the path, his inner voice advised. He went to investigate anyway. Fucking conscience.

It was the terrier, covered in pine cones. The only trace of the dog was its muzzle and its tail, no longer wagging. No sign of the cute pink owner. He threw a rock at the pile of cones and ran.

Herman swore he'd never complain about the monotony of his life again.

Disregarding the trail, he ran into the woods, fighting branches with each step. He was close to the parking lot now. This shortcut was going to save his life.

A few more steps. Lungs an inferno. Finally, the blue Honda. Few cars haunted the parking lot. Herman wondered about the fates of their drivers.

Keys in hand, he heard the beep signaling the doors were unlocked.

Twenty feet. Fifteen feet.

To his left, he saw the shit storm.

Cones. There must have been a hundred of them.

Herman looped the headphones around his wounded hand and as the first pine cone came within striking distance, he swung with all his might, a would-be David, sending both the cone and the Walkman into the shadows of the forest.

It bought him a few seconds, just enough time to reach sanctuary. Inside, he turned the key. Unlike in horror films, the Honda immediately came to life. *AC/DC* blared from the stereo. Bon Scott singing, *Dog Eat Dog*.

He shifted gears as cones pelted his windshield.

"Weird weather we're having," he said to himself, tires squealing.

The pine cones were in his rearview now. No pursuit, just waiting, bouncing up and down, almost in anticipation. He adjusted the mirror to get a better look.

"Sayonara, suckers."

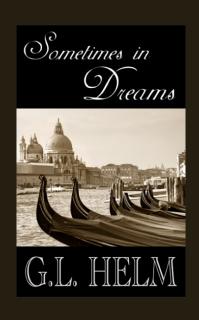
Distracted, Herman slammed the brakes. Too late. Tires screamed. Seconds before impact, Herman realized there was no avoiding the impossible—the tree that suddenly stepped in front of the car.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of As the Worm Turns and three poetry collections.

Facebook: www.facebook.com/HeWhoSuffers

## **Sometimes in Dreams** by G.L. Helm

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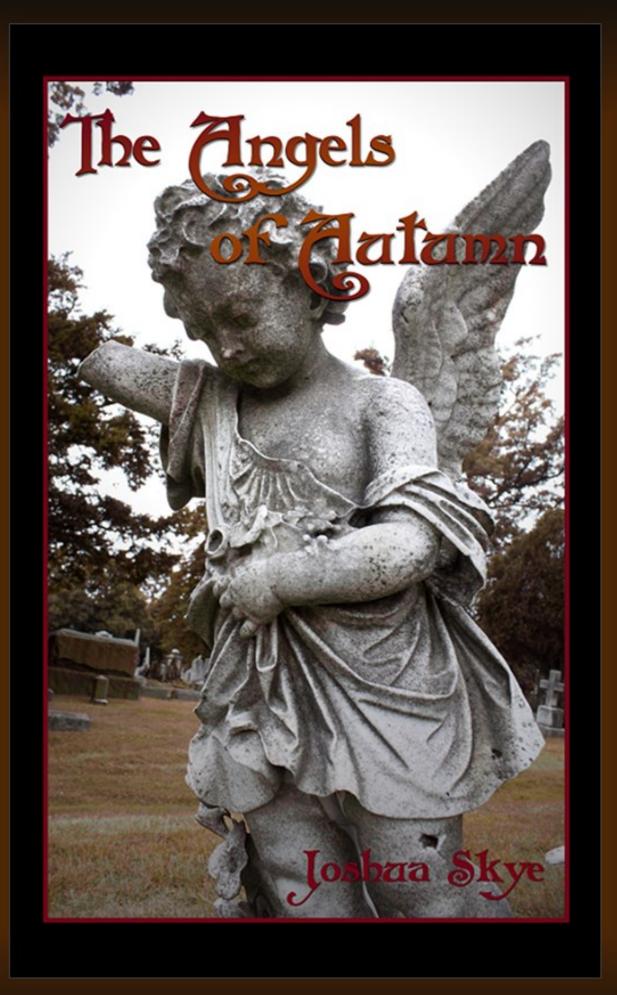
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#### Dry Spell | Adam Golub

Was his profile picture really current? It couldn't be. But there was the time stamp. Taken just a few days ago, on his back patio. This guy was too good to be true. Like he walked out of yesterday. So vital. So fresh and alive. So damn verdant. No one had plants like that anymore. Not since the drought started.

Joanna was suspicious. Of him and of me.

"Have you even bothered to look at his face, or you just looking at the kangaroo paws? You would never have gone for a guy like that back in the day."

True, he was no knockout. Heavy face, though it appeared well hydrated. Jowly. Thick around the middle. Bad haircut. Man-boyish. A definite hint of arrogance about him. But you could see droplets on the argyranthemums he knelt beside.

"Maybe I wouldn't have," I said. "But types change. Priorities change. Don't be so shallow."

And then there was the other photo. The one that really made my mouth water. That shirtless selfie. On his front lawn, giving the thumbs up in front of that sparkling, flowing, sixtiered fountain.

"Have you stopped to wonder how this could even be possible? It's either photoshopped or he's in violation of every California megadrought law ever passed and the police are headed to his house as we speak."

Whereas Joanna saw only red flags, I saw green. Green everywhere. Natural green, photosynthesis green, the kind of green we hadn't seen in a decade out here. And I pictured me in that green.

I had to meet this guy. Mr. "FineVine951."

"You know vine is just another word for creeper, right?"

"So you want me to keep dating guys who drink their own purified urine? Is that what you want?"

"We all drink our own purified urine," said Joanna. "You drink your own pee, princess." Not anymore, I thought. This guy was a cool drink of clean water.

**\***\*\*

Joanna made me promise to text her from dinner.

"And whatever you do, do not go back to his place," she said.

FineVine951 greets me at the restaurant with a rose. He's taller than I imagined, and better looking than his photos. His skin glistens, his hair shines, his eyes are moist and blue.

He makes me laugh. He asks me questions. He treats the waiter well. We order from the limited menu of rationed food and toast each other with imported wine.

When he excuses himself to go to the communal outhouse across the street, I text Joanna: "He's a bore. Leaving now. Gonna go to a late movie by myself."

Five minutes later I leave the restaurant with FineVine951 and follow him back along the 10 to his house in Riverside County. He lives 90 miles from L.A., way out in the desert. As I drive, I gulp down the three bottles of water he gave me in the parking lot from his trunk.

He lives in a big ranch house with a Mayan-style red pyramid roof. We park in the circular driveway that hugs an illuminated koi pond. I catch sight of the fountain from his photo, to the left of his front door, and it's gurgling at me. On his lawn, under the outdoor lights, I see rows and bunches of Peruvian lilies, Gloriosa daisies, catmint, coneflower, moonshine, mama bear manzanita, pineapple sage, western redbud. There are flowers and shrubs everywhere.

And they are being watered! His sprinklers are on, ticking, sputtering, spraying—oh how I missed that sound! I get out of my car and close my eyes, listening to the familiar whirr of water spitting out, falling through the atmosphere, landing on leaves and windows and asphalt. As I continue to listen, I hear another tone in the air, one I hadn't quite remembered, something like a faint, jangling chorus, with strains of tinny voices reverberating in the drizzle.

I open my eyes and steady myself on the hood of my car. Just then, a koi jumps out of the pond onto the driveway and slides into my heel. Its gills swell and recede, its panicky eye looks up at me, its mouth gulps rhythmically, as if it's singing along to the sprinklers' chorale.

FineVine951 picks up the fish and gently releases it back into the water. Then he looks me in the eye, winks, and smiles, the whole front yard flush and misting in the moonlight behind him.

\*\*\*

Inside, he asks if he can fix me a drink. Vodka if you have it, I say. In the kitchen, he opens the freezer door. "On the rocks okay?" Ice cubes. The man has ice cubes.

"Make yourself at home," he says as he shows me to the living room. "I'm going to freshen up."

I sit on the couch and sip my drink. Diffenbachia and snake plant dot his mantel. Cat palms line his picture window. A tray with a half dozen water bottles sits on his coffee table. I open one and down it. Then I drink another.

I hear the shower turn on in the bathroom across the hall. Steam comes out from under the door.

Showerheads had long been removed from all homes by order of the state of California, all non-essential pipes sealed up. Joanna was right: this guy was flouting every conceivable regulation. How did he get away with it? By law, I was required to report him.

I take moisturizer out of my bag and drench my face and arms. Then I suck on the ice cubes in my vodka tonic, one by one, enjoying the slow melt. Soon he returns, wearing a bathrobe and drying his wet hair with a hand towel.

"Want to go in the hot tub? I have a bathing suit that would fit you."

Maybe it's the vodka talking—or more likely the ice cubes—but I say yes.

I change in the same bathroom he has just showered in. The mirror is still fogged up. I lean over the sink and splash water on my face. I drink from the faucet. The bikini fits perfectly.

The back yard is as lush as the front of his house. With a second chilled vodka drink in one hand and a bottle of water in the other, I sit close to him in the hot tub. I could get used to this, I think to myself.

\*\*\*

The next morning I wake up next to FineVine951.

"Good morning," he mumbles, nuzzling up behind me.

He embraces me and I sink back into him. His lips—so moist even at dawn! I bet he doesn't have morning breath, either—pass tenderly over my back and the nape of my neck. I turn to face him.

He brushes the hair out of my eyes. "Sleep well?"

"Best sleep I've had in ten years," I say. "It must have been all of that water."

"What's that expression? Sleep 'til you're thirsty, drink 'til you're sleepy?"

"Something like that," I murmur.

He cups my head and kisses me.

It's a different kind of kiss.

Unlike any I've ever had before.

First my feet go numb. Then my legs seem to drain of all blood. Then my spine gets hot. I break out into a sweat—I'm drenching the sheets—but then all of the perspiration suddenly disappears, as if it's been sucked back into my body.

His mouth is closed around mine and we're breathing through each other. My head is spinning. I can't move.

My body feels like it's contracting, as if all of my extremities are moving in toward my stomach. Once they retract into my center, the different parts of me congeal. My legs and arms form a globule that starts to slide up my esophagus and my throat. And when it gets to my mouth, that coagulated lump of *me* suddenly liquefies. It's warm and salty, with a vague hint of vodka. I think I'm going to choke.

Then the liquid leaves me and flows into his mouth. And I've left me, too.

I'm sliding down his throat, in the dark, free falling. I splash down in his stomach, where I swish around for a few seconds before I ooze out through his skin, seeping through his pores onto the bed, then onto the floor, then through the walls, out into the front yard. All of a sudden I'm pooling in the top tier of the fountain and trickling down. Then I'm filling the koi pond and passing through fish gills and frogbit. I'm spraying through the sprinklers onto the lilies and daisies and catmint and coneflower. I'm bubbling up in his hot tub. Then I'm feeding the plants on the patio and the plants on the mantel and the plants by the picture window.

I scream a clanging, tinny scream that's lost in all the wet stuff.

Finally I settle into a neat square, some kind of plastic box. The lights go out and the temperature drops. I'm still and I start to freeze.

\*\*\*

Hours—maybe days—later, the light returns.

I'm removed from my box. I'm dropped into a glass. Vodka pours over me. I float and start to thaw.

"Make yourself at home," I hear FineVine951 say. "I'm going to freshen up."

I'm tilted and I rattle against the walls of the tumbler. The alcohol gradually recedes around me. I hear the shower turn on in the bathroom across the hall.

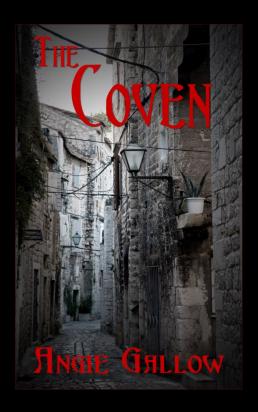
Then I'm plucked out of the glass and dropped into a warm, dark place.

As the drought rages on and California dies, my date charms another cotton-mouthed lonely heart and I become her slow melt.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Adam Golub lives in Southern California. He is an American Studies professor who teaches classes on popular culture, music, and monsters at Cal State Fullerton. His writing includes essays on zombies and cold war youth culture, and he recently received honorable mention in the 38th New Millennium Writings Award for Fiction. He is currently coediting a book of essays on teaching monsters in the humanities.

Twitter: @adamgolub

Author link: http://amst.fullerton.edu/faculty/a golub.asp



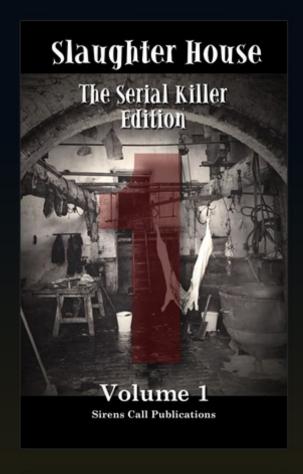
# **The Coven** by Angie Gallow

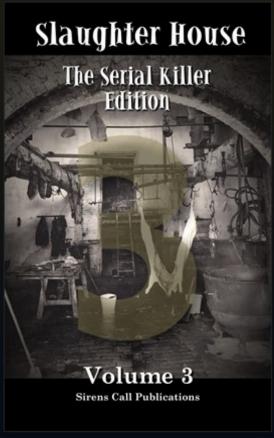
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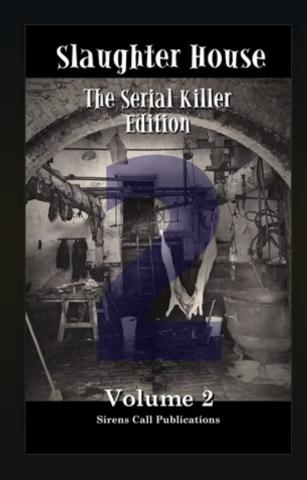
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#### **Interview with Photographer Tammy Ruggles**

In this 21<sup>st</sup> issue of The Sirens Call, we're featuring photography from Tammy Ruggles. Wanting to know a little more about what makes her photography so compelling, we sat down with her to ask her a few questions...

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Tammy, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do?

**Tammy Ruggles:** Photography had always been off limits to me because I'm legally blind due to a progressive eye disease called RP, but I became a fine art photographer in 2013, with the help of a point-and-shoot digital camera set on auto, a 47-inch computer monitor, and a little courage. I didn't take formal photography classes, but I do apply my 4 years of high school art, 3 years of college art, and experience as an artist. Some of my photos have been published in literary journals, art magazines, and photography publications, so this is where you'll find most of my work, but I'd love to have my photos invited to art exhibits someday, or maybe as a movie poster. Prints are available at my portfolio:

http://tammyruggles.deviantart.com/gallery/54032883/Dark-Photography

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

**TR:** Digital photography is my primary medium right now. I like high contrast black and white because I can see it better than color, but I like color too. I can't think of any medium that I'd like to try, at least not at the moment.

SCP: What are some of your main influences?

**TR:** I have many subconscious influences, I'm sure, like Poe, van Gogh, Picasso, Hitchcock, Dickenson, Serling. I'm of the opinion that horror doesn't have to be bloody or over-the-top in order to be effective. I think the psychological—the real—is more frightening than gore, like that voyeur creeping around your windows, or the mother who drowns her five children.

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

**TR:** Well, he's gone now, but I wouldn't mind climbing a few hills with Ansel Adams to take some pictures. I actually had a dream once that I was doing that, lol.

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

**TR:** I can't honestly say that that's happened to me, but if it ever did, I'd just leave it for a while, then come back to it and try it again. I don't pre-visualize my photos, it's more like post-

visualizing them, where I pick the ones I like from a bunch that I've taken. I delete many more than I keep. High contrast and simple composition are elements that appeal to me in an image.

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

**TR:** Fortunately, I've never had that problem. If anything, it would be that I have too many ideas to work on, and have to pare them down. If I ever do have a block, I would just go off and do something else, then go back to it with a fresh outlook.

