

The Sirens Call



June 2016

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Horror-ific

*A collection of
Short Stories, Flash
Fiction, and Poetry
from multiple Horror
genres!*

*Featuring the
Photography of
Thomas Sawyer*

*An Interview with
Craig McGray,
author of the soon to
be released novel
'The Somnibus'*

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The Secret Staircase | *Joshua Skye*

There was a staircase under Lincoln's bed that only he could see. He'd pointed it out once to his mommy, but she'd only looked at him with a curious expression not unlike the ones she had when he'd do something naughty. She'd commented, "So silly, your imagination. You should write these things down. You're a natural born storyteller, my dear."

His daddy had pretended to see it, but he'd warned Lincoln not to climb down the rickety old steps. "Those wooden steps are dangerous," he'd said. "They'll bow under your weight, splinter even, perhaps crumble altogether and send you tumbling down into the dark and I'd never see you again. You don't want that, do you?"

The staircase wasn't wooden. It was made of cold gray stone worn away in spots, tarnished in others, and there was a writing in a foreign language scrolled in long dulled colors down their length into the shadows where Lincoln couldn't see anymore.

His friends couldn't see it, nor could his brother. He knew it wasn't merely a figment of his imagination because he'd reached down beyond where the floor would have been. He'd touched the second, third, and even fourth steps, the cold of the stone seeping into his fingers all the way to the bone where it made him itch. It was there, a staircase into a secret world, and only he could see it. It was special, meant for only him.

Hours were spent on his tummy, chin resting on his crossed wrists under the bed as he gazed into the shadowy depths. Sounds drifted up to his ears. They reminded him of the endless toiling noises he heard when he put his head down on his desk at school, ear to the cold polished wood. He imagined tiny men mining for precious unknown things inside the desktop. Somewhere way below, beyond the distant last step, something clandestine was taking place, and he imagined it to be something wonderful, something magical. Something that called to him.

At night, when he was under his covers, head sunken into his big fluffy pillow, the house was particularly quiet and the rest of his family fast asleep, he could hear the muted sounds of those far-away workers forever laboring. Clank, clank, clank the picks tapped on and on against stone, chipping away at it, the miners searching for their treasures. Gold? Diamonds? What was it they sought?

His adolescent mind swirled with possibilities night after night, the darkness of his room blanketing him as surely as the cotton covers tucked in around him. Sapphires, rubies, and emeralds waited patiently in long, flowing veins of silver to be discovered. At his most whimsical the laborers were archeologists of the mystical seeking the fossils of unicorns, dragons, and fairies.

Chills of excitement at the prospect of owning the bones of some mythological beast coursed through him giving him the same warm fuzzies a hug from his parents did. He couldn't help but grin from ear to ear at the thought of a golden spiral jutting forth from the skull of an otherwise ordinary horse. Unicorns, dragons, fairies. Shiver. Shiver. Shiver.

It always took a very long while for him to fall asleep with such visions so vividly alive in his imagination, oftentimes whisking him well into the wee morning hours. His schoolwork paid the price, exhaustion taking him down in the middle of class, his sleepy mind wandering into the promises beyond those cold stone steps when he was supposed to be doing his homework. After

a particularly embarrassing report card, he decided enough was enough. He had to satiate his curiosity.

One Friday night, dressed in his sea turtle pajamas, he borrowed a flashlight from his father's tool drawer, hiding it under his pillow as his mother tucked him in. "Goodnight, my sweet boy," she said and drowned him in kisses. "Sweet dreams. Don't let the bed bugs bite. I love you."

"I love you, too."

One more kiss and a sudden brief tickle that elicited a chuckle, and she hurried from the room, closing the door behind her.

Sometimes his parents checked on him and his brother throughout the evening. He waited patiently for them to go to bed, but it took a long time. It always did when they smoked their special cigarettes, the ones that smelled like weird Christmas Trees. Midnight had come and gone. He could hear them giggling, the drone of some inane grown-up movie, and the constant cacophony of the sounds from the secret place under his bed. He was so excited to finally venture down there.

His anticipation heightened when the television was turned off. After a few moments, the bedroom door crept open, a thick cloud of smoke billowed, ghostly wisps in the dim glow from the hallway light. Lincoln closed his eyes, squeezed them tightly as the weird Christmas Tree smell filled his room. Low laughter seeped in as his parents checked on him, mumbling strangely to each other. The door closed, he could barely contain himself as he listened carefully to his parents' footsteps moving to his brother's room and then to their room at the end of the hall. At last, the time had come.

Slipping out from below the warm covers, he reached under the pillow, took hold of the flashlight, and dragged it behind him. Quietly he coiled onto the cold floor and switched on the light. For a moment his young, cherubic face was illuminated in the dark, his eyes blinded by the sudden brilliance. Further down he went until he was flat against the floor and the light was pointed down the staircase.

The sounds were louder than they'd ever been before. Did they, by some miraculous precognitive gift, know he was coming? Smiling broadly, the widest grin he'd ever grinned, he crawled under the bed and carefully down the first few icy steps. It was a steep incline, blood rushed to his head as though he were hanging upside down on the jungle gym at the playground. When he was confident he could stand, he carefully turned himself around and got to his feet. He had to crouch, but he didn't mind.

The beam of light opened a long extent of the darkness before him, but faded away not too far down the precipitous corridor. A chill oozed along his spine, thrilling and frightening and exhilarating all at the same time. The sounds slowly grew louder, the air steadily colder, and the sensation of butterflies fluttering around in his tummy swelled with each and every step he took. Clank, clank, clank, the toiling became thunderous, a sound he could feel, at first, as a beat in his ears, then a caress upon his flesh, and soon it transformed into a rumbling that shook the earthen walls around him.

A thin brume came from his mouth with every sighing exhalation. The arctic air had finally seeped in and made him start to shiver, but he couldn't stop now, not when the final stone step, at

last, had come into view. He hurried toward it, excitement blooming, the din of the miners booming all around him. Gold, silver, and radiant gems as big as his daddy's fists, the skeletons of long dead wonders, it all was there, everything he'd been fantasizing about. The workers would be thrilled by their curious guest and they'd allow him his choice of treasures.

His right ankle painfully turned as it left the staircase. He fell hard, sprawling out on the dirt floor. The flashlight flew from his hand and spun in wild circles away through the blackness. He'd scraped his knees and elbows, his chin had slammed down and split open. Sitting up, a smear of blood was drawn down the back of his arm as he wiped it along his face. Darkness was all around him, but the workers continued onward, ever seeking treasures in rock. Of course they couldn't stop, not just for him.

A withered hand picked up the flashlight, the beam directed at the boy. Lincoln watched the blazing white spot move up until a face slipped out of the gloom. She looked like his grandmother, only infinitely more ancient. She seemed a prehistoric kind of person, an ancestor, something older than modern man. Her eyes were mere slits wreathed by bags of flesh poked with liver spots and moles, a grotesque motif that continued over the map of her plump old face. The nose was a bulbous thing running in a crooked line from a nest of a brow. Lips were nonexistent, her mouth a reptilian slit below the flaring nostrils.

"You took such a long time," she said in a hissing voice that cracked. "Curiosity brings boys much sooner usually. It's naughty, naughty of you to have kept us waiting."

She moved the shaft of light away from her cringe-worthy visage and along a series of even more unusual faces. They were squat things crouching around her in the dark. They had hollow eye sockets, these creatures made of stone with their gaping mouths. Opening and closing, opening and closing, the lips were curled back over the stone teeth as they endlessly clank, clank, clanked. The monsters salivated, a foaming filth dripping out and pooling all around them. Upon short fat legs they slithered through the muck toward him.

"They're so hungry," the woman whispered like a teacher telling a scary story. "And so am I. Thank you, Lincoln, for joining us for dinner. Remember children, I get the eyes."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Joshua Skye is an award-winning, bestselling author. His short stories have appeared in anthologies like *Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed*, and periodicals such as *The Sirens Call*. His novels include *The Angels of Autumn* and *Cradle*. He lives in Texas with his partner Ray of twenty years and their twelve-year-old son Syrian. A Japanese Chin, Norfolk Terrier, and a chinchilla round out their family.

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FROM THE AUTHOR OF DAYMARES

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The Lik'ichiri | *DJ Tyrer*

There was an old man sitting on a mat looking out over the altiplano when I stepped outside to check the llamas before bed. I didn't recognize the man, but then I'd only been at the village less than a month, having been sent up the Andes after my parents were killed in a bus crash. A new start.

I walked over to the llama pen and fed them. Then walked back, my chore complete. The man was still sitting there and regarded me as I passed.

"Not planning to sleep out on the altiplano, son?" His tone was concerned.

"No, sir, I wouldn't want to freeze! I have a bed here with an aunt."

"Ah, I thought you were new." The old man chuckled. "Not just the cold you need to worry about, son."

"Why? Lions?"

"Worse than cats, son; Lik'ichiri."

"Lik'ichiri?" The name sounded familiar, I thought I'd heard it before. Then, I remembered. "Don't they attack people who fall asleep on buses and eat their flesh?"

"Hee-heh. What is it with you city people? How could a Lik'ichiri get on a bus unnoticed? Well, I guess he could drive, eh? Hee-heh. No, they live out there," he gestured out over the altiplano, "waiting for humans. If you fall asleep out there," he gestured again, "one will sneak up on you out of the dark and slit your sides open. Then they reach in and scoop out your fat." He chuckled at the thought. I gulped. "That's what the name means, you see, 'fat stealer'. They eat your fat; they need it to live."

"Like a vampire needs blood?"

"I suppose so, though the Lik'ichiri are real."

"I had heard they were westerners who steal fat to make the oil for their machines like the Pishtaco and Sacaojos. Someone said that if you eat garlic, it dilutes the fat and makes it useless."

"Sounds like a modern lie to me," replied the man with a sniff. "I've been around a long time and I've never heard that before."

"Maybe their priorities changed after they went on the buses?"

"Humph! Nonsense! They like the darkness, the cold, the wild expanse; why would they turn to the lights and noise? No, they are out there..." again his arm swept in an arc to take in the darkening land. "Watching, waiting."

The old man turned back to look at me, a strange glint in his eye.

"They have been there since before the Spaniards came," he said, eyes gazing intently into mine...

That was when I made my move, made the old man sleep with a wave of my hand. I laid him gently down upon the cold ground. Taking my knife from my pocket, I set about making the incisions, just as *they* had done to my parents before making me one of them.

Finished, I pushed my hand into his side.

The old man groaned slightly as I fished around inside him, pulled out a bloody goblet of fresh, warm fat and raised it to my mouth and began to feast...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing*, placed second in the 2015 Data Dump Genre Poetry Award, and has been widely published around the world, including in *Chilling Horror Short Stories* (Flame Tree), *State of Horror: Illinois* (Charon Coin Press), *Steampunk Cthulhu* (Chaosium), and issues of *Cyaegha*, *Illumen*, *Scifaikuest*, and *Tigershark*, and has a novella available on Amazon, *The Yellow House* (Dunhams Manor).

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A banner for Sirens Call Publications. It features a dark background with two pairs of hands, one on the left and one on the right, with fingers spread and palms facing forward. The hands appear to be holding or framing the text. The text "Sirens Call Publications" is written in a large, stylized, red serif font. Below it, in a smaller, red, all-caps sans-serif font, is the tagline "PURVEYORS OF DARK & EDGY FICTION".

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Through Clouded Eyes

A zombie's
Point of view

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Cornflower Farm | Kenya Moss-Dyme

Crouched in the darkness behind an old Chevy pickup, three thirteen-year-old friends plotted their next move.

“You’re wheezing again,” Darth whispered to Rooney, who immediately pressed an inhaler to his face and sucked in noisily.

Concerned, Darth placed her hand on the sleeve of his jacket.

“Wanna go home?” she whispered.

“Cut it out!” snapped Joe, adding with a snort. “He don’t need you babying him!”

Rooney shrugged Darth’s hand away and leaned forward to peek around the front bumper.

“Wait - the door!” Joe slid down flat on his belly, pulling on Darth’s leg to signal her to duck lower.

While engaged in a lively game of Ding Dong Ditch, they wandered into a less familiar section of their neighborhood. The homes on this end were smaller and spread further apart with very few streetlights, so they were thrilled at the idea of annoying the residents in an area where they wouldn’t be easily recognized.

At the moment, they were scoping out a quaint little home sitting a few yards away. Even in the darkness, they could make out an array of whimsical lawn figures and spinners decorating flower beds. A large man stepped onto the porch, his heavy work boots sounding like thunder in the quiet night. He stared at the truck briefly as if he sensed something out of order, causing Joe to reach behind protectively to nudge Darth backward.

After picking up a watering pot from the edge of the porch, the man lumbered down the two steps and made his way over to the faucet jutting out from the side of the house. Humming softly, he filled the metal can and watered the potted plants lining the edge.

Rooney snickered and Darth quickly reached out and covered his mouth. When the man returned the watering pot to its place and disappeared inside the house, Darth removed her hand from Rooney’s face and they crumpled over, laughing quietly.

Suddenly, Joe punched Rooney in the thigh. “Dude, you almost got us caught!”

“I couldn’t hold it in!” exclaimed Rooney. “Did you see him? *Look at meeee, I’m watering flowers!*” Rooney raised his hands and mimicked pouring water.

“Alright, I gotta get home soon,” Darth reminded the boys. “Whose turn is it?”

“Joe’s turn this time, I did the last one!” replied Rooney, pointing at the other boy.

Joe took a deep breath and rose to his feet. “Okay, watch me show you losers how to do it!”

Staying low to the ground, Joe slipped around the front of the car and up the long walkway toward the house. Darth and Rooney tried to hold in giggles as they watched him approach the porch. Darth held her breath when Joe placed one foot on a step and then the other; moving slowly and cautiously with his arm outstretched toward the doorbell. As his finger connected with the button, the high/low chord of the bell ringing inside the little house was loud enough to reach the street.

Joe spun around and cleared the steps with one leap as the door flew open.

“Go! Go! Go!” Darth and Rooney softly chanted, pumping their fists in the air.

But suddenly, Darth's glee turned to concern when the unmistakable form of a woman filled the doorway. Framed by the soft light from the interior, she stood there in a cornflower blue nightgown with a look of confusion as she watched Joe's retreat.

Holding to the doorjamb, she cautiously stepped barefoot to the porch and yelled, "Hey!"

"Oh, no," whispered Darth, when she saw the beautiful color of blue that caught her eye was draped smoothly across a very pregnant belly.

Joe failed to stop and the woman took another step forward; her right foot slipped on the rain-slick wood, sending her tumbling over the side of the platform. She cried out in shock as she crashed forward over the row of clay pots, striking her head soundly against the brick wall before landing face down.

Startled, Joe spun around and froze in his tracks, staring at the woman's body lying prone in the grass. Rooney sprang into action and darted past Joe, rushing to kneel next to the woman. He gently rolled her onto her back. When he spotted the blood spilling into a crimson halo beneath her head, he screamed in horror; Darth crumpled to her knees in front of the pickup, squeezing her eyes shut.

"Please don't be dead, please don't be dead," Rooney prayed as he attempted to scoop the blood back into the gaping wound on the side of the woman's head.

"WHAT DID YOU DO?" A deep baritone voice roared into the night, barreling around the corner and towering over Rooney. The man's face was filled with blinding rage and an indescribable anguish when he saw his wife's body in the grass.

A frightened Rooney scrambled backwards on all fours; when the tips of his sneakers touched cement, he pushed himself up to make his escape. He grabbed his brother's arm and pulled him down the walkway toward Darth. The three ran, leaving the grief-stricken man wailing and cradling his wife.

"YOU'LL PAY FOR THIS! I SWEAR! YOU'LL PAY!" He raged as they disappeared into the darkness.

Darth cried harder as they ran. Ducking between cars and skipping curbs until they stumbled into a clearing in the woods. Out of breath and in shock, the boys fell to the ground while Darth walked around in a circle, hugging herself and sobbing.

"Don't *ever* tell anybody about this," warned Joe, staring into the opening in the trees.

He repeated, "Did you hear me? We can't tell ANYBODY! He doesn't know who we are but we gotta lay low, stay on our own side."

"It wasn't our fault! We rang the doorbell but we didn't make her come outside!" Rooney cried, as if he was trying to convince himself.

"*We* know that, but the cops won't see it that way. We'll end up in juvvie!" Joe angrily turned his attention to Darth. "Stop moving around!"

"You don't think that lady's gonna die, do you?" whispered Darth, wiping her nose onto the sleeve of her jacket.

Rooney scrambled to his feet and stood in front of Darth. "She just hit her head, Dar, nobody dies from that. Right, Joe?"

Before Joe could respond, the sound of a siren cut into the night.

"See? Hear that?" Rooney grinned. "They're already on their way!"

Joe stood and glared at the two. "I don't care! I'm not getting in trouble for this when it was YOUR idea!" He said, stabbing his finger into Rooney's chest. "I said keep quiet about it and I mean it!"

And they did.

Weeks later, when their school bus took a detour past the little house, baby furniture sat piled against the curb for trash. Darth blinked back tears and kept her eyes focused on the front of the bus.

Click, clank.

David flipped the latch and turned the security lock off to open the door when his mother yelled from the other room.

"Where are you going?" She screamed, rushing toward him in a panic.

David sighed and turned to face her. "I'm just going to shoot some ball, Mom. It's my birthday, I don't wanna spend it here with just you and Brianna!"

Darth wrapped her son in her arms and squeezed tightly. "I thought you would stay home tonight! I...*we have cake*...and everything! I thought we would just have a nice family night together!"

"I'm 13 - I don't wanna have a birthday party with my *mom*! Why can't I have a real party like everybody else?" He struggled to free himself from her tight grip.

Darth was helpless as she looked into his face. She couldn't give him an answer because the truth was something that no child should have to hear, so she tried to bribe him with *things* to keep him home. She couldn't tell him that she had spent the past year crying herself to sleep, dreading this day. She couldn't tell him that she was trying to protect him from an unimaginable horror that no one else would believe.

Her son's fate wasn't so obvious when Joe's boy disappeared. After all, Charlie had always been trouble. Much like his father, he was headstrong, a bully, and *throwing rocks at the prison*, as her grandmother used to say. At age twelve, he ran away for the first time and the cops brought him home, kicking and screaming in the back seat of the car. Over the next year, Charlie ran away so frequently after fights with his drunken father that people stopped looking for him, figuring he'd return when he calmed down or got hungry, whichever came first. He and Joe argued on the morning of his 13th birthday and he stormed off down the street. Days later when the police were finally called, they stood around puzzled at Joe's insistence that he was missing a child for which he had no evidence ever existed. Hours later, Joe didn't remember Charlie either.

When Rooney's daughter Savannah vanished from her thirteenth birthday party, Darth raced to the scene to console her best friend. Witnesses insisted the girl had never been there, so Rooney frantically pulled out his wallet to show photos of her to the police but found instead empty plastic sleeves. His wife chalked his hallucinations up to being overworked and by nightfall, Rooney had forgotten Savannah too.

But Darth knew something much more sinister was going on, and she knew the answer to it all lay inside the walls of the tiny house with the colorful lawn ornaments.

They had kept their vow to never again discuss that night, but as David approached his 13th birthday, Darth knew she had to do something. She refused to just lie down and surrender

her children without a fight.

One morning, she parked her car in the same spot where they had hidden behind the old pickup almost 25 years before.

Structurally, the house looked the same from the outside but there was something very different that Darth couldn't quite put her finger on. There were no longer any plants on the porch; in fact, there were no flowers or decorations of any kind around the yard.

She raised her finger to press the doorbell, then shuddered at the memory and decided instead to knock. Rustling could be heard on the other side of the door as *someone* approached on the other side.

"Hello? Hello, I need to talk to you!" She leaned in close and whispered urgently.

The sound of pressure against the door and more rustling gave Darth the eerie feeling that she was being watched through the peephole.

Carefully measuring her words, she took a deep breath.

"Mister, we were just stupid kids. If we could take it all back, we would."

"*You owe me,*" an angry voice growled.

Darth took a step back. Hearing his voice again sent chills up her spine as scenes from that fateful night flashed through her mind. Desperate, she began to cry.

"You already took two of our kids, what else do you want?"

There was a long moment of silence until the rustling began again.

"*You took everything I had,*" came the reply.

Suddenly, Darth understood what was different about the house, why there were no flowers or lawn ornaments, no objects of beauty as before. Her heart sank as it became clear what had happened to the beautiful woman in the cornflower blue nightgown – and her baby.

"I'm so very sorry, sir," she pressed her forehead against the door and whispered. "It was an accident. Please, don't take my son."

"YOU OWE ME."

His words chilled her to the core and she knew at that moment that she had only one option.

She waited until the next sunrise to leave.

She elected not to say goodbye to Joe or Rooney because a part of her felt guilty that she would be able to save her children when they could not. So with both children asleep in the back seat and a trunk packed only with the essentials, Darth headed out of the town where she'd spent her entire life.

With no real destination, she planned to get as far away as possible, settling wherever she felt safe. Several hours later, she spotted a billboard advertising an apple picking orchard and petting zoo at the next exit and she knew that was her sign: *Cornflower Farms*.

Tears of relief welled up in her eyes as she exited the freeway, where a multitude of road signs directed her toward motels, diners, gas stations, and the sprawling Cornflower Farms attraction. Darth broke into a wide grin as she made her way down the dirt road toward what she hoped would be their new home.

"Wake up, guys, we're going to stop here for a while," she called over her shoulder.

“Where is this, Mom?” David leaned forward, yawning and rubbing his eyes.

“I’m not sure yet, hon, but we’ll find out soon!”

Suddenly, a deer jetted across the road in front of the car; Darth screamed and lost control of the wheel, careening off the road and slamming head first into a utility pole.

When she came to, it was dark outside and she was blinded by the flashing red and blue lights from the emergency vehicles. Hands reached in from both sides of the car; shaking her shoulders, pushing her hair back to feel her forehead, unfastening her seat belt. Worried voices and faces she didn’t recognize filled the space around her.

“Miss, are you okay? Are you in any pain? Can you hear me, Miss?”

Darth shook her head and waved the hands away. “My kids-”

Panicking, she tried to twist around to look into the back seat but someone had slid into the car from the passenger side and was busy trying to push the steering wheel up and away from where it had jammed painfully into Darth’s midsection.

“ARE MY KIDS OKAY?” Darth screamed, whipping her head from side to side against the hands wiping the blood from her face.

The person standing just inside of her driver door bent over and looked into her face.

“Miss...what kids?”

“She’s in shock!”

Ignoring the pain in her upper body, Darth frantically twisted her neck around to look at the empty back seat.

“Miss?”

Darth knew it would be pointless to explain; resigning herself to the rescue efforts. Her shoulders racked with the weight of her tears as she chanted the names of her children, so she wouldn’t forget as the precious minutes ticked away.

“David. Brianna. Dav..Da.. Bri...”

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

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PURVEYORS OF DARK & EDGY FICTION

Fantasy, science fiction, and horror rub elbows in *Grandfather Hollow*, a collection of eerie tales guaranteed to produce some sleepless nights...



Available on Amazon

Urban Legend #9 | Michael Thomas-Knight

My current mark had no idea that I was watching. She had no idea that I lurked outside her window, creeping through the darkness to gain the best view and observe her every move. Stealth movements, silent, invisible like a soft breeze.

I gained access to her place through a back window. So easy, I cut the screen with a razor-knife and pried the inner window open with a screwdriver. I let the screwdriver fall to the ground outside, something for my adversaries to ponder, inspect, worship. I looked at the razor-knife... so sharp, so precisely crafted; it reflected a spot of light from its fine edge like a twinkling star in the night sky. It had more work to accomplish on this night.

My victim, this night I would make her immortal in the newspaper headlines and tabloid press. As they loved me, they would love her; especially the tabloids with their color photo spreads. Her life would be thrust into focus, suddenly important to the whole TV watching nation.

From the dark room I watched her, my dear Nicole. I saw the back of her head, unmoving, enthralled by her computer screen. Her Facebook, her Twitter, her subscriptions and feeds, she was mesmerized by it all. Her whole world was within the borders of the computer screen, tablet monitor and I-phone display. She was wholly unaware of the real world around her.

I retrieved a pencil from a cup on a shelf. I stood in the doorway, veiled in shadow, watching my victim. I snapped the pencil in half. She turned her head, listening, questioning. Then she turned back to her computer screen. *The insolence. The audacity. I can not have this!* I threw the two halves of the pencil across the room. One half gave a light tap against a wall, but the other hit something glass or porcelain and produced a clear ringing sound. *Ping.*

She jumped in her seat and turned around to look at the doorway. She couldn't see me standing in the dark room. *I'm standing right here sweetheart, come. The dinner bell has rung.* Perhaps I would attack the moment she entered the room, here in the doorway. As her eyes adjusted to darkness, I'd slash her throat. Then, I'd step forward so she could see my face as she clutched her neck and blood spurted through her delicate fingers. I'd relish the fear in her eyes; bask in the intensity of her terror.

She motioned to stand and my heart pounded, adrenalin surged, my excitement peaked. The moment had come.

A cluster of digital *plunks* emanated from her computer. Instant Messenger called her attention and she responded like one of Pavlov's dogs. She sat back down, read her message, and clicked a link opening a new window.

Enough. I stepped from the shadow into clear view. I walked toward her, slowly, but not overly cautious. Perhaps she would see my reflection in the monitor, perhaps not. I stood behind her, readied the razor-knife to do its deed.

I saw myself clearly in the monitor, she did not. I looked closer to see what had engrossed her attention so completely that it allowed me to step right up behind her without notice.

It was titled *Urban Legend # 9*. I read the first few lines and I comprehended the strange anomaly. She was reading the exact story of a serial killer's current murder, the murder I was about to commit, as the events unfolded in real time within the very room she sat. It was

impossible, but somehow it was happening. At that moment I realized, I had made it. I was immortal! Razor-Cain would go down in history with Jack the Ripper, Son of Sam and The Zodiac Killer. I had reminded the world of true terror, not the ridiculous movie characters, like Jason and Michael.