#### SCP: Where do you find your inspiration?

**TR:** Many places. My surroundings, emotions, experiences, art, music, movies, just about anything.

#### SCP: What influences your composition? Props, setting, costume, subject?

**TR:** My composition is influenced by subject, simplicity, contrast, and whether or not I can make out what the picture is. If I can't tell what it is, I delete it. But I'm always hoping that the viewer will like it too. Some photographers or artists don't care what the audience thinks, but I do. I like hearing what the viewers think, see, feel, or imagine. Their feedback helps me visualize the photos I've taken in a better way. People see things in my photos that I don't—nuances, shadows, depth, layers, details, things like that. I like compositions that can be interpreted in different ways. I also like for some of my photos to tell a story, especially with my dark photography—but enough ambiguity to allow the viewer's interpretation.

#### SCP: What is your favourite piece that you have ever completed? Why is it your favourite?

**TR:** It changes. "Side of the Mountain" used to be my favorite, then "Flowers for the Gone". Now I think it's "Grazing". It could change again depending on future photos.

#### SCP: What is your favourite piece of artwork that you did not create?

**TR:** "Canyon de Chelly". It's an Ansel Adams photograph, a panoramic view of the valley from the mountain. I wish I had taken that.

#### SCP: Thank you Tammy. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

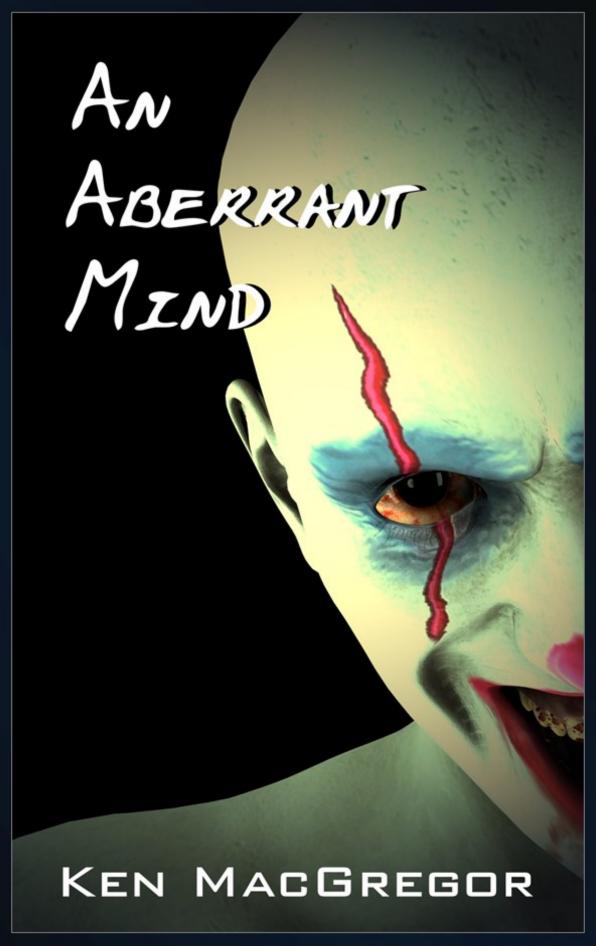
**TR:** More of my dark photography will hopefully be published in future horror publications. And, it hasn't been confirmed, but I'm hoping that some of my winter photos will be invited into a winter exhibit in a Cincinnati gallery called "Art Beyond Boundaries".

For more information on Tammy and her photography, please visit:

http://tammyruggles.deviantart.com/gallery/54032883/Dark-Photography



ABERRANT is defined as unusual, abnormal or different...



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#### The Silent Forest | Shawn D. Standfast

As my delirium takes hold I find myself all alone
With mute surprise I wander aimlessly through a silent forest
Grotesque spirits shrouded in shimmering haze hover in the distance
A cold shudder ripples over me with every breath I take
Then in front of me, a shining moonflower appears in full bloom
Its sweet scent fills my nostrils and transports me far away

Rambling thoughts pour forth into a murky unknown
Ivy clad memories tremble in the solemn moonlight
Decaying moments are strewn everywhere in abstract abandon
Desires shriek as writhing shadows dance with licentious rhythm
And I am caught in a rhapsody of conflicting emotion
Tossed upon a sea of lost passion and forgotten dreams

Wave after wave of missed opportunities wash over me
In echo of a life torn asunder - times past thunder all around
Suddenly, stillness descends and a velvet blackness envelopes me
As the darkness takes hold I am alone again in the silent forest
Clouds have covered the sky, blinding the moon and stars
A shiver runs through me as the moonflower silently closes

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Shawn D. Standfast is a Canadian living in the United Kingdom. Shawn has a background in Archaeology and book selling. After a near 25 year dry spell he began writing poetry again in 2013. His interests include Silent Film, Louise Brooks, Old Time Radio and Books.

Twitter: @BooksR4Life

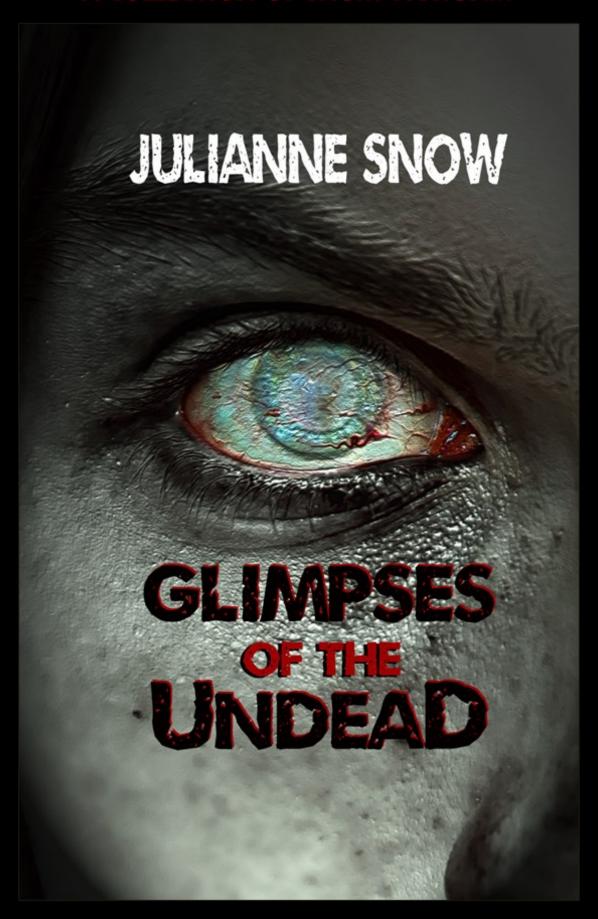
Blog: www.abloglesstraveled.wordpress.com

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## A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION...



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#### Worst Case | DJ Tyrer

Pollution pools
The reactor waste should be sealed
Buried for a thousand years
But correct disposal is costly
So they let safety slide
Saying: What's the worst could happen?
Well the worst is soon discovered
Crabs having fed in the pool
Shed their shells over and over
Growing to prodigious size
Coming ashore to feast on human flesh
About the worst worst-case scenario you could find

#### After Man | DJ Tyrer

Pollution settles in a thick sludge
Plastic, sewage, toxic waste
Accumulating in a seafloor ur-slime
Rearranging itself into a living organism
Vengeful in its alien soul
As it wreaks devastation upon its parents
A vile tidal surge overwhelms the land
Submerging all human endeavour
Drowning all human life
The ur-slime sets out to replace
Repopulate the world in its image
As it slowly attains sentience
A myriad of forms
And looks to the stars with envious eyes

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing* and has recently been placed joint-second in the tenth annual Data Dump Award for best genre poetry published in the UK, having had poems in issues of *Cyaegha*, *Carillon*, *The Pen*, *Scifaikuest*, *Tigershark* ezine and *Poetry Cornwall*, and online on *Poetry Bulawayo*, *Poetry Pacific*, *The Sirens Call* and *The Muse*, as well as releasing several chapbooks.

Blog: <a href="http://dityrer.blogspot.co.uk/">http://dityrer.blogspot.co.uk/</a>

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



Available on Amazon

#### **Rock Climbing** | Brian Rosenberger

rocks are climbing trees, buildings, mountains in Seoul, Sidney, and Saginaw inching their way towards heaven with no rhyme or reason to their motion and no stopping their advance when they reach the summit with nowhere else to climb and their journey skyward ends rocks are falling in Berlin, Boise, and Bangkok dropping from the air like petrified birds gravity's victim but not the only victim judging by the screams

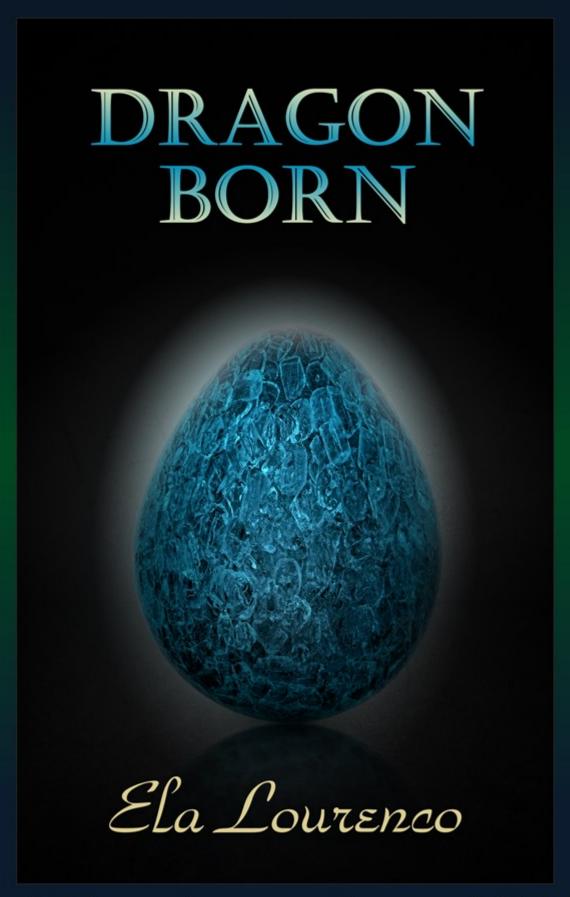
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of As the Worm Turns and three poetry collections.

Facebook: www.facebook.com/HeWhoSuffers

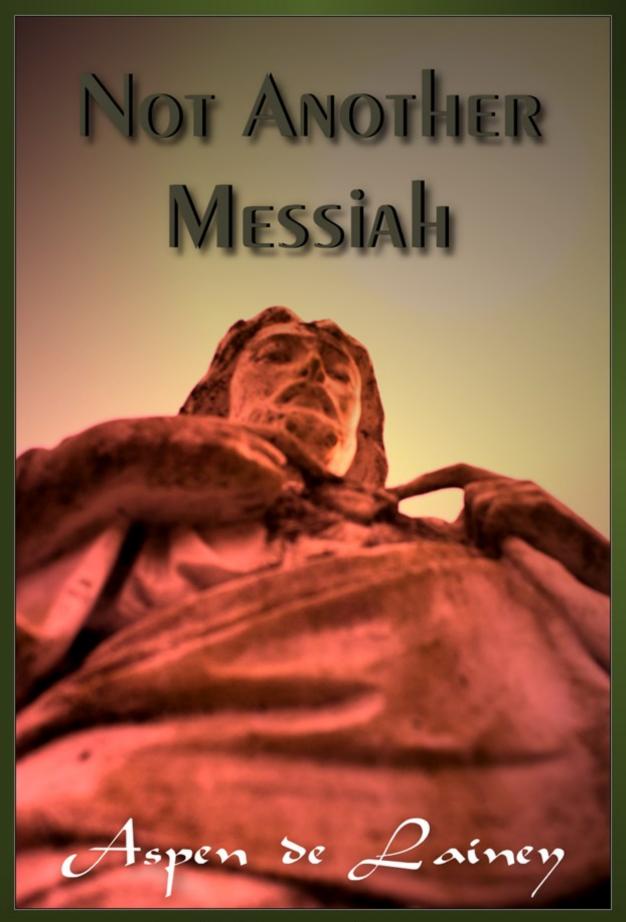


# **Bellows of the Bone Box: A Steampunk Anthology**

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Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes All men are created equal, or so it is said...



Available on Amazon

#### On the Vine | Mark Cassell

Shane's legs tangled with his sleeping bag. He fumbled for a torch, snatched it, and almost dropped it. Again something thumped outside the tent, scratching the canvas. He sat upright and thumbed the switch. Light speared the darkness. He squinted at the apex in the tent roof.

Something pressed against the fabric...and a barbed vine pierced through. Its end hooked like a beckoning finger. The thing tore downwards—so many barbs—and the canvas, frayed and jagged, flapped with the wind.

He grunted and kicked away his bedding.

The vine twisted like it had purpose, reaching for him. Cold air and the stink of something rotten poured in. He choked.

"Carla!" He shook his wife in the sleeping bag beside him. "Wake up!"

He scrambled onto his knees.

"Carla!" He coughed. The smell reached into his lungs.

The vine lashed his face. Grimacing, spitting agony, he flailed with both arms. Barbs sliced his forearms and the torch flew from his hand. It smacked the groundsheet beside Carla's head, spotlighting her closed eyelids, and flickered once...twice...and blinked out.

Darkness.

Feeling the most naked he'd ever been, despite wearing shorts, he backed into a corner. The damp fabric clung to his back. One hand swiped at the vine and barbs lacerated his flesh. His other hand fumbled for the lantern he knew to be somewhere near. Miraculously, he found it and prodded the *on* button.

Light exploded. He winced, blinded by both glare and pain.

The vine—more a trunk—recoiled like a cobra, framed by torn canvas and black night.

"Carla?" How could she sleep through this?

With awkward hands slick with sweat and blood and fear, he grabbed their food bag. Knife. He needed a knife. He looked down and...

The trunk smashed into the back of his head. The barbs raked his scalp. Darkness stole his vision, for only a second, and he swayed. Reflected in the serrated blade he held, the lantern banished his threatening darkness. Before he and Carla had left for this camping trip, she had teased him and said they'd not need a bread knife, it wasn't for camping, they'd not use it.

He felt his blood rushing through him, roaring in his ears and also dripping from his arms and head. His breath short, sharp in his lungs. Again, he choked.

The trunk lashed at him. He clutched it—the damn thing had *grown*—and the barbs lanced his palm. Lightning pain tore up his arm. As he gripped, digging in fingernails, he brought up the knife and hacked. The blade sliced through the trunk in a spray of dark filth. It spattered his face, stung his eyes, and dribbled into his mouth. Bitter, foul.

Carla screamed.

"Get out of here," he shouted at her. "Now!"

The trunk wrenched from his grip, the barbs further shredding his skin. Black gunk peppered the walls.

Carla's sleeping bag had shifted to reveal the torn groundsheet. Grass and earth bulged, and coils of smaller vines had twisted into her bedding. The zipper was mangled, perhaps even melted. She thrashed, still screaming. It rattled his brain. The sleeping bag bunched and slid down her body, now covering only her legs.

Shane gasped.

Where her night-shirt, the blue one with daisies on it, had ridden up, the flesh across her navel glistened; mottled and covered in pustules. Several oozed. Beneath her, half-buried in the disturbed earth and half-protruding from her skin, smaller vines wriggled like grass snakes. She twisted left and right, and uprooted those vines. The earth seethed as more vines erupted, seeking out her skin once again, each extending and whipping.

The sleeping bag slipped further...

Cold air hissed through Shane's clenched teeth.

Downwards from Carla's hips was the barbed trunk. No legs. Seamlessly that bastard trunk blended with her mottled flesh and burrowed into the ground. As she writhed to and fro, so too did the trunk overhead, raining black goo.

Shane fell back. The knife slid from numb, bleeding fingers.

His wife's eyes were still closed and she reached out with pale arms. The lower half of her body, the vine trunk, yanked the tent fabric. More filth sprayed and spattered his face. He blinked away that stinging muck.

Poles snapped in a tangle of canvas. The tent collapsed.

Carla wrapped the trunk around him, coiling. Tighter, ever-tighter. The barbs tore into his flesh. He yelled and grunted, wrestling. Useless.

A rib cracked. Then another.

Still she screamed. And Shane joined her.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Mark Cassell lives in a rural part of the UK with his wife and a number of animals. He often dreams of dystopian futures, peculiar creatures, and flitting shadows. Primarily a horror writer, his steampunk, dark fantasy, and SF stories have featured in several anthologies and ezines. His debut novel, *The Shadow Fabric*, is a supernatural horror available in paperback and digital.

Twitter: @Mark Cassell

Website: <a href="http://www.TheShadowFabric.co.uk">http://www.TheShadowFabric.co.uk</a>





#### Harsh Winters | Mike Driver

Simon Kent was having a bad day, or more precisely a bad lunch. He would have cheerfully killed for an inch thick Cuban sandwich dripping in Monterey Jack cheese with a decent Americano coffee on the side, instead he was being offered honey on toast and weak tea.

The doe-eyed Latvian waitress prompted him again, her pencil poised to scratch her pad with the order, "Doo u vant oonee?"

"No," Simon replied firmly. "I don't like honey, and I don't drink tea, now can I please get a decent cup of coffee and a sandwich."

"This is tea-house," replied the waitress puzzled, "We serve tea and oonee." Before adding brightly, "It is local."

Unlike you love, muttered Simon, gathering his coat.

"It win prize," called the waitress to Simon's back as the tea shop door slammed loudly in his wake.

\*\*\*

Kent trudging disconsolately back to the office feeling hungry and frustrated, his collar turned up against the biting wind; his mood worsened considerably when he was greeted by the large bee that drowsily buzzed and circled behind the vast panoramic window that formed the frontispiece of Strudwick and Chance: Estate Agents.

Kent hated bees. As a child, he had poked a stick at a large nest that he believed empty, and had never forgotten the painful experience; either the stab as stings entered the palms of his hands as he tried to fend them away from his face or the slow agony as poison pumped from their detached stinger sacs while his mother clumsily tried to remove them with a pair of eyebrow tweezers. The residual itch of his swollen palms had stayed with him for a long time afterwards.

The bee continued to bump and tumble before his eyes, first, over a three bedroom semidetached, then a detached four bedroom with an annex and finally coming to rest on a single bedroom flat, before it rose again and drifted repeatedly into the thick panes of glass of the automatic doors.

Kent trod on the pressure plate and watched the doors slide open, expecting the bee to make its escape. Instead the bee became trapped between the panes and its pitch heightened and grew in volume.

"Idiot," muttered Kent, angry at the bee's inability to cope with a simple door. "Alan, get rid of that thing, before it stings a customer."

Alan Gill, the office junior jerked back from his computer screen in alarm. "What thing, Mr Kent?" He quickly clicked away from the game of Candy Crush he had been playing to replace it with a half-filled spreadsheet.

"The damn bee," said Kent, pointing at the door, which had now slid shut releasing the antagonised bee back into the office.

The office was empty of customers at that time, as it had been all that day and largely all that week. So there were no members of the public at risk of being stung or to witness Alan's twitching, flinching, attempts to swat the creature with the aid of a large green prospectus that advertised a Town House with ample parking at the rear.

"Just kill the bloody thing," snapped Kent agitatedly, not wishing to be stung himself by the black and yellow drone that was now angrily circling the overhead light fittings buzzing loudly.

"How, Mr Kent?" Alan Gill warbled from his position on his desk, his face red from his exertions, his prominent adam's apple bobbing alarmingly.

"I don't know, smash its bloody head in," shouted Kent, reflexively scratching at his palm.

"Mr Kent, if I may," interrupted Kelvin Sutherland, in his gentle Scottish burr, "there's no need for that."

Kelvin took an empty glass and gently coaxed the bee onto a Yucca plant, before engineering it between an empty prospectus holder and the rim of a drinking glass, briefly trapping it, before carrying it outside and releasing it into the high street with a flourish where it tumbled on its way in the cold afternoon's breeze.

Typical, thought Kent, he even tries to belittle me over a bloody bee.

To say the relationship between the two men was not good would be an understatement. Kent had been parachuted in from Head Office and asked to take a firm hand in the workings of the Coopers Fold branch of Strudwick and Chance, following the disappearance of the previous Managing Director, Don Pendleton, earlier that year, and was not pleased with the arrangement.

But it was fair to say that Kelvin Sutherland was even less pleased. Tradition dictated that the MD's role would be Kelvin's when Don departed. But at the last moment his birth right had been snatched away from him by a faceless decision maker at head office and given to a narcissistic, bullying barrow boy who didn't know a decent house from a hole in the wall.

Kent's assessment was even starker; the posting was a punishment sent from Hell. If Head Office expected him to spend years in a godforsaken backwater of civilisation, moulding a crack team from such meagre clay, they had another think coming. As his last written report clearly announced the staff were either lazy or incompetent, and Kelvin Sutherland particularly, in a unique phrase that Kent had coined himself, was 'lazily incompetent.'

Kent calmed and ran his fingers through the fine blonde hair above his ears, checked his reflection in the blank face of his computer screen for composure, and levelled his best patronising smile at Kelvin.

"Now that you have finished playing with insects, perhaps you can get on with some work."

Game, Set and Match - Kent scored himself, assured that the matter was now closed, and having declared himself winner of that particular round, spent the remainder of the afternoon poring over housing particulars as the sun lengthened the shadows across his desk into faded diagonals.

\*\*\*

It was five pm; the cold autumn sun was entering its final decline, the town hall clock was still chiming the hour and the last rays of sunlight were bleeding from the office carpet when Kelvin Sutherland asked the office PA, Marion, for the Ludlow House file.

Marion stopped filling her nails. "What do you want that for?" she squeaked.

He gave her a look and nodded in Kent's direction.

Her mouth formed a perfect 'O' as she straightened her blouse and fetched the folder from the file cabinet.

Kelvin Sutherland paged through the manila folder, tutted loudly and looked pointedly at the clock. "Marion," he announced, "I'm going to need to go to the Ludlow House, tonight."

"Yes, Mr Sutherland," twittered Marion.

"It's the quarterly inspection," continued Kelvin. "I suppose Don should have done it, but you know what he was like and now it's late."

"What's this?" asked Kent his ears pricking up. "What's late?"

"We have a quarterly inspection contract for a property out of town," explained Kelvin. "It's normally taken care of by the Managing Director but with Don's departure, I'm happy to pick it up."

"Hold on there fellah, I'm the MD, if anyone is picking things up around here it's me."

"It's very dull," said Kelvin. "Just a vacant property, held by a trust, we carry out an inspection every three months or so to maintain the house, the grounds and the apiary."

"The... ape... the what?"

"Apiary, you do know what an apiary is?"

"It's a... it's a ... garden thing," stumbled Kent.

"Bees," corrected Kelvin. "The trust still provides honey every year, locally and internationally. It's won awards."

"So I've heard," muttered Kent sarcastically, feeling his palms itch and his heart sink, realising he'd clearly walked into a clumsy trap. "Of course," he added, recovering his composure, "I'd be happy to go but as you know the area better than I do, you'll need to drive me there and drop me back at the office. You are okay being my chauffer for the evening, aren't you?"

His itching palms subsided as he watched Kelvin's neck redden beneath its collar.

\*\*\*

The Ludlow house stood alone before them, four-square whitewashed walls set to the elements, which had darkened in evil looking patches from the weather and grime of the

countryside. Kent looked nervously up at the house, and as the winter sun sank beneath the horizon, the two upper storey windows lit up with reflected fire and seemed to blaze malevolently down upon him.

"Whose house was this?" asked Kent nervously.

"It belonged to a farmer and his two sons," replied Kelvin. "But the father passed in '78. The sons carried on living there but inevitably they fell out, and none of them would give an inch they ended up dividing and sub-dividing the property, really messed the place about, even installing separate staircases so they wouldn't have to meet by accident. But eventually they all passed too, right here in this property; first Bartholomew, the oldest in '94, his brother Benjamin passed in the cold snap of 02."

Kent paled and nodded, unable to trust his voice not to crack nervously as he eyed a house that had held three dead men.

"If you're uncomfortable I can do the house and you can do the grounds?" Kelvin offered, a shy smile on his lips.

Kent knew what that meant, the grounds would contain the hives, it was another clumsy trap, he was better off in the house.

"I'll do the house," he announced confidently. "You take care of the grounds."

"Okay," replied Kelvin looking at his watch, "but you'd better get moving, it will be dark soon and the wiring is a little unpredictable in there, we wouldn't want you stumbling around in the dark."

"Just do your job Mr. Sutherland and I will do mine," retorted Kent.

\*\*\*

The white gate recoiled on an old rusted spring and slammed shut behind Kent as he traversed the short path that led to the scratched and battered front door. He took the key, fitted it in the lock, and felt it turn easily with a satisfying click. The door swung open.

For a moment there was a point of hesitation, he turned, as if to leave to be greeted by the sight of Kelvin standing by the closed gate, his hand resting protectively on the top bar.

"Going somewhere?"

"No, no," flustered Kent, his right palm itching like crazy. "I was just... making sure I hadn't left the gate open."

Inside the house was dry and surprisingly warm. Kent let the front door swing closed and the gloom and faint glow of the electrical light that flickered above were all that remained in the silence, except for a faint electrical hum, deep within the building.

Kent checked the condition of various rooms, inspecting walls for damp and mould and gradually moving upstairs, through a seemingly endless series of doors that cut staircases in half and divided and subdivided the house in just the way that Kelvin had described. Until he found himself in the short corridor outside the master bedroom, or at least a room he assumed was

the master bedroom. The room itself was large, with a single bay window that faced to the front of the house.

Through the window Kent could see darkness beginning to sink across the countryside and the room itself grew appreciably darker by degrees. Kent hurried his next checks, quickly assessing for any signs of dry rot in the ceiling joists and the broad planks of the wooden flooring. As he worked he became aware of a slight aroma; vaguely sweet, almost sickly, with a slight metallic tang. The tang stuck in his throat, cloying, he struggled to swallow, and the warmth of the room now seemed positively tropical. He unbuttoned his shirt collar and wiped thick beads of sweat from his brow.

Feeling it was time to leave Kent swung back towards the bedroom door that led to the corridor but as he stepped back he felt a soft crunch beneath his heel.

Kent lifted his foot carefully and toe-poked the object, watching as the dry husk rolled across the floor. It looked like a small shrivelled deadheaded flower. He bent to pick it up and then staggered back in revulsion at the object that lay in the palm of his hand.

The object was not a flower head at all but a dry desiccated bee.

Convulsively Kent flicked the object from his palm and broke for the bedroom door. He opened it to find the corridor scrolled out before him but at either end was an identical door. He hadn't noticed this before and he suddenly felt disoriented, he darted to his left and with relief found that the door opened out onto the downward staircase.

He took the flights two at a time.

At the bottom of the stairwell was another door, this led onto a further corridor again with doors at either end. Kent kept spiralling down, eager to be out of the building, more doors confronted him. More than he remembered on the way up. But he kept going.

Suddenly he paused, surely he must be at the ground floor, but there were no windows on the staircases, just the dim raw bulbs swinging on their cords as he had seen elsewhere, that and the low electrical hum.

Kent realised he was lost. He must have somehow become side-tracked onto the other stairways. He needed to retrace his steps. He turned but was met by an angry buzzing high to his left. A small host of bees clung to a hexagonal comb high in the cornice above the door through which he had just entered.

Kent swore grimly to himself, his palms feeling like fire.

He needed to keep going, he reasoned if he carried on down far enough he would find the basement, then he would just need to find the right door out.

He kept descending. The heat rose, the walls sweated. The humming grew louder and denser; until the final chamber opened out before him.

The first sharp sting entered his palm but he barely noticed amidst all the others.

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Kelvin Sutherland glanced at his wristwatch. Above the sky had darkened to deep blue and the first inklings of stars were now visible.

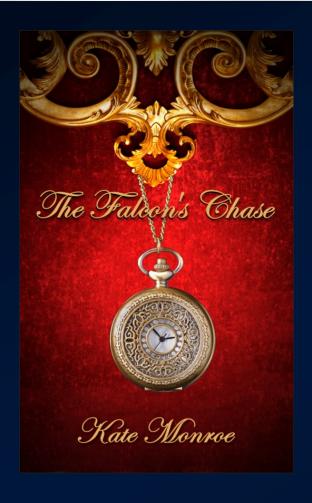
The house was still and silent. A solitary bee made its way over the overgrown front garden disappearing inside the flower of a lupin before landing amidst a cluster of wild purple lavender.

Sutherland watched it trace a slow lazy arc with a sense of contentment. It would be winter soon. Another harsh winter was forecast, almost as bad as those of '78, '94 and '02 and even last year, when Don had made the ultimate sacrifice.

But harsh winters made for good honey, some of the finest prize winners had emerged during heavy snows and frosts. It must be their diet, Kelvin chuckled to himself; some said it added a distinct tang, almost metallic.

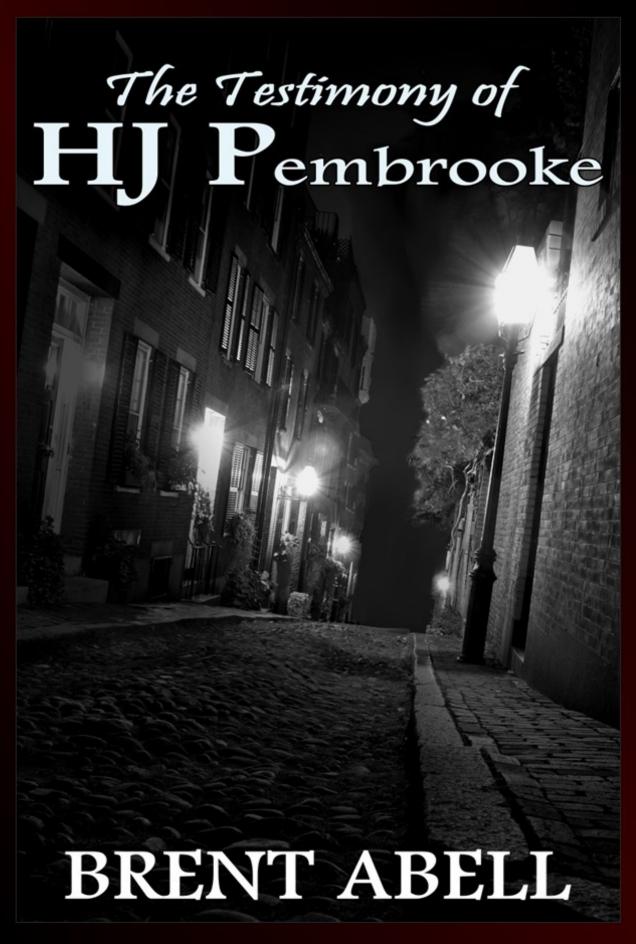
He started the car's engine and drove slowly away.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Mike Driver lives in Yorkshire, England. His publication history consists of dozens of published short stories scattered across print magazines, online titles and anthologies around the horror fiction globe. However his most recent works can be found in Encounters magazine, Kzine issue 12 and on Kindle where his short collection "Box of Bones" and his debut novel "Fall, Leaves, Fall" both reside.



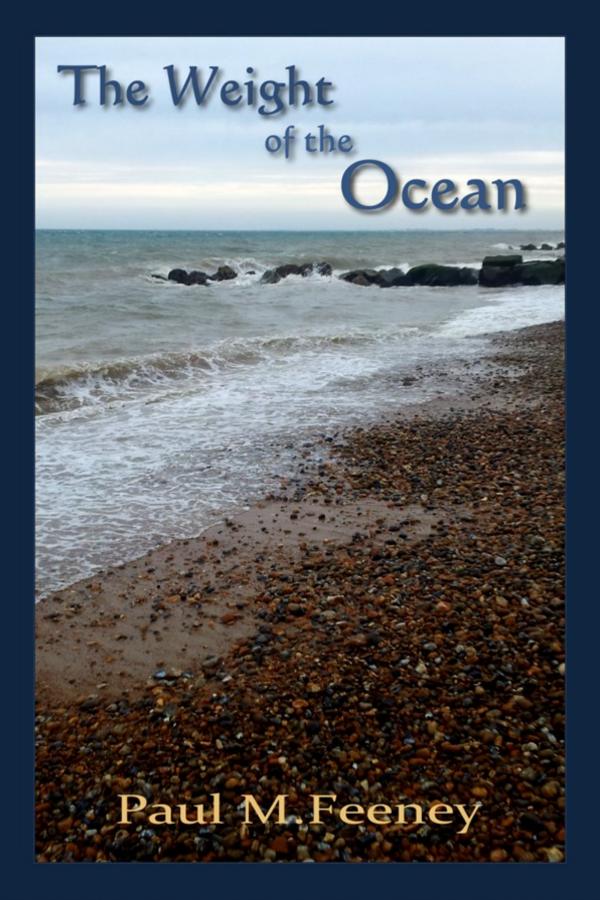
# **The Falcon's Chase** by Kate Monroe

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## Pain is...