Did I really need to take this young woman's life? I had reached my pinnacle, my goal. I looked at her soft, silky hair, white blond with icy streaks, like rays of sun reflecting off a new fallen snow. I watched her beautiful face reflecting in the monitor, wide eyes like blue glass, long lashes like butterfly wings, her soft pink lips agape with wonder as she read. She was seventeen and fully worthy of punishment for her lustful sins. I know. I had followed her for months, watching her and the boy she dates in action. But, as I looked at her that moment, she looked like a child; delicate, innocent, angelic. If ever my heart held the capacity for love, it was for this young woman. I followed her for far too long, passing on numerous opportunities to take her life, but not knowing why until now.

I looked back at the text on the monitor and I saw my innermost thoughts turning into words on the screen. I thought about the paradox. Were the words appearing on screen because of my existence, or, did I exist because the words were appearing on screen?

As I looked into her scanning eyes through the monitor's glass, I saw her stop reading. Time passed in nanoseconds. Her pupils dilated and her face turned pale. She had seen my reflection. I could have run and let her be, let her live out the rest of her life to a ripe old age. She would forever speak of me, about how she had survived, keeping my name alive for years to come. Who knows? I could even change my look; perhaps meet her on the street one day and talk. She could tell me about the time Razor-Cain almost killed her and I could express amazement and shock, asking about the incident.

I saw her lips begin to part, preparing for a scream. In a fraction of a second, before she had a chance to stimulate her vocal chords, I made my decision. The last words appeared on the screen as I pulled the razor-knife across her throat. If there was any more to the story, I would never know. The screen was covered in bright red blood.

Excerpt from a newscast the very next day: Breaking News - On News 5 at 5

Police on the scene found seventeen-year-old, Nicole Taigon slumped over her computer keyboard with what appeared to be a self-inflicted wound to her neck. The box-cutter style razor-knife used for the fatal wound was still clutched in the girl's hand and was believed to be taken from a toolbox within the home. Police are baffled by the suicide, noting it is the fifth similar suicide by a teenage girl in the tri-state area over the last thirteen months. All five victims had left a bizarre suicide epitaph in the form of a story describing their own death's, told from an unknown assailant's point of view named Razor Cain. However, none of the homes had any evidence of breaking and entering, or tampering, and no evidence has been revealed pointing to an accomplice assisting in the suicides in any way...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Michael Thomas-Knight is an author of horror fiction stories, bending the scope of reality one word at a time. Michael's style ranges from classic ghost tales with violent endings to Eldritch tales steeped in mysticism, cynicism, and irony. His work has appeared in numerous horror anthologies, magazines and websites. His latest work, *Skin Job*, a novelette in Terry M West's *Car Nex series*, is currently available from Amazon.

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

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Behind The Mask | *John C. Adams*

Brett Flint parked up in front of Whiteacre Hall and adjusted his white bow tie in the Land Rover's rear-view mirror. He smoothed back his brown hair and sighed at the thought of how awful this evening would be. Usually nothing would've induced him to accept an invitation to a formal event that included dancing. He hated company. He loathed uncomfortable clothing. He detested making small talk with his county neighbors. He certainly had no intention of getting drawn into the pointless business of wearing masks. He already knew who everyone was.

Brett scowled. The infernal garden party at Lady Slimeport's last week had gone on forever. Sneaking out of the tent and getting lost amongst the rhododendrons with Rose Ffanshawe had been the highlight of the day.

Brett got out of his vehicle and handed the keys to the parking attendant. Rose had hinted that she'd be up for taking their fun and games to the next level when they met again. He buttoned up his jacket and walked up the steps into the Hall. Tonight was the night. He'd been as randy as hell ever since he'd kissed Rose last week. He wasn't waiting any longer.

The family were greeting their guests in a formal receiving line. Brett moved along it shaking hands with Lord Arthur. Alphonse winked at Brett and nudged his sister. Rose dimpled when she saw Brett and blushed. They shook hands. Brett felt the thrill of her touch course through him.

"Happy nineteenth birthday!" Brett told Rose.

"Radclyffe's around somewhere. Please dance with her at least once," Lord Arthur asked Brett.

"My sister won't have any partners otherwise," Rose murmured. "Make sure you save every other dance for me."

Brett leaned over and whispered in her ear. "I'd rather see you out in the rose garden."

Rose blushed and glanced across nervously at her father and brother. Alphonse was staring into the middle distance. Lord Arthur was already lecturing another young man about remembering to dance with his younger daughter. Rose nodded. She raised her white mask to her face.

"Take care! You might not recognize me!"

Brett chuckled. He'd know those ample breasts and curvy hips anywhere. All he needed to do now was get his hands on them. He wandered into the ballroom and looked around for Radclyffe. Best to get the duty of dancing with her out of the way first. He spotted her on the other side of the room and went over. She was wearing a full-length black dress and she held a white mask in her hand. He nodded in appreciation at the low cut of the back of her dress. The material was silky and smooth. Radclyffe was slimmer than her elder sister and her hair was brown to Rose's blonde. One day Radclyffe would be the more beautiful of the two: she just needed the passage of time to shift matters to her advantage.

Brett held out his hand and Radclyffe took it. She was sixteen and just starting to blossom into a young woman. Brett put his arm around her waist and spun her into a waltz. She held her mask in her left hand.

"Why's everyone got one of those things?"

“They turn you into whoever you want to be. Father thought the guests might find the intrigue amusing. Why haven’t you got one?”

“Perfectly happy being me, thanks all the same.”

Radclyffe stared over Brett’s shoulder. He felt her tense up. Her face became drawn and reserved. As they spun round the dance floor he noticed her glaring in envy at her older sister. He realized how stupid he’d been. Rose was far and away the most beautiful woman here. Brett enjoyed how ripe for the taking she was. She was nineteen. She’d be warm and comfortable. Soft and welcoming. She was artlessly bouncy and lusty. Even the talk of Rose’s serpent lover didn’t put him off. The thing was enormous and it was rumoured to be very possessive of her. He imagined Rose gave it the run around even so.

Brett caught a glimpse of Rose flirting with other men as he spun round the dance floor. He felt his randiness rising as he moved with Radclyffe in his arms. There were moments when he lost sight of the fact that it was Radclyffe he was dancing with and imagined it was Rose. Then he caught sight of Rose again and remembered he was with her younger sister. Radclyffe had become very quiet.

“Who will you wish to be when you put your mask on?”

Brett realized he’d blundered as soon as the question was out but Radclyffe was unabashed. “I’d like to be my sister. Then all the young men will want me instead of her.”

The dance began to edge to a conclusion. Brett focused on enjoying having Radclyffe in his arms as the final bars of music reached their climax. Everyone else started clapping. Brett took Radclyffe’s hand and led her back towards the corner he’d found her in a few minutes earlier. Other young men were lining up to dance with her.

“I think yer should be happy just being yersel.”

“That’s easier said than done,” Radclyffe replied. Her face had become red and blotchy. She’d clung to him during the dance and her breathing had become hurried and irregular. Brett recognized the unmistakable signs of sexual arousal. She was old enough and it was perfectly natural. “You’re going to meet Rose in the garden, aren’t you?”

Brett nodded. He had nothing to hide. Radclyffe bit her lip. Tears had risen to her brown eyes. He felt such a fool for not realizing how she felt earlier.

“Be careful out there. Nothing in my sister’s garden is what it seems.”

Brett waited out on the veranda in the cool night air for Rose to leave her guests and come to him. When he saw her hurry down towards the garden he hurried after her. Her white tulle dress billowed out behind. She had pink roses plaited into her hair. As he followed Rose, Brett mulled over Radclyffe’s advice. The roses in this garden were famous for their poison. Many had vicious thorns as well. He wasn’t afraid of anything he might find here tonight but it was good to be on his guard.

Brett found Rose lolling on a white wooden bench in the middle of the garden. The perfume of the blooms was intoxicating. He sat down next to her and slid his right arm around her waist. At twenty-three, he was almost constantly randy. Hours alone out in the moors or in the tractor didn’t help. He had altogether too much time free to linger on thoughts of taking Rose, here in the garden or upstairs in her bedroom. He’d never seen her room but he’d had

plenty of spare time to imagine what it looked like.

Brett leaned over towards Rose and kissed her. She returned the pressure of his lips, and slid her arms around him. He unbuttoned her dress and slipped his hands inside, caressing her breasts. Her nipples were already erect. He stroked them thoughtfully. She'd been playfully demure before but he'd been right about tonight. She was as hot for it as he was. Brett yanked Rose's dress up past her knees and pushed her down onto the bench. She lay in front of him smiling. He stared into her blue eyes but something unnerved him and he pulled away.

"What is it?"

Brett couldn't answer. Rose had bright sapphire-blue eyes. They were usually ready to sparkle with enjoyment. But now her eyes looked dark and malevolent. They looked quite unlike those of a nineteen-year-old woman who has sexual needs and is about to have them satisfied by an energetic and experienced lover.

Rose leaned up and put her arms around Brett's neck. She dragged him back down towards her. He lifted her dress, pulled down her knickers and stroked her. She threw her head back and gasped at his touch. He felt his erection harden. He was so ready for the warm release of being inside her.

Brett paused. Something in Rose's tone hadn't been right. She was tense, too, like a coil ready to spring. This Rose was observing him, watching the effect of her actions. The Rose he knew would've thrown herself into the fun with abandon. She'd have been down on her knees in front of him or better still ripping his trousers off and egging him on.

Brett sat up and zipped up his fly. He folded his arms. Rose rolled her eyes.

"I know yer Radclyffe, wearing a damn mask. What yer doing trying to seduce me, pretending to be yer sister? If I'd known yer wanted me that much I'd have taken yer without this malarkey, girl. Yer beautiful, if yer would only realize it."

Rose's cackling laughter crescendoed until she was hissing at Brett. She stood up and towered over him. "Wrong again!" she said. "You stupid randy fool!"

Brett backed away. Rose's form grew until she was at least six feet tall. She became thinner but stronger. Her dress melted away until he saw the body of a giant serpent. Her face mutated until it was no longer placidly round and beautiful, but thin and pointed. A forked tongue flicked out and caught Brett on the cheek. He put his hand up to his face and saw that it had drawn blood. Everything started to spin and he collapsed onto the ground. Darkness enveloped him but he struggled against it. This awful creature was Rose's serpent lover. Under cover of the fun at the masked ball it had changed its shape and snuck out the garden. It must've watched him with Rose, here at the house, on all the occasions they'd flirted and laughed together. It had husbanded its jealousy until a moment came for it to act.

Brett backed away and scrambled away on the gravel path. The serpent slid after him. It overtook him and blocked his way. It uncoiled itself and slid over to him. It gently wrapped itself around him and began to squeeze. Brett gasped for breath. He pulled at the snake's head and yanked it away from his face. Its dark eyes were staring into his. He pushed his arms and legs outwards against the slithery touch and braced himself. He put all his mental and physical energy into resisting its embrace but the snake was the stronger of the two of them. He felt it overcoming him. It began to squeeze around his torso and particularly around his groin. It

squeezed very hard around his thighs until he cried out in agony.

The snake's grey pointy face honed in on Brett's. Its eyes were sly and artful. "When I've finished you'll never be able to harass Rose again."

Brett felt unconsciousness rise up to meet him. The snake smiled. Brett heard someone running along the gravel path. The snake turned to listen. Brett saw the shining shape of a spade swinging up towards him. There was a sickening thud as it hit the snake full on the head. The snake fell to the ground unconscious. Brett felt the coils of its body loosen. He gasped for breath and wriggled out of its embrace.

Radclyffe stood over him with a shovel in her hand. She bent down and helped Brett clamber to his feet. He was unsteady and she put a firm arm around his waist and helped him over to the bench.

"I hadn't seen you in ages. I came to, well, talk to you. I heard you shout."

Brett closed his eyes. He put his arm around Radclyffe and gently kissed her forehead.

"Thank you."

"Did you mean it when you said I was beautiful?"

Brett bent his head and placed a kiss on Radclyffe's lips by way of answer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: John C. Adams' debut novel 'Souls for the Master' is out now from Sinister Saints Press. She is a Submissions Reader for the Aeon Award and Albedo One. You can read more of her short fiction in anthologies from Horrified Press. John has had fiction published in The Horror Zine, Devolution Z magazine and others. She lives in Edinburgh, UK and is a non-practising solicitor.

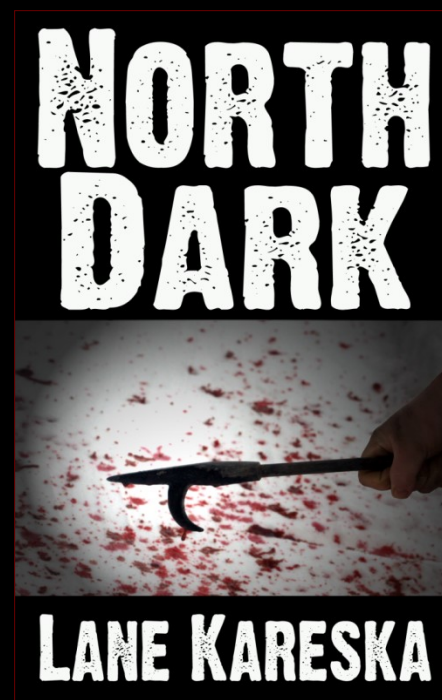
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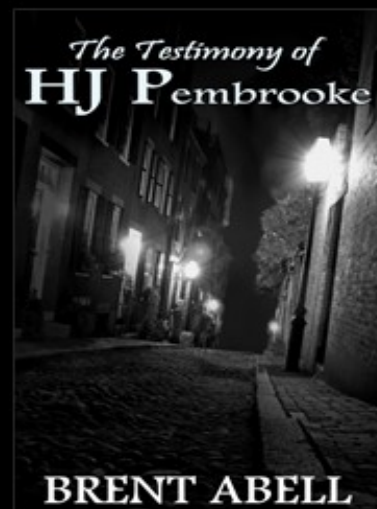
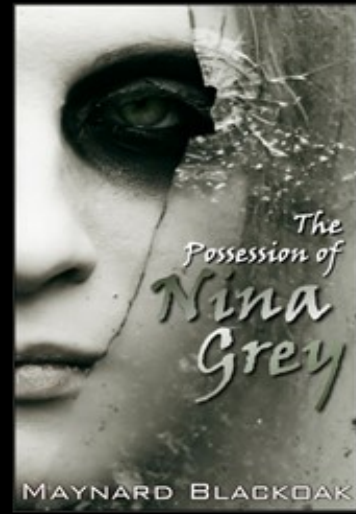
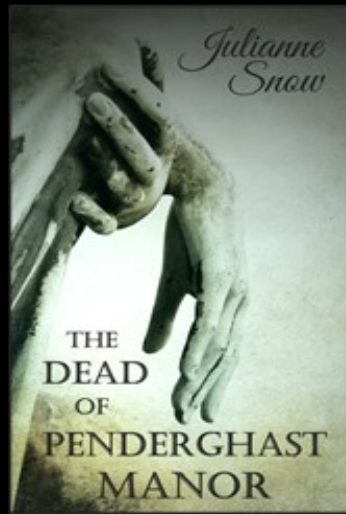
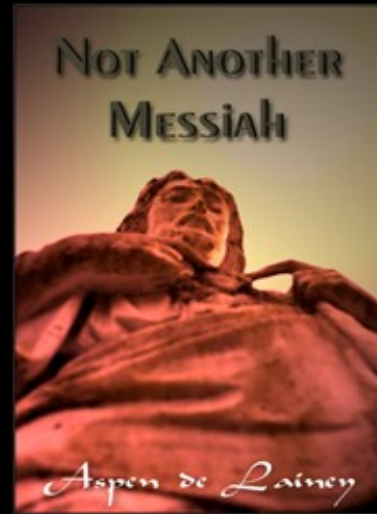
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Fight or Fuck | Jaap Boekestein

Fight or fuck. I'm a guy, that's the first thing I think when I see somebody: fight or fuck. The fighting part is other guys. Can I take him, and how? The fucking part is girls. Could I take her, and how? Okay, there is this thing called civilization and I don't go smashing in brains or nailing women on the spot. I'm good, I'm gentle. But always, always, the first thing is: fight or fuck?

I was sitting at Billy's at my usual spot when she came in.

A *she* so the question should be 'fuck?' Only it wasn't. Something deep inside me asked: *fight?* Why was that?

She was skinny, made her look tall, but she wasn't really. Zipped up leather motor jacket, short black hair, long face, eyes... Those bloody eyes. Dark, black almost. And she was directly looking at me. She looked at me the very same moment I asked myself *fight?* Like she could read my mind.

Her smile didn't show her teeth. (*Big sharp teeth*, my mind told me.) She walked over. Not elegant like a cat or something, like you always see in the movies. It was just walking. Was she a dyke? Nothing against them, personally. Girl on girl action is great. Love to watch it. Only can't stand those dominant bitches who want to cut off every penis in the world. *Fight, fight, fight.* It was the way she walked. She wasn't a dyke, I think.

She kept staring at me with those big black eyes, sat down beside me. Not bad. She was a girl, I was a guy. Yes, I wanted to fuck her, my brain decided. Also wanted to beat the living daylight out of her, but I am not that kind of guy. You Do Not Hit Women. Especially if you're build like me. Maybe it's a code of honor or something, but you Do Not Hit Women. "Hi, you want something to drink?"

She licked her lips. "Yes. Come with me. I've a car."

Just like that. Not "What's your name" or "What do you do?" Just "Come with me. I've a car." *Why? Why me?* Were there a couple of guys waiting outside? Not very likely. She wouldn't have picked me for that. I'm big, and it ain't all fat.

Let's find out. Maybe there was some pussy, maybe there was some fighting. Maybe there was both. *Fight and fuck?* It sounded fine. I grabbed my jacket and followed her, like a sheep to the slaughter, I guess. She had a nice little ass, wiggling under a short black skirt. *Nice.* Nice legs too.

Okay, if you don't believe in vampires, or demons from hell, of evil bloodsucking she-monsters, you don't want to hear the rest of my story. She was. I didn't know that because I didn't buy that horror crap. I know better now, but I'll come to that. Basically she was a bloodsucker with dinner plans and I was dinner.

There is an alley, not far away from Billy's. That's where we ended up. The car just seemed too far.

Kissing. My damned mouth exploded. She was so god-fucking hot. She also was not tall enough, not for me. I lifted her up and forced her against the wall. No protest. She just wrapped her legs around me, flexible little vixen.

Her nails under my jacket, through my shirt, digging everywhere.

I unzipped her heavy leather. Two hard boobs pointed at me. She didn't wear anything under the jacket. Neither under her short skirt. My fingers had found her pussy. Naked, wet, willing.

We kept kissing (well, it was more sucking and wrestling), she reached in my pants and pulled out my dick. Needless to say, it was so fucking hard. She almost jumped to get me in her. No condom, nothing. I've style (some), I've finesse (some), I know what to do and what not to do. I didn't need all that. I just had to fuck, fuck, fuck like the animals we all are. So I did, she did, we did.

How long we were busy? Ten minutes, fifteen, thirty? We didn't care, it was that bloody good. It was a competition. I wanted to make her come first, to show I was the gentleman. (Fucking her against the wall in a dark alley with my pants down. Yeah, a real gentleman!) She wanted to make me come first, so she could let me know she was in control. So I fucked her and she fucked me and neither of us was giving an inch. She won, in the end, but it was a close finish.

I was still in her, gasping for breath, wet with sweat. My weight and dick pinned her to the wall. She was making little purring sounds, legs still wrapped around me, hands resting on my shoulders.

"Fuck!" I whispered.

She giggled, bent over. For a kiss I thought.

It was not a kiss, it was The Kiss. Yes, the one with fangs, and blood, and sucking the life right out of a mortal.

I died that night, in that alley, with my dick in her pussy.

I chose fucking instead of fighting. That's what it got me. I died.

And I lived again, in a fashion....

She made me a vampire, forced her own blood (well, her own stolen blood) over my blue lips. I was too good a fuck, she later said.

That's how I was made.

So lady, fight or fuck, what's it gonna be? I promise I'll take you to dinner afterwards.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jaap Boekestein (1968) is an award winning Dutch writer of science fiction, fantasy, horror, thrillers and whatever else takes his fancy. Five novels and almost three hundred of his stories have been published. He has made his living as a bouncer, working for a detective agency and as editor. He currently works for the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice.

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Upping the Production Values | Ken MacGregor

Martin French had loved horror movies since he was six years old. His father took him see *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* in the theater; it had been his dad's favorite when he was a boy. As soon as the creature hit the screen for the first time, he was hooked. He asked his dad to get him all the classics: *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *The Wolfman*, *The Mummy*. Martin's mother said he'd have nightmares, but he never did.

By the time Martin was fifteen, he was a horror movie expert. Plywood DVD shelves were bolted to the walls of his room, stocked with everything from *The Abominable Doctor Phibes* to *Zombieland*.

When he was seventeen, Martin made a short horror film of his own: *Crushing Desire*. It starred Martin's friend Kelly, an eighteen year old senior and fellow horror fan.

The film opens with Kelly wearing sweats and t-shirt. She is standing in a room that is empty except for a large box. Kelly looks at the camera and smiles; she lets her sweatpants fall and puddle around her ankles. Kelly peels off her shirt; there's nothing under it. Looking into the camera again, Kelly pulls down her underwear. She runs her hands down her naked sides and tosses her hair back.

Kelly opens the lid to the box and climbs in. She somehow makes it seem sexual. She beckons to the camera which moves in on her. Kelly closes the lid and squirms, touching herself all over.

She stops, eyes wide as the box jolts. Kelly starts to panic as the box gets smaller and smaller, beating against the sides with her fists until it slowly crushes her to death.

Martin built twenty eight identical and progressively smaller wooden boxes. Kelly squeezed into each until she could not fit in the last one.

The final shot was the outside of the smallest box; Kelly's voice-over screams faded to quiet as blood oozed out from the bottom of the box. Creepy music Martin composed on the computer added disturbing ambience. Martin edited it to look as if the box was shrinking on camera.

Martin entered *Crushing Desire* in a Detroit horror film festival. It won the audience choice award. His dad grinned and clapped Martin on the back; his mom left the theater after her son's film and wouldn't meet his eyes until the next day.

On his eighteenth birthday, Martin only got one present.

"Oh my god! A Hi-Def Camera! No way! You guys rock!" He hugged both his parents with the hand that wasn't holding the new camera.

Martin and Kelly were sitting in the Chicken Shack. Martin was drinking coffee; Kelly had a chocolate shake that she was making last as long as possible.

"How would you like to be in another film?"

"Martin, you have a real gift, you know that?"

"For what?"

“Well. Making movies for one thing,” Kelly said. “But, also you’re kind of a born leader.”
“I am?”

Martin didn’t sound convinced.

“Last year, you convinced me to take my clothes off on camera.” She tossed a mischievous grin at him. “I never thought I could do that, but you made it seem like nudity is the most natural thing in the world.”

“That’s because it is.”

Kelly shook her head, smiling.

“Well. Whatever this project is, you know I’m on board. I think you’re brilliant, and I plan to ride your coattails to fame and fortune.”

The waiter brought a thick, greasy cheeseburger, rare on a plate with waffle fries and a pickle. He set it in front of Kelly who thanked him.

“You eat that stuff?”

By way of answer, Kelly hefted the burger and took a huge bite. Thin red juice dripped down her chin; she caught it with a napkin.

From his backpack, Martin pulled a sheaf of stapled pages.

“You wanna hear what it’s about?”

Kelly nodded.

“Mm-hm.” Her cheeks bulged with food around her smile. Martin handed her the script and she read while she ate.

Int. Dimly lit room, single chair in center, small window high on the cement wall.

Kelly looked up.

“What’s ‘int’?”

He laughed.

“It means ‘interior’. It’s industry-standard.”

“Okay. Don’t talk to me like I’m an idiot, please.”

“No, Kelly. I know you’re not. You’re great. Please. Just keep reading. Okay?”

For a long moment, she eyed him warily. Finally, she sighed and looked back at the script.

It is a basement, pipes running overhead. Water can be heard dripping slowly off-camera. MARILYN is in the chair, wearing a blue sundress. Her hands are tied behind her back, her feet bound to the chair legs; she is slumped over, unconscious. A FIGURE steps into frame wearing surgical scrubs. In the Figure’s left hand is a straight razor, glinting in the meager light. Marilyn stirs, moans. The Figure shivers in anticipation.

Kelly swallowed hard and picked something out of her teeth. She didn’t look up from the pages until she had read the whole thing.

“Oh yeah. I am so doing this.”

Martin had written Marilyn with Kelly in mind. A lot of directors use the same actors again and again. The male actor was new to them both; Martin knew him from film class, but hadn’t worked with him before. Martin had written lines for the Figure, but James had a stutter; it was a bad one, and he couldn’t do dialogue.

However, he looked great for the part; he was over six feet and broad-shouldered. He

wasn't particularly muscular, but not fat either, just big. The lack of speaking lent the Figure an even more disturbing air; James's stutter was a blessing in disguise.

It was just the three of them and Martin's new camera in the basement. Also the tripod, lights, light stands, boom and microphone. Martin was running all the tech himself; he set everything up before the cast even showed up.

Martin watched through the camera's small monitor as James lifted Kelly's head by the hair. The camera studied her face as the Figure did, and Martin thought she looked beautiful on screen, despite or maybe because of the bruise on her cheek and the burst capillaries in her eyes. Makeup and contacts, but it looked very real; his makeup skills were improving, he thought with no small amount of pride. Martin zoomed in as James leaned closer, his face almost touching Kelly's. He inhaled deeply, smelling her skin. Tentatively, he stuck out his tongue and tasted her cheek. Her eyes widened and flicked in his direction.

"Please," she whispered. "Please. I'll do anything. Just don't hurt me."

James put his finger to his lips and shook his head. He pulled the neck of her dress away from her skin with his free hand and used the razor to cleanly cut it from her body. The blade was real; it belonged to Martin's dad. He had a prop razor that looked just like it on the table with the soda and snacks; later, they would use that for close ups of skin cutting, adding the blood in post-production. She held very still, watching the blade move inches from her skin. James sliced all the way down to the hem and through it; he peeled away the severed halves, exposing Kelly's bra and panties.