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#### Sanctuary | Duncan Ralston

The East Texas sun beat down on my head as I jogged the marsh trail through the animal sanctuary. Sweat poured down my back, matting my hair to my scalp. Togo, the four-year-old mutt my ex-wife stuck me with in the divorce, panted heavily as he ran along beside me.

The ex used to say—before the divorce made anything she'd said fall on deaf ears—I should exercise more. Exercise is fine, but the gravel crunching under my feet is a meditation thing for me, hypnotic. It cleared the head. The sanctuary was one of my favorite spots in the area, and just about the only place nearby you could go to get away from the trucks and bustle of the city.

A bird chirped high on an electrical pole, repetitive, trying to get my attention. "Robins are active today," I told Togo. He looked up at me, tongue lolling to one side—thirsty already, but we'd only started running. I promised myself to stop once we got to the next intersection in the trails.

Up ahead, black smoke rose over the trees. A hunting cabin, most likely. The sound of rifle fire cut through the wind filling my ears, confirming my suspicion. Some yahoo gun nuts firing off automatic weapons. Something I hear a lot these days is, "Go big or go home." The expression doesn't just apply to pickups, or the portions at your local Tex-Mex.

Never was one for guns, particularly after having one pointed in my face where I tend bar. At least with open carry laws you know where you stand. It's the ones who've got them tucked into the back of their pants or under their jacket you have to worry about. When a fight breaks out in a bar where open carry is the norm, things either escalate quick, or people calm down in a hurry, not wanting to be the object of some psycho's target practice.

Alligators lurk in the marsh out here. With Togo by my side, I had to keep an eye out that one of them hadn't slinked out of the muck to warm itself on the gravel trails. Part terrier, Togo would make a nice light snack.

I was in a sort of trance when he yelped behind me.

I spun around. Togo had gotten down on his haunches, quivering and looking up at the sky. Up in the haze of blue and white, a bird circled. As I looked, it dove toward us, with a familiar cry.

The gull swooped down, its beady yellow eyes locked right on mine. I ducked out of the way, but it was Togo the bird wanted. The poor little mutt rolled over backward as it landed, squawking at him, dancing toward him. Togo reared back and growled, but the bird kept coming, squalling, calling out for the feeding frenzy.

Scouring the tall grass where the marsh reached the ditch, wary of gators, I grabbed a fat black branch and hauled back with it to strike the gull before realizing what I'd done. The stick wriggled in my hand, cool and fleshy to the touch.

Startled, I dropped the coachwhip, crying out in fear and disgust. I've seen those snakes eat mice whole before, but they're incredibly wary of humans. Rather than slither off into the brush though, the snake came right at me, and with a moment to react, I stomped down hard on the thing, feeling its insides ooze under my shoe.

Togo, meanwhile, bared his teeth at the gull. More cries came from nearby, and two others landed near the first, the three birds menacing my poor dog. I moved to shoo them when something struck the back of my head.

I turned to a flutter of wings, a familiar chirp. As I rubbed the spot where the robin had hit me, feeling the wet warmth of blood, it dove in for another strike.

I ducked, swatting out blindly. The bird fluttered over my head. Somehow my wrist managed to penetrate its flapping wings, striking its fragile body. The bird chirped—whether in pain or out of anger, I had no idea—then flew up to its perch on the pole.

Nature's gone haywire, I thought. So much for sanctuary.

Togo barked, frantic as the birds flanked him.

"Get the hell out of here, shithawks!" I cried, kicking out at them. They stepped back, raising their wings defensively. Pleased, I stomped toward them, waving my arms like the biggest bird around. They waddled back, spreading out. Their yellow eyes, somewhat reptilian, watched me without betraying their intentions.

Togo screeched then, a tremulous sound that rattled my nerves. I wheeled, ready to kick some avian ass, but it was too late. A gator had lurched up from the marsh, still glistening, and had caught Togo in its jaws. Togo's front legs danced, his wet black eyes looking up at me for assistance. I had none to offer. The gator snapped its head back, revealing a sickening glimpse of the steaming insides of my poor dog, and swallowed the rest of him whole.

I ran.

The birds parted for me, trilling cries. Out in the marsh, three fat gators splashed into the black water. The eyes of another rose from the reeds, locking on me. The one that had eaten Togo bypassed the gulls, as if unaware of them, and ran headlong at my heels.

You don't outrun a gator, I thought. Gators don't tire.

As I thought it, glad that I'd worn runners, glad to be in the best shape of my life after the divorce, the goddamn robin swooped into view and struck me on the temple, shooting stars across my vision. I battered it out of the air, but the damage was done. The gator had gained precious feet. I was lunch.

Rifle fire made me jump. In the next moment, the alligator's head exploded in a shower of meat and gore. Its momentum kept propelling it forward, the legs still pumping, until the huge rugged beast slopped down at my feet, spilling its insides on my shoes.

It was then that I heard the growl of trucks. I'd never been so happy to hear axle-back exhaust and see a set of Bumper Nuts in my life.

A portly guy with mutton chops stood in the back, brandishing some sort of rifle. "Just

about made yerself a horsie douver there, buddy!"

I looked back at the trail. The robin fluttered on the hot gravel. I'd somehow managed to break its wing. But the gulls were still coming, and more gators crept up from the marsh on either side.

The driver smacked the door. "Don't just stand there pissin' your panties. Hop on in!"

Another truck met the first, carrying two more guys I wouldn't want to meet in the woods on any other day, every one of them packing.

I didn't hesitate, just climbed into the passenger seat.

Peeling away, we left the gators in a cloud of dust.

The driver turned to me, chewing on a mouthful of tobacco. "When the animals rise up against their masters, the whole G.D. world's gone snafu, ain't it?"

"Yeah," I said, peering in the rearview. The fat guy in the bed had taken up a stance on one knee, the rifle sight at eye level. He squeezed off a round, a trail of gray smoke rising from the weapon. "Missed 'em!"

"No shit, you moron," the driver called over his shoulder, jumping up and down in his seat. "We're bouncin' all over the damn road. Save your ammo!" He spat a wad of tobacco juice out the open window.

"Gotta get to the city," I said, knowing the birds circling overhead would follow us, but at least we'd be safe from the gators, the snakes—for a while, anyhow. "Get to a high rise, and wait this out. Whatever it is."

The driver turned with a slimy brown grin. "You're in good hands, fella," he said, patting the Dirty Harry gun holstered on his hip. He was loving this, had probably been waiting for any excuse to kill every damned animal on the planet, and now he would get his chance. Kill or be killed. Eat or be eaten.

I looked beyond his insane grin, out through the window. I saw the black smoke rising above the trees, and knew we were doomed. It wasn't a hunting cabin—I was wrong about that. The *city* was that way. We were too late.

When the animals rise up against their masters...

The driver yelped, and shielded his eyes, not even attempting to swerve out of the large buck's path.

The front end crumpled. The truck swerved, grinding hard into the gravel, and Mutton Chops pitched over the roof, crying out. The beast's head shattered the windshield, a rain of glass falling down around me, its antlers gouging up through the driver's throat and pinning him to the ceiling. The second truck braked, raising dust that swirled around us in a churning wind.

I sat there stunned, covered in glass. The buck snorted, breathing heavily, its face so close I could smell its breath, see the feathered lashes on its glossy black eyes.

Slow as I could, I reached down for the belt buckle. The eye followed my progress. The animal was stunned, likely just as pinned as its victim. Its bulk had crushed the hood, and one

leg was badly broken, jagged bone poking through flesh.

The belt clicked, releasing me from the driver's chrome tomb.

The buck's head shifted. It blinked, moaning pitifully.

"Good," I said, and pulled on the door handle, propelling myself out into the road.

Mutton Chops rose from the dirt, groaning. His rifle had skittered away from him. I thought if I ran I could get to it before he could. Dog eat dog, and all that.

Poor fucking Togo...

Behind me, the other two had gotten out of their truck, guns readied. "Jesus Pleasus! That's a twenty-point buck right there," the second driver remarked, dressed in full military camo.

"The hell it is," his skinny partner said. "Eighteen at the most."

"When we tell the story, it's a twenty." Warning in the driver's eyes. "Teevo would have been honored to die by the hand of that sucker."

"Hoof," the other guy said. "Bucks don't have hands."

"Would you shut the—" His eyes widened. "Oh, my shit..."

I looked where he was. A dozen gators had crawled out of the muck and stood poised to strike barely fifteen feet from the truck. Snakes had filled in their ranks, a battalion of Kings, pit vipers, coachwhips, corals and hognoses. Behind them, the rats, voles, moles, and hedgehogs clambered over each other to reach their next meal.

I ran. As the gunfire erupted behind me, I bolted past Mutton Chops and his rifle. As the reports died out and the cries of pleasure became screams of fear, of agony, I kept on running. My lungs burning, my legs beginning to tire, head swimming with thoughts of home, of a city teeming with killer animals, I sprinted down the sanctuary trail, evolution's last cruel joke clawing at my heels.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Duncan Ralston was born in Toronto, and spent his teens in a small town. As a 'grown-up,' Duncan lives with his girlfriend and their dog in Toronto, where he writes about the things that frighten and disturb him. In addition to his twisted short stories found in *Gristle & Bone* and *The Black Room Manuscripts*, his debut novel, *Salvage*, will haunt various booksellers in September.

Twitter: @userbits
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#### **Blades** | Brian Rosenberger

(first published in Flashshots)

Summer means snoozing late, no need for alarms. The clock reads 7:15 AM. Sleep rubbed from your eyes, you rise and stumble towards the window. Peering through the blinds, your yawn transformed into a scream. Mom lies outstretched in the backyard, facedown. Barefoot, you rush out the door. Immediately, your feet start to tickle. An itch. You reach down. Your hand stained red. Red like the ground where your mother rests motionless. You move, one foot after the other until it's too late. Summer after Summer, lawnmower after lawnmower, the lawn has waited for revenge. Now the grass cuts you.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of As the Worm Turns and three poetry collections.

Facebook: www.facebook.com/HeWhoSuffers

#### Hikers Beware | Anthony Avina

Christian Hale felt adventurous as he veered off of the Griffith Observatory West Trail Loop. Having lived in Los Angeles for over ten years, the thirty-year old writer felt a need to explore on this particular hot summer night. The lights from the observatory and the city below beckoned to him, urging him to ignore this feeling and stick to what was safe and familiar. Yet as he came to the halfway marker of the trail and stopped to catch his breath, he saw for the first time an unknown path veering off the familiar road.

"What the hell?" Christian muttered to himself. "I've never seen this before."

Looking down the unknown path, Christian wiped away the loose locks of golden hair from his face. The fair skinned writer checked his phone, and saw that it was nearly time for the sun to set. Sweat dripped down his back as the heat baked into his skin, giving him a rich tan. He was a big man, with an athletic build and standing at 6'4". He had stupidly decided to wear a thin white shirt on this hike, and the sweat he had built up from his workout had made his shirt nearly see through. Hoping to take this unexpected route to cool off and get his shirt back to a normal color, Christian stood and caught his breath as he pondered the choices before him.

Christian knew he shouldn't mess around with the unknown trail. The sun was nearly set, and he had chosen to run alone tonight, without mentioning his plans to his girlfriend Elise before leaving. Yet as of late, the voice of doubt and self-shame had begun to gnaw on his thoughts. He was thirty years old, and although he'd experienced some success as a journalist,

he'd yet to have a hit book on the market. He felt old and unaccomplished, and this new voice in his head pushed him forward, until he found himself walking down the new trail.

His first thought as he entered the new trail was just how beautiful the scenery around him was. He couldn't believe that this trail had not been touched by mankind before. Not a single piece of litter adorned the trail. No water bottles, no protein bar wrappers, and definitely no cigarette butts were found on his hike. His second thought was how odd it was that there seemed to be no signs of life whatsoever along the trail. Not only did no human tracks line up and down the trail, but there were no animal tracks either. There were no birds chirping, no mammals growling, and no buzzing from nearby bees. The only sound Christian could hear as he walked was the sound of crickets chirping and a soft breeze blowing across his warm brow.

After twenty minutes of exploring the trail, Christian began to feel like he was being watched. He looked around the dark and unlit path, searching the woods around him. The forest was thick with large trees and heavy underbrush, making it impossible to see. A breeze blew in from the west, carrying a foul smell that made him gag to the point of nearly throwing up. Hunching over and trying to catch his breath, Christian heard a low growl ensue behind him, on the trail he had just walked from.

Turning around, Christian squinted his eyes, peering into the darkness in hopes of catching a glimpse of what had made that noise. All he saw however was a pair of filmy yellow eyes. They hung low to the ground, and in a flash of movement they disappeared. His heart began to pound in his chest, and as a series of growls and demonic laughter erupted all around him, Christian immediately put a name to the foul smell that came on the heels of the breeze. That smell was the smell of a dead carcass, picked apart by some sort of predator.

Knowing he'd made a huge mistake, Christian turned back to the path he'd come from, and ran for his life. He didn't know if it was the adrenaline coursing through his heart or the very real fear that his life had become forfeit the moment he entered the unknown trail, but the run back towards the observatory became a bad LSD trip. The wind not only brought more foul smells and demonic laughter, but a cacophony of voices cried out as well. He didn't know if they were the voices of demonic entities or victims who had made the same mistake as him, but he knew that if he stopped to listen, his voice would be added to the chorus.

Cutting his original twenty minute hike in half, Christian exited the foreign trail ten minutes after he began his run for his life. He laughed and smiled as he came upon the familiar sight of the observatory, beaming in the pale yellow lights of the parking lot and the beacons of light from the city below. Pulling out his phone, Christian placed a call to Elise, hoping to get a hold of his girlfriend to relay his experience.

"Hello?" a smooth, seductive voice answered.

"Hey babe, you won't believe what just happened," Christian replied to Elise. "I..."

Before he could finish, a sharp pain erupted in his leg. He looked down in shock, only to find a tree branch impaled in his right calf. He screamed in pain, but before he could move, strong vines that felt like steel wrapped themselves around his body. Totally immobilized, Christian dropped his phone as the vines pulled him back into the unfamiliar trail. As the screaming hiker was dragged into the darkness, where dozens of filmy yellow eyes waited, the trees and brush at the beginning of the trail suddenly closed together, hiding the path from public view.

"Christian, are you there? Christian!" Elise yelled from the speaker of Christian's cell phone.

As if in reply, a lone vine shot out of the woods, ensnaring the phone in its clutches and dragging it into the forest. Soon the Los Angeles hills grew silent once more, with no sign of Christian Hale. Only the sounds of crickets were left in his place.

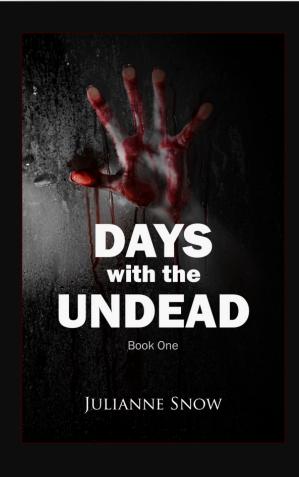
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Author Anthony Avina has been an indie author for over five years. An avid fan of the horror genre and hungry to showcase the true nature of society, Mr. Avina has always written tales that not only entertain and scare, but also bring out true and heartfelt emotion. Anthony Avina lives in Southern California, and works as an indie author, journalist, and internet personality.