"Please," she said again. James ignored her this time and very carefully slid the blade under the bra at the join between the cups. The edge of the blade nicked Kelly's right breast, just a tiny bit, but it drew blood. James stopped; he, Kelly and Martin watched the trickle of blood as it ran down her ribs and abdomen.

That was not in the script. It was an accident, but it looked amazing on camera so they kept rolling. Everyone was still in character, maybe more so than ever. James carefully turned the razor blade so it was facing away from Kelly and used it to slice the bra open. His free hand pulled away the separated cups, exposing her breasts. The blood was darkening the elastic on her panties, though it was slowing down and clotting already.

"I don't want to die," Kelly said, choked with fear and desperation. "Please, I don't care what you do to me, but please let me live. Don't hurt me. I can please you, I know I can. I can be a good girl. You don't need the razor. I'll cooperate, I swear."

James hooked her panties with a finger, pulling them away from her hip. He used the blade to slice the fabric, then repeated the procedure on the other side. He went behind her, grabbed her underwear by the back and pulled them off her, the camera catching the front of the panties disappearing between her legs. Naked, she began to cry. Martin tilted the camera up and zoomed in on her face; he even got an extreme close-up of one of her eyes as real tears fell. Beautiful.

"Cut," Martin said quietly, stopping the camera and immediately turning off the hot lights. "Wow." James sat down as Martin unlocked the cuffs and untied Kelly's ankles. She got up and reached for a robe, but Martin stopped her.

"You'll smear the blood," he said. "Sorry, but you need to stay naked. Are you cold? I can get the space heater."

“No. I’m okay. I wasn’t thinking.”

“K-K-Kelly,” James said. “I’m s-sorry I c-c-c-cut you.” He gestured vaguely at her chest. She smiled at him.

“Don’t sweat it, James. It hardly hurt at all and besides, it totally ups our production values.”

“That’s why I love this woman,” Martin said. “She’s a big-picture girl all the way. I need to do the second set-up; James, will you help me move these lights? They should be cool enough by now. Just don’t touch the bulbs: you’ll get burned and they might explode. Seriously. Also, they cost a fortune. Thanks. Right over there. Good.” It took about fifteen minutes to get everything the way Martin wanted it and the actors in place; that was the beauty of a script where everything happens in a single chair. Martin checked the battery life and how much memory he had left on the chip. He was good for at least another hour.

The new camera angle was low, pointing up; Kelly’s left thigh was in the foreground, out of focus. Beyond it, her still-bloody breasts and face were visible. Martin had added more bruising on her arms and torso, mostly finger marks. He had also added several new cuts to her shoulders, abdomen and legs, though these were simulated with fake blood. Kelly was once again bound to the chair. She and James were waiting; Martin just stared at them for several seconds, mind racing. He looked at his storyboards and then at the tableau in front of him.

“Ready?” Martin asked.

“I’m s-s-sorry, Martin,” James said. “I s-suddenly have to p-p-p-pee.”

“Shit,” Martin said. “Go upstairs. Make it fast.”

“No,” Kelly said. “Don’t, James. Stay here. Piss on me.” Nobody moved or said a word for several seconds. James looked at Martin. He looked back at Kelly.

“W-What?”

“It fits the scene.” Kelly’s jaw was set.

“If you want Marilyn to be peed on, we can work that in, but I can fake it, Kelly,” Martin said. “I think I have some Gatorade in the fridge upstairs.”

“Just hit ‘record’, Martin,” she said. “It will look better on camera if it’s real. It’s what the Figure would do, and you know it. James, you go ahead and do it. Martin and I want this film to be as good as it can be, don’t we, Martin? Go ahead, James; I don’t mind, really.”

“This is fucked up, Kelly,” Martin said.

“I’ll d-d-do it,” James said. “But you c-c-can’t t-tell anyone.” Kelly smiled at him.

“It’ll be our secret, James,” Kelly said.

James looked down at himself. Martin hit *record*. James pulled down his fly and reached into his pants. Kelly’s eyes got wide as James pulled it out. Martin watched in the monitor as James pissed on the girl tied to the chair. He started on her thighs and arced it up her belly and breasts then he pissed on her face. She whipped her head back and forth, trying to escape what was happening to her. It was sick and fucked up and looked amazing on camera.

After, James went to the utility sink and washed his hands. Martin kept the camera on Kelly. Her head slumped. Urine dripped from her hair. The razor was on the chair next to her. The water was still running off camera.

Kelly wriggled in the chair, pulling at the ropes holding her wrists. She got a hand free just

as the water stopped. She snatched the razor and quickly put her hand behind her back.

James stepped into frame. Martin's heart was pounding behind the camera. He was still rolling. There 27 minutes left on the battery.

James, as the Figure, leaned over her. He flicked his tongue out like a snake.

Kelly's hand whipped forward. The open blade flew across James's throat. Blood arced out and James jerked back.

He fell on his ass on the stone floor, holding his neck with both hands. His eyes were huge.

"K-K-K-K-K."

His eyes glazed over. Blood soaked his shirt. Kelly looked at the dripping razor in her hand and back to the big man on the floor.

Behind the camera, Martin swallowed hard.

"Cut."

James fell back, limp. Kelly looked at Martin. Her eyes shone in the work lights.

"I already did."

"Jesus. What have we done?"

Kelly untied herself from the chair. She set his father's straight razor on it and pushed her hair back. Stepping close to Martin, she smiled. He could smell copper and piss.

"We made a movie, babe. A real horror movie, just like you wanted. And you know what? I can't wait to do it again."

Martin turned off the camera and the hot lights. He stared at James's body on the floor. The blood had stopped, but there was a lot of it. Kelly called his name from by the stairs.

"Can I use your shower? I'm a mess."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ken MacGregor's work has appeared in dozens of anthologies and magazines. His story collection, *An Aberrant Mind* is available online and in select bookstores. He edits an annual anthology for the Great Lakes Association of Horror Writers. Ken is a member of HWA. He lives in Michigan with his family and two cats, one of whom is dead.

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Such a Good Girl | *Brian Burmeister*

If I'm being completely honest, I don't remember much.
I could feel fingers on my head. Petting, swimming through my hair. One hand after the other.
That much I remember.
Then the whispers:
"Such a good girl. Such a good girl. Granny loves you very much."
Some minutes or hours passed in this way. The syrupy-sweet words poured atop each caress of my hair.
Whatever she'd done, I couldn't move. I don't think I was bound, and yet I didn't leave. Didn't sprint. Didn't struggle. Didn't spit in her face.
Eventually she kissed me. First on the eyelids. Then on the cheeks. Then on the lips.
When it was over she wiped at her mouth and said she would let me go today if I promised never to tell anybody. If I promised to send my pretty little sister to her tomorrow.
Whether from drugs or magic, I was unable to conjure words.
So I nodded, nodded.
And with that, she seemed pleased. With that, she held my hands as she helped me to my feet.
I stumbled some as we walked down the steps of what I then learned was an old train car. Everything, everywhere else I looked was forest.
She pointed. And when I didn't move, she waved with her other hand repeatedly in that direction. No words passed between us.
That's where she left me.
I walked and walked through the woods. No idea where I was or where I was going.
Eventually I exited near a farmhouse I recognized to be close to the edge of our town.
An hour or so later I reached home. I walked through our front door, through the kitchen and past my mother on the phone. She didn't even see me.
I went to my room, grabbed clothes, showered. Took some deep breaths.
I entered my sister's room. Shut the door. Whispered kindly to her, "How'd you like to go on an adventure tomorrow?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Brian Burmeister teaches writing at Iowa State University. His work has appeared in *The Furious Gazelle*, *Thin Air Magazine*, and *The Feminist Wire*.

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Travis had decided that at the precise moment his boss's wife, Lori, had palmed him a tab of high grade LSD that this could be the greatest job ever. He had been employed at Morbid Manor for the past two months. For the past eight weeks he had consensually slapped, humiliated and abused the willing "guests" of Long Island's most "extremely hardcore" haunted house. Participants would have to sign various waivers and releases weeks ahead of their scheduled appointment. Then they would wait.

They would spend the next twenty or so days being tormented and mentally assaulted. Mildly obscene phone calls would turn into threats that promised pain and agony. Mock snuff clips would be sent to email address. They would be stalked, photos of them walking in stores as they shopped would be left on their windshields. They would leave for work only to find disturbing scarecrows filling their driveways.

Everything was a path to the most brutal Halloween haunt on the east coast. Every one of them loved it.

Travis, himself, couldn't understand it. Why would anyone want to be treated this way? It made zero sense to him but what was that saying? Never look a gift horse in the mouth.

For someone like Travis, this was Christmas and Halloween rolled up and dropped in the middle of Disneyland. The mere idea of someone paying him to perform acts he would do for free was a gift in itself.

He had met Billy, the Manor's owner through an ad on Craigslist. The advertisement read "Large fighter type wanted for seasonal Halloween Haunt work." Travis certainly fit the bill standing at just over six feet tall and weighed around two hundred twenty pounds. He had trained in Krav Maga for years until he was blacklisted from nearly every dojo on the island. His training bitches couldn't handle his style of training. Light sparring would turn into full on assaults with Travis always on top.

He had always enjoyed fighting. The give to a rib cage when a right hook crashed into it was as satisfying as any orgasm if not better. Top level "masters" would fall to him. Years of training didn't prepare them for his fury. Their egos couldn't handle the beatings any more than their bodies could. It was never about martial arts to him. For Travis it was all about violence, about terror. The fear of what could happen beyond the battery. The unknown dread of what else would this man do beyond the beating.

When the dojos refused to allow him to even enter their schools he began to employ his favorite pastime in the tried and true manner. He began to fight the homeless.

Travis knew that Long Island had a thriving homeless community that would be encouraged to square off with him for the price of a cheap bottle of rotgut. In his high school days, he and his friends would spend many Friday nights sharpening their fighting skill with some of society's less off. They always video recorded the fights which were always a huge hit at swap meets. Hobo Wars had made some nice change for them.

The last night they filmed, they had convinced a thin, tall old man to play. He was sure he didn't want to fight the large boy but the promise of some money and whiskey was too much to turn down. Running a hand through greasy hair, he agreed.

The "fight" was over the moment it started.

The old man wouldn't stay down though. Every time the wino hit the ground, they would taunt and tease him. "No hooch for you! You went down too fast old man!"

The threat of nonpayment had spurred the old man up in spite of the fierce beating he took. After four more rounds of the blows to the head, kicks to the torso and a vicious stomping to the limbs the old man just laid in the strewn trash of the alleyway. His right eye swollen to the size of a baseball threatened to pop loose of its housing. His weathered face was bruised to a near black. His labored breathing forced a wave of maniacal laughter spew from Travis.

The laughter continued long after he had stopped breathing.

Travis had thought the beating tape could pull in some really serious cash. The rest of the boys felt otherwise. As far as they were concerned, the old man, the beating and the tape never existed. Reluctantly Travis agreed to destroy the tape. No evidence.

The truth was Travis never destroyed the tape as he said he would. Instead he had used the tape as a masturbation aid for nearly three years until he had worn the tape to the point of ruin.

Hobo Wars turned out to be the reason for his employment at Morbid Manor. Billy turned out to be a huge Hobo Wars fan. Once he found out that he was interviewing the series' most popular fighter he couldn't stop carrying on about what a huge fan he was. Billy had told Travis that he still had the tapes and still watched them ten years later.

Travis was intrigued enough in the job to sit there and listen to this little dork wax poetic about Hobo Wars. Billy represented everything Travis wasn't. Short with a bit of a gut but also rich as fuck all! The guy did have a rap though.

"Morbid Manor is the ultimate horror experience!" His voice was light almost feminine. "We take all the normal Halloween haunted house troupes out. No witches and ghost. No jack o lanterns and werewolves. No kid stuff. Instead of all the kid stuff, we provide a realistic 'What if you were in the lair of a psycho?' scenario. Our clients know that they maybe lightly tortured or slapped around. They pay a lot of money to be pushed to the limit."

Travis was definitely interested.

A week later, Travis stood in the rented warehouse space that doubled as Morbid Manors' torture dungeon. Wearing an executioner's hood and bare chested, he was water boarding a blonde with a perfect ass. She gagged and coughed hard making Travis hard, Billy was yelling in her face asking her if she had enough. There was a safety word that always was cried out in the two hour tour. A week later he was dumping cockroaches on a tied up lawyer in a porcelain bathtub. The lawyer screamed in primal terror and Travis was in heaven. He was getting paid and without Billy's knowledge and Billy's wife participation, was getting laid.

Travis had found his calling.

Billy had promised that tonight, Halloween night, they would end the season with a bang. When the clients had come through the front doors, Travis watched the monitor. Identical twin redheads on the screen were giggling. The clients never saw Travis until they were escorted (or dragged) into the torture chamber that he worked. He always promised himself that they wouldn't be smiling when they left him.

The LSD had started to take effect as he made his way to his space. The walls vibrated in a low hum, the vibrations lightly massaging his orbital stalks. The grey paint on the walls deepened into canyons. He stood there inches away, staring deeply into the acrylic paints lumps and folds. The wall became a crashing, violent ocean. Wave after wave, he swayed back and forth trying to find his balance.

The face appeared in the ocean. A grotesque swollen eye covered most of the face. The skin around the wound was blackened and bruised.

Travis fell backwards. His rump hitting the ground hard.

The face was joined by others. Identical in their injuries. They rose out of the oceans' darkness.

The flooring became taffy soft, his legs ached to overcompensate the lack of footing. Blue liquid pooled around his feet and rose around him. The walls started to leak and run in tiny streams towards him. The water flowed over him, slowly encasing him in an armor of viscous scum. Threatening to drown him in a dry room.

Tired, worn voices filled his head. Begging for mercy and uttering pitiful cries.

Panic set in causing him to thrash about. He saw himself, a standing unconfined pillar of flowing water. A liquid tomb.

The multiple clone faces of a battered old man stared at Travis. Offering nothing but a cold stare.

Travis began to weep heavily. His spine ran cold with fear.

Footsteps filled his ears. Turning he saw two figures staring at him. The blue scum still filled his eyes. Clawing painfully at his face, he gouged his eyes clear and looked back at the two standing there.

A pair of identical old men stood there. The right side of their faces was bruised black and rotted. The enlarged eye was split down the middle, the irises bisected.

"Cocksucker!" Travis roared, launching himself at the twins. Gripping one by the neck, he kicked the other in the stomach, folding the old man in half, gasping for air.

His powerful hands tightened on the throat of the other old man. Stepping his right leg between the old man's legs, he pivoted and threw the old man down in heavy crash.

Straddling on the chest, Travis started raining down double hammer blows to the old man's already ruined face. The blows echoed thunder in his ears driving into a killing fury. Bone crumpled under his hands. Blood spurted over his wrist as the bulbous eye finally burst!

"Die you motherfucker!" He screamed, the words barely recognizable.

He drove his face forward into the neck of the old man. His teeth shredding into the old man's withered neck. He bit, swallowed and bit again. Swallowing everything in great gulps.

An arm snaked around his neck. The other old man was screaming in his ear. A hand started hitting Travis above his ear then grabbed at his shoulder only to quickly release him.

"Travis! Stop it! Stop please!" Billy's voice rang in though his eardrums.

Confusion clouded his hyper firing brain. "Billy? Where the hell was Billy?" The ocean walls continued to roar over everything. He was starting to drown in a much thicker pool encasing his face as he continued to eat.

A heavy blow pounded on his neck. Vision flashed white, doubled as he pulled away from the old man underneath him. His stomach felt full to the point of nausea. He burped, spitting out a chunk.

Another blow. He swayed, trying to hold off collapse.

For a brief second, he couldn't see anything past the light. Then he saw the old bastard under him. Face turned to pulp, the head barely attached to the shoulders. He saw that even the long hair was stained red.

Long hair?

A third blow put him out.

The three squad cars flanked the ambulance on its drivers and rear sides. Cherry lights flashed in erratic strobes. The outside of the industrial park that Morbid Manor conducted business was bathed in deep red lighting and fleeting shadows from the flurry of activity.

Billy and Lori sat on the curb in front of the lot they rented. Dried blood caked his forearms and hands. Hands that haven't stopped shaking since Travis went berserk. Billy had answered all the questions without hesitation. He provided all the paperwork that he had; he always was good with paperwork. The only answer he didn't have was why did Travis go berserk?

Travis was well known among local law enforcement. His hot temper and quickness to brutal violence was always on their radar. Until now, they were never able to pin anything on him. After seeing what he did to that girl however, the officers didn't even feel the faintest hallow ting of victory.

They had spoken to her sister who was separated from her halfway through the haunt. The owner had told them that was not usual. Neither was hearing screams, all part of the experience.

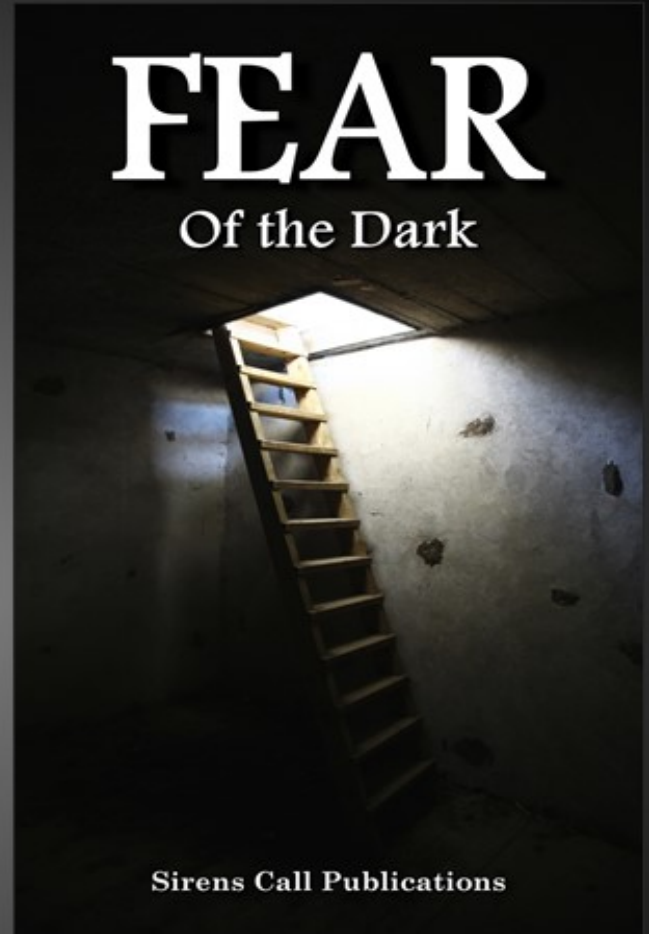
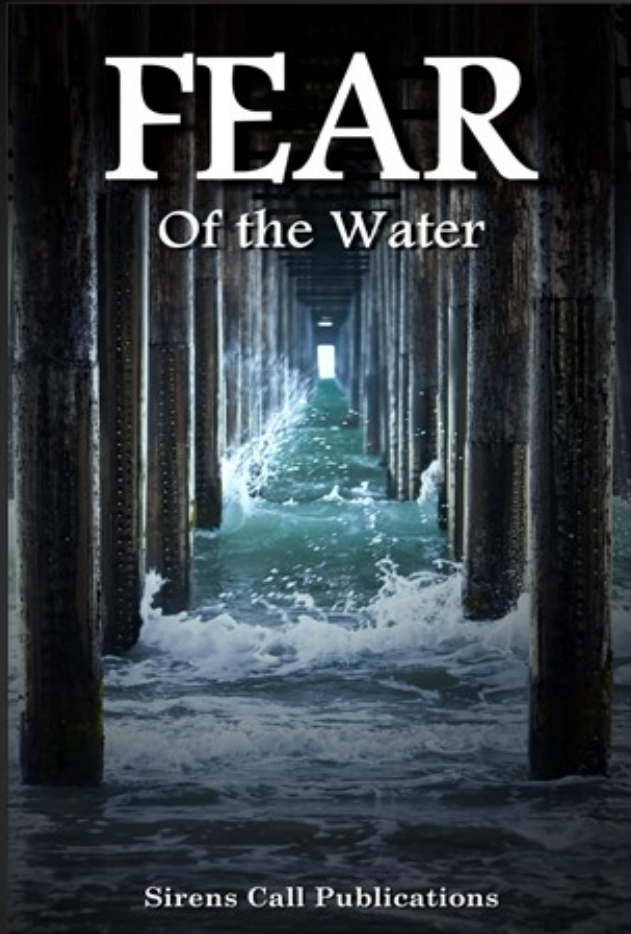
The only person who had some answers and wasn't talking was Lori. The moment after she called 911, she had flushed the LSD and then quickly vomited. She tried to force what she saw on the monitor out from her head. Travis had attacked the moment Billy and the girl walked into the room. No warning, no threats, just a savage attack. One moment, he was on the monitor, walking about as if nothing was wrong. The next...she shuddered.

Travis sat in the rear of the squad car. Two sets of cuffs and a bite gag were fastened tight. He was watching all the old men scurry around outside the car. Beaten old men in police uniforms, driving an ambulance. Their swollen rotten eyes fixed on him. He would get out and crush them all. Sooner or later, he will get to them all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: John Collins has horror in his DNA since the shark popped up to say hello to Brody. Since then a steady diet of creature features, splatterpunk fiction and heavy metal helped shape him into a surprisingly functional adult. A lover of all things haunted and Halloween themed, he lives on Long Island with a very patient wife and kids. He's currently working on more fiction.

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What do you FEAR?



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Stripped bare of her clothing, wrists shackled in heavy irons, ankles and neck fettered as well, she does not bother to struggle. Staring down the length of chain leading from her throat to the beast holding her bonds, disdain bleeds from her eyes as they bore into his.

"You've always been an arrogant cunt, it's time someone taught you to heel," he slurs past the malformed lump serving as his lower lip. His jagged, cracked teeth do nothing to improve his enunciation.

With a quick, hard yank, he drags her forward a step, but only one; the crunch of bone distinctly recognizable over the sound of the rattling chains. A bare flicker of emotion registers in her expression as her left wrist falls slack. Still, she stares in defiance.

Stepping down from the dais, he paces, seething with anger. The longer he paces, the angrier he becomes. Standing on the stone floor several arm lengths away, she remains stoic. His nakedness as rigid as her obstinance, he closes the gap between them in two quick strides.

"Ragged whore, I am your keeper. Without me you are nothing, as pathetic as those loathsome sheep you seem so fond of. When I command you to heel, you will do so." The threat issuing from his vile, twisted mouth is unmistakable. Still, she stares back as the bones of her broken wrist begin to stitch together.

Wrapping the chains around his forearm to shorten the length, he looms over her, spittle flying as he roars, "You were told not to interfere." Ah, the crux of her punishment has come to light.

They continue to stare at one another, his breathing growing heavier by the moment. Finally she breaks the silence. "And I did not, My Lord," the slight bow of her head clearly meant to mock him; her dismissive tone conveying her disinterest in his attempt at intimidation.

With a growl that comes from deep within his chest, fury radiating from every pore of his being, he begins to froth. Using the chains wrapped around his arm, he raises her two feet above the ground, bringing her level with his eye. With the other hand, he snaps her right wrist between his forefinger and thumb. A slight groan escapes her before she can contain it. A smile begins to spread upon his face.

Cupping her ass with his free hand, he presses her body hard against his own, his want throbbing against her. He leans forward, whispers in her ear, "So you do feel. I've heard an angel is an extremely... erotic creature and the darker the soul, the sweeter the nectar. Perhaps I have been going about your discipline all wrong." He slowly licks her shoulder, her neck, the side of her face, then begins to boom with laughter – intent all too clear in his eyes.

She returns his slight smile as he runs a razor-sharp black talon over her lips, tearing them to shreds. Blood begins to trickle down her chin; he laps it clean. She unfurls an obsidian wing; he stares at it in wanton lust. With lightning speed, she uses the tip of a feather to pluck his left eyeball from its socket. There is a moment of resistance as the sinew and tendons try to cling to his skull before tearing away.

Screaming in agony, he releases her and she tumbles to the stone floor. His arm still tangled in the chains, he drags her with him as he retreats to the dais until they become unwound. Cupping his empty socket, he screams, "You whore!"

Lying on the floor, she begins laughing manically.

“You fucking whore! I’ll see you dead for this!”

Gently, she places the eyeball in her mouth, blood still running down her chin from her slashed lips. Through peals of laughter, she positions her new prize between her teeth, and as he watches in horror, she smiles brightly and begins to chew.

Darting forward once more, her wing tip slams into his other eye with an audible pop, then carves it in two with a single stroke. She leaves this one in place to heal useless and deformed; a match for his lower lip, a reminder of her for the days to come.

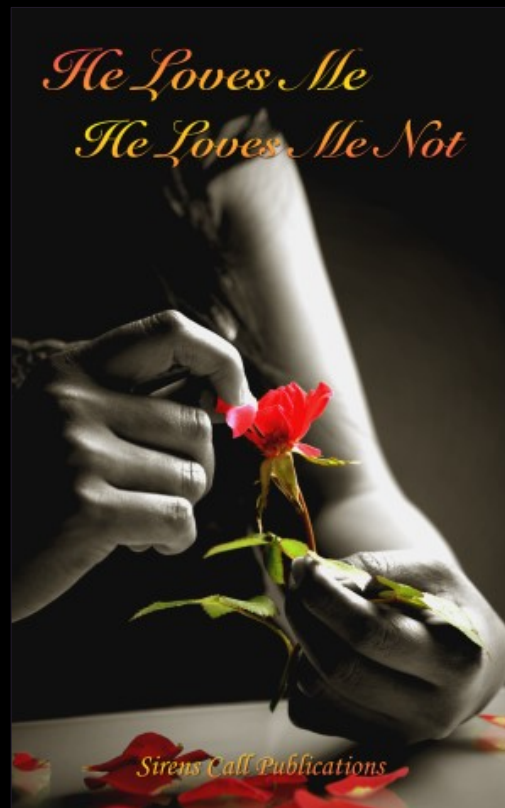
Rising to her feet, she walks to the dais and flippantly asks, “You wish to see me dead?” With a mirthless chuckle, she leans in and whispers, “I don’t think you’ll be seeing much of anything...”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Nina D’Arcangela is a horror devotee who likes to write soul rending snippets of despair, insanity, and pain. She reads anything from splatter matter to dark matter. She’s an UrbEx adventurer and professional photographer whose wanderlust takes her to abandoned locations, decrepit buildings, purportedly haunted places, and old graveyards. Nina is one of the co-owners of Sirens Call Publications, a co-founding member of the horror writer’s group PenoftheDamned.com, and the owner of Dark Angel Photography.

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Fear | *Mark Steinwachs*

Tilting my head back, I undo the clasp of the invisible collar around my neck. I feel two sets of long, sharp nails remove themselves from the skin of my shoulders and upper back. Bringing my arm over my head, I clasp the collar shut and hang it on my bedpost as I do every night.

I run my hands along my neck. There are no physical marks on me. Nothing my friends or family would ever see, but I know they're there. Twenty nail marks etched into my skin that will not heal for another night, and bruises from the weight of the creatures tugging at my collar.

I turn around and face them. They stand side by side, ebony creatures who stare down at me. They look emaciated, their rib cages protruding. They have long, sinewy arms and legs; I shudder knowing I will feel the creatures pierce me again when I wake up. Their faces are dominated by sets of razor sharp teeth that drip with inky saliva whenever they open their mouths. I've yet to feel their bite, though I often wonder what would happen if I did.

Fear opens his mouth and his pointed tongue snakes out. I shiver but meet his gaze. I know he is fear by the only color on his body, amber orbs that are his eyes. I've stared him down many a night.

I look to Doubt, his gold eyes glow in the darkened room. He brings his hands up and sneers. He dug deep into me all day and is gloating about it.

Neither emit a sound, the silent monsters who haunt me. They have been with me for years. Gnawing at my being every day, growing inside me until they forced themselves out. Everyone has these creatures in them, but mine reign over me. Control me.

I am not alone. There are others whose demons are just as powerful. There are no support groups, no doctors who can heal us. We are broken. What I've learned about mine, I've learned on my own.

They look down at me, watching. They are weaker at night when I am alone with my door closed to the world. But they know I cannot leave these four walls without them. They grow stronger each day. They rule in the outside world, but in mine, my room, I can stand up to them. Keep them at bay while I sleep. Dreams are my only safe place.

I walk to the side of my bed, their eyes never leaving my body. They turn in unison, standing guard as I slip under the covers. I turn off the lamp and my last vision is of their bedside vigil.

My eyes open to a new day. Fear and Doubt stand exactly as I left them. I push myself out of bed and they flex their taut muscles, their claws extending. I know what must be done. My body trembles inside. Each day I lose more of myself, but I cannot stop it. I reach for my collar and put it around my neck. I turn away, offering myself to them as I clasp it shut.

Closing my eyes I wait to feel them. Ten nails pierce my skin, what little healing happened overnight is erased.

Fear.

He pushes in deeper, tendrils snaking inside my body. As more of him enters me, his body shrinks. He is no longer standing over me but now attached to me. Feeding from me. I inhale sharply, choking, as my collar is pulled to one side from his weight.

Waiting. One breath. Two breaths.

Doubt.

He stabs at me. Ten wounds at once. He is swift. Brutal. Taking hold of me. I gasp and grab the corner of my dresser so I don't fall over. His tongue flicks my ear as I straighten myself.

They settle in as I open my bedroom door, ready to face the world.

Shutting the door to my bedroom, I lean against it. I can't face another day of school, the humiliation, the bullying.

I'm done. I can't fight anymore.

I realize there is only one thing left for me. I finally understand what to do. No longer doubting myself, I will give in. I smile, it will all be over soon.

Pushing myself away from the door, my heart races. The weight shifts along my neck as my collar pulls against me when Doubt's feet hit the ground. His body comes free and I feel his presence behind me.

I turn to face him. He is losing substance, shimmering in my vision.

"I'm sorry," I whisper through clenched teeth, tears streaming down my face. I slide my hand under my shirt, feeling along my shoulder blade. Once again I smile. Just as I thought, his wounds are gone.

He steps forward and gently lays his hands over mine. Our eyes stay locked. He has been a part of me for so long. His tongue slips out and he kisses my tears away. Then he is gone.

My heart thumps against my chest. Unclasping my collar, I pull it around in front of me. I wait. His finger traces my body as he steps in front of me.

Fear.

My body is shaking but I don't move. I am no longer crying. My hands quiver, fumbling with the clasp that binds Fear to the collar. Patiently he stands in front of me. I release the clasp and drop the collar to the floor. Fear smiles. It is grotesque and beautiful.

His hands roam over my body, feeling flesh he never has before. He grows as we stand together. Every inch of me is now his. There is only one thing left.

He opens his mouth.

My heart races as I close my eyes. A hundred spikes of pain shoot through me. I scream out in agony and fall to the floor, instinctively curling into the fetal position, rocking.

The door bursts open behind me. I hear my mom yelling asking if I'm all right. I know she is only a few feet from me, but she sounds so far away.

I've lost count of days, maybe it's been years. I can hear everything that is being said, but my body never responds. I'm trapped. My only reaction is to sob when they give me medication to relax my body. No one knows why I cry. They don't understand they are tears of joy for being free.

Inevitably I feel my body slowly twisting into position as the drugs wear off. My tears stop. Those few hours of peace are gone. Once again I return to the hell in which I reside.

Fear is waiting for me.

My body enters his.

I am home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mark Steinwachs is a roadie who retired to shop life and is now GM at Bandit Lites in Nashville, TN. Over a decade traveling in tour buses plus time as a United States Marine, and a rave DJ/promoter has given him a unique outlook in his storytelling. He writes in the wee hours of the morning trying not to wake his wife and two kids.

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GAPE



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GAPE

Aiden Truss

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The Gap Girl | *Kevin Holton*

Julia Wyckoff

She waits in the cabinets.

She's there, behind the couch.

I know it. Don't bother looking—if you're looking, you'll never see her. It's when you're not looking, when you're off guard, sitting there minding your own business, when she'll catch your attention. You might even think it's an illusion, at first, a trick of the light, an odd shadow, but no, that's a woman staring at you from the gap between the TV and the liquor cabinet. It's a two-inch gap at most, but there she is. Part of her, anyway, an eye, some hair, moon-pale skin that chills to the bone, and when your eye meets hers, the game begins.

That was two days ago, and the internet says there's no telling when she'll pop up again, but when she does, you die. Any gap will do. The slightest breath of space between one surface and another, that's where she lives, and it's how she kills. No one quite knows what happens. Some say she drags you into the gap, whatever the size, wherever it might be. Others think she just kills you. A few say you go insane and run off into the wildness, screaming.

I've got her. Check fucking mate, as my dad would've said. He was the best chess player in Central Park, and there's only one real rule to winning chess: always know what your opponent is going to do next. Don't make your own plans. Make sure to rip your opponent apart piece by piece so the king has nowhere to hide.

I sold the TV. Really pissed off my husband, but hey, he didn't see her. It's not his soul on the line. We got rid of the booze too. Most of it was mine anyway, and he seemed relieved to have it gone. He was less relieved when I got rid of the bookshelves in the bedroom, moved our dresser into the guest room, took the frame off the bed, and threw away the nightstand. In fact, he was pissed, but that's okay.

From what I've seen, she's the ghost of an abused woman. The running legend is that she hid in a cabinet to evade a violent husband and watched him kill their child instead. She waited there, eventually starving to death, too afraid and guilty to come out. Now, whoever she sees with her cursed, wandering eyes gets dragged into the same miserable hell she's been trapped in since that day.

Honestly, I don't give a fuck. There's tons of information on rituals out there, and I've found the keys to keeping her off my back. It all boils down to salt, flour, and the blood of a martyr. There's always some tricky bastard of an ingredient to these things that you're not going to find in Kmart, so I stole a little communion wine from church. Blood of God, right?

Here's what you do: line the door ways with salt so she gets trapped in one room. Use flour to find her footprints—see what she's hiding behind. Then, use the blood to banish her, preferably by hitting her with the weapon. It helps if you're blindfolded while attacking so she can't kill you.

I've got her, though. Three more days went by before I had a chance to try it, but I've got her. Mitch is out for a business conference, so I coated every floor with flour and salt, then went to the nearest hunting store and got a handgun. They're easy to get in my state, as long as you've got a license. I doused each shell with wine and returned home.

It really hadn't taken long. I saw footprints in the living room. They led straight to the closet.

The door was ajar. I quickly looked away, then smiled. I had her.

Check fucking mate.

Mitch Wyckoff

My mother was a drinker, as was my dad, and their parents, and my brother, and half my college buddies. I know what social drinkers look like, I know the difference between alcoholism and alcohol abuse, and I've been too weak to help my wife. After being promoted to senior marketing manager two years ago, I've spent most of that time on the road. The last third of our marriage was wasted with my business trips.

I was blind to it, until someone at the park pointed out the bruise on Mikey's neck. I hadn't noticed it and said he must've fallen. When I asked later, he didn't respond. Julia didn't know, and angrily waved me off, saying he was probably clumsy.

I'm not suggesting she was abusive. Just negligent. Maybe careless.

Whatever the case, I knew I had to act when she got rid of the TV a few weeks later. She ditched the alcohol too, which was a good sign, but her delusions didn't let up. I heard her muttering about 'that girl in the gap' and shuffling around the house at all sorts of hours. She sold more of our furniture and destroyed the rest, then shrieked about 'not wanting to die' when I asked about it. She wouldn't listen to reason, even when I tried explaining that everyone sees weird stuff from time to time—myself included.

After making a point to cancel my upcoming trip, Mikey said she used to be a 'sleepy stone' every night I wasn't there, and that "she'd never wake up," even if he shook her.

Her problem was late stage. Drinking to unconsciousness, psychosis—god, how selfish had I been, not to notice all this?

I called out of work early and returned home to find her car not in the driveway. A bottle of whiskey lay empty by the front door, which was left unlocked. Inside, flour coated the floors, empty bags strewn around like a hoarder had come through. This couldn't go on. Someone had to watch over her, and as awful as it sounds, I couldn't do it. What did I know about caring for someone so mentally ill?

The 9-1-1 operator had just answered when Julia's car rumbled onto, then off of, the driveway and parked on the grass. I ran into the closet, leaving it ajar so I could see what she did, but didn't dare respond to the operator. The last thing I wanted was to lend credence to Julia's paranoia by confirming that someone was, in fact, spying on her.

Julia walked slowly by the open door, glancing over then quickly away, eyes wild, hair tousled. Then I realized I'd left tracks behind in the flour—she'd know for a fact that I was in there. Cursing my stupidity, I watched as she walked in front of the closet door, her shadow falling across my footprints.

I was just about to speak up when I saw her shadow raise a gun.

Dr. Jerome Turnville

It is my professional opinion that the defendant, Julia Wyckoff, is not mentally fit to stand trial. She has clearly had a psychotic break. Not only did she not grasp the consequences of her actions, but she would not be able to understand what is happening in the court room.

The police arrived at 181 Hammond Drive after a dispatch operator relayed ‘signs of distress’ and the sounds of gunfire coming from a phone at that location. Officers found Wyckoff firing a gun at the living room closet. Flour had been strewn around the scene, and it appeared more than fifty rounds had been fired through the closet door. By some act of God, only three struck the husband, Mitch Wyckoff, who was hiding in there, for reasons not currently known. He is unconscious at Saint Helen’s Memorial, but expected to make a swift recovery.

Even at a preliminary psychiatric evaluation, it was obvious that the woman is not connected to reality. She mumbled incoherently about having ‘killed’ a woman living ‘in the gaps’ of her household, but when asked, said that the woman had died many years ago. She raved, unprompted, about ‘the blood of the martyr’ and how ‘you have to play her game, and you’ll always lose.’ Those quotations are some of the only sensible fragments. The rest of her speech was disjointed and unresponsive.

Officers Viceroy and Fitzpatrick met their son, Michael, at school to place him in protective custody. From the boy’s report, it seems Julia was a late-stage alcoholic. While any number of factors could’ve contributed to her break, this seems the most likely.

No professional, no matter how advanced, will ever fully understand how the mind works. I’ve continued to meet with Mrs. Wyckoff and have begun overseeing her treatment. Though she takes medication without a fuss, she shows no signs of improvement. She continues to talk about a woman ‘who stares from the little spaces between things’ with overwhelming vehemence. Her zeal is such that she’s begun to disturb the other patients, so we moved her to isolation.

Perhaps it’s fatigue, exposure to such a client, or both, but even I could swear I’ve seen ‘the girl from the gap.’ Last night, I was reclining in my study when I thought I saw an eye peering at me from between my armoire and a bookshelf, but when I blinked, there was only shadow. It was stress, I told myself, but still, in my dreams, I sometimes see it. I see that eye.

Something in me can’t shake that maybe she was real. Maybe she’s there.

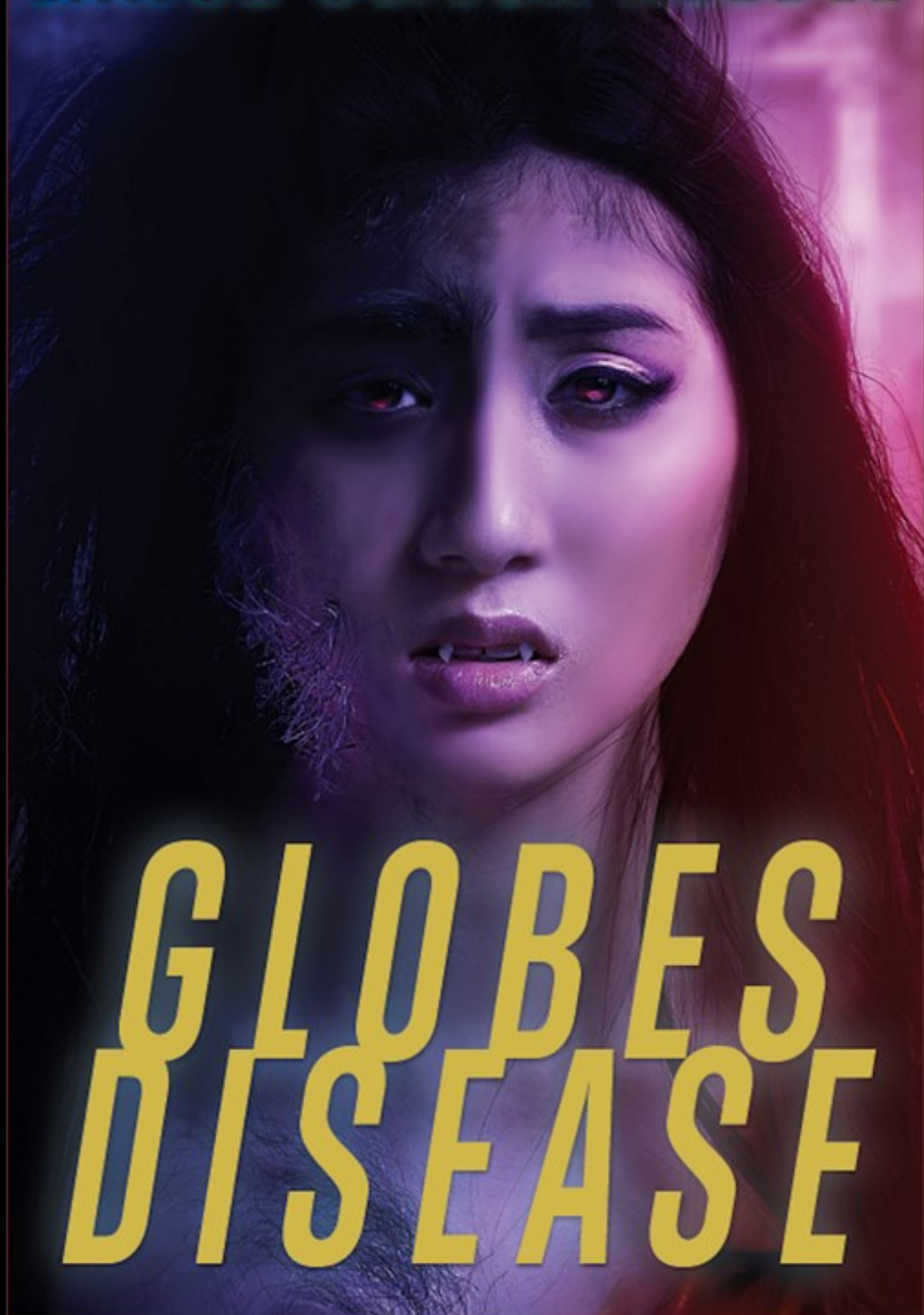
She’s there, in the cabinets, in the space behind my couch...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Kevin Holton has published or will publish with Sirens Call Publications, The Literary Hatchet, and Crystal Lake Publishing. He has had work appear in a number of anthologies. When not writing, he is an actor, editor, gamer, and student who loves to cook and spends too much time talking about Batman.

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Nothing | Otis Moore

The air was filled with broken glass and debris from an unknown source. Gravity seemed to disappear as we were lifted from our seated positions. The eruption of numerous sounds exploded into a deafening silence. Nothing was as it should be.

The jolts of pressure pushing me back and forth took my breath away in an agonizing torture. A crashing blow to my head brought a burst of consciousness to the atmospheric surroundings. I was suddenly aware of the grave situation that controlled my life. This, nothing, was the end.

Inches away, the terror exposed itself in the face of my young bride as the firmness of the world was left behind. Every twist and turn as we rolled on brought a new face of pain to her rapidly diminishing existence. Her eyes locked on to mine just long enough for the color of her iris to fade to black. In less than a few seconds time, my everything became what I once had. She was gone into the nothing and I seen her go.

My emotions were completely separated from my soul. It was as if I were outside of the scene looking in at my deepest fear coming true. My body was tossed, battered and broken but I felt no pain. I felt neither sadness nor sympathy. There was just nothing. I too was lost to the unsuspected separation of life. But my mind was still there trapped in the nothing.

A blinding light engulfed the Earth and a scorching scent reared to life ending the tumble of the wreckage. Heat beyond anything imaginable flashed as the steel structure gave away and melted into a gelatinous lava not resembling the seconds ago vessel. Nothing was left.

A screeching noise from off in the distance brought consciousness back into my mind. Fear arose me from my sleep into a panting fury as I found my life to still be mine. My young bride was startled into a panic as she quickly advanced to my side in a consoling voice. It was nothing. It was a dream of nothing.

“Hunny, its okay. You had a dream; a bad dream. It was nothing,” she said as she rubbed my back hugging me. “It has been a long day. Let’s get some rest before we have to leave. We have a long drive. Nothing is going to go wrong.”

Nothing was going to happen!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Otis Moore was born in Louisville, Kentucky on November 7, 1979. He was raised in Somerset, Kentucky where he now lives with his wife and their blended family of nine children, tales of tragedy and terror are never in short supply. With such a large family, inspiration for the next book or story is never too far away.

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The Shadows in Regina Court | Matthew R. Davis

When I turned from the bar at Lanegan's and glanced around for a place to sup my traditional end-of-week ale, she was leaning against the polished wood of the back wall, a wrought-iron lamp burning over her head like a streetlight advertising a lady of the night.

Her clothes struck me as a mish-mash of fashions old and new – dowdy flower-print dress, wide-collared brown leather jacket, purple leggings that vanished into battered sneakers, a green barrette in her tousled blonde hair – but then, I am hardly an authority on the subject. She noticed my appraisal and beckoned me with a friendly wave. I braced myself for mockery, and walked over anyway.

Stepping into her presence was almost like stepping into *her* – those eyes were alleyway openings, a dark grey that deepened into black centres – and I attributed this fanciful notion to the beer I was sipping quickly as we talked. She said she was a traveller who never travelled, she claimed to have so many brothers and sisters that she could never remember them all, and she told me her name was Regina Court.

“So what brings you out on this damp, unwelcoming evening?” I asked her.

“I tire of watching the world go by,” she sighed, waving one languid hand at the planet. “I haven't involved myself in a while, haven't been keeping up with the times. Things change so much.”

This was a simplified version of my own mantra. “They do, and so fast. Just when you get used to something, it becomes something else.”

“The old truths are still there, if you know where to look.”

I offered to go to the bar for us both, and asked what she drank.

“Rainwater, usually. But I should like a beer for once.”

Regina Court was not at all like the professional women who frequented Lanegan's – those worthies were impeccably presented to hide the hardening of age, acted regal enough to suit her name better than she, and saw nothing in me worth more than a barely civil exchange of pleasantries. I wondered if she might be here to work, as it were, and didn't know whether to be relieved when I concluded she was not. It had been too many years since my marriage had been edited into habitual solitude like a rewritten sentence, and I was becoming less and less resistant to meeting a woman of the streets.

“Where in town are you from?” she soon asked, intent on my answer.

“East. Brichester Street.”

“Ah!” She clicked her fingers, smiled. “Now *there's* a street with some stories to tell.”

The only recent one I'd heard involved a neighbor's off-key audition for some abysmal talent show. “Really? Such as...?”

“Clayton Carstairs,” Regina Court said with relish. “And *there* was a man who knew more than one way to skin a cat. He did sixteen of them in his garden shed, made them into fur-lined boots. An old neighbor got suspicious, but then she disappeared. Carstairs only got caught because the woman's daughter recognized a birthmark on the arm of his new lounge seat.”

I was rather taken aback. “I don't recall that! When *was* this...?”

“1958.” She gave a casual shrug. “My brother told me. He’s very close by. You’ll probably pass him on the way home.”

An unusual conversation, and an unusual woman. Regina Court seemed ageless, but refused to give a number and brushed away the question with a firm flick of the hand – and though she looked perhaps half my age, somehow I felt the younger man. Maybe she had lived the lives I’d denied myself in pursuit of the past, and was so much broader than I could ever hope to be.

“What do you do?” she asked, and I gave a perhaps too-detailed rundown of my work at the museum. It always sounded dry and dull when described to another, particularly one young enough to enjoy more immediate pursuits, but I was gratified to note that Regina Court followed my words with an attentive intensity that I found both disturbing and exciting.

“I see,” she said when I paused to sip at my beer. “The present keeps changing behind your back as you curate the past to fix it in place. That must be quite perplexing. Don’t you ever wonder what’s *really* going on?”

“How do you mean? Going on where?”

“All around us! Behind the scenes, within the walls, in the corner of your eye. There’s a beauty that awaits us all, once we transcend the everyday truths.” She saw my eyes go flat at this, and grinned as if I’d confirmed a hunch. “Ah, but of course you don’t. Clearly, imagination is not your strong suit.”

I bristled a little at this. “Imagination... isn’t necessary in my line of work. It’s not quantifiable, it can’t be confirmed, or dated, or –”

“Or stuffed, or pinned to a board,” she teased, smiling as she straightened my tie. “You sound very certain of yourself. Are you so sure you know the way of things?”

I tugged on my lapel and gave a firm nod, emboldened by her attention. “I am.”

She found this amusing. “I do like a man with the courage of his convictions. Well, then. I think I’d like to show you something.”

“What’s that, my dear?”

She slipped her cool hand into mine and asked, “Want to see where I live?”

Of course I did, and perhaps it was the three pints I’d consumed during our conversation, but I said so without hesitation. Her replying smile was inscrutable, and I found myself doubting the wisdom of my impetuous answer. Why should she want *me* alone behind closed doors, an old-fashioned man who could not even keep a quiet and homely wife happy? Might this be the set-up for blackmail, a mugging, a murder?

It might. But on the other hand, what if...?

Two beers over my limit, I felt reckless, disinclined to walk my usual path. I let go my rational concerns and started toward the front door.

“Not that way,” Regina Court insisted, tugging at my hand. “I can’t go out the front. Come with me.”

She led me along the back wall of the club, past a group of acquaintances from the museum who sent me knowing nods and a cluster of those well-preserved viragos who now deigned to air presumptuous frowns, and pushed through a door that insisted upon STAFF ONLY. I swallowed my protestations and followed her down dim corridors until we reached a

fire exit. It didn't seem to be as alarmed as I, and made no comment as we stepped out into the night.

Lanegan's backed onto a courtyard that bottlenecked at one end to empty itself out into a side street; no cars passed that empty mouth, and none partook of this little nook in the center of the city. Besides the club, a few other businesses kept their backs turned here, walls devoid of windows or the gaudy advertisements that colored their faces. One two-storey building did look into the courtyard, an old heap that had seen decades trudge by, now home to an antiquarian book store; a couple of wraith-like trees stood guard before this place, reaching for nothing with dead hands. All walls had been misted by the wet exhalations of graffiti artists, or else held up the faded, torn scrolls of posters that proclaimed nights long since gone. Despite the night and the hour, no vehicles huddled in the loading zones that lay barren under puddles left from the recent rain, puddles that gleamed like mirrors at the moon's soft silver touch.

"Well, this is me."

Regina Court let go my hand and danced into the center of the courtyard, looking back to see what I made of it all.

"What do you mean? Surely you don't *live* here?"

She grinned and curtsied. "Do I look dead to you, sir?"

"What I mean is... are you homeless?"

Regina Court shook her head, a disappointed teacher. Before I could continue on this apparently obtuse angle, she skipped across the courtyard with a creaking laugh that sounded centuries older than her childlike movements would suggest.

"Look! This spot is where Alfred Macklemore lost a vital game of conkers, and was so sickened by having to give up his brother's favorite cigarette cards that he threw up blood. Where you're standing, that's where a courier was on the phone to his dispatch lady last year when she had a fatal seizure – the only word she could say, over and over as she died, was *whipple*. This storm drain over here is where a girl called Queenie once found something that looked like a cross between a goat and a squid, something that had died alone and terrified and so very far from home. And under the cement *here*, if you dug in just the right place, you'd find a wedding ring that Mrs. Clemence Argyle dropped in 1893 – she'd lost a lot of weight due to dysentery, and it slipped right off her finger. Oh, but she was cross!"