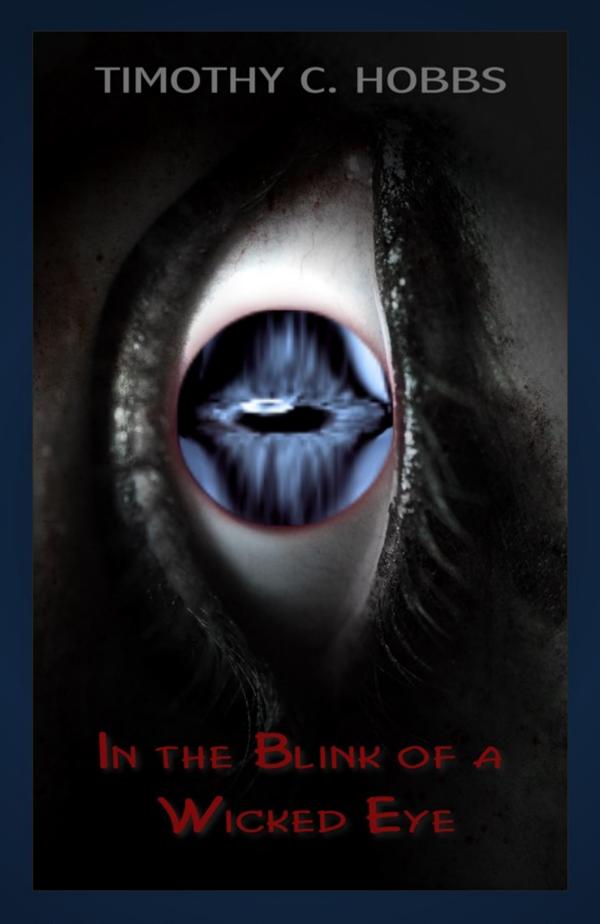
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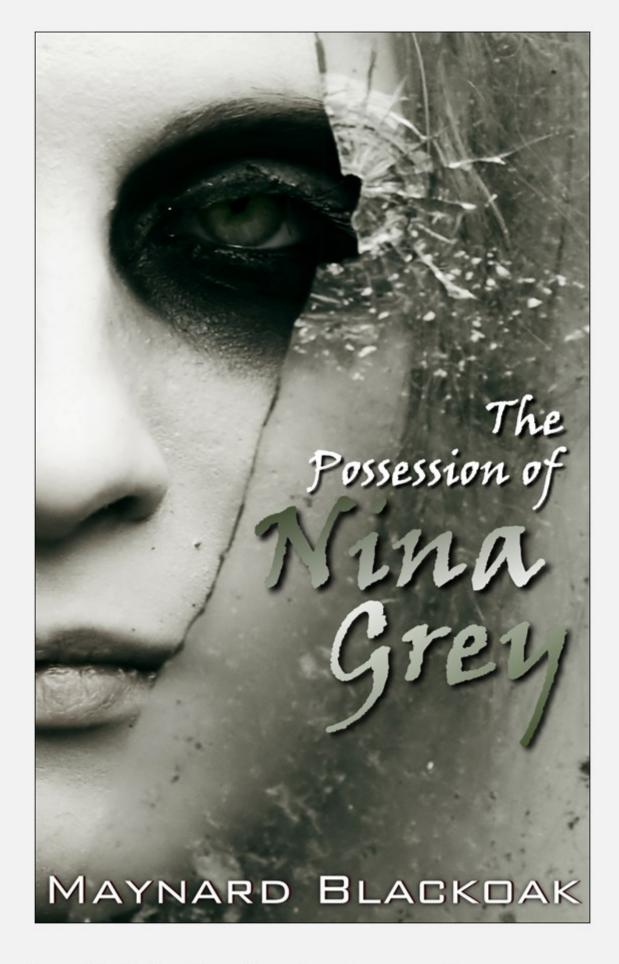
# Days with the Undead: Book One by Julianne Snow

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo and iTunes





Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes



Available Exclusively on Amazon

#### A Walk | Nicholas Paschall

Jennifer was proud of herself, walking down the nature trail in the public park, huffing from the exertion she was putting into moving quickly. She'd been putting on a few pounds the past few months since her break up with Daniel, and it'd only been fueling her ever-growing depression, which fed her ever-growing waistline.

But now she was doing something about it! Dressed in a tight black tee-shirt with a pair of biker shorts, she walked down the trail with purpose, sweating from the hot summer day. The heat of Virginia was only matched by the beauty that it held when the flowers all bloomed across the state. She smiled wickedly at the thought.

Daniel had horrible allergies.

Stopping for a short water break, Jennifer pulled her water bottle from her side satchel, glugging down a good portion of the frosty bottle in one long go. Smacking her lips, she screwed the top back on, before heaving a long sigh, trying to catch her breath. The long buzzing of the cicadas combined with the rustling of the branches overhead as the wind blew through the wooded area, bringing the scents of summer to Jennifer's nose... She just couldn't see why she hadn't done this before!

"H-Help..." A low voice moaned from a distance away, off the trail and deeper into the woods.

"Hello?" She called out, quirking her head to the side to try and hear the cry again, or if it had just been a figment of her imagination.

"H-Help..." The voice, a low voice, called out from the depths of the forest. "It hurts..."

"Who's out there?" Jennifer called out, taking a step closer to where she thought she heard the voice coming from.

"H-Help... it hurts..." The voice was definitely male, and from the sound of it older. It seemed to be coming from perhaps twenty to thirty feet into the woods, where Jennifer thought she saw a clearing.

"Hold on, I'm coming!" Jennifer said, pushing through the underbrush and jogging towards the low moans of pain coming from the woods. Cursing as the underbrush cut up her calves, she hopped from open patch to open patch, huffing as she fought to try and find a decent path towards the person in distress.

Finally breaching the tree line, she saw a meadow of blooming sunflowers, a haze of pollen flitting above the wide open petals, bees buzzed to and fro while butterflies fluttering from flower to flower. And in the middle of it all, was a man with his back facing Jennifer, kneeling amidst the wildflowers, his head tilted to the side.

"H-Help me..." the man said, a light gurgling beneath his words.

"Are you injured? Do I need to call 911?" Jennifer asked, marching into the meadow and up towards the man's still form. His whole attire was wrong for the weather, a thick maroon

sweater over a bulky torso with dirty jeans. From the sides of his head she could see he had long hair, and longer sideburns.

"It hurts..." he moaned once more, irritating Jennifer.

"Look, if you want my help then you need to tell me what's wrong with you!" She said, walking up behind him, grasping his shoulder and pulling him to look at her.

A wide open mouth that was contorted, dislocated greeted her in a low moan, with a pitiless gaze from eyeless sockets. The bearded man's skin was drawn tight over his body, as if he didn't have any water in him, and patches of skin opened up with a rash of honey-combed wounds. Still kneeling, the man reached up and grabbed onto Jennifer's arm with an iron grip, tugging her close to his opened maw. Shrieking, she almost didn't hear the buzzing coming from him. When she saw what was causing it she began to shriek more.

Belching forth clouds of angry bees, the man vomited the swarm directly onto Jennifer's face, where she felt their sharpened legs dig and cut into her face. From the holes in his skin more bees popped out and flew onto her, tiny legs dissecting her piece by piece before flying back into the body of the man. Jennifer struggled, but found she was almost incapable of moving between the man's tight grip and a series of sharp stings appearing all over her face and neck, the initial stab painful, but the area becoming numb within moments.

The man moved, shifting with a horrid rigidness as he lowered Jennifer to the ground beneath the sunflowers, into a pile of bones. Pressing her deep into the soft earth, he continued pouring out gouts of the flying insects, all of which seemed to be harvesting her. She could feel the warmth of her own blood trickling onto her shirt, dampening it, but her face and neck were numb. She could barely breathe from all of the insects swarming over her face, and with every breath she took, however shallow, a few insects crawled into her mouth, where they began to cut into her tongue.

Choking on her screams, she struggled in vain to try and get out of the man's grasp. Her hands, slick from blood and stinging with hundreds of slashes and missing hunks of flesh, slid along his arms, and her kicks to his stomach just seemed to rile the bees up as they swarmed over her.

With one final savage kick to the man's chest, she almost cried in victory as she felt his sternum break, and his chest collapse. The man immediately crumpled to the side of her, and the swarm dissipated, flying above in a swirling cortex of bloody gobbets of flesh. Gasping for air, Jennifer pried herself from the man's grip and kicked him once more in the chest, before crawling backwards through the sunflowers and assorted bones away from him. The sound of buzzing droned on and on around her, making her head swim from the combination of toxins and blood loss.

Dizzy, she collapsed back, gasping for air, the bees continued to fly in a swirling tornado above her, forming a wall around her so she couldn't escape, at least not easily. She heard the

man hacking and coughing, moaning in agony as he struggled to maintain his own breath with a cracked sternum. Jennifer sat up on her elbows, looking over at the man.

If she could have screamed she would have. All she managed was a panicked gurgle.

Protruding from the man's distorted mouth was a large bee, some six inches long, which crawled up from the throat of the man as he jerked and twitched in his final moments of life. The sides of the bee had tubes, and instead of a yellow ringed thorax, this one was shiny black like some hellish wasp. Testing its wings once, twice, it slowly rose into the air and began lazily flying towards Jennifer, long legs dangling below.

"H-Hurts... Help me..." The large bee droned its tone high and brittle. "Are you injured? Injured. H-Hurts... Help me..."

It mimics what it hears! Jennifer thought frantically, edging away through the wildflowers, eyes locked on the hell wasp growing ever closer. When she reached a certain point, a hailstorm of flesh-eating bees descended upon her, this time merely stinging her into submission, slowly paralyzing her. Dear God, no!

Lying amidst the flowers, paralyzed from the combined stings of the numerous bees, there was little Jennifer could do to stop the large one from landing on her chest. She felt its weight, about that of a kitten, pad up her body slowly until the bee was sitting at her lower lip, tugging it down with its mandibles. Two prickly forelimbs reached into her mouth, grasping onto her lower teeth, and begin to pull down, opening her mouth wider and wider, until it was as wide as it could get. A buzz of wings from the wasp was the only warning she got as it pulled even further, twin pops filling her ears as her lower jaw was pulled out of socket.

The pain of bone slipping along bone had Jennifer moaning in agony, but nothing could prepare her for what would be next. The wasp folded its wings and began to wheedle its way down her mouth and into her throat. She could feel it scraping along the sensitive lining of her esophagus, creating lines of blood to help grease its path, allowing it to slide down that much easier.

For a second, she couldn't breathe and Jennifer prayed that this would be the end of it, that somehow the insect was killing her and would simply allow her to rot. But then she felt it stirring in her chest, buzzing within a lung. A sharp pain echoed from beneath her sternum, as if something was cutting her insides with a pair of thin, dull scissors.

Then she felt it move again, her chest heaving up and down as her lungs began to operate without her, even when she tried to hold her breath. *The tubes!* She thought suddenly, trying her best to think through the pain. *It's connected itself up to my lungs on its own!* 

And just as she tried to scream from that realization did she find herself swarming with bees once more, this time burrowing into her flesh and flying down her throat. She felt them buzzing about in her stomach, and laying down wax over the holes they were burrowing to prevent her from bleeding out. Most worrying of all, she felt the continued stinging of the bees as they slowly began to numb her entire body and, slowly, her mind.

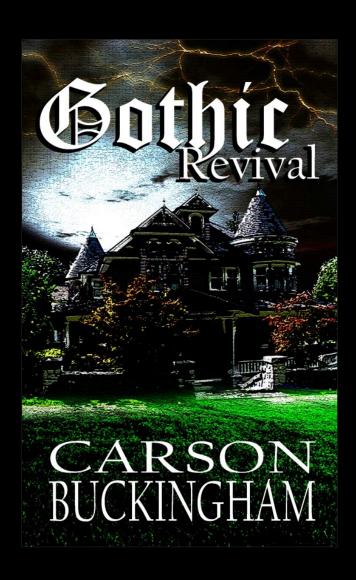
And so Jennifer laid there, amidst the pollen clouds of the wild flowers, bees crawling in and out of her nose and throat, and innumerable holes cut through her tee shirt and bicycle shorts. Staring up into the late afternoon sun, Jennifer's slow, ponderous thoughts only dwelled on one subject.

To die. She needed to die, and get these bees out of her body.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Nicholas Paschall has been writing professionally for three years, publishing horror and fantasy alike. His latest works include *Shrieks and Shivers, Demonic Visions Volume Five* along with his recurring column in *Beyond Time* magazine. He dwells in an ancient cemetery not far from where you live, so beware.

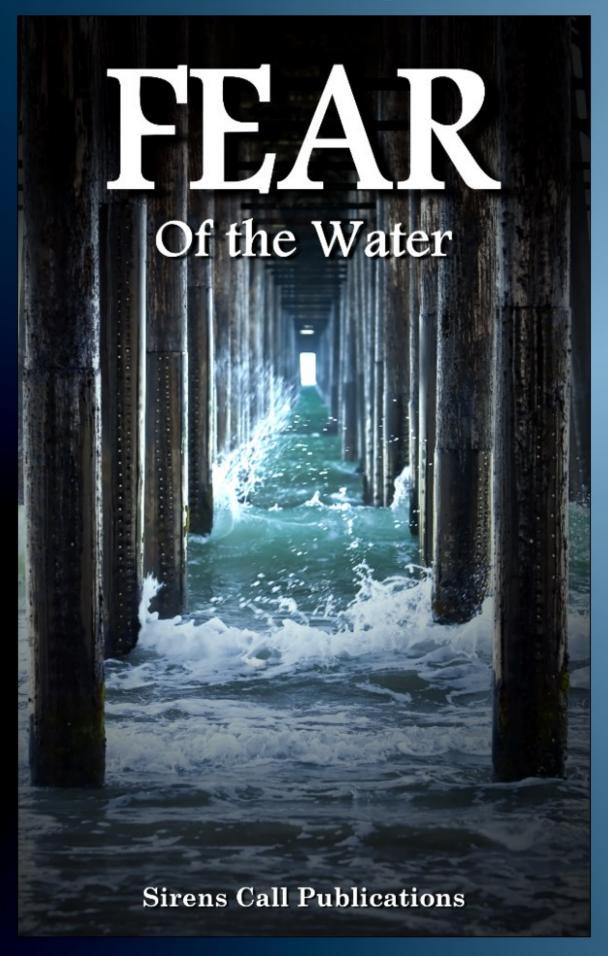
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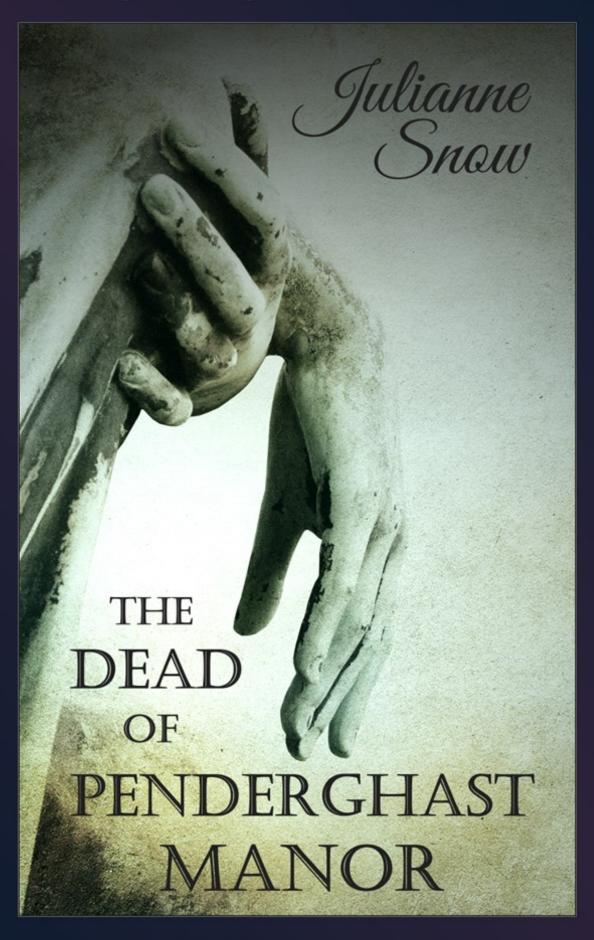
## **Gothic Revival** by Carson Buckingham

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



Available on Amazon

#### Leaves of Three | Mollie McFarland

Every spring, Edmund and his father had to clear a path through the woods to the fishing hole. The task grew with the boy. It was almost too much for them to handle this year. All of the plants were overgrown from the volatile winters which brought blizzards one week and tornadoes the next. The land was beginning to resemble a rainforest more than Appalachian foothills. Edmund was still so small that he had to take two steps for every one his father took. Nonetheless, he had been deemed old enough to carry his own machete. Life was good. He merrily chopped through the trail and even had enough energy left to scare off all the fish. He gathered flowers for his mother from the fallen plants on the way back.