I shook my head at this eccentricity, impatient and starting to pine for the dry, sane warmth of Lanegan's. "Look, I didn't come out here to play silly games. It's cold. If you've nowhere to go, you can... come with me, and I'll put you up for the night."

If she caught wind of any dishonorable sentiments in that offer, she didn't let on. Regina just shook her head.

"You don't understand – not yet. I can't *leave*."

"Well, you can't stay here. It's freezing out. At least let's go back in and have another drink, yes?"

"I'm staying," she said, quiet and low, "and so are you."

I shoved my hands into empty coat pockets, my indulgence coming to an end. "Oh, really? And why would that be?"

“Because you’re so... *rigid*. So stiff.” She grinned at my discomfort. “So firm in your belief, and even more so in your disbelief. There are worlds within worlds, you know – space beyond space, knowledge beyond reason. I want to show you that there’s so much more than you’ve ever dared to dream. And it all starts with me.”

If she was extending the kind of proposition I had both desired and dreaded, she was being awfully obscure about it. “And why would you do that, Regina?”

“You might call it fun. If you remembered what that was.”

Indignant, I stalked the courtyard toward her. “You won’t make sport of me. Don’t presume to mock your own assumptions.”

“Oh, I assume nothing. *You* assume a position that has calcified with time, an ignorance that has trapped your wonder like an insect in amber. You, sir, make sport of yourself.”

Regina Court didn’t flinch as I grabbed her wrist in a chastening grip. “Stop it. I’m no one’s figure of fun.”

“You have no idea how right you are,” she said, smiling, and her eyes were fixed on a point over my shoulder.

Aware that this scene could easily be misconstrued as something reprehensible, I swung halfway around to see if we were observed. No one stood in the mouth of the alley that led into the courtyard, and no one had crept out of back doors that kept closed like reliable mouths; the moon showed me no one. Annoyed that she had caught me with such a simple trick, I turned back to remonstrate with Regina Court.

And saw that my fingers were wrapped around a branch from one of those withered trees, twigs grasping back at me in a parody of fingers.

Shocked, I let go my grip. I’d been focused on Regina Court’s mocking grin, true, but was sure we’d been standing in the center of the courtyard. Now the dim windows of the antiquarian book store were close enough to cast me a shadowed reflection, the spectral trees looming on either side of me like screaming ghosts. This was impossible, and my heart knew the truth of it, and my pulse pounded like a hammer in my head.

Regina Court was nowhere to be seen... and yet, I felt her all around me.

She was *everywhere*. The puddles gleamed at me like her alleyway eyes in the moonlight. The tree branch I’d been holding swayed from side to side, the way she’d waved at me earlier. Clouds draped themselves like pale hair over the peak of the building before me, the moon atop them a glowing barrette. And the *shadows*... they loomed toward me from every corner like gaping mouths, growing wider and deeper like the last laugh of a lunatic. She was falling on and over and through me, a million moments and movements and memories crashing across my mind, and my lungs were thick with the very essence of Regina Court.

I managed to stumble toward the one oasis of sanity in this sudden madness: the back door of Lanegan’s. Once inside, surely I could laugh at this ludicrous delusion, could rationalize my sudden terror as the prodded-awake imagination of a sadly repressed man. I came within arm’s reach of the door, a drowning man clutching for an extended hand.

And then –

And then I flinched away, turned tail in a desperate dash toward the alley. My mind screamed in atavistic terror as it drove me in the direction of safety, screamed to block out any

contemplation of what my eyes had just told it. *My eyes!* Oh, how the scales had fallen from those sorry organs, would I just stop to realize it!

There came a massive, rippling *CRACK* from the courtyard around me, a sound that tore through my head and made my bones dance to its concussive percussion. It sounded like the popping of unused joints, only it started at the two-storey office directly behind me and ran out through every building and brick around it – every inch of glass and mote of dust and drop of rainwater, even the bitumen beneath my flying feet – as if the whole courtyard was flexing in the throes of waking.

I didn't dare look back. I raced like the credulous child I had once been toward the mouth of the alley, expecting the *coup de grâce* to fall here if anywhere, and was terribly relieved when it didn't close around me with a sudden gnashing of brutal brick teeth. I glanced up at the street sign fixed to one wall as I fled out of the courtyard, and let loose a strangled sound somewhere between a laugh and a scream.

No wonder the back door to Lanegan's had disappeared like that, swallowed whole by the wall as solid cement angles came together in an impossible peristaltic twitch, before appearing again as once-immutable matter returned to its designated place.

The wall had *winked* at me.

The street sign that flashed by me as I dashed out – out into a world much wider and more terrifying than I had ever chosen to suspect – said REGINA COURT.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Matthew R. Davis is a dark fiction author and musician based in Adelaide, South Australia, currently working on a number of writing projects, preparing a new album with alt/prog/metal band icecocoan, and enjoying a fresh romance. He's also been selected as a judge for the Horror Novel section of the 2016 Aurealis Awards, meaning his To Read pile is going to get even more insane.

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Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed

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



Urban Macabre | *Lance Oliver Keeble*

I worked a civil service job, I did, yes I did
A job my mother could be proud of, I did, yes I did
The voices in my head they smile
Oh yes they do, oh yes they do
They speak to me they scream to me
They tell me things, yes they scream these things
Is it me or just a dream?
Is it real, is this happening?
This murder I see before my eyes
And I know it's real, is it real?

I think it's real
I saw his blood squirt
I saw it spill
Oh yes it did, I think it did

And as I enjoy the orgasmic slaughter
I could not help but wonder
Oh I wondered
How do you clean sneakers of that crimson rancid?
The Massa's acid
His acid blood burning through his cold, cold heart
Through my shoes, my socks making my toes hot
Why am I hot?
The sweat it mixes with his blood
It dilutes the kill

I must chomp one more chomp
When I slit his throat I thought of his gurgling squeal
It causes me to wonder
How should I dispose of this swill? Never mind
Live for the moment, the blood rush
The frenzy, the rage, blood lust
I cannot stop
So I answer his stupid question from earlier in kind
Chomp, chomp, chomp...
I hear those voices in my head they talk to me

Oh yes they did, I know they did
They say, "Remember your childhood"

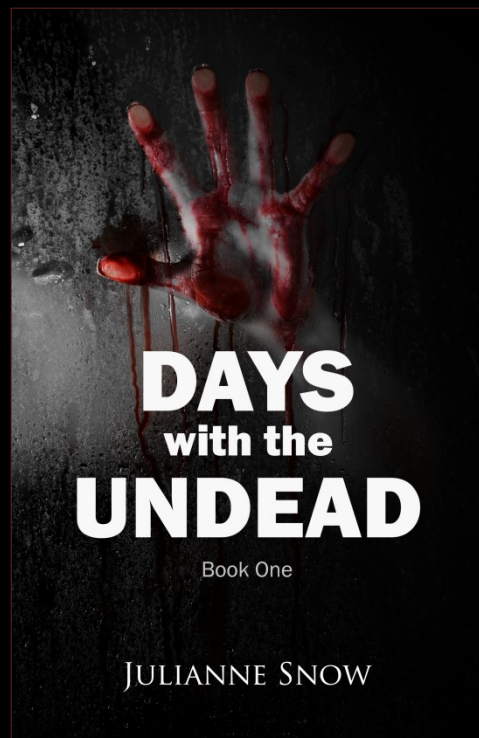
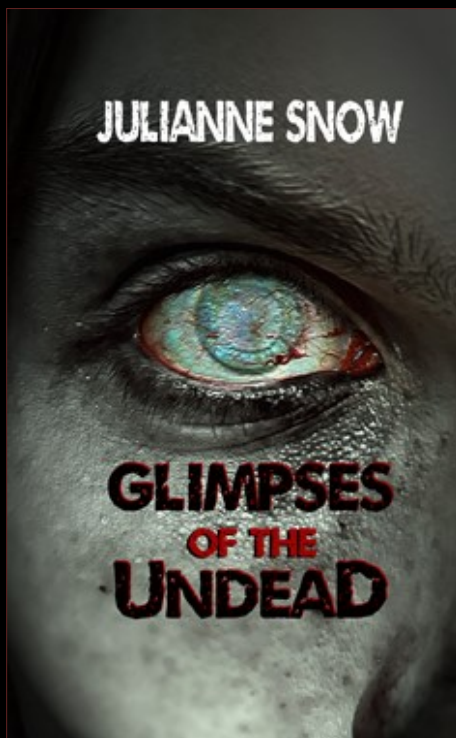
“Remember when you were a kid, Oh what they did”
“They teased you, they ostracized you, shunned you and brutalized you”
“And what did you say?” the voices asked, “What was it?”
“That someday, one day, I’d show ‘em”
“I’d show ‘em all, well now my son it has begun”
“Show ‘em, find ‘em, find ‘em all
Till all those voices cease, ‘til the last call
Show ‘em all”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Lance Oliver Keeble resides in Los Angeles, California where he's worked as a firefighter for 30 years, an experience that helped shape his current style. A writer most his life, Lance is passionate for a variety of books, genres and authors. Lance Oliver Keeble's current work is a Sci-Fi, Thriller, Action Novel titled *Globes Disease*.

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Facebook: <http://www.keebleink.com/>

Days with the Undead: Book One **&** **Glimpses of the Undead** *Julianne Snow*

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Forest Spirit | *Olivia Martinez*

As the sun sets, illuminating the sky in layers of
whitening gold, amber, and scarlet with fluffs of rose blush,
she initiates her attack.

Blood on her lips,
flesh in her teeth,
and a town- that mistakenly
allowed her in- murdered, all
one by one.

Twilight skies of zaffre chase the last of the dusk
faster than her two legs can run away from the massacre.
Streams of emerald wave
in the starlit navy ocean above, signaling twilight's end.

She reaches the top of the hill,
legs burning, hair sticking to her sweaty body.
She looks at the trees,
broken, burned and destroyed.
Humans, they destroy in their wake
expecting no consequences.
She's watched it countless of times and would
not stand by it.

Body bending, hands and feet turn to paws.
Fur covers her skin, and she howls as her muzzle forms.
This land is hers.

Lights Out | *Olivia Martinez*

The twilight is leaving
you alone on a road.
Not a sound to be heard.
The crickets wont chirp
Winds wont howl.

Thump
 Thump
 Thump

Your shoes go.
The street light above flickers
as you pass. Its light, an eerie glow like a Jack-o-lantern,
casts your shaking shadow
in front of you.
Another shadow appears. It
is not yours.
Turn around fast, but
nothing is there.

Twilight is gone,
along with the stars in the sky.
You're still here.
Are you alone?
Walk a little faster.

Thump thump-click
Click-thump
Click click- thump!

Spin around! There's someone behind you!
The road is empty and
the street lights
are going off.
Run.

The night is here,
the darkness is deep.
A black hole.
Almost home, right?

Clickclickclickclickclick!

The light behind you
casts hundreds of shadows.
You try to turn around
but the light turns off.

Trapped | *Olivia Martinez*

Lights flickering,

heart racing,
and the train keeps on the track
with wheels turning rhythmically in the forever tunnels.

A flutter here,
wings move there.
Every wall, seat, window and door,
covered in moths.

Feel the need to scream,
though no one is around to hear.
No one is ever around to hear the screams or the cries.

Just take a deep breath
and move
Slowly.
Slowly.

Closer and closer the train's car comes to an end.
There's hope to be free from a cage of fear and loneliness.
Open the door and hope runs dry.
Moths, still everywhere.

The wheels turning doesn't skip a beat unlike the racing heart
but still,
can't stop.

The next car is the same and the one after that.
Anxiety building,
breathing faster,
the eyes begin to burn with moisture.

But then there's a door,
a door with no moths.
Quickly!
Open the door and get through!

It's safe.
Breathe out slowly.

There's a beat of large wings.
Feeling dread,

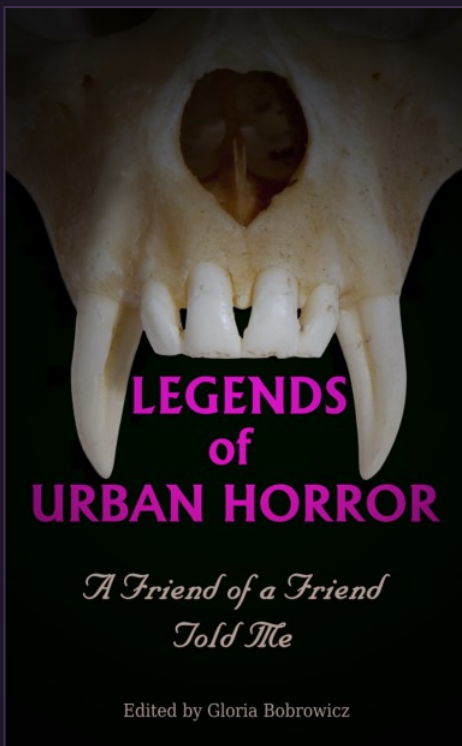
turn around

and I wake up in bed,
cold,
sweating,
trembling.

It was all just a bad dream.
But wait.
Whats that sound?
Wings?
Air?
Breathing...
I turn around,
seeing the true source of why I'm feeling trapped.
I see you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Olivia graduated from SUNY Oswego with a B.A. in Creative Writing and a Minor in English. She writes fiction, poetry, and dabbles in playwriting. She loves to read her poetry out loud to an audience, and loves attending poetry readings. She is very excited to have her work published with *The Sirens Call*.

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

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

Dark Secret | DJ Tyrer

The cellar holds a secret
Hidden out of sight
In perpetual night
A wellspring of regret
A moment's mistake made manifest
A sudden violent passion
An inconsiderate action
Laid there in perpetual rest
Pallid and unmoving
Perfect marbled skin
Maggots hidden within
In the darkness soothing
A secret none may ever know
So lock the door, don't go below

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing*, placed second in the 2015 Data Dump Genre Poetry Award, and has been widely published around the world, including in *Chilling Horror Short Stories* (Flame Tree), *State of Horror: Illinois* (Charon Coin Press), *Steampunk Cthulhu* (Chaosium), and issues of *Cyaegha*, *Illumen*, *Scifaikuest*, and *Tigershark*, and has a novella available on Amazon, *The Yellow House* (Dunhams Manor).

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Blog: <http://atlanteanpublishing.blogspot.co.uk/>

Nora's Wish *John Mc Caffrey*

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



The Unlucky Ones | *Paul Edward Fitzgerald*

I can see them all together through the window sitting around the dinner table; they are the image of the perfect family, of course. He wouldn't have it any other way.

He is sitting at the head of the table. He is the glorious patriarch and king of the castle, sitting down to enjoy not only his meal but bask in the glory that is his family, his life, and the realization of everything he has ever wanted. He is so...*Lucky*. Not like me.

He has everything I have ever wanted but could never have.

I stealthily move in closer to get a better look at his wife. She's beautiful; stunning even. There's a sparkle and light in her eyes that seems to fill the room. It is no wonder he stares at her with such adoration; she practically glows when she giggles at his silly jokes.

I look closer and see she's pregnant; of course she is. Why wouldn't she be? With this new installment to their family he'll be at four offspring. This just so happens to be the number of children I always dreamed I'd have running around underfoot in my happy little household.

As I continue to stare I catch a glimpse of his many awards on the walls. Side by side with these awards covering the dining room area in earnest exhibitionism are framed poster versions of his many, award-winning books. He's quite the accomplished author and is anything but modest about it. He has indeed achieved the kind of fame and recognition a lowly hack like me could only dream of.

A hack; I had never thought of myself as a hack writer until I submitted a short story of mine to a contest his highness at the dining room table in there was holding. I was expecting helpful pointers and perhaps something to give me a boost, a helping hand, and tell me what I was doing wrong so I could become as successful as he had become. There's no denying, I even had respect for him at that time. Even though I may not have been a huge fan of his works, I was a fan of who he was and what he had accomplished for himself.

"It's hack writing," he said quite plainly in an impersonal email critique. "What else can I say?"

Nothing constructive was said. Indeed it read quite harsh and uncaring to the extent that I realized how much his own, self-made success had blinded him to the fact that he was simply one of the lucky ones; at least what I've dubbed the lucky ones. They are people who seem to genuinely have it all in life. Anything they pursue or do turns to gold before their very eyes. The deck is stacked in their favor, whereas people like myself have it stacked against us.

I tried to be a writer. It's the only thing I ever aspired to be. But after all my passion, practice, and efforts I am told I'm nothing more than a hack. I'm not commercial enough. My efforts mean nothing in comparison to those who, though untalented, have better connections or commercial appeal than myself.

I wanted a loving relationship and pursued both men and women to no avail. I was always too fat for their liking; too piggy like in my appearance to ever get the attention of anyone other than the unstable who would just use my desperation for love and acceptance to milk me till I was dry of whatever it was they wanted from me be it money, sex, or just simply attention.

And then there's him. He didn't even struggle to become an author. Indeed in interviews he's laughingly stated how one day he just decided to pursue it when an editor friend of his

stated he would be wonderful at it. With that he was graciously accepted into the world of publishing, steady flow of money, and constant praise. He met his wife soon after. And the squad of youngsters before them now at the dinner table soon followed. Everything just fell in place for him. He's never had to struggle or scrape or face any kind of rejection or unacceptance. Life has been kind to him. Unfortunately for him, I won't be.

I slink away from the window and reach into my holster, checking to make sure once more that my .45 ACP is loaded. At my other side I feel for the handle of the hunting blade, strapped in snugly and eagerly awaiting for me to extract it from its leather sheath so that it may serve its purpose.

Life may have been kind to him, it's true. He may have gotten everything he and I ever dreamed of with hardly any effort while life has been nothing but cruel and unforgiving to me. There is no doubt he's been one of the lucky ones. But when this night is through that will no longer be the case. For I will make him one of the unlucky ones. He will know my pain and loneliness. He'll feel the overwhelming sense of powerlessness as I enter his home and make him sit and watch as I strip his life down before him to the emptiness that is my existence. I will start with his twins, the apples of his eye, and go from there until it is only he and his pregnant wife left. And just when I let them think that perhaps I may spare not only them but the only remaining seed they have that lies within her belly, I will snuff out that hope as my own hope has been shattered through my years of internal agony and rejection. As he rejected my life's work, so will I reject his and his wife's pleas to stop. Once she and the child are dead and he is emotionless and staring at the wreckage of the life he once had before him, I know he'll look down the barrel of my gun and a look of welcoming in the relief death will bring will come over his face. And just when he thinks I'm going to grant him mercy, I won't. Instead I will simply end my own suffering in my single, final shot, leaving him to take my place as one of the unlucky; he'll have to live the rest of his life in misery and alone.

I take one last deep breath and make my way to the front door. My finger hovers over the doorbell for what feels like hours until finally I will it to press in on the bell.

There is silence and no sign of movement.

I ring the bell once more.

I can hear the pitter patter of little feet and child's laughter approaching the door.

"Wait for Daddy!" I hear his muffled cry say through the door.

The handle begins to turn and I cock my gun behind my back.

The door slowly begins to open. It's about to begin.

"Hi there," comes a little voice from down low. I look down to see the twin boy's smiling faces looking up at me.

I can't do this. I simply can't. How can I do this to them? His children have done nothing. Hell, his wife has done nothing. It is him with whom I have an axe to grind, not these innocent people.

"What do you want, mister?" the chubbier of the two boys says.

I try to speak but find there are no words. I begin to back away; I know I can't do this. And if I just walk away now, no one will be the wiser. He'll never even know I was here.

I begin to turn away from the boys and away from the door. That's when I hear him call from behind the boy's as he approaches them and the door.

I turn to face him. He stands there with an obliging smile on his face that seems to mock me. I can feel an overwhelming intensity rising within me as I become dizzy with my own fury.

"What can I do for you?" he inquires, still smiling.

I realize that he doesn't even recognize me. He's crushed my dreams, there's no denying. He's told me I'm nothing but a sad hack. And he cannot even put a face to the man he's helped destroy.

"Sir?" he inquires, his smile finally beginning to fade as a subtle tell-tale of concern takes his smile's place.

I pull the gun from behind my back and point it at his head. The twins scream and run behind him as I aggressively storm forward into the house. I kick the door closed behind me as I also kick myself for being so naïve and stupid as to have almost let him get away with this scot-free and be blinded by the cute smiles of his little brats. The more I think about it the more I realize they aren't even that cute at all. Actually, their smiles look almost exactly like their father's. And for almost tricking me into giving up my plan to make him pay for all he's done and all he has, I know I'll have to save some sort of special punishment for those little bastards.

"W-what do you want?" he stammers, raising his hands in the air defensively and almost backing up over his frightened twins.

I simply smile at him.

"I want this," I say calmly.

"This?" he replies with a look of confusion on his face.

I look around the house, now hearing his wife frantically calling to him and asking what's wrong.

"This," I respond once more. "This is what I want; this life you have. And since I can't have it...I don't think you should either."

As I finish this sentence I aim my gun lower towards his feet where his twin boys are now huddled.

"So let's start taking it away," I snicker, "Shall we?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Paul Edward Fitzgerald has always had a passion for writing as well as a flare for tales of the macabre and the darker side of human nature and the world around us. He feels the best stories are those that come from a place of truth and writes primarily in the realm of LGBT interest, horror, and suspense.

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/paulewardfitz4>

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Driver, Surprise Me | Azzurra Nox

I could still feel Rex's hands wrapped around my neck when I met Damon. I shuddered at the thought. Maybe it was because he was wearing a suit, or maybe because I needed a getaway car, but when Damon stopped the car to ask me if I needed a lift I nodded – still dazed from the lack of oxygen. It was only after I got in that I noticed them. The whole back seat was lined up with porcelain dolls. Their glassy eyes and red lips painted in a perpetual smirk kind of creeped me out.

"Where to?" he asked, dazzling me with his smile.

I gulped – unsure of where I was headed. I hadn't planned that far ahead when I ran out of the apartment.

"The bus station," I hesitated.

"Getting out of the city?"

I nodded.

"Where to?"

"Florida," I lied.

He nodded, as he tried to make small talk but I wasn't listening.

I kept staring at the rear view mirror so I could steal glances at the dolls. I was transfixed by their disarming beauty and impeccable detail. Each doll dressed in a particular style, goth, hippy, posh, 17th century baroque, to mention a few. Once he caught me staring at them, our gaze met in the mirror for a fraction of a second before I quickly diverted my focus.

I looked down at my hands. Thought about how they had been covered in blood an hour ago. My mind raced, replaying the scene. The blade coming down and his hands around my neck. He didn't think I had it in me. He thought I was weak. But boy, had he been wrong. *Dead wrong*. I stifled a chuckle.

"They used to be broken you know..." Damon interrupted my thoughts.

"What?"

"The dolls. I *fixed* them." There was something about the way his eyes moved over my body that made me feel as though he were prying into my very core.

"Oh," I replied. I suddenly felt uncomfortable. The space between us seemed too little at that moment, and I willed him to drive faster. But that wasn't the case. Instead, he suddenly brought the car to an abrupt stop. I would've flung forwards and probably through the windshield if I hadn't worn my seat belt. Before I had a chance to react, a rag covered my mouth and I blacked out.

I've gotten used to it by now. Sitting here and waiting for the night to go by as he drives throughout the city. He fills our nights with music as we ride. The Doors, Nirvana, at times even Queen. We're in a loop, hapless passengers of a demonic ride. We pass through Soho, Park Avenue, across the Brooklyn Bridge. My glassy eyes take in the city lights while my red lips are frozen in a perpetual smirk. But I'm no longer broken.

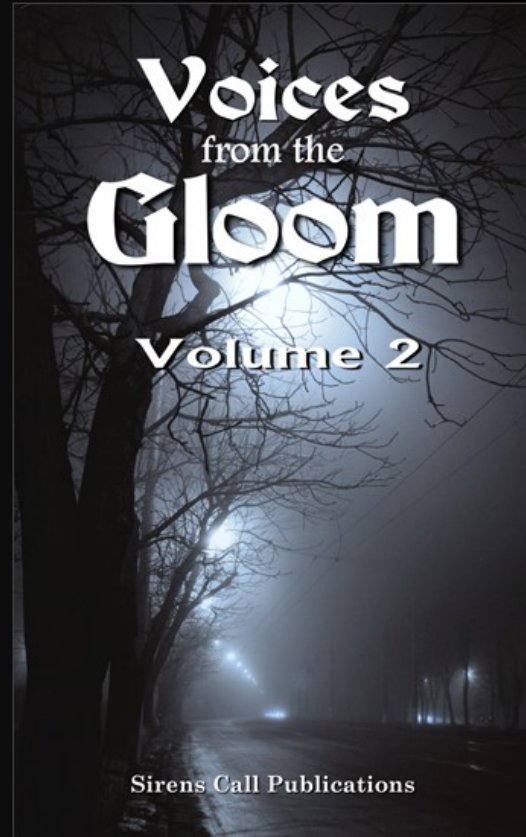
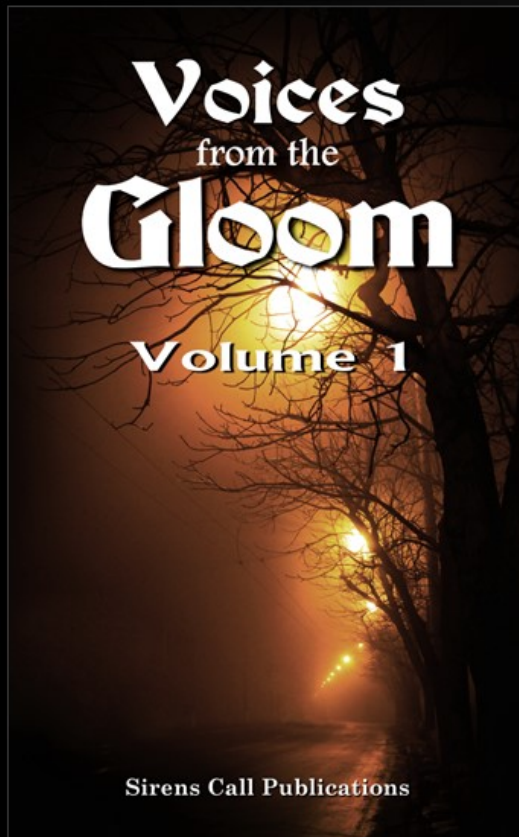
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Azzurra Nox was born in Catania, Sicily, and has led a nomadic life

since birth. She has lived in various European cities and Cuba, and currently resides in the Los Angeles area. As a child she loved entertaining her friends with ghost stories. She loves horror movies, cats, and a rock concerts. She dislikes Mondays and chick-flicks. CUT HERE and Doll parts: Tales of Twisted Love are her most recent publications.

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The Room Between the Seconds | *Josie Dorans*

"Hello," he said from the tiny sliver of light shining out of the crack between panels of false wood next to my bed.

"Hello," I answered in my five year old voice.

"Don't be scared," he said. His voice was warm and happy.

I wasn't. I didn't even think that I should be. Maybe all new houses came with lights in the wall full of warm voiced greetings. At five, how was I supposed to know? I smiled and leaned in to put my eye to the crack. I could just make out a shadow blocking the view of a large room full of colors. The shadow laughed invitingly.

"Would you like to come in? I think you would like it here. I've got a lot of toys and I noticed that you haven't had a chance to get yours out of the boxes yet. We could play for a while if you want."

"Mom said I needed to go to sleep," I said but I kept my eye pressed to the crack trying to see the toys past the shadow and the glare.

"I'm sure you do. Growing girls need their sleep. Luckily, you won't miss any of it. No matter how long you play here the clock won't have moved even the tiniest bit when you go back to your room. It's magic," he said.

I was all about magic. I was even pretty sure I had some of my own if I could just learn to let it out.

"Is it magic like fairies have?" I asked.

"It's a bit like what fairies have," he answered. "I don't need pixie dust though. Want to come see?"

"I don't think I'll fit," I said, trying to press against the crack hard enough to slip through.

"You just need the magic words. If you want to come in, I'll tell you what they are," he said.

"Tell me!" I said. "I want to come in."

The shadow sighed just like my daddy did when he finally got to sit down after a long day.

"I'm so happy you want to come play. I've been waiting a long time for a new friend," he said. "All you have to do is say 'A gift for you. A gift for me. Open up the Door of Dreams.'. Can you say that?"

"That's easy! A gift for you. A gift for me. Open up the Door of Dreams," I said. Magic couldn't really be this easy, could it?

I knew it was when the light spread wider and the crack between the paneling opened big enough for me to slip through. It took a minute for my eyes to adjust to the new light and everything was blurry around me. Then the shadow touched my shoulder and the room cleared. It was full of all the toys I had ever wanted and never had. In the center was a playhouse castle with a real drawbridge and flags dancing from the turrets. I turned to the shadow hand and it too cleared into that of a boy. He was close to my own age with messy hair and freckles covering his nose. For just the tiniest second I thought I remembered an older voice when he had spoken through the crack and was confused.

"Not what you expected, Linnie?" he asked with the same happy laugh even if it was in

the higher pitch of a child. I must have told him my name before but I didn't quite remember doing it. I had a strange, queasy feeling in my tummy.

"I thought..." I started to say but then laughed when he grabbed my hand. Of course that was the same voice I had heard through the crack. It was a perfect voice and I would have been scared if it was older. I felt silly.

"I'm Seth. You want to go play in the castle? We could defend it from the dragon!" He was already pulling me toward the entrance.

"Yes!" I answered and just like that we were best friends.

Much later, when I slipped back through the crack to my own bed I saw that Seth had been right. Not one single second had ticked away on my little clock. I couldn't wait to go back. Seth lived in the best place ever!

The next night, and the next, and the next came and went. Each time I'd whisper the magic words instead of saying my prayers and the light would open up like a doorway into the best, most magical place a girl could ever hope for. Seth and I would play until my sweaty hair stuck to my forehead and my breath was coming in gasps. Then Seth would send me back through the crack and I would sleep, dreamless and still until my mom came to wake me up for school. She would cluck her tongue over my tangled hair and pink cheeks and plunk me in the bath even before breakfast.

"I can't understand how you can do that to your hair and never mess up the covers. It must be magic!" she would say.

"It is! It's the best magic!" I would answer. I wanted to say more but I could never quite tell her about Seth. The words wouldn't form on my tongue no matter how I tried to make them.

Mom brushed my hair and kissed my cheek. "My little magic Linnie," she said and got my breakfast. I ate everything she could put in front of me. "I do believe you are about to grow!"

That went on until I was old enough to get myself up and make my own breakfast even though I stayed on the short side of the height scale. By that time Seth's magic room had changed. The castle still sat in the middle but now it had a moat as well as a drawbridge and there was something with tentacles living in the murky water. Child toys had been replaced with those things that I coveted as a pre-teen. High heels, make-up, fancy dresses all lay in heaps and piles everywhere you looked. In the far corner a pony chomped on impossibly green grass growing from the floor and I would bring it apples after my climb in the room's enormous tree. Seth and I were brave adventurers then. We would dare each other to step close to the moat's edge and touch the suckered arm of the monster. We would challenge each other to climbing contests in the tree or see who could stand the longest on the pony's back while it ran around the room. Seth grew as I grew. We were both gangly with our age and just starting to share a shy understanding that we were not the same.

At sixteen, Seth gave me his first kiss. It left me breathless and weak kneed. I went home early that night and woke up with a headache that mirrored the bright crack of light in my peripheral vision. I felt better after I threw up. When I didn't come down for breakfast, Mom checked on me. There was worry in her eyes and knew I was doomed for a doctor's visit. He said it was a migraine. I was given a prescription and the day off school with an order to rest. I slept like the dead for the rest of the day.

"I'm sorry," Seth said when I whispered the words and slipped through the crack that night. "I shouldn't have done that."

"Done what? Kissed me or given me a migraine?" I said and tried to laugh even though the words didn't feel like a joke inside my head. I was still awkward and unsure about where this new turn in our relationship would lead. I looked around the room and noticed that the pony was gone. In its place was a powder blue scooter just like the one I had seen on the way home. I was glad for the change.

"Both," Seth shrugged. "Want to watch a movie?"

I nodded. Just like that we were settled again. We went into the castle which had started to look more like a New York high-rise in the last few months and settled onto a red velvet couch facing the oversized movie screen. Seth put his arm around me while we watched the scenes of the latest rated R movie that my parents had banned play out and I snuggled close. I wondered if I wanted him to kiss me again. I decided that it would wait until I was less tired and his arm felt more normal around my shoulder.

By eighteen I realized that my time with Seth left me ragged. The realization came during finals week when I panicked in calculus and whispered the words. I didn't think anything would happen but I was desperate. When the crack opened up just beside my seat I dove through it and into Seth's arms. I sobbed my fears and frustrations out into his warmth while he stroked my back and made soothing noises. In the end, he told me he loved me and kissed me with a hunger I hadn't realized was between us. I stopped blubbering and backed out of the room in shock. The migraine hit as soon as I was in my seat and Mr. Murrey had to have the hall monitor help me get to the nurse's station. He called me Lori when he told me to feel better even though I had been in his class all year. After the meds kicked in and I could form thoughts again I realized that something was incredibly wrong.

I didn't say the words again for a long time. Sometimes I would feel them forming and would have to breathe through the urge to let them out. I missed Seth. I missed him like I would have missed my arm if it was suddenly gone. Still, I didn't say the words...and I didn't have any more migraines.

I got used to my college professors having trouble remembering my name. I figured that I must not look like a Lynne since hardly anyone ever got it right. It didn't matter. I learned what I learned whether they knew who I was or not.

When graduation came, I was a nervous wreck. I had been quiet through the four years and hadn't made any close friends. I wanted someone to share my worries with so badly that the words slipped out.

"A gift for you. A gift for me. Open up the Door of Dreams," I whispered half hoping nothing would hear but the light appeared beside my closet and I found my feet running toward Seth once more.

He was beautiful. More muscle had appeared since I had last seen him and his hair hung just so across his forehead. I stopped short in my mad dash and simply stared at him.

"I've missed you, little Linnie," his voice was rich like honey and full of longing. "Come give us a hug."

And I did, melting into the embrace. "I missed you too. So much."

We talked about the years that had passed for me. I told him about college life and dad's cancer scare. He showed me around the beautiful penthouse apartment that occupied what had once been a castle turret and let me drive the little red convertible around the busy city that had sprung up inside the room since I had been gone. He didn't kiss me when I left. Part of me craved his lips against mine but part of me dreaded them. I could only guess that he knew. Instead, he laid his forehead against mine and combed his fingers through my hair.

"Come back," he whispered. "Come back sooner."

I nodded. I didn't feel whole unless I was near him.

On my own in the city with a new job where my boss sometimes called me Tina and sometimes just snapped his fingers and pointed at his office, the loneliness really set in. I was back to seeing Seth every night and trading my weekends for migraines just to feel his kisses. At twenty seven I inherited the house my parents left to me in a two decade old will even though the last time I had called them they had told me to stop stalking them or they would press charges. It seems they didn't remember ever having a daughter. I took my childhood room back when I moved in. I wondered how they could have forgotten me with all of my things still as they were before I left home. Seth held me while I cried for their loss.

My new boss asked me almost every day what I was doing in his office. When he didn't ask, I know he didn't see me at all. I never knew how invisible I would be from day to day, and worse, I found that I didn't care.

The night before my thirtieth birthday a woman almost ran me down with her baby stroller. I had been feeling less substantial lately but sidestepped before my reality could be defined for certain. It's hard to decide whether you are ready to not exist or not. I sat in my room later and pondered the silent and sometimes beautiful war I had been in for the past quarter of a century. Seth's sigh of contentment echoed mine from directly behind me when I finally decided that I no longer had any reason to fight. It was the first time he had slipped through the crack into my world. We both knew he would not be returning to the magic room.

"I do love you," he whispered when he wrapped his arms around me. "And I am sorry."

I could only nod and sink into his embrace.

"You won't say that you love me too?" he asked. There was hurt in his voice.

In answer, I kissed him feeling the last of me drain away to fill his gaps. "A gift for you. A gift for me. Open up the Door of Dreams," I whispered and fell into the light knowing I would never see him again.

Don't ask about time. It doesn't pass here. Don't ask about castles or ponies or fancy clothes. They aren't here either. It's just the light and the blur of color. It feels vacant and wanting. It feels like me, or what is left of me now that Seth has the rest. It feels like...

Wait. I think I just heard...

...yes! A voice! I did hear a voice! A small voice. Maybe a little boy? Yes, definitely a little boy wanting his fire truck out of the boxes stacked in his room from the move.

It's been so lonely here. I know I should, but I think I'll see if he would like to come play for a while.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Josie Dorans is the pen name responsible for unleashing the feistier side of an indie children's author/illustrator who grew up in the heartland, currently lives surrounded by the mountains, but sometimes wishes her toes were still in the ocean of her twenties.

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Now I Lay Me Down To Reap

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

The Resurrection of Doddy Lean | *Jeff C. Stevenson*

Six feet under the Gainsbrook Cemetery, Doddy Lean awoke to a nightmare.

He opened his eyes in darkness. Disoriented, he tried to turn to his left to see the time on his bedside clock. His right shoulder bumped against a hard piece of wood. His mattress felt odd, it was too solid and it had a thin satin padding over it.

He sat up and banged his head sharply against a massive wooden plank. Had there been an earthquake and the house had collapsed around him? He felt around in the darkness. He was surrounded by solid construction. He reached above him but couldn't hold his arms straight because the bedroom ceiling had apparently fallen down on top of him.

He called out for his manservant but Courtland didn't respond. And Doddy's voice didn't carry very far; it sounded muffled and tight and warm. He took a breath and the air wasn't fresh; there was an earthy, musky scent about it. He coughed violently to expel it.

It wasn't until he began to pound against the thick planks of wood that surrounded him that he realized he was in a coffin and had been buried alive. I must be dreaming, he thought, and frantically tried to wake himself up by sheer will, but the reality of his confinement remained solidly in place.

But what had happened? He strained at his thoughts, trying not to panic but wanting the answer immediately. He thought backwards. He remembered the country was in the middle of what had been called the Dust Bowl heat wave. It was June and the temperature was at 100 degrees; he recalled reading that in the *Chicago Tribune*. Many townspeople had been experiencing heat stroke and exhaustion and some had even died. They had been quickly buried because the bodies would not keep and decay and disease were setting in quickly. It had been horrific, the accounts he had read about.

And then...

And then?

He remembered reading the newspaper.

And then?

Only Jessica, Doddy's fiancé, Mason, his brother, and Father O'Brien remained at the Gainsbrook Cemetery. It was just after 11 a.m. and the funeral had been over for fifteen minutes and everyone had drifted away from the gravesite.

"Thank you, Father, for what you said about Doddy," Mason said, grasping the priest's surprisingly thick, rough hands in his own. "It meant a lot to me since you've known our family for so long."

"Of course, Mason, of course. You and your family have been a part of this parsonage since before I was assigned, so of course I'd be here." He turned his kind eyes to Jessica, who was frail and appeared ready to collapse. "How are you holding up, my dear?"

Lost in her own black thoughts of grief, Jessica didn't respond. Mason touched her elbow. "Jessica?"

Tears spilled out of her eyes and she buried her face in his shoulder. He embraced her and he and the Father exchanged a look of pity over her distraught emotional state. Overhead, the

heavy clouds continued to bear down on them, threatening rain and another gray and gloomy day.

While Jessica wept and Mason comforted her, Father O'Brien said, "Don't forget the words of our Lord: 'I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.'"

Jessica took a moment to compose herself. Mason provided her with a handkerchief and she dabbed at her eyes. She turned to O'Brien and said, "Do you believe that, Father? Really, really believe it? In the resurrection? A life after this one?"

He smiled gently at her. "Oh course I do! And so did Doddy, you know. Right now he has a resurrected body. The Scripture says 'to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.'"

"You mean...right now he's with God?" she asked with wonder. "Right at this moment?"

"Yes, Jessica. He shook off this mortal coil and has a brand new, resurrected body that is now worshipping at the throne of grace in God's almighty and perfect presence."

"And I'll see him again?" she asked, as if the thought was too good to be true. Her eyes were wide now, the tears gone, filled instead with hope and expectation.

Father O'Brien nodded and smiled. "Yes, you'll see him again, Jessica. I promise you so."

Six feet under the Gainsbrook Cemetery, Doddy Lean tried to slow his breathing. He wasn't sure how long he could survive, maybe an hour, maybe longer, maybe less. He was a large man and was tight in the coffin; there wasn't a surplus of space or air. He was sweaty and the moisture rolled down from his forehead and stung his eyes.

He had shouted and pounded at the paneling that enclosed him and that's when he discovered the cord next to his right hand. He would have missed it in the darkness if he hadn't thrashed around a bit. He had heard about safety coffins and how they included a cord attached to a bell that the interred person could ring should he or she need to be rescued.

Thanking God for his good fortune, Doddy grasped the cord and yanked at it hard, imagining the sounds of the peeling bell alerting everyone to his desperate need.

Jessica felt a great calm envelope her after her discussion with Father O'Brien. Her grief still pressed down on her, a great weight, yet she could see a day sometime in the future when it would be lessened and not all consuming. Until then, she would focus on the reality of the resurrection and the promise of seeing her dear Doddy again in the kingdom of heaven.

Behind her, the Father and Mason were finishing their conversation and Jessica stepped closer to Doddy's tombstone to tell him a final goodbye. She placed her hands on the damp, cold stone. At the same moment, she was startled to hear the bell at the foot of the freshly dug grave sharply ring out.

Six feet under the Gainsbrook Cemetery, Doddy Lean felt the cord immediately yield after he had pulled it taut. With a whisper soft thud, the cord landed next to him in the coffin.

It had broken. With only one use, just one tug, the cord had torn free from the bell and had now joined him, uselessly, in his burial chamber.

“But Jessica, there’s no reason for the bell to have sounded,” Mason had tried to reason with the now hysterical woman. She had screamed out to both men and they had rushed over.

“The bell rang! I heard it!” She pointed at the sheltered item, which was still and unmoving in the late morning gloom. If it had rung, surely it would still be swinging back and forth for the men to see. And if Doddy had pulled the rope, he certainly would tug it again and again and again to prove he was alive.

Jessica insisted she had heard it and so, to calm her, the two men stood with her, the three of them intently watching the bell. The wind rose and the promised rain began to clatter down on them, rattling off the roof of Mason’s Standard Little Nine automobile that he had parked nearby.

“I heard it,” Jessica maintained, willing the two men to stay with her as the rain increased and thoroughly drenched them. The housing over the bell prevented rainwater from running down the tube and netting was attached to prevent insects from entering the coffin. But there was no shelter for the three of them as the storm soaked the earth and the brisk wind chilled the air.

It was Mason who finally called an end to it. They couldn’t even see the bell through the deluge.

“Jessica, I think, in your grief...”

She turned to him, her face covered in tears and rain, her voice angry. “In my grief I imagined he is signaling us that he is still alive down there? Is that what you think?” Father O’Brien stepped closer to them and spoke loudly over the storm. “He’s in God’s hands now, Jessica. You will see Doddy again, but he’s not down there. Remember what I said earlier about the resurrection? Hold that hope close to your heart.”

The wind rose and seemed intent on pushing them out of the cemetery. Mason put a protective arm around Jessica; her shoulders were stiff but she allowed herself to be led out of the cordoned off gravesite area. The three of them slipped on the muddy grass and dirt and held on to one another as the rain and wind rushed about them, escorting them out of the cemetery.

Once they were in the car and Mason had started the engine, Jessica took one last look back at the bell and the grave of her beloved.

Six feet under the Gainsbrook Cemetery, Doddy Lean had shouted himself hoarse and blooded his hands and fingernails, pounding and scraping on the interior of the sealed coffin lid.

The lack of fresh oxygen was like a tremendous weight on his chest, squeezing his lungs tightly; he gasped and struggled to breathe. The carbon dioxide built up and filled the coffin space. Doddy began to become sleepy. His breathing was slow, ragged, and raspy.

His mind became unmoored and drifted, memories surfacing and disappearing in rapid succession. Thoughts tried to grasp something, to anchor and hold on to consciousness. He remembered reading the newspaper and collapsing on the floor. Was that what had happened to him?

Soon he drifted deep into a coma, a muffled place of darkness and numbing comfort. No thoughts, no memories, and no awareness of the airless box he was in.

His heart stopped and then the rest of his body.

At the exact instant that Doddy took his last breath, the sun pushed its way through the thick mass of gray clouds, illuminating the area with bright noonday sunlight, creating and casting long, bold shadows.

It was going to be a magnificent day after all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jeff C. Stevenson is an advertising copywriter and member of Pen America and the Horror Writers Association. His first book, *Fortney Road: The True Story of Life, Death and Deception in a Christian Cult* was published in 2015. In 2016, he has had ten short stories published and is finishing a novel. He lives in New York City with his cat, Wendy.

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Ela Lourenco

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Blood Family | *Christopher Hivner*

The tall one was gentle while he tied the family up. He wore no shirt and white-streaked jeans. Wavy, brown hair fell over his back as if he were the singer in a rock band. His angular shoulders rippled with muscle as he tightened the ropes on the kneeling father, mother, and teenage daughter.

The shorter, slimmer man, dressed in a blue track suit and brown work boots, peered at them with one eye as the other was covered with a V of dirty blond hair. After the family was tied up, he went to them one at a time, backhanding their faces, throwing vile words at them like jagged rocks, enjoying the fear in their eyes. The mother held fast, but the daughter cried. The short man flicked a pink tongue out, licking the tears from the girl's face.

Another round of blows were coming until a third man walked through the front door. Dressed in a black pinstriped suit with a vest and knotted silver tie, he moved with an overpowering confidence. The other two men now stood shoulder to shoulder in the shadows of the room, their eyes directed to the floor. The new man's sandy brown hair was professionally styled, cut short and parted on the left side. He walked over to the father and posed with his hands behind his back.

"Look at me," he said. The father tilted his head up, meeting the man's gaze.

"My name is Maxwell, and you know why we're here." He waited for the father to speak but was met by silence. Maxwell sighed.

"Please, Mr. Durning, don't force me."

Albert Durning lowered his head again. "He's not here," he finally said.

Maxwell smiled. "Let us see," he sang in a jangly voice. He walked behind the tethered family, placing a hand on the father's balding head.

"Mr. Albert Durning is present." He moved to his left and put a hand on top of the mother's head. "Mrs. Amanda Durning is present." The daughter shrank as Maxwell's hand covered her auburn hair. "And Miss Michelle Durning is present." Maxwell then laughed. "So the entire family is present this evening... except five-year-old Tyler Durning. Tell me Albert, where does a toddler go after dark in your neighborhood?" The only reply was Michelle's quiet sobbing.

Maxwell walked over to the father and knelt down, leaning close to the man's face.

"The world doesn't keep secrets. All the families know of him and will be coming; we're just the first. If you somehow survive this night, how will you vanquish all of us?"

"He's a child!" Mrs. Durning suddenly yelled. Maxwell turned to meet her rage-filled eyes. "How can you people be so heartless? Leave him alone."

Maxwell reached out a manicured hand to cup Mrs. Durning's face. "A woman this lovely cannot possibly be so naïve. You know what we are, and you know what your son is." Maxwell stood up and began to pace.

"The first human child in the history of the world to be born immortal, and the mother doesn't understand all the fuss. 'Just let our boy grow up like a normal person. Leave him alone.'"

Moving with a grace that belied his size, Maxwell leapt at Amanda Durning, grabbing a fistful of her hair and yanking her head back.

"The first human... to be born... immortal," he growled. "His blood is priceless, and I mean to have it. WHERE IS HE?" Maxwell opened his mouth, peeling back his lips to reveal curved, yellow fangs. He pressed their points into Amanda's cheeks, roaring in violent anger.

The room had become a cacophony of feral sounds: Maxwell's bellowing, Amanda's screaming, her husband's pleading, and the daughter's crying. Over top of all, it came from the corner of the room, the tall intruder's soft exclamation of "What the hell?"

Maxwell looked at him quizzically, seeing him gazing at the ceiling. Twisting his head around, he looked up and directly above him saw Tyler Durning, naked and covered in a downy black hair. He hung from the stucco by the talons emerging from his fingers and toes. Then he dropped.

Before Maxwell could get completely turned, he took slashes to his face and chest, and then the child was gone. He pressed two fingers to his cheek. They came away dripping with blood. His two companions were quickly at his side, the shock pooled in their wide eyes.

"Did you see where he went?" Maxwell asked them.

"No," the shorter one replied. "He was too fast. You said..." The complaint was cut short by Maxwell's bared teeth.

"Dancer, go to the basement. Taj, upstairs. I'll stay on the main floor. Find him."

The tall man opened the basement door while Taj swallowed hard before running up the stairs. Maxwell pulled a handkerchief from his vest pocket to wipe the blood from his face.

"He's farther advanced than I thought," he said to the father.

"You have no idea."

Maxwell turned around angrily, thinking he was being challenged, but he saw each member of the Durning family slumped together, breathing in concomitance.

"When did he start?" he asked. The father answered again.

"Six months."

Maxwell fingered the slice in his shirt and the scratch on his skin. The boy had moved with such speed that Maxwell never saw the thrusts coming. It proved how powerful his blood was, but it also gave Maxwell pause. His clan was meager: Dancer and Taj were young and inexperienced, and he was feeling his own strength wane. He needed that blood. After 450 years, this was his first chance for real power.

The living room was small: a few pieces of furniture, a door leading to the basement and another to the kitchen. The staircase was twenty steps going up at a forty-five degree angle.

Learning from his previous underestimation of the boy, Maxwell scanned every square of the ceiling. Satisfied he wasn't going to be attacked from above again, he started with the furniture. Bracing himself, he turned the couch over then moved quickly to the love seat. Met only by dirt and loose change, Maxwell grabbed the last piece of furniture, a single-person chair, and flung it across the room to quell his growing frustration.

"Where are you, boy?" Maxwell bellowed. He threw open the door to the kitchen, stalking around the island, wildly pulling open the cupboard doors. Then he heard a crash from beneath.

There were more muffled bangs, followed by screams. There was a thump, and the floor directly in front of him rose up.

Maxwell raced back through the living room to the basement, hesitating a moment before pulling the door open. Carefully Maxwell eased his head around the door jamb to stare into the darkness. He bared his teeth with a guttural growl, morphing his fingers into crusted, black talons. Not sensing any imminent danger, he stepped into the gloom.

Taking each step slowly, Maxwell was hit by a myriad of odors: mold, oil, cat urine, stale barely-breathable air. At the bottom of the stairs was a square cement landing. He turned to his left and dropped a foot to the uneven basement floor. Under the stairs was a perfect hiding place, but he didn't detect any movement, breathing, or human musk.

To his left Maxwell could see a rusted set of metal shelves holding paint cans. To the right were a washer and dryer. Ahead was a door to the outside and a dog leg into the corner that was underneath the kitchen.

"Boy? Come out and face me." No sound.

Maxwell strode purposefully across the room, turning to face the blackness of the rear section. He immediately smelled blood.

"Dance," he whispered to himself. The odor struck him from manifold directions. It was strong at eye level a few feet ahead, but also a light sense of it pierced his nose from each side, and there was a pungent hit from his feet. Maxwell stretched his right leg out. His foot soon felt an object. Bending down, his hand wrapped around the handle of three foot long trimming shears. The blades were covered in blood. Maxwell licked a thick dollop into his mouth. It was Dancer's.

"Boy!" he railed in anguish. Suddenly the light bulb that was inches from Maxwell's head flickered on, and he was looking into Dancer's eyes. They remained open, ice-blue orbs gazing out from his head that hung by a chain off of a wooden ceiling beam. Then the basement door slammed shut.

Maxwell's own eyes burned orange-red. His breaths came in deep, hard gasps as he stared at his friend, asking himself just how powerful the Durning boy might be, only five and taking down an adult immortal with ease. Maxwell seethed. He had to have that blood. To be anything in his world you had to be powerful. He was tired of impotence, tired of the low ground. He wanted respect.