Despite their intentions, the boys never caught much, so Grace was grilling burgers on the deck. She graciously took Edmund's bundle of weeds and lifted them to her nose. She didn't notice Ed's mistake until she felt the familiar tingle that accompanies poison ivy. She had never been very allergic, but the boys were both quite sensitive. "Leaves of three, Ed! Look at my flowers and tell me what you see." This would be a doozie of a teaching moment Grace thought as she plotted oatmeal baths and days of sleepy idling on Benadryl. Ed had had enough run-ins with the plant to be appropriately dismayed. He fell to the floor in a fit of melodrama. "I take it you see what I mean? Sorry, I gotta throw your flowers out." She dumped them in the trash and tied the bag shut. "We need to wash off or it's going to be worse! Up you go! To the kitchen, little man!"

Ed was a dedicated actor and he would carry his bits too far, a common source of exasperation for his mother. He laid in the grass gasping and holding his chest. Grace nudged him with her foot, but his head just lolled from side to side. "Up! I mean it! I touched the plant too. If I touch you, it'll just be worse!" Grace's pulse sped up and she felt her face flush. "Clark! Come and get your son! FAST!" Still, the boy didn't move and his father never materialized. Her frustration gave way to concern when his breathing became fast and shallow. Grace kneeled at his side and brushed the hair back from his forehead. As if by magic, the skin rose up in weeping welts.

"CLARK! Call 911!" His skin was so hot.....he wasn't responding. Grace could hardly breathe herself. She felt like her body was swelling around her, enveloping her senses. Is this what panic feels like? Furious at her body and her husband she clambered to her feet to find the phone. Her hands were clumsy and the sensor on the phone didn't recognize her. After several attempts, she noticed the 'emergency' button, which dialed automatically. In the amount of time it took for someone to answer, her tongue had swollen so much that she could only grunt and scream into the receiver. She threw the phone to the ground and returned to her son. She scooped him up in her arms, dumped him in the bathtub and turned on the water. Her hands were fleshy mittens, unable to remove his clothes or shoes. She shook and splashed him to try and wash away the poison. He slumped as the cool water rose around him.

Grace sat on the floor and prayed they would be able to trace the call. While she was praying, her eyes were growing heavy and her head drooped. The paramedics found Clark first, crumpled and gasping on the porch. By the time they got to the bathroom too much time had passed, mother and son were unconscious. Grace rallied, but Edmund succumbed. Whether it was to the water or the poison, she would never know. Father and son died and Grace was prosecuted for her son's death by drowning. She was so dispirited that she didn't call anyone's attention to the fact that poison ivy, of all things, had been the cause.

Grace barely cared when she was cleared from any wrongdoing. She went back to her home alone and bereft. She cut ties with friends and family and locked the gates of her estate. Her last communication with the outside world was a smoke signal. No one would ever know if it was accident or malice that set the woods ablaze that summer. The smoke, pregnant with seeds, spread to her neighbors and their neighbors and lands for miles around. With alarming alacrity, the ivy began the task of avenging its Mother and reclaiming swathes of land for the planet's green and growing denizens.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** If you asked who Mollie McFarland was, you'd get a different answer depending on the time. In the morning she's a librarian, in the evening she's a musician, the rest of the time, she's a writer. She has works featured in the Necon Ebooks Best of 2015 Flash Fiction Anthology. She's working on new pieces of fantasy and horror from her home in Birmingham, Alabama.

Twitter: @molliemcwrites

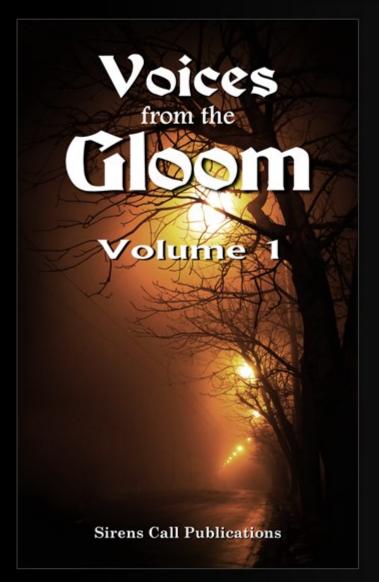
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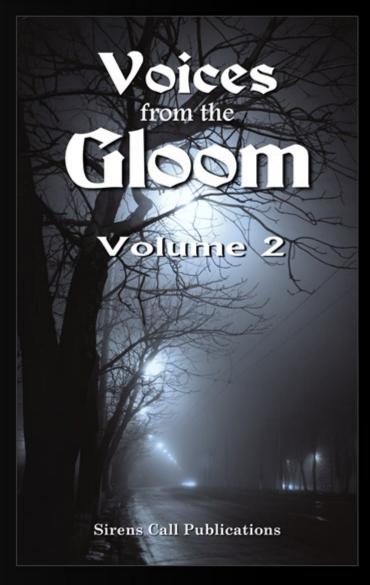
## **Dusk and Summer** by Joseph A. Pinto

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## Eclectic collections of spine-tingling stories...





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#### Earth Day Every Day | Taylor White

When I was little there was this lady who would go to all the schools and teach the kids about recycling and energy conservation and CFCs, Chlorofluorocarbon. Earth-Day stuff. She was from the government, and she was real creepy. Maybe it was because she was 'from the government'. What eight-year-old has any concept of the government? She was like this strange exalted being from a dark and cold world beyond what I knew. She came to dispense orders to us with colorful charts and graphs and bland cartoons. There was to be a new program at the school. We were to start recycling. We were now to save water, save the lights, save the whales. We were expected to carry these orders into our home lives and free time.

This lady wasn't like the Red Cross lady or the guy from the Cub Scouts or the fire safety superheroes. They were firm, but friendly and open without a hint of condescension. The environment lady held something for us that could only be described as contempt. She shamed us. We were responsible for destroying the Earth. The Exxon Valdez disaster was our fault for wanting to be driven everywhere. Deforestation and the burning of the Amazon were the direct results of our hamburger addictions. Adorable animals were choking on our trash.

I was drawing or staring out the window or picking at my feet or something. I wasn't paying attention to her. She pointed right at me and said, "You, little boy! Pay attention." I pretended like I had been absorbing every bit of what she said. Eventually, though I drifted off again. I couldn't help it. She was weird and I didn't want to be there.

So she stood up and commanded me like a bad dog. "Little Boy I won't say it again. You must do as I say." Then she stormed the front of the stage, held the microphone in her hands, and addressed all of us. "The Earth is dying due to your greed, children. When that happens, it will be death for us all. So don't think it won't be necessary to sacrifice those who are unwilling to conform to the new standards. The Earth will have balance, even if it must turn you into bones on your own lawn."

Well, she got escorted out of there real fast after that. A bunch of the kids started crying, but most of us just sat there in abject confusion.

I don't know what happened to that lady. I heard she got fired and they put her on the news because she had an outburst outside city hall. But I didn't see it, so I really don't know. What I do know is that what she said stuck to me. It stuck to all of us from that class. Protecting the environment became an important issue to us. Or at least avoiding the anxiety of ignoring the environmentalist argument became important to us.

Growing up since then I tried to be as conscientious about 'saving the earth' as I could be and still live a regular life. I knew kids who grew up saying they wanted to live 'off the grid' so they could live better for the planet. Most of them turned into paranoids who moved away and completely disappeared. I couldn't do that, but I could recycle.

Except for that time I didn't recycle. I had all these cans saved up for this charity thing or

whatever. Instead of recycling I got lazy and threw them out with the regular trash. I could have done the right thing, but I slept in and watched some cartoons instead. As soon as I heard the trash guys pull up and take away those cans, a heavy, sick feeling bored its way up from my gut and pulled on my heart. On the television screen, the hard, cold face of the lady from the government appeared, eyeless and mummified. Just for a second, she glared at me with disapproval, and then she was gone.

A few years later my friends from school started dying. I didn't get many details since most of them moved away. I know one kid got caught in a trash compactor and another 'accidentally' fell into some industrial waste.

My thoughtless transgressions against the Earth didn't stop there. When I was a teenager, we found this old microwave. It was junk pick-up day and we were looking for things lying out to bust up. We carried it out to the middle of the bridge: one of the big ones that span the entire river. We lugged the microwave over the railing and into the black water below. It made a huge splash, which was wildly entertaining for a few seconds. As the water settled, I could see bodies of kids, all of them about my age, bubble to the surface. They floated and bobbed in the exact spot where the microwave hit the water. All of us saw it. When the bodies reached up for us, we got back in the car and peeled out. We never spoke of it again. A few days later, those guys were all either dead or vanished.

There were a few more deaths of my old elementary school class around this time. Some of them were just teenage tragedies of suicide, overdoses, and car crashes. Some were real mysterious though. They were found in fields and forests, dragged there and cleaned of flesh. Flayed. Torn to pieces. Each time there were no clues. No leads, no evidence, no witnesses, no tracks or prints or even a damn skin flake.

So I was sitting at home the other night, mucking around on the internet. I was only a little drunk, but enough to put some piss in me. I saw feed articles saying two more kids from my elementary school had died. One of them had been tangled in a rose bush and just bled to death. The other died of complications of a pine tree growing out of her lungs. I was getting numb to the terror of it. So many of them had died, and I could not stop wondering what it meant. Eventually I just grew tired of it. The drinking helped. There was a brief moment of mourning where I bottomed-up in salute and prayer for my old class. Then the feeling passed and I was back to Skeletor memes.

Another article came up on my feed. Some internet friend, not even a guy I knew in real life, wanted me to pledge money to his crowd-sourcing thing. Some kind of business where he would build a solar truck and then travel around to environmental disasters and aid in the cleanup. He was a popular, good-looking guy with a hot wife and a ton of money. So of course I hated him. And all my other internet friends were in the comments section paying him dollar after dollar and compliment after compliment. Like his stupid business venture was so fucking revolutionary and he was such a better environmentalist than all of us. What a shit. I scrolled

right past with only a hateful sneer. I intentionally donated nothing!

That act was so satisfying it put me on a real tear through the apartment. I had finally had enough of this earth day bullshit rhetoric. For years I lived in fear that something terrible would happen to me if I didn't work to save everything. But then I look outside and these major polluters are just getting away with it. These oil-spill-coal-slurry-nuclear-disaster guys who want to get on the news and talk about how it's everyone else's fault except theirs. I had a brick in my toilet and recycled toilet paper that felt like fucking cardboard up my ass for years and these corporate fucks were driving Mercedes Benz while bleeding the planet dry. I said Fuck Them and fuck the lady from the government and fuck all her stories about humans killing the planet.

I was so pissed about the whole thing that I had to step outside for a little air. I needed to get away from my computer, away from the media, and away from these old fears.

So I was standing out on the back porch and just staring out there. Thinking about stuff. And then the wind started blow. It was nice at first but then it started to get strong: a succession of quick, aggressive blasts of air. It shook the house and blew leaves and plant clippings all over me. Then I heard this voice come from on the other side of the fence. It said "We saw what you did and now you must die." I swear to Christ that's what it said. It was loud, and its deep, menacing tone resonated off the neighboring houses. It was like the wind was saying it.

So then these gusts started to pick up and they swirled around in the backyard. My landlord had just mowed the lawn and cut back the hedges, so there was all this plant matter just lying about. It all got taken up by the wind and it formed this small tornado. Then the tornado all started to coalesce in the middle of the yard, and it took a human shape! It stood ten feet tall, this man-thing made of yard clippings.

The wind stopped, but the plant man was still there. He walked, picking up one thick stumpy foot after another, over to the tool shed. Then he just swatted at the front door and it came right off at the hinges. This fucking thing was strong. I just stood there watching the thing. I instantly regretted my attitude of the night, and for living a life so selfish. I didn't know what was going to happen, and I was too scared to do anything else but watch.

So then the thing came out of the shed and it had the fucking lawn mower. He held it up in front, and yanked on the rip cord. The engine choked a few times, then roared to life. I could see the spinning blades and I knew they were meant for me.

I ran. I ran through the house like my ass was on fire. I dodged around every piece of furniture and knocked over whatever I couldn't get around. No fucking way was this thing going to get me.

I grabbed my phone and ran right out the front door. I started dialing 911, but before I could hit the call button the fucking trees grabbed me. That's right. The trees. They grabbed me with their branches and lifted me up off my feet. I dropped the damn phone. The one thing I had that could have gotten me out of this. Dropped it in the damn grass.

I yelled for help, but nobody could hear me over the lawn mower. The plant man had

been on my heels the whole time. Lights came on in all the houses on the block. It was way too late to be mowing the lawn, so all the neighbors had been woken up and were pissed about it. By the time some of them came out of their houses, I was dead. The plant man shoved the lawn mower right into my face and all over my torso. It ripped me to shreds. Death came quick, but the horror of the situation made it seem like a lifetime.

The neighbors found me like that: bloody, mangled, and ruined in the front yard.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Taylor White is a writer, musician, and forever horror geek. He has been published with Palladium Books and Tobacco Magazine. He also has two self-published books: an anthology of end-of-the-world stories and a table-top RPG. His music has been described with the words "noise blues horror destruction". Taylor's work is known to cause anxiety and depression. There is no cure.

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#### Bleakwood Pond | Lori R. Lopez

Folks stopped swimming in the pond when a boy became infected and a girl's extremities were dyed a permanent shade of inky green. A legend had formed that the pool of fetid dark water was giving birth to crypto-carps and assorted oddities near the community of Bleakwood. There were stories of disappearances, dead things resurrected. The rumors claimed of a fish with feet and a human face, a turtle with two heads, a frog with teeth and bulges like grayish-white tumors. Everyone else was creeped out. Finster Noddy was a rancid goat with a bushy grizzled beard who didn't believe in anything. He sold dirt for a living, excavating holes in the woods around his shack. "Buncha fairytales and hoot-owl nonsense," he scorned, overhearing a conversation.

The guy was another juicy topic for the local gossip mills.

"Quit eavesdropping. We weren't addressing you," scolded Clara Dell. Her curiosity shop doubled as a museum for twigs and feathers. The curly-haired woman patted a stuffed bird by the cash register. "And leave Hooty out of it." The store's mascot had been her pet and was preserved when he fell off his perch five years ago, dead as a ghost. She imagined him blinking, turning his head, but didn't mention it or people might whisper about her.

The shop featured peculiar wood carvings along with original handcrafted pine-cone critters, which started as a hobby. Her most popular attraction was homemade brownies, and

that was what drew the churlish scruffy individual to the tray of baked walnut and chocolate bars.

"Last I heard, it's a free country. Unless there's an invasion I missed, or the liberals voted to outlaw opinions."

"Are you going to buy that brownie?" Clara demanded. She kind of agreed, although she would never admit it. That was the trouble with opinions. You might find yourself flocking with cuckoos, and siding against your family or friends, depending on the issue. It was best to keep them to yourself. It wasn't even safe to talk about the weather anymore!

"Not sure. I'm weighing my options." Noddy compared two of the cellophane-wrapped squares, estimating the biggest.

Rolling her eyes, Clara resumed a private chat. "Oh, there's something in the water, Betsy. It's foul to the final unholy drop. Only a matter of time till something hellish and wicked crawls out." She was a horror fan.

"We need to save this town," her friend stated. "Let's hold a prayer meeting at my house tonight."

"You know what? I'll have to skip that. I'm planning to curl up with a good book."