The door above opened. Maxwell turned in full attack mode and soon found himself with his hands around Taj's throat. The smaller man bent to his knees. Maxwell slashed his spikes across Taj's face then lifted Taj into the air with one hand.

"Where is he?"

"I don't know, can't... breathe."

"Dancer is dead," Maxwell said. "And we're next. That boy is stronger than I expected. His blood will more than rejuvenate me. It will exalt me." Taj was dropped to the floor.

"I couldn't even sense his presence. Do you understand what that means?" Maxwell peered down at Taj. "Get up! We'll start on sweet sister and see if he gives a damn about his dull, mortal sibling."

"We can't, they're gone."

“What?”

“When I came down from searching upstairs, they were gone.”

“Go.” Maxwell shoved Taj onto the steps. When he reached the top of the staircase he came face to face with Tyler Durning. The boy hovered in the air, the color in his eyes dancing like a bonfire. Taj could feel the heat emanating from the boy’s presence. He remained mesmerized until the sharpened point of the curtain dowel rod penetrated his skin and burst through his heart.

Taj grabbed at the weapon as his breath caught in his throat. A distinctive black circle appeared at the edge of his vision, slowly narrowing to a singular point. Taj’s mind spun backward madly until he was a child again, standing on the porch of the old farmhouse. His sister, smiling in a new flower print Sunday dress, held his hand. He was dressed in gray short pants, a white shirt, and his only pair of shoes. Out in the yard of hardened dirt, his mother called his real name, Charles, trying to get him to smile. He snuck a look at his impatient father waiting in the buggy. One more coaxing call of his name and Taj smiled meekly for the man with the giant camera. He squealed, “Mommy” before falling backward down the basement steps.

Maxwell deftly leapt up, grabbing hold of a wooden beam, allowing Taj to pass beneath him. When he dropped back down, he looked at the deflating body fluttering as the life force escaped. He peeked at the basement door to see the boy watching him.

“You have another of them for me?” Maxwell said with a laugh as he walked up the stairs. “My heart’s going to be tougher to get to.”

Maxwell went airborne, flying through the doorway. His outstretched hands reached for the boy’s neck, but at the last second Tyler eased sideways and with just a touch of his fingers sent Maxwell tumbling across the room. He crashed through the ornate, wooden railing of the upstairs steps, bouncing off the wall.

Tyler Durning hovered over the prone vampire, incandescent wings flapping at an invisible speed. Knowing Maxwell wasn’t dead, the boy watched at what he thought was a safe distance, determining his next move. But before he could act, Maxwell sat up, eyes now obsidian rocks. He opened his mouth and erupted in a howl that spewed sulfurous breath into the boy, knocking him to the floor.

Momentarily stunned, Tyler lay on the champagne-colored carpeting taking labored breaths. Then his body rose into the air as Maxwell had gained control. The vampire spun the boy around faster and faster, slashing at him with his diamond-hard talons. His body shivered when he thought of how Tyler’s blood was going to taste, how it would feel coursing through his veins. Maxwell tilted his head back and laughed from his ancient belly.

“The time has come,” he said, his voice an octave lower, raspy like boiling water. “Your power will be mine, boy.”

Maxwell stopped the spinning child and left him hanging in mid-air. Tyler Durning’s body was limp, covered in scratches and cuts, blood flowing in spatters. Maxwell reached out a finger for a drop when the boy’s eyes snapped open and one of the broken bars from the wooden railing was shoved into Maxwell’s back and out through his heart.

The vampire dropped to his knees. Behind him, Dancer's headless body held onto the make-shift stake, pushing it in deeper. Tyler Durning held up a tiny hand and Dancer stopped. The boy eased down in front of Maxwell who spoke with desperation.

"How?" he asked, his eyes rolled back in his head looking at Dancer's body being controlled by the child.

"I can do things," Tyler answered. "More than others."

"It doesn't... have to end... this way. We can... work... together. Help me. Make... me... strong. I'll... follow."

Tyler pointed to a large portrait on the far wall of his father, mother, sister and himself sitting in front of a fake beach back drop. Tyler's face bloomed with the silly grin of a five-year-old, happily sitting on his big sister's lap while their parents stood over them.

"My family," Tyler said.

"Isn't over. There... will... be others," Maxwell said.

"Sending them a message," Tyler said then nodded. Dancer shoved the stake another foot through Maxwell's eviscerated heart until the body collapsed. Tyler stared at Maxwell, peering into his mind. He gathered the names of all the immortals from Maxwell's memory and swirled them together in his own thoughts, creating a miasma of faces and histories.

The boy sent out a wave that shuddered through his whole body. He directed it to every clan. Only moments passed before they answered. Tyler was connected to his kind for the first time, but there were few that were happy about it. He told them Maxwell's story, announced the death of the family. Those that wanted his blood were not deterred. Then the boy opened his mouth and spoke aloud.

"Come and get me."

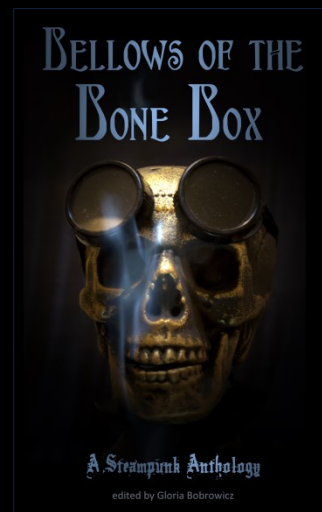
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Christopher Hivner writes from a small town in Pennsylvania surrounded by books and the echoes of music. He has recently been published in *Creepy Campfire Quarterly*, *Night to Dawn and Illumen*. A collection of short stories, *The Spaces Between Your Screams* was published by eTreasures Publishing.

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Bellows of the Bone Box

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MARROW



Jon Olson

Available Exclusively on Amazon

I look out at the desolate wasteland that has become our world and it makes my heart ache. It was such a beautiful place once. There were oceans, deserts, mountains, meadows – there was variety and it was breathtaking. I miss that. Now it all looks more or less the same. The sky is blocked from view by thick, gray smoke, the buildings are mere ruins, the deserts are ash, and everything that was once green has long since withered and died. No matter where I look it's the same sights over and over. Reality has become nothing more than a monotonous limbo that never seems to change. Everything is covered in the remains of a society that no longer exists.

The plants were the first to go – they just withered away after the last of the bombs went off. The animals died out soon after. Humanity went on for a little while, but they struggled. The undead carried on after the humans had dropped off, I guess because it takes the dead longer to starve on average. When the last few hundred people succumbed to either the virus or the radiation finally did reanimate, there stopped being any source of food for even the zombies. When they stopped feeding they eventually stopped moving, and then they stopped doing anything at all. They left me all by myself.

It would be nice to think that there's a place out there somewhere that's been unaffected by all of this, that the nuclear fall-out left even one small patch of the Earth untouched. I'm inclined to believe otherwise, however. I've been nearly everywhere that there is to go and as far as I've seen – there's nothing. It's been so long since I've seen any traces of other life. It really is just me.

I don't know how I've managed to make it this long when no one else did. I didn't do anything differently. I salvaged what I could, ate what I could, scraped by as best I could – but so did everybody else as far as I can tell. Maybe I'm just wired differently. Who knows? I certainly don't and there isn't anyone else left for me to ask. The only thing I am sure of is that for as long as I've been going, I won't be able to go much longer. I've been doing nothing but surviving for so long now and I've grown so incredibly tired.

I finally allow myself to collapse, landing hard on the rough ground. I barely feel my collision because I feel so numb; numb and tired and cold and hungry. It's a sad existence. It's an even sadder thing, what we've done. The human race created a monster, and instead of destroying it, or better yet, *fixing* it, they chose to go for the nukes. They thought that the path of least resistance was just to end it all and as a result the entire planet got destroyed.

Humans and zombies worked together to bring down civilization whether they meant to or not. Who'd have ever thought that the apocalypse would end up being man-made? The sad thing about it was that we were all the same. Some of us were infected, some of us weren't, but we all came from the same place and when it came down to it we wanted all the same things. We should have been working together – that seems so simple from here in the aftermath. If we'd cooperated, we could have had a cure. We could have restored life instead of choosing to end it. Now we have nothing at all, and there is no 'we' anymore. It will just be me, and that will be how it remains until that time when I too stop existing.

I wonder what will become of this place when I go. Nothing, I expect. I'm just the last remaining ghost of something that once was, and I fear that when I finally give in and fade away

there will just be a whole eternity of nothing. There will be no one left to remember us, or to weep over what we've done. I don't want to go. I'm terrified to die after all this time, but what else can I do? There's no food, no hope and no salvation. At least not existing can't be worse than this. Maybe when I pass it will put an end to the expansive loneliness that grows ever fiercer inside me.

I relax my body and close my eyes, letting the darkness take my vision. I don't remember the last time I slept and I was starting to think that I never would again. I know that if I rest now, I won't ever be getting back up but the longer I stay down the better it feels. I just hope that whatever waits for me on the other side is kinder than this place has been. My last thought is a strange one. People feared the world would run out of humans, but no one stopped to fear what it would be like in this final moment when I let the darkness take me and the world runs out of zombies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Cat Voleur is a 21-year-old writer who currently works from home with her feline companions Atticus, Malcom, and Washburne. She is currently studying linguistics and parapsychology through two different virtual academies from which she plans to graduate this year. Her free time is dedicated to music, gaming, and completing the final edits for her first novel manuscript.

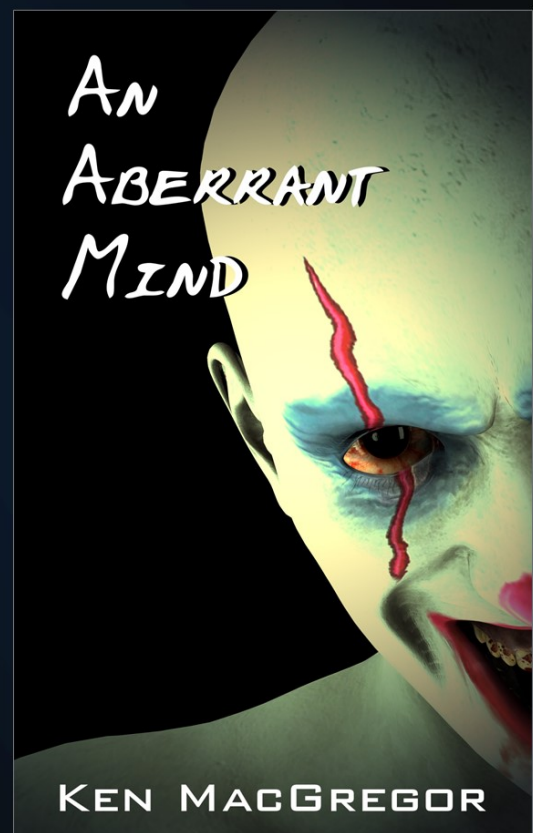
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ABERRANT is defined as unusual, abnormal or different...



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“Excuse, Madame.”

A clearly over-worked, under-dressed waiter bumped my elbow as he rushed to the kitchen. His momentum placed my watch squarely beneath my nose, and I saw that Professor Gray was now fifteen minutes late.

Finally, when I was about to start packing my things and call the interview a wash, the professor blew in the door, as if pushed by a particularly unforgiving wind.

“Madame Calau... you must accept my deepest apologies. It’s-well you see...” the professor looked around the mid-sized café frantically before throwing his coat on the chair next to him and sitting across from me.

“He’s dead.”

The professor wiped the corners of his mouth with a shaking hand. “He’s dead.”

“You are joking.” I placed my pen on my notebook and crossed my arms tightly.

“I assure you, Madame. I would never joke about something like this. I have just returned from identifying his body.”

The Professor removed his glasses and began to absently wipe them with his napkin. “I apologize for this, Madame. I know you traveled quite a way for this interview. I should have known...well, I should have been aware of his situation a bit better. You see, Monsieur Kinar had been in ill-standing for quite some time. He died in squalor, Madame. The same squalor he had been rotting in for several years.”

“I don’t believe it. News gets to London quite slowly sometimes but nobody ever heard ramblings of poverty. Last I heard, he had retired to Nice.”

Professor Gray shook his head slowly. “Non, Madame. He never left Paris.”

“But what about his paintings? One fetched several thousand dollars at Sotheby’s just last week.”

The professor sighed before removing a piece of crumpled paper from his pocket. He placed it on the table, never removing his hand from what I assumed was garbage.

“Madame, what do they know of Monsieur Kinar over in London?”

“Well, not a whole bloody lot to be honest-that’s what this interview was all about, wasn’t it?” I snapped. I instantly felt horrible. “I’m terribly sorry, Professor. It’s been quite a long trip.”

Professor Gray held up his hand. “It is completely understandable Madame. I promise you will go home with a story. It may not be the story you were looking for, but I believe that it is one that must be told.”

I nodded, and opened up my notebook to a fresh page. “Go on, Professor.”

He took a sip from the water that had been waiting for him for twenty minutes before withdrawing a cigarette from his shirt pocket and lighting it, in an almost hypnotic daze.

“I was Monsieur Kinar’s closest confidant for many years. It’s true we had fallen out of touch in the past decade, but when he was just starting out as a struggling artist, painting cans to sell at street fairs, we rarely went a day without seeing one another.”

I jotted down the Professor’s words as he exhaled thick, magical smoke into the air above him.

“We met at one of these fairs when I was passing through on my way to the library. I was obtaining my degree at the time. I remember being in such a rush-until I saw this man arranging a collection of cans into a small pyramid. They had portraits on them. Small, painfully detailed portraits of people.”

“Famous people?” I asked, rubbing my cramped hand.

Professor Gray shook his head. “Non...non. They were just normal people. Neighbors of his, prostitutes, paupers-despair ridden people really. But they were beautiful-all of them.”

He took another sip of water and stubbed out his cigarette. “That’s right, Madame. The reclusive, respected Monsieur Kinar started as nothing more than a caricaturist. But he was happy. Poor, of course, but getting by the way only a young, hungry artist can. You see, Madame, there is a difference between a starving artist and a hungry artist. A hungry artist is moving up the food chain, while a starving artist has been reduced to begging for scraps. Monsieur Kinar was hungry-and getting noticed.”

“And the first day you met-you could tell all of this?”

The professor nodded thoughtfully. “Oui, I absolutely could. You see, I was rushing along and these caught me. They drew me towards the young man and his sorrowful art. We had a wonderful conversation that day, after I purchased a can. For the life of me though, I can’t remember what about. I just remember thinking that this man was a true, modern artistic genius. I used my father’s contacts in the art world to give Monsieur Kinar’s work showcases at museums all over Europe.”

“But why did you take such an interest in him? To go to such trouble, I mean?”

Professor Gray considered his water glass for a long moment. “Because I would have never forgiven myself if I didn’t. It’s incredibly selfish to not urge along talent if you have the means. I happened to have the means so I did what I thought was right. It was all so wonderful for a while. He was popular and young and in demand. That’s when he started to do portraits. See, your art world in London doesn’t know about these portraits, do they Madame?”

I shook my head. “No. We have no record of him being a portrait artist.”

“There’s a reason for that, Madame. You see, once Monsieur Kinar had gathered a bit of fame, the elite started to clamor for him to paint them. Commissions were sinful, and hard for any young artist to ignore. It started with the daughter of a count. She was a young, beautiful thing, barely sixteen years old. Monsieur Kinar was thrilled to start his portrait career sans cans, and she was a perfect first subject. The sitting took three months, and by the end, he had produced the most beautiful portrait that anyone had ever seen. It was both hyper-realistic and fantastic. But you see, as soon as he dragged the last stroke across the canvas, the girl crumpled in her chair, dead. The doctors said it was heart failure, but a child?”

The professor held his hands out to me, pleading.

“It affected Monsieur Kinar, this death. But he pressed on with his work. His next sitting was with a banker, who wanted his portrait to hang in the lobby of his bank. When the painting was done, so was the banker who died only a week after it was hung. Next, a young bride sat for him, and she too succumbed shortly after completion of the portrait. Shaken, Monsieur Kinar vowed never to paint again.”

“Did you keep in contact with him when he stopped painting?” I asked.

"I did. It was getting increasingly difficult to track him down, as his money was disappearing and he was slipping down the ladder, as we say. He was still selling his paintings, but not producing anything new. I thought it would all change for him when he met Maribelle. She was a dancer at one of the noir jazz cafes. He fell in love with her immediately, according to his letters. She was just what he needed to mend the years of despair he had deluded himself into having. Maribelle made his guilt fall away, and he no longer believed he was somehow responsible for those deaths."

I swallowed hard, and motioned to the waiter for more water.

"And you know what she begged of him, the night before their wedding, Madame? She begged that he paint her."

"No." I whispered.

"Oui, Madame. They were married the next day, and on their wedding night, she fell asleep but never greeted the day. That is when I stopped hearing from him altogether. I would receive updates from my artistic friends on him. He completely stopped living, according to them. He took to wondering the streets, drunk, sick and starving. I have no idea how he stayed alive, but I feel as though his guilt must have worked as a tonic for a long life. A curse, really."

I put my pen down on my filled notebook, as the professor dabbed at his eyes and pulled out another cigarette.

"He died in the attic of a boardinghouse. The maid found him, next to this." The professor finally loosened his grip on the crumpled paper that he had been guarding.

I picked up the paper and unfolded a crude picture, drawn with what looked like a crayon. The picture was of a man-a hollow, terrifyingly skeletal man with patches of hair missing from his beard.

"That's a self-portrait, Madame. Of Monsieur Kinar."

I turned the paper over and noticed a date on the back. It was dated April 2. Yesterday.

"He finally broke the curse." The professor attempted a tired smile.

I turned the portrait over once more to look into Monsieur Kinar's eyes. Even though they were crude and sketchy-with runaway lines and blurred edges, these were the most real eyes I had ever looked into. Bubbling pain brought them to life on the last page he ever touched.

"I'm afraid that is all I can tell you, Madame. I must get to the university to teach a class but I feel I must apologize for not being able to secure the interview with the Monsieur himself. I feel somewhat responsible. I just thought foolishly, that I could pull him out of the gutter for one last hurrah. A bit stupid, no?"

I looked up at the professor, who had already retrieved his coat from the chair next to him.

I shook my head. "No, professor. This was the story to be told." I handed the picture back to him, but he held up his hand, refusing. "No, Madame, you may keep this. It was his only personal effect and I prefer it go home with someone who can truly appreciate the Monsieur's work.

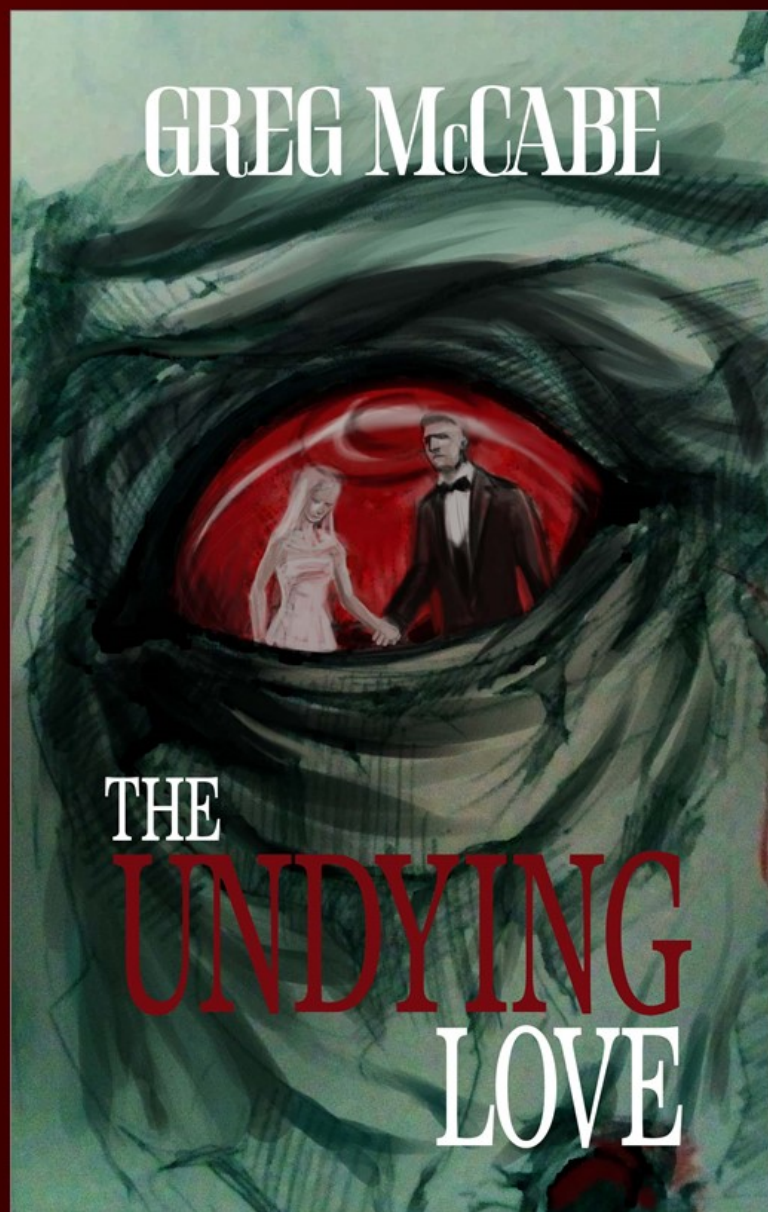
With that, Professor Gray threw down some bills, smiled and turned to leave. Before he reached the door, he turned back around.

"Be sure to tell them back in London, Monsieur's work is beautifully cursed."

With that, the professor vanished into the softly falling rain drops outside the café, leaving behind his only existing burden, just as the serpent did when he left paradise in ruins.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Kathleen Wolak is a writer and blogger from Hamden CT. Her short fiction can be found in various literary journals including Hello Horror, KZine, and Massacre Magazine. She is a frequent guest on The Easy Chair Podcast.

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Brittany Rollins hopped down the mossy stone stairway of the terraced garden, clutching her old, stuffed bunny in one hand and dragging him bumping and bouncing after her. She heard her mother behind her, “Oh isn’t this lovely, Brittany. I’m so glad we came...”

The girl gasped as she came to the bottom of the descent and saw the meadow filled with primroses, daffodils, and bluebells shimmering before her in the morning sun. She turned to see where her mother was, squinting upward into the light. Strands of her light-brown hair lifted and floated around her face, caught on a breeze.

“Stay where I can see you,” her mother called as if right on cue, still standing higher up on one of the gray-green garden steps. “I’ll be right back. I have to let your father know we’re going for a walk.”

Brittany returned to the vista that stretched in front of her. She skipped into the meadow, bending to pluck the florets and toss these in the air while prancing in circles as if she were dancing in some ancient pagan rite of spring. She approached what appeared to be trimmed thickets of waving willows and tangled shrubs speckled with pink and orange blossoms. She could see one section of an uneven wall constructed of layers of weathered, flat, silver stones. A hedgerow partially overgrew the wall, and extended past it, as if marking the dimensions where an entire enclosure once stood.

The yellow sun warmed her skin. The sweet air filled her senses. Brittany distinctly heard the glassy sound of trickling, gurgling water.

Her mother’s loud, panting voice broke in from somewhere behind her, “Honey, I told you not to run ahead of me like that. Slow down. Do *not*, do not go past that wall, *do you hear me? Brittany!? Stop!*”

The girl slipped through a small opening in the branches and leaves of the hedgerow, and emerged beside a lovely, gently flowing stream. The water was translucent emerald, dotted with diamond-like bubbles. Clutches of large green lily pads drifted on the surface, each one a perfect circle that gently rocked as it rotated around a central white bloom.

“Look Bun Bun, isn’t it beautiful?” Brittany exclaimed, shaking her fading and furless once-pink stuffed rabbit and grasping him to her chest. She glanced up and held her breath as the sunlight beamed through the upper branches of the oak trees on the opposite bank and flashed the stream, for a moment turning the world a sparkling white-gold.

Brittany squatted on the grassy edge just above the rippling water and set her Bun Bun beside her. She thought she saw something move on one of the lily pads and tried to reach for it, but it was too far away. She stood and peered at the gently bobbing cup-like leaves, then started to wade in, inching closer to the current. She jutted her chin forward in astonishment, grabbed her hair with one hand and pulled it out of the way as she took a step, then another, the water making her shoes squish, saturating her socks, soaking her pink corduroy pants up to her knees.

The girl glanced behind her, “Bun Bun, you can’t believe what’s here!” She thrust her face close and stared at a group of seven pads that drifted past. On each one was a baby--a tiny, gray-green, perfectly formed human baby with miniscule pointed ears. She slid her left hand into the water to halt the lily leaves. The baby closest to her hand was no bigger than her index finger,

and it was writhing, jerking its arms and legs, its pin-prick eyes crinkled up in a furious scream. Brittany could almost recognize the tiny cries at the very edge of her hearing, like the buzzing of an insect.

Reflexively, Brittany scooped up the miniature infant in her right hand. It squirmed and waved its infinitesimal fists, kicked its delicate feet. Brittany straightened, cupping her hand to keep the baby from falling out. The thing felt slimy and fluttery and cold against her skin; it frightened her but she didn't want to let it go. She began to move away, backwards toward the bank, letting the lily-pad nursery spin and float by. She closed her right hand a little more as she reached the mud and cord-grass at the margins of the stream. She gazed up and around her--something seemed different, something had changed. The sunshine was gone. A mist seemed to be spreading from the direction of the oak trees.

"Oh my gosh, Brittany, what are you doing!" came the harsh tone of her mother's scolding. "Get out of that water at once! Get out of there! What is the matter with you?"

The girl felt frozen in place, her legs unable to move. She tried to turn, to face her mother as the latter approached. "Mommy, there are babies in the water," she cried. "There are babies in the water, really little babies!"

"Get out of there now, young lady!" her mother yelled. She gripped the hem of the child's long-sleeve T-shirt and yanked hard. The girl felt her legs fly up; she landed with a faint thud on her rear-end in the grass.

Her mother hovered over her, hands on hips, "What did I tell you about going into the water? Why don't you ever listen to me?"

Brittany started to sob. "I want Bun Bun, where's Bun Bun," she sputtered.

Her mother swung her gaze around. "What a dreary place this is. It's bright and cheerful everywhere else, but here it's all foggy and cold." She sighed, trying to calm down. She glanced at the water and thought she saw movement--sinuous darting like rainbow lightning just under the eddying surface of the stream. Then she noticed Brittany's raised right arm, the folded and locked fingers, the white knuckles, and something dark and bloody dripping down the child's forearm. "What the... did you hurt yourself? What is that?"

Brittany opened her eyes wide, her sobs shaking her entire frame. She stared at her clutched fist now stained by dark-red liquid and green-blue dots of pulsating tissue that oozed from between her fingers. She slowly opened her hand. Threads of something pink, like wisps of spaghetti, slid down the base of her thumb. She had time to identify the tiny crushed head, traces of brains, the smashed torso and severed limbs, before she leaped to her feet, her high-pitched shrieks echoing like a flock of enraged birds. Her mother attempted to grab her shoulders but Brittany evaded her, hopping up and down, whipping and flinging her hand, trying to remove the remains. Before her mother could stop her, the child fell to her knees and scrambled like a mad crab to the water where she submerged her right arm, splashing and splashing as she tried to wash it clean.

The woman, unnerved and exasperated, grasped her daughter under the armpits and yanked her up to standing. "What the hell is the matter with you?" Out of the corner of her eye she saw the shimmering flash again, now multiplied as if several forms slithered at great speed under the water. *Too big for fish*, she thought. *Maybe seals*.

“Let’s get out of here,” Brittany begged as she attempted to run, tugging her mother’s arm at the same time. “I killed it.”

The woman was determined to get the situation under control--she prepared to give her speech about behavior and discipline as she restrained Brittany, gripping her upper arms, forcing the girl to look into her eyes. But then they both jumped, hearts pounding, as a piercing sound slashed the air. A wail, a keening note, like a blast from a broken flute, rose and fell and swirled on a wind that rose around them.

Jenna Tregellas turned off the ignition, and sat in her 2011 Ford Focus for a few moments while she peered through her windshield at the front of the cottage. “I am annoyed,” she said aloud, to herself.

She exited the car and slammed the door. She was a successful and respected real estate agent, with an impeccable reputation in the highly competitive rental market of this part of Cornwall that appealed so much to Americans. “It’s Daphne du Maurier’s Cornwall,” Jenna muttered.

She straightened her lime-green jacket and smoothed her lime-green skirt as she unlocked the front door of the cottage. She cautiously scanned in all directions. The place was a mess. What else did she expect. The family had disappeared, suddenly, without a word.

“The Rollins family,” she recalled, as her shoes clicked over the hardwood floor of the cozy living room. She checked the fireplace--it had not been used. She shoved an overturned chair cushion out of her way as she advanced to the wood-framed French doors that opened onto the terraced garden. She paused by the 32-inch television sitting on a cart in an alcove opposite the overturned couch; it was on, but set to mute. Jenna bent slightly, pushed the power button.

“What in the world is wrong with some people?” she said to the empty room.

She walked to the windows, slid the flowery curtains back and forth on the rods, inspecting the cotton panels. Two of them had long gashes down the center, as if a sharp object had been ripped through.

She stepped out to the patio, the highest level of the garden. She gazed down to the property below, and across to the field, observing the antique hedgerow and the ancient wall and the woods beyond. Philip Rollins, the father, was a college professor, Jenna remembered. He was fascinated by Cornwall, and thrilled to rent a cottage with Iron Age ruins on the premises.

Jenna Tregellas sighed and moved back inside; she spent the next thirty minutes or so inspecting the rest of the building. The bedrooms were in a sorry state, with lamps, knick-knacks, and furniture broken, tossed, scattered and torn, coated with a layer of feathers and down from the pillows. No trace of the family’s personal belongings remained. It was like they’d decamped in the night, but not before attacking and damaging the place.

“They seemed like such a nice family, too,” she said as she descended the wooden staircase, to look at the kitchen. “The mother... Kaitlin, Kaitlin Rollins, in her mid-thirties. And an adorable little girl. What was her name? Brittany, I think. Six years old, bright, kind of rude to her parents. But what do you expect from the only child of American academics.”

She almost didn’t want to look at the kitchen. And indeed, when she stuck her head in the doorway, she was shocked enough to withdraw and say, “Oh my.”

This wasn't the first time a family had disappeared, abandoning the cottage without warning, leaving their \$2,900.00 rental deposit, and never heard from again.

Jenna once again exited to the patio, and serenely began climbing down the rough-hewn stone steps to the meadow below, noting that the garden was always left intact, that nothing ever seemed amiss on the surrounding grounds, when a family vanished.

"Yes," she said to the willows and camellias and guelder roses of the hedgerow as she approached. "I've never found any disturbance here. I just don't understand... and now people will talk. Of course they will. We will be accused of doing something to drive the Americans off so we can keep their money." Jenna found the narrow passage-way and stepped through, into the natural grotto that had probably been here since the last Ice Age, hiding this pristine stretch of a feeder stream for Mawgan Creek. "It's so peaceful here," she said. "I really just don't understand..."

The agent didn't want to get too close to the embankment, because of her expensive shoes and stockings, so she darted her eyes here and there, satisfying herself that all was well. She turned, in order to go back to her car, but then abruptly stopped.

"I thought I saw something," she said to the birds and the ferns. The stream bubbled and murmured, butterflies danced in the shafts of sunshine, the highest boughs of the oaks rustled and undulated. Jenna Tregellas gingerly picked her way closer to the edge of the water, and moved to her left several feet. "There is something there". She hesitated, because of her clothing, but the need to find some answers to all these mysteries motivated her, and she tiptoed right up to the bank. She lowered herself in a sitting position, just far enough to keep her skirt off the mud and cord-grass, and focused on a button-eye that was looking back at her. Jenna reached out and picked up what looked to be a very worn and bedraggled once-pink stuffed animal of some kind. She rose to standing, and held the dirt-caked toy at arm's length. "Hmm," she said, turning it a bit by flexing her wrist. "It's a rabbit, someone's plush rabbit. By the looks of him, he's been well used."

She tried to recall if she'd seen the bunny before, but gave up, feeling depressed and angry at the same time. "What difference does it make," she sighed, tossing the rabbit into the water. "They didn't call, didn't ask for their money back. Why provoke trouble?"

Jenna Tregellas primly wiped her palms on her skirt, and began to make her way carefully back to her car, anxious to call in the cleaning crew and get the cottage ready for a new family as soon as possible.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Rivka grew up in South Florida and currently lives in West Virginia. In the 1980s she published stories in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, the *Far Frontiers* anthologies, and the *Women of Darkness* anthology, and more recently has placed stories with *The Sirens Call* eZine, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Riding Light Review*, and the anthology *Out of Phase*. She has a BA in history, MAs in sociology and counseling, and a BSN.

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The Lady in White | Linda Burkey Wade

It's Tuesday. I'm up early to get breakfast. The kitchen is getting cold, chilling my pale skin. I let the refrigerator illuminate the room. First, I grab the cat's wet food, and remove the lime tin lid.

Snap, Pop! The large gray tiger and a fuzzy black/copper hair converge around my feet almost tripping me. I push them aside gently. The can contains turkey in garden sauce. I dispense dry food in opaque white saucers and smother it with the garden sauce which makes them cry in desperation.

"Meow! Meow! Meow!"

"Yes, you're hungry, starved," I say. They crazy love the stuff. I wonder what it tastes like.

Dare, I taste it? I chicken out, placing the saucers on the floor. Silence follows.

Opening the wrapper on the honey wheat bread, I take out one slice. I strangle the rust colored plastic, replacing the twist tightly around its' slick neck, then tear the bread in half. From the fridge, I snatch a cooked homemade sausage patty and place it between the soft uneven brown sponge rectangles. Carefully, I pick up the blood red cup of steaming coffee and push the fridge door shut with my right elbow.

I lean over the kitchen sink, and gaze out the widow, watching the slow sunrise. It's still dark out. The sky turns from black navy to a dark royal blue. Darkness surrounds me in the kitchen. Gray shadows tiptoe about, both inside and out.

Swizzz, whhhiirrr! I jump, startled as the furnace kicks on. I bite into my sandwich and scan the neighborhood for signs of life. No lights are on except the dull street light in front of the apartment compound.

The complex is three single story, drab dark brown buildings which were made for older people to live in. Now days anyone can live there. The rent all depends on your income. Three houses line the street across from the apartments. Beyond them where the street curves south, lies a fenced pasture.

Next to me is an almost vacant lot. On it stands a decaying, weathered wood shed with a broken door, and a small boarded up beige garage. Windows remain lifeless and dark, no one has gotten up except me and the cats. An eerie tree stands next to my house. The one that's hundred, crooked, gray and looks dead even when leaves pop on it in the spring. There are no leaves on the bony tree now, because it's February 23rd.

I notice a lady in white at the fence past the curve. She moves quickly at a diagonal. A white vapor mist seems to surround her. White chiffon covers her face and whips around her. She floats towards me, my pulse hastens, and my heart enters my throat. She glides behind the crooked tree.

My body shakes as I wait.

Never emerging.

She haunts me day and night.

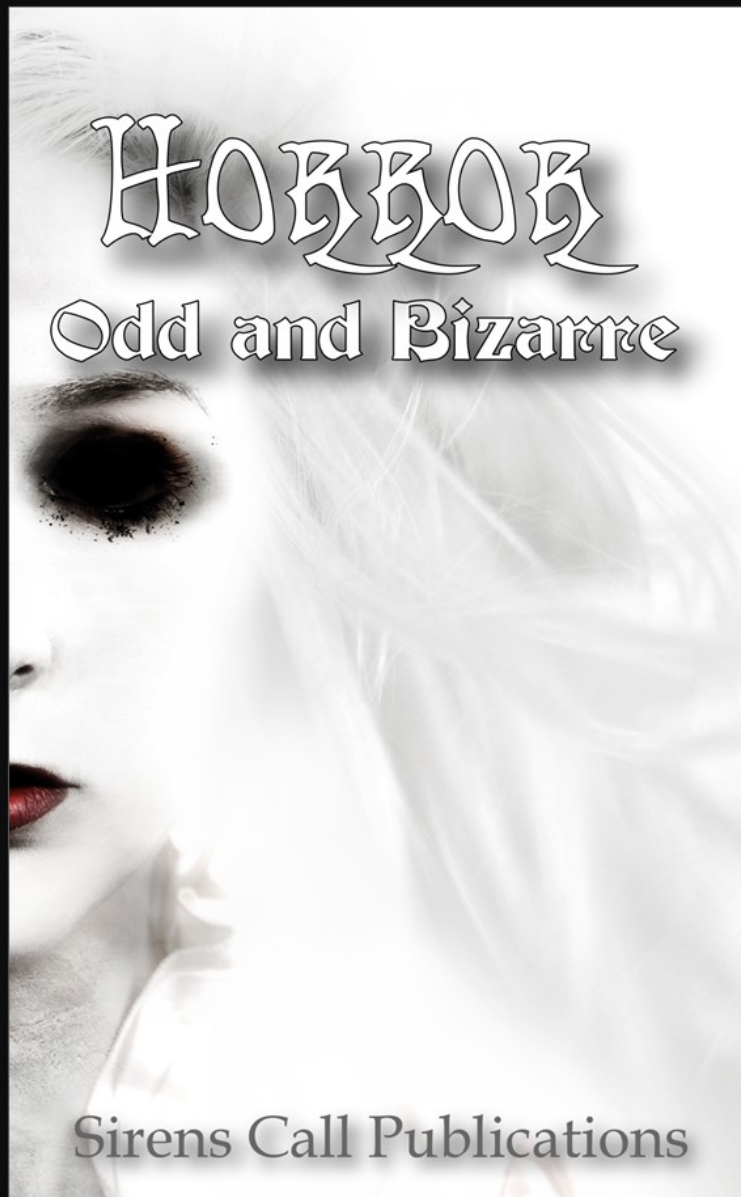
Obsessed, I look at the fence, then the tree.

Waiting...

Waiting....
Waiting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Linda Burkey Wade is a digital librarian and writer from Illinois. She has previously been published in over a handful of library anthologies and co-edited one. She has refocused on her fiction work with a short story series in progress as well as several novels. She likes to write with a touch of comic relief, though her characters are pushing her down a darker road.

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Caballo El Diablo | *Maynard Blackoak*

Over the Oklahoma Panhandle on a dark moonless night, a fissure opened in the blackened sky as if a clawed finger had ripped an opening in the fabric of reality. It extended and grew, eventually stretching from the bottom tip of the crescent moon to the landscape below. Flames vomited from the opening. A wretched odor of scorched flesh permeated the air. The earth shook as the night gave a mighty shudder. A fireball spewed from the opening, landing atop Black Mesa with a thunderous crash.

Lightning bolts flew from the ominously glowing orb, until it exploded, sending chunks of smoldering rock raining down on the ground below. When the acrid smoke lifted, a large, black creature stood casting a fiery gaze into the rip of the partition that separated the dimension of the damned from the world of humankind.

The creature reared its mighty head and released a deafening whinny when the tear in the sky closed. Its hooves pummeled the ground as it galloped off into the night, leaving behind smoldering hoof prints and a foul smell of sulfur. Its unholy mission of ferrying souls to land of the damned had begun.

Marcella, concealed in a grove of twisted oaks, watched a group of cowboys attempting to lasso the black stallion the locals called Caballo El Diablo. The first to try his hand at conquering the devil horse met with a quick and gruesome end as the creature's steel hooves came crashing down on his head when he approached the massive beast. His skull was crushed. The ground surrounding his body was littered with pieces of bone and brain matter, and his blood soaked the ground.

The second cowhand did not fare any better than the first. The third, however, managed to leap onto the back of the deadly steed as it slammed its terrible hooves down on the cowboy lying helplessly on the ground. After wrapping his rope a few times around the horse neck, he secured his hand in the loops and prepared for a wild ride.

Caballo El Diablo reared high into the air and bucked mightily. Clinging to the rope with all his strength and digging his spurs into the devil horse's flanks, the cowboy remained on its back for several seconds before a massive buck and twist sent him hurtling over the steed's head. The last thing the cowboy saw as he lay in the dirt was the thick, putrid breath of the beast and a pair of blood stained hooves colliding with his face.

With its intended captors lying in bloody heaps on the ground, the horse from Hell gave out an earsplitting whinny and raised up on its powerful back legs, pounding the air in defiance with its front hooves. Fire danced in its eyes and a dense yellowish smoke, reeking of death, poured from its snout, a dire warning to any others with a notion to tame the savage beast.

With a snort, the majestic creature leaped into the air with three spectral cowboys perched on its back. Away it soared into the night sky until it disappeared into the velvety darkness, delivering another cargo of souls into the realm of the damned.

A poised grin crept over Marcella's lips, observing the devil horse's return to the top of Black Mesa. *You might've took down those ol' boys without a sweat but you ain't gonna best me*

that easy. You ain't never come across anyone like me and that's a fact.

Stepping from the concealment of the oak trees, she strolled confidently toward Caballo El Diablo. The mighty steed glared at the diminutive young woman with its devilish eyes blazing menacingly. It reared high on its back legs and kicked at her with its front hooves. Undaunted, she dodged its assault with an arrogant smile and continued her stride, matching the beast's intimidating stare with a steely gaze of her own.

"You cain't scare me, devil horse. I'll ride your ass though Hell and back if need be to break your will. Come Hell or high water, you're gonna be broke."

The massive beast stilled, studying the petite female facing it down with a gritty resolve. It put up no resistance when she jumped on its back and intertwined her tiny hands into its mane. When she dug her spurs deep into its muscular flanks, Caballo El Diablo released a hideous neigh, and then abruptly kicked and bucked wildly.

For hours, the determined steed leaped high into the air, rearing and twisting to remove its rider. The tremendous force jarred Marcella violently but she merely tightened her grip of the horse's long flowing mane and maintained her balance while continuing to rig the beast with her spurs. Every powerful buck and turn only strengthened its rider's grip and failed to throw her to the ground.

"Gimme your best, devil horse. You ain't gonna get shed of me near that easy," she chided the raging stallion with an amused lilt in her voice. "I done told you I'm the roughest and toughest cowhand you've ever come across."

Fire burned in the beast's eyes and its breath filled the air with a vile stench, realizing Marcella was not like any of the others that had tried to tame it before. She would not be budged from its back by normal means. With a loud whinny followed by a tremendous leap, the steed from Hell soared skyward with Marcella clinging to its mane. Lightning flashed all around them as horse and rider pierced the veil separating the living and the eternal damned.

Jagged, barren peaks rose up into an eerie orange sky. The odor of scorched flesh and stewing blood saturated the air. Streams of molten lava spewed high into the atmosphere and filled the air with scorching hot bolts of fire. Marcella managed to dodge most of them, although a few found their way to her flesh. Despite agonizing burns on her arms, hands and face, she clung to Caballo El Diablo's mane, refusing to relinquish her grasp on the bucking and twisting steed.

Below her, she observed a multitude of wailing souls, some bound in white-hot, iron chains while others languished in pools of bubbling lava. Hordes of demons wearing depraved grins tormented and tortured them. They dismembered and mutilated the bodies of the damned, only to have the severed limbs and disfiguring injuries heal, allowing the minions of the devil to inflict the same horrific damage repeatedly.

"If you think draggin' me through Hell is gonna shake me off, you got another thing comin', devil horse. I've wallered through shit that would make a Billy goat puke and a parson give up his bible," she proclaimed through a contemptuous scowl.

With a sudden change in tactics, the hellish beast stopped bucking and twisting, and darted swiftly toward a column of molten lava spewing up from the ground. If the hellacious creature could not throw her from its back, it would burn her from her seat upon its back. Having only

mere seconds to prepare herself for a flesh-scorching shower, she hunkered down with teeth clenched, burying her face and chest in the devil horse's neck.

Caballo El Diablo darted into the center of the fiery stream. Marcella's hair began burning and her blood felt as if it were boiling. Her exposed skin bubbled and peeled. Bloody pus oozed from her scorched flesh. Excruciating pain ravaged her body. Still she refused to allow the devil horse to shake her. With burnt and bloodied hands, she tightened her grip on the beast's mane. If she was going to go down in a molten death, she was determined to take the spawn of Hell with her.

Upon exiting the fiery stream, the mighty steed changed directions. Refusing to allow its rider any time to recuperate from her searing wounds, it soared into a group of skinless, brimstone horned demons with razor-sharp talons of shiny steel, hovering high above the ground.

Their long claws ripped through Marcella's smoldering clothes, raking her body and inflicting long and jagged cuts. Her flesh torn with gaping wounds that bled profusely and exposed bone, muscle and intestines, she steadfastly clung to the devil's steed, refusing to relinquish her ride.

"I'm still here, devil horse," she shouted in defiance, raking her spurs on two demons clawing at her legs. "I've faced a lot tougher varmints than these sumbitches. I've been cut up and shot by the best of them. These greenhorns are gonna have to do a whole lot more n this to shake me off you."

More of the ghastly demons joined the assault, raking their claws over her flesh, inflicting more wounds and drawing more blood. Caballo El Diablo, in an all-out attempt to shake her from his back, reared and kicked more fiercely than before and darted into another towering column of molten lava. A confident grin seemed to spread across the devilish horse's muzzle. The resilient young female had withstood each tactic thrown at her. Neither horse nor demons believed she could withstand everything at once.

The devil horse bucked and spun with all its might, forcing her to focus solely on remaining on the creature's back. Liquid fire burned already scorched skin and set her blood to boiling once again. The pungent odor of burning skin and hair nauseated her gut. Demons continued to press their relentless assault with greater vigor and a fiendish glee, adding more agonizing pain to Marcella's suffering.

Burnt, torn and bloodied, she felt her grip begin to slip. Peeling flesh on her hands and fingers sent unbearable waves of pain through her weakening muscles. An inclination to give up the fight and let herself slip off the back of the beast, to fall into the pool of molten damnation popped in her head. She had endured much more than ever before, perhaps even more than she was equipped to handle.

Then as thoughts of quitting began taking root in her spirit, a cool and invigorating breeze wafted through her soul. All the pain and suffering began retreating giving way to the healing power of her resolve.

"You and your demons ain't gonna beat me," she averred with a thunderous shout, as she sat boldly upright and started fighting back. "I am Marcella El Angel, half woman, half angel, and the toughest damn cowhand around. Ain't nothing born in Hell can best me."

Sitting tall in the saddle, she dug her spurs deep into Caballo El Diablo's sides and freed

her hands from its mane. After speaking an Enochian invocation, the column of fire parted. Then she drew her pistols and began firing at her tormentors. One by one, the demons shrieked and began retreating, as the blessed slugs tore through the devil's underlings.

The mighty devil horse, realizing he had been beaten, ceased bucking, acquiescing to its foe. With a tremendous leap, it transported Marcella out of the land of the damned and into her world.

Upon touching down atop Black Mesa, Marcella jumped from its back, and walked to face the defeated equine. As she cast an unyielding stare into the fearsome beast's eyes, it whinnied meekly and laid its massive, black head on the ground at her feet. Caballo El Diablo the ferry of damned souls to Hell would ferry no more. It answered to a new master, Marcella El Angel, the roughest and toughest cowhand in the west and Hell.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Maynard Blackoak is an author living in Oklahoma. The greatest influences in his writing are the works of Poe and Dickens. He draws inspiration from the sounds and shadows of the night and processes them through the splintered windmill of his mind to create his tales.

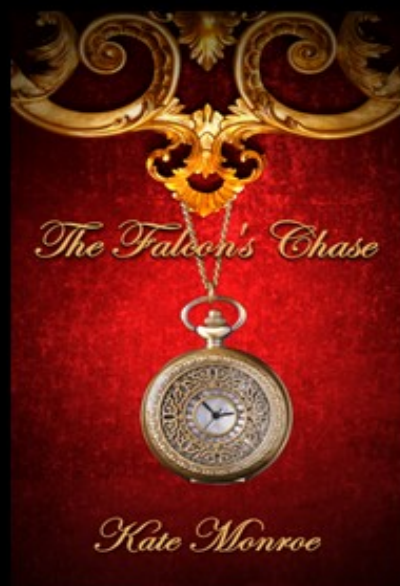
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I Dream of Death | *Steven Nicholas Marshall*

...I lie here in eternal calm with my arms crossed on my chest. My eyes closed, body stilled, I feel a tear drop splashing upon my cheek and trickle like an icy tendril congealing upon the dead clay that was once my flesh. A loved one looms over my borrowed human shell, crying.

A dark coolness cascades over my carcass like a wave. I hear the lid to my coffin clamping down, imprisoning me in this grim solitude, my own personal nocturnal pit of evermore. Henceforth, the casket seals and I'm lowered into the dank, brittle ground of a sunless earth. Darkness quickly absorbs me as swelling shadows encompass me here in my grave. I'm trapped in this abyss, screaming within myself.

Now hear my cries! A deafening scream from within me permeates my being at the odd realization of the end of taste, touch and smell. My hollow empty husk hardens as it crusts over with the brittle earth. My lifeblood drained and the fluids evaporated, I lie here in perpetual stillness, *crawling* inside my skin as if to twitch in protest. I endure a lingering itching sensation that I cannot scratch. My organs are writhing like snakes uncoiling in coming to terms with my life lost. I cannot claw my way out of my skin.

What has happened here? This must all be some kind of mistake! My heart doth no longer beat; my blood no longer pulsates through my body. Indeed, they confirmed this upon my death. Yet my brain somehow maintains its own heartbeat within me; a sensation of existence I cannot escape. The last food rots inside my stomach; my insides are no longer able to process it. Thoughts ripple through me like an entity within my own being. Death has yet to take claim of them for reasons I know not. *Stop thinking, just acknowledge an end!*

For me, there is no Heaven of glory bright where angels are dwelling, no Hell where sinners are roasting; divine is my suffering and now is my day of torment. My thoughts echo on and ricochet through every fiber of my being. Yet I cannot will myself to cease to exist as I run lunatic in my head, for I am devoid of life, yet not quite one with death. My new awareness of existence continues to haunt me in the catacombs of my imagination, forever taunting my dead self.

I can feel the dirt spilling over my grave, feel my casket sinking deeper into the earth; hear the distant sobs of loved ones. If they only knew the grim nature of my suffering in this asphyxiated eternal suffocation of my soul, my nocturnal state of anti-being, they, too, would crawl inside their skin.

A numbing chill tickles my soul as death enraptures my body. *Why can I not die? Why can this existence not cease to be? Why does God not feel me?*

The thought of oblivion terrifies me so! For the moment, I feel solace in my awareness of existence. I remember having panic attacks at night while thinking about death, eternity, the beginning and end of time, and the nothing from whence I came, to the nothing to where I shall go.

This Void of Nevermore has stemmed from a vision of nothingness -- now a fully conscious living-but-not-breathing nightmare. The frigid darkness is overshadowing me with yet more frightful sensations that this may *never end*; creeping, lingering thoughts of embodied imprisonment and my eternal unrest as I decay away. Death in pure form is simply not an option.

ONE MONTH DEAD

Let the sweet decay begin...

My skin begins to shrivel up like the dead autumn leaves outside of my grave, peeling like bark and flaking away. Death has now taken on its own life as the process of decay withers me away; corrodes me with mold growing over my skin. The formaldehyde settles in me like still water in a pool, replacing the life force of my blood.

Numb inside, start to decay, emptiness shatters into gray. Memories of life I once forgot, slowly I mold, decay and rot.

I have become one with the metamorphosis taking over my flesh as I see the beauty of decay firsthand. How the symbiosis between life and death interacts with each other in parasitic contentment unaware of my pulsing thought. Its only function is to trade my flesh for a more organic purpose; to give life within death uninterrupted by my whimsical dilemma.

The roots of the soft earth are now feeding off of me: vines corrugate my veins, rain moisture replaces sweat and mold patches over my flesh; worms fester inside my intestines. I can feel each stage of my transformation consuming and becoming me as I lie here defenseless, without hope; a manmade dogma of pragmatic comfort. The predicament