"Exactly. See you later. Seven-Thirty!" Betsy had rushed to the door swifter than Clara could object.

"I didn't mean that book!" She would have to phone the woman, who was always inviting her for activities that didn't interest her. They weren't very close, but it was a small town. A lot of people were like that. Clara sighed. After all day speaking to customers (mainly there for the brownies), she enjoyed spending her evening at home. Why couldn't they understand? Now and then she went to a card game, a book group at the library, a town meeting. More often to a restaurant and a movie, sitting by herself if nobody interfered by taking pity or advantage, plopping beside her. She liked being alone. It was peaceful. And she wished people would obey the sign on the wall behind her. NO RELIGION OR POLITICS. Whatever happened to not discussing those things?

The pond was in a separate category, and she couldn't be sure how to classify it. Maybe as Just Plain Weird. It was okay to talk about Weird. Some folks were simply rude.

Finster deposited a handful of sticky coins on the counter, then shuffled to the door unpeeling his snack, taking a huge bite. His baggy coveralls were smudged with dark stains, evincing the theft of earth from the forest. Regulations were lax about it. He would get away with it until Mother Nature took action or somebody brought it up for the civic council to decide. That wasn't going to be her. 'Live and let live' was Clara's philosophy. The words adorned a pillow at home.

"Thanks, Mister Noddy." She rang up the purchase. It had been a long day. She couldn't wait to flip the sign on the door to CLOSED.

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Noddy climbed in the cab of a rusty pickup truck. The cargo area was stacked with thick plastic sacks of rich soil. What could be more fertile than the woods, brimming with brush and trees? The dirt-digger sold 'the forest floor' to landscape and garden suppliers in surrounding cities. "You can't get this at Walmart."

His current haul was for a greenhouse in Bleakwood. The cow had reneged on her order.

"That's highway robbery. I can shovel it myself for free," complained the female. She was in her sixties and ate a few too many pound-cakes for breakfast. He doubted it.

"You do that then." Finster had walked away grinning to himself. She'd be calling pretty soon, begging him. Women were that way. Couldn't make up their minds.

Speeding down a highway bordered by evergreens and birches, he veered toward a rabbit tentatively crossing the pavement, hopping and pausing on the center line. The bunny leaped to a gravel shoulder scarcely before a tire could flatten it to roadkill.

"Darn." He could have made stew. "Next time!" Fin blasted his horn and laughed, swerving lane to lane.

His pickup jounced along a rough pitted driveway. The parking-brake moaned; he jumped out and ignored a dog tethered to a stake, trudging beyond the length of the chain. The mongrel whined for attention. Stupid mutt. "I didn't get paid, so you don't get to eat," griped the inhuman. "That's how it goes." He ambled into the cabin muttering, "Better luck tomorrow."

Swinging wide a battered fridge door, he surveyed the meager contents. Half-empty chips. Bottles of beer. Leftover take-out. He peeked in the container: something that had once been chicken. Noddy grabbed a bottle and popped the top in an opener nailed to the wall. Sipping, he scuffed past an economy-sized bag of dog food. The man flopped onto a worn sofa, raised a remote control. Aiming at a bulky screen, he flipped channels and drank his beer, legs stretched out in filthy threads. He plunked a mud-caked boot on a scarred rectangular coffee-table. "Peace and quiet."

Swigging beer, ignoring the drone of a newscast, he emptied the bottle and leaned his gourd back. Eyelids sank. Fin's mind drifted to the old broads in the store going on about what he referred to as the dumpwater. He made a tidy little profit from allowing some plants in the region to dispose of hazardous chemicals there, carting toxic waste and whatever questionable substances through his property. His driveway extended on to the water's edge. He didn't care what they shoved or poured into it, but the sly coot had been considering lately to raise his fee. Why work so hard spading dirt? He might be able to rake in enough dough charging for traffic in and out. Instead of by the load, he could bill them per barrel or bucket, however they transported their crud. Fella had to be shrewd.

His worthless nameless watchdog began to bark. Dozing, Fin roused and yelled, "Shut up or I'll duct-tape your yap!" He had done it on occasion, when he had a monstrous hangover. An hour or so did the trick.

The racket continued. Probably a squirrel. Or a truck making a delivery. This was early.

They usually did it in the middle of the night so nobody else would get snoopy and point fingers. Accuse him and the companies for the mess in their precious duckpond. He snickered. Hadn't seen a duck there in years. Several warped duck-like creatures had floated ashore. Finster buried anything unnatural to keep locals from getting suspicious. Some of the anomalies were spotted first. He did his utmost to discredit 'exaggerated' reports.

Switching off the television, he napped again briefly. The dog was growling. Fin thudded a boot from table to floor, knocking over the glass bottle. "Okay, you're asking for it!" He could snarl too. *Mangy cur.* Pushing up, he staggered to the icebox to extract a second brew and opened it. The kitchen tiles were littered with metal caps. He guzzled amber liquid. "Ahhh." Beard damp with foam, he barged out of a creaking screen. A dry water bowl had been tipped over. Oh yeah, he forgot to fill that yesterday. Or was it the day before? Sipping beer, he frowned. The canine whimpered at him, then turned to grumble toward the dusty road into the woods.

Fin gulped the last of his bottle and let it tumble. "What? Is somebody trespassin'?" Squinting at trees and shadows, the galoot surveyed the fringes of his yard. "Looks like nuthin." Glaring at the dog, he retreated inside. "Waste of time to pay any attention to that hound," he concluded, slamming a solid door.

The jerk strode to a bed in a corner and collapsed facedown, layered with grime, his boots dangling off the edge.

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Bleakwood Pond was presently a cesspool of oily venomous concoctions. Its murky bottom harbored a collection of algae-coated drums. Other odd shapes and junk were heaped in clusters like bizarre underwater sculptures fuzzy with rust and mire. The broth consisted of sludge and bluish-green bacterial blooms, thickened to a boggish consistency that bubbled and blooped. Most life that once flourished within the crepuscular swamp had been killed or transformed, minus the usual stages of metamorphosis; the natural phases of growth and cellular division cancerously circumvented.

This accelerated mutation, initially a bane, a disaster, had been seized and implemented by Nature for defense—to counter a species rampantly out of control, upsetting the balance in her ecosystems. Born of necessity, wounded, befouled, environmental intelligence developed as a vengeful awareness, meshing spiritual and organic compounds to a multi-faceted soul that could feel and destroy.

The diseased essence that evolved would manipulate an unnatural process of pollution and taint into a biological mutiny, a rebellion against the blight of humanity, to exact punishment upon those responsible for pillaging the forest and treating the pond like a sewer. Nature's child, she harnessed what remained of the habitat, altering states, mushrooming to a legion of madness bent upon retribution.

A writhing malevolent soup bled forth, draining the basin, exposing the truth like

skeletons jutting from soft wet ground. The roil of anger and anguish, fungus and frond, sediment and sentiment risen out of a dross-matted cauldron and the timber's seething mulch was on the march.

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Clara boarded her twenty-year-old bike to pedal home. She couldn't wait to relax, trade shoes for slippers, clothing for pajamas and a bathrobe. It was shower day (as opposed to washing up) and there was no better feeling than to pull on a clean set of flannel or satin peejays, wet hair combed, sheets changed for the week, and view T.V. in bed while eating dinner on a tray, then open the pages of a book to where she had left off. Humble pleasures were as satisfying as expensive ones, in her opinion.

A cushioned seat squawked; rubber tires bounced along asphalt, cruising from ranks of brick storefronts to lanes of houses. She braked for a Stop Sign. A chill gave her forearms goosebumps. She should have worn a sweater. The weather could be so fickle and unreliable, despite the season, ever since Global Warming became indisputable. Yet she sensed an ominous cloud, an invisible atmosphere of dread or eeriness hanging above the town.

Her eyes shifted to the woods that stood watching them ... silently monitoring their movements with an air of appraisal, almost an attitude of condemnation.

Where did that come from?

Her shoulders quivered. She rode gingerly on with a mild case of the willies.

A gauntlet of trees with sagging branches towered in rows, a sight she normally welcomed and cherished. Now the brooding Willows increased her uneasiness. Coasting to a halt by the door to a trim cottage, she dismissed the notion that the trees disapproved, but a trace of apprehension lingered.

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A bang. Noddy jolted to alertness and rolled over, blinking into the dusk that invaded his cabin. He couldn't blame it on the dog. The noise was loud, as if something had fallen. Pupils adjusted to the gloom. He listened, ears discerning a fluid sound, kind of squishy. Then muffled rattling. That was the dog's chain. Finster reached to click on a lamp. Breath caught sharply in his throat. He goggled at a sea of gelatinous contaminated goop spreading in the room. Muddy and ripe, the disgusting tide had oozed beneath his door.

Seeping, the ick menaced. Its farthest contour led the way to where he sat, orbs staring, mouth gaping. Fin scooted away from the fumes and groping tendrils of the slime. A plague slithered up the foot of his rack, snaked across the mattress. He cowered, unable to escape; it blanketed the floor with a churning mass of glop.

"No!" The gunk leaked into his boots, under the legs of his grubby coveralls, attaching to the skin, a mucous scourge, wriggling over groin and belly, scaling his chest and neck, plastering his beard. Screaming, he gargled then coughed and gagged as the noxious goo infiltrated his lips, nostrils, ears...

The pond scum did terrible deviant things in his body, contorting him like a balloon animal to the crude effigy of a man, gnarled and knotted, resembling a Mandrake root. Limbs were twisted to withered stumps, atrophied stalks. Helpless and bloated, he dimly perceived the creak of the door. Vines sprouted, tuberous appendages. An eyeball protruded on a stem, spilling down his stomach. The other eye ogled in fear at a hound with bristling fur and black lips baring large cusps, padding forward, a strangled malicious beastly rumble deep in his throat.

"Nice doggy..." It was a hoarse appeal, half begging for clemency. Or maybe it was just an afterthought, belated and futile.

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Carrying a tray that bore a cheese sandwich, a glass of chocolate milk, and a raspberry cupcake, she placed it on a plump mattress and carefully climbed in at the opposite side. Clara smoothed the covers over straightened legs. Grasping a remote from her bedstand, she selected a channel for a show, then moved the tray to her lap.

The phone rang as she picked up her sandwich. Annoyed, she laid the sandwich back on the plate. "Hello?" The introvert scowled, holding a receiver. Who would be calling her?

"Clara?! I'm so glad to hear your voice!"

She sighed. "Betsy, I told you, I'm not—"

"It's awful!" the woman interrupted. She seemed frantic.

Clara was afraid to ask. "What?"

"My husband, he's dead! They swallowed him, and they're everywhere!"

"What?" Clara scrabbled for the remote control, wildly pressing buttons. The television had gone dark. She quit pushing it, clutching the device in one hand, the phone in the other. "Who's there? Have you called the police?"

"I tried, it just rings. I've called the whole town! You're the only one who answered."

Clara made a face, slightly miffed that she was last on Betsy's list. She did refuse a lot of invitations. "What's this about?" She groaned. "Are you in danger?" Just as bad. She wasn't sure what to say.

"They're in my house. The doors were locked." Betsy's tone was dull and frightened.

"I'm coming over. Hide! Stay safe." Clara put her meal on the bed and stepped to the floor, stumbling, kicking her slippers. "Hang on!"

Discarding the receiver, abandoning the remote, the woman shrugged into her robe and tied the belt. She danced to slide bare feet into the slippers then rushed from the room as a faint voice pleaded on the rug, "Don't go outside!"

Hastening to the entrance, Clara gripped an umbrella as a weapon. She threw her door ajar and dashed headlong into the night.

There was a verdant hue, a moldy aroma like mildew and garbage. Wrinkling her nose, Clara paused to examine the sky. A full silver moon winked between clouds. Rain and wind pelted her. She unfolded the handy umbrella. And observed a sinister carpet of dreck

channeling up her walk in the glow of house and street lights. Scrutinizing the dense wave of impurities, she could distinguish fibers, minerals, rubbish; a fecund array of rotting organic compost. "What the devil?"

This pungent morass was political more than religious. It sprang into a grotesque swarm, a lurching connected army—freaks of Nature that shambled to ring her. Clara gasped, and realized with dismay the entire town was being absorbed and ingested. The aggregate jumble enveloped her in unison. A single, melting, callous embrace.

No Willows wept. Her cries echoed for blocks that rustled and burgeoned with sylvan consciousness, a bleak wood's implacable animosity.

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Clara's Dell was inundated like every other structure. Teeming elements searched aisles and shelves, broke display cabinets of glass to take back its pine cones and twigs, the feathers, Hooty's stiff carcass, books on basket-weaving and other natural crafts, furnishings made of wood. Quaint buildings cracked; foundations crumbled.

Finster Noddy's ravaged corpse was dragged to the woods, followed by sacks of dirt. He was tossed to the nadir of a hole, conveniently having dug his own grave. Soil penetrated the man's orifices, cramming him to the limit. Bags of dirt were flung on top, crushing him, burying the villainous wretch with the fruit of his labor.

A sick and poisoned fen gurgled to an uncomfortable bed, having shed some of its rage and illness. Generations of algae would consume the rest.

The town was reclaimed by land and water, converted to an uncivilized state as trees emerged where they had been cleared; vines and shrubs obscured the rubble; blades of vegetation burst through pavement... though millenniums were required to restore it to perfection.

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

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#### An Interview with K. Trap Jones, Author of *One Bad Fur Day*

Sirens Call Publications recently had the pleasure of publishing of publishing K. Trap Jones' anthropomorphized novella titled *One Bad Fur Day*. Knowing that we wanted to pick his brains a bit about the novella and his writing, we sat down to ask him a few questions.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome K. Trap. Why don't you take a few moments to introduce yourself to readers?

**K. Trap Jones:** I'm an author of horror novels and short stories. With inspiration from Dante Alighieri and Edgar Allan Poe, I have a temptation toward narrative folklore, classic literary works and obscure segments within society. I'm also a member of the Horror Writers Association and can be found lurking around Tampa, Florida with my wife and three sons.



#### SCP: What made you decide to become a writer?

KTJ: Back in 2010, I started to write a story and thought it would be pretty cool to have something for my kids to read when they grew up. I wrote the concept of *The Sinner* as narrative journal entries (ala *Dante's Inferno*). I ended up writing two complete novels with no intentions of being published. I was talked into submitting the manuscript to a Florida State wide awards and it ended up winning first place in the unpublished horror category of the Royal Palm Literary Awards. I thought, what the hell, maybe I should try to get published. Blood Bound Books picked up the book and it went on to be on the 2012 Preliminary Ballot for the Bram Stoker Awards. Five years later with 6 contracted novels and over 55+ short stories published, it's been quite the whirlwind

and I have no intentions of slowing down.

#### SCP: What is One Bad Fur Day about?

**KTJ:** One Bad Fur Day is a crazy tail, err I mean tale, about what happens to the animal population during a natural disaster. The entire story is set around the civilization of animals and the predatory conflicts they go through on a daily basis. As Hurricane Katrina barrels through the Louisiana bayous, the animal population is forced to deal with the tumultuous upheaval of their world. Sheriff Sid and his wife are caught completely off-guard by the natural disaster unfolding around them as they battle not only the turbulent winds and flooding waters, but heinous acts committed by other creatures inhabiting the backwaters. Following a brutal assault on his wife, Sid is forced to fight off voodoo-priestess snakes, a junkyard raccoon,

deceitful badgers, and a band of roving power-hungry alligators. While clinging to his tenuous hold as sheriff, Sid must find a way to recapture what is rightfully his and exact his revenge.

With this idealism mixed with hours and hours of watching cartoons and Pixar films with my sons, I began to conjure a story built for adults, but keeping the same visual appeal and details, but of course, much more horrific and bloody.

### SCP: What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about *One Bad Fur Day* before they read it?

**KTJ:** One Bad Fur Day is filled with all kinds of animal characters with unique personalities with an old school western feel. Don't be fooled by thinking this is a soft story because of the characterization. It is a fast paced unique pairing of the genuine horror of a natural disaster with a story of deceit, betrayal and vengeance that will pull you in and forces the reader to identify with Sid as he journeys through the darkest reaches of the bayous, facing deadly encounters, on One Bad Fur Day!

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

**KTJ:** My writing process is pretty crazy. I spend most of my time thinking about the story before I write a single word. I will never start a project unless I know exactly what the ending will be. I enjoy embedding twists and turns within every story to keep the reader off guard. In order to do that, I need to know the ending so everything makes sense along the way. It's an insane way to do things because I could have a kick ass idea, but if I can't get to the ending then I don't start it and it becomes a bullet on an ever growing list of unfinished ideas.

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

**KTJ:** I think the hardest challenge I have faced as a writer was when I first started. I came out of the gate with a debut novel that was completely written in a narrative verse format. I had no other publications to my name and there I was holding a narrative novel which appeared to be written in the classical era. Sometimes when you do things out of the norm, you get some crazy stares, but that's alright, who the hell wants to follow the pack anyways? I've stuck to my guns throughout the years and continue to write stories which provide a challenge and tend to stray from mainstream.

#### SCP: In your opinion, what sets One Bad Fur Day apart from other books of the same genre?

**KTJ:** You mean beside the fact that the main character is a squirrel? Just joking © Seriously, I had a lot of fun writing this story because of the fact that it is so different than anything out there. Writing a narrative horror through the eyes of an animal was an insane challenge to take on, but I think in the end, the reader will relate to all of these unique characters and forget that they are immersed within the animal kingdom once the chaos starts to roll.

On a side note, every character name is associated with the type of animal they are by the first letter of their name. For example, Sid and Sally are squirrels, Randall the raccoon, Artie the alligator, Paulie and Petey the possums, etc. With so many unique characters, there had to be a method to the madness.

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

**KTJ:** I'm actually reading Clive Barker's new one, *The Scarlet Gospels*. A must read, especially since I am a huge Pinhead fan.

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

**KTJ:** I'm definitely old school when it comes to all-time favorite authors so I would say Edgar Allan Poe has influenced me the most. I can pretty much recite *The Tell-Tale Heart*. For modern day writers, I really enjoy reading Edward Lee and Jack Ketchum. Richard Laymon, Clive Barker and Brian Keene certainly make the list as well.

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

**KTJ:** Success to me is *enjoyment*. If you enjoy what you are doing, then you are successful at it. You could be great at something, but hate it. Sure, a condo on the beach with never ending time to write would be amazing, but you also have to be realistic. I believe it starts with enjoying the craft and putting out your best work every time no matter if it's a short or a novel.

Personally, I believe I have been successful for the simple fact that I can still write and pump out stories. One day, I won't be able to do that; my keg of creativity could run dry at any time. For now, I'm enjoying the roller coaster ride.

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

**KTJ:** I had a chance to meet one of my favorite authors at a convention and I'll answer this with what he told me. Most people kept asking him how long it took for him to be famous and other crap like that. When I got his ear, I asked him how he kept enjoying writing after all of these years. His answer was short and has stayed with me for a long time. He said, "Stay grounded, and don't get big headed, no matter what happens."

I think once the fascination of being a "published author" wears off, that's when you truly become a writer.

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

**KTJ:** With every story I write, I always have the same goal: I want the reader to feel a part of the character's journey through the narrative tone as they travel amongst a wide range of emotions. At the end, I want the reader to walk away having read a fun story and of course shocked by some of the twists and turns along the way. By working alongside the great staff at Sirens Call Publications, I believe we have achieved just that.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak about *One Bad Fur Day!* 

Thank you K. Trap! One Bad Fur Day can be purchased online where all fine books are sold.

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And now for an excerpt from One Bad Fur Day...

## Chapter 1 The Winds of Change

I had six bullets and there were eight vultures nearing me. I could see their shadows upon the ground as they soared overhead. Nasty bastards, all they wanted was to feast on my body after I died. I've made a lot of enemies in my life, but it came with the badge. The path to the roadside had taken its toll on me; with every step, I lost more blood. It's where all us animals traveled to when our time was about to end; some called it an honorable death.

"You're bleeding, sheriff," a burly vulture named Victor stated, fluttering his blackened wings as he landed on the ground. "Either way, I will be dining on your corpse; road or no road."

I smelled of death; my fur was saturated with blood from the gunshot wounds. My leg barely worked and my chest was burning, but I refused to stop. I would decide my own fate, not them.

"I will hollow out your carcass and drink from your skull," the vulture continued to torment. His featherless head was coated with the dried blood from his last prey. Hopping upon his feet to keep up with me, the vulture got closer.

A member of the vulture volt, Victor was constantly on parole, but with the shift in the law and devastation upon our land, things had obviously changed. The blood trail leaking from my wounds led his gang to me, but I was confident that no part of my flesh would pass through his beak. Slowing my pace, I wanted him just a little closer; my blurred vision was not an asset to my aim. Climbing over a fallen tree, I didn't take another step. I needed Victor to leap down without care and the stupid bastard took the bait. I spun around; his beady eyes came face to face with the barrel of my gun.

"Let's not be harsh, sheriff," Victor nervously stated. "You are still the law; you have rules. I am merely escorting you to the road for your own safety."

Victor squawked as my bullet tore apart his head. The thin skull offered no protection as the bullet struck deep into the bark of the tree behind him. The blood splatter stained the ground as the vultures soared overhead. Like I said, Victor would not taste my flesh. With five bullets left, I had to continue on my way to the road so that I could die admirably.

How did I get myself into this situation? Well, it all started with one bad fur day.

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Everything had to be perfect. The reservations were made well in advance. I waited for her outside with a dry throat and shaky legs. She was everything to me and I wanted to prove that to her. I was never the dress up type and the self-made knot of my tie, if that's what it was intended to be, felt like an abnormal growth on my neck. I started to doubt my appearance and bullied every aspect of my own self, but that all went away when I saw her. She exited our tree and stood on the porch limb for a brief moment. It felt like eternity for me. The way the setting sun twisted between the swaying leaves and caressed her fur was mind blowing. In that moment, I drifted away from reality until our eyes met and she smiled. I watched her every movement as she scampered down the tree bark towards me. She was mine and I was hers.

"Hi there stranger. Are you waiting for anyone particular?" she said with a seductive grin.

I believe that I mumbled something incoherent, but I'm not sure what it was. My eyes were staring at her slim grey body. I managed to calm down the visions of her being my dessert after dinner and managed to muster out a compliment.

"You're the most beautiful squirrel I've ever seen," I said with a few stutters here and there.

"Why thank you, you're not that bad yourself," she said while licking her lips. "Shall we be on our way?"

"Yes, of course, we have, uh, reservations. They reserved a table for us."

"Isn't that what reservations are for?"

She knew exactly how to light the blood fire in my heart. Her words, the way she said them. I just wanted to bypass the dinner and take her upstairs and eat sweet sap off her body all night long. She walked a few steps ahead of me and I was in no rush to join her. My eyes swayed from side to side as I pretended to be able to see her ass moving beneath her dress.

"Stop staring at my ass and come up here with me," she whispered without turning her head around.

Hook, line and sinker. All she had to do was throw out the bait and I would nibble on anything she offered. I walked faster until I caught up with her, and then stood on my hind legs. Her arm slid under mine and we walked through the leaf littered floor of the forest.

The wind was starting to pick up, but it was nothing unusual for that time of year within the bayous of Louisiana. The tree tops danced in the red orange hue of the sky. I never grew

tired of watching them bend and give way to the mercy of the wind. As we walked along the path, the loose leaves that had no strength to hold on and fell. I held Sally's hand tight and I did not want the moment to end. She was beautiful. The trees, the wind, the leaves; they were all beautiful.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked after she noticed me staring at the trees.

I wanted to tell her how much she meant to me. I wanted to rip my chest open and give her my pulsating heart, but sharing emotions was never my best trait. As sheriff, I live with death on a daily basis and over the years, the daunting task of crime scenes and investigations has made me numb to the sensitive nature of others. I don't know how to verbalize the visions that my mind was showing me. The act plays out perfectly within my head. The dialogue flows seamlessly through my lips and she becomes flattered by my uncanny ability to shelter her with romance as if she was a princess.

"Nothing," I answered. Not quite the perfect rendition of a romantic Broadway show.

I felt sad after I spoke because I knew that my sadistic mind was lying to her, but I just wasn't comfortable enough with my ability to share emotions.

"Look, there it is!" she stated, pointing at the lights in the distance.

Pete's Landing, our favorite restaurant, and a small establishment on the banks of a bayou inlet. It certainly wasn't the fanciest of places, but the food was always good and fresh. With each order of their famous crawfish, Pete would fly onto the shores of the bayou and collect the meal himself. In the center of each table was a bucket where he would dump and drain the catch. The restaurant was an old, rusty shack left behind on a farmer's field. Pete had a fascination with strings of Christmas lights and his restaurant was evident of that. It was a glistening winter wonderland within the darkened environment of the dreary bayous.

The restaurant was more than just an eating hole. For Sally and me, it was the location of our first date. It was a place where we could block out all of the real world hassles and just enjoy each other's company.

As we neared the restaurant, I quickly scurried in front so I could open the front door. It always made her blush when I did that. The door swung open to reveal a packed house inside. The restaurant was family owned, so Pete had all of his sons and daughters working various positions. His youngest daughter, Anna greeted us at the door.

"Good evening Sherriff, Mrs. Sherriff," Anna said with an innocent childhood lisp.

"Why, hello Anna. You are certainly looking beautiful tonight," Sally proclaimed.

"Mama styled my feathers. Do you like them?" Anna stated while twisting around as if she was walking the cat walk in a model competition.

"Most beautiful you are and such the professional, I might add."

"Thank you Mrs. Sheriff. Mama says one day I could be famous."

While Sally and Anna continued to talk, the Mayor spotted me from afar. The old Badger himself had seen better days, but he certainly did his part to keep the society peaceful.

"Beautiful night Sheriff. The crawfish are superb," the mayor shouted, making his way over to us.

"Evening mayor, I'm not sheriff tonight. Just another guy trying to take his wife out to dinner," I had to proclaim because the mayor never stopped working. All day and night, he was handing out tasks for people to do. A simple dinner at a restaurant translated into additional free time that could be used to talk about the laws of the land. It became quite annoying and began immediately when he was elected into office. Over the years, I began informing him in the beginning of the conversation whether or not I was indeed on the clock.

"So what brings you out tonight sheriff?" he said in his usual tone, trying to decipher how to sneak in a chore for me to do.

"I'm off duty, mayor. The wife and I are celebrating our anniversary."

"Of course, of course. Listen, it's also the anniversary of the *Old Lincoln Bridge* construction project. I was wondering..."

"I'm off duty, mayor."

I had to cut him off. No one else would dare silence him like that, but I felt really comfortable doing it, plus there wasn't a line of people wanting to replace me as sheriff, so job security was not a high concern for me.

"I see, I see. Let's talk in the morning. For now, you and Misses enjoy your dinner."

He always ended the conversation like he was doing me a favor. He made it seem that he was allowing me to stop talking. I let him have that power, because in reality it overshadowed my rudeness and complete control over the conversations I had with him.

One of Pete's older daughters approached and announced that our table was ready. Holding Sally's hand, we walked toward the back of the restaurant to the open air porch which overlooked the water. The wind was picking up by the looks of the long pieces of moss that were clinging to the branches. The water was shifting as if the tide was about to come in. The candle on our table was flickering ever so softly as I pulled out Sally's chair to allow her to sit down. I sat directly across from her and became quickly enamored by the way the candlelight danced across her fur. The flame illuminated her eyes and made them sparkle like gems. I would have stayed in that embarrassing state of infatuation if our server did not interrupt me by asking what we wanted for drinks. Sally requested the house wine, while I desired a cold beer. I required alcohol running through my veins if I were to calm my nerves. I was no longer that grade school squirrel with a large crush. My tendencies to daydream about Sally needed to be subdued. I often would gaze at her from afar without her knowing. After work, I would stay outside the tree and watch her inside. Whenever she saw me, her face would smile causing her whiskers to stand up. The vision always made the troubles of the day vanish.

Pete stumbled out the kitchen doors and wobbled towards our table.

"Sheriff! Welcome to the Landing!" he slurred with his large open beak. "And Sally, looking very delightful this fine evening, if I must say."

"Why, thank you kind sir," Sally replied with a head nod.

"Two orders of crawfish? A large grouping just came into the bayou," Pete announced, wiping the end tips of his wings across his dirty apron.

"Sounds perfect," I said with an eager stomach.

"It shall be done," Pete replied while extending his large white pelican wings. All of the candles on the tables sputtered as Pete took flight and flew off the porch, into the bayou. As I watched him soar with ease, I saw lightning through the heavy rows of trees. There was no sound of thunder, just quick flashes of light.

"Looks like rain."

"It will hold off while we eat. It looks a bit far away," she replied. She always had a way to calm my nerves and to postpone my worrying nature. It was a unique gift that she had from the elementary school teacher in her. She was always patient and kind. I, on the other hand, had no patience and would not consider myself a kind animal, by any means. She made me a better animal.

With wind at his back, Pete came soaring across the water. Growing up, I was always jealous of birds due to their ability to fly. No matter how big and clumsy they were on the ground, each one became graceful and powerful once they took to the sky. His large wings fluttered to control his weight as he guided his feet down to the porch deck. Waddling over to our table, he tilted his beak letting the water and crawfish spill into the center bucket. With his mouth empty, he bowed his head to us while walking backward.

"Enjoy my dear friends. There's a few extra in there that are on the house, Happy Anniversary."

The restaurant was packed, but in my mind, Sally and I were the only ones there. I heard nothing else, but the sweet sound of her voice. I saw nothing else, but the beautiful hue of her grey fur. Her long eyelashes teased me with every blink. She made me hunger for life; she made me thirst for adventure. She was my whole world and yet my tongue would not allow me to speak any words to prove it. I shut down in her presence like an oyster shell tumbling with the waves. It was not fair to her, but she loved me anyway. My eyes would always coat her with love even when my throat clinched and blocked my speech. She was tolerant of my emotional wreckage of a mind and I would always love her for that.

"Frisky little buggers tonight," Sally proclaimed, trying to grab one of the scurrying crawfish.

Without much thought, I quickly snatched one, twisted its head and handed it to her. The smile I received in return was how I knew that she understood the way my love works. My jumbled words of mess, failed in comparison to the small actions my mind allowed me to show her. She understood that. If she ever doubted my love, all she had to do was provide me a test. I would pass a test as long as words were not the answer.

Our candle was flickering in heavy spurts with bits of moss floating and finding their way into the restaurant. Small ripples were forming on the water with some cresting over and breaking up the dark blue color with a foaming white. I focused on a few more crawfish and my beer, but the outside summoned my attention once more. There was eeriness to the environment caused by the lack of sound. There was no movement of the trees; no buzzing of the insects. It was a dead calm, which was a rare occurrence within the bayous.

My instincts kicked in as I witnessed the trees bending the opposite direction and the water siphoning away from the porch towards the ocean. No one else on the deck noticed; something was just not right. I saw a group of seagulls flying away from the coastline. They never flew at night. Something was happening.

"Are you going to eat?" Sally interrupted my mind stare with the outside trees.

"I, I... do you see the water? It's being pulled back."

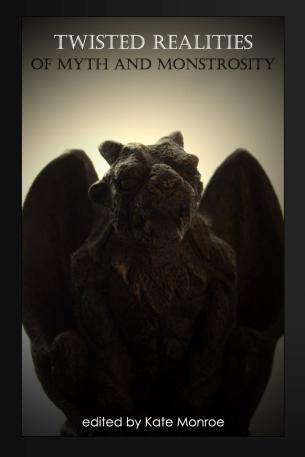
"Maybe it's low tide."

"No, low tide was this morning. And the trees, they bend one way then the other."

"I'm sure it's nothing."

At that moment, my attention was on the water level. It was rising again. The small ripples turned into larger ones. The waves and swells followed shortly after. Our candle began to flicker once more with the table cloths flipping over. The trees bent back towards the restaurant as the wind barreled through the woods. It was becoming stronger in force and picking up lightweight objects. Branches and leaves began funneling onto the porch deck.

It was definitely something happening...



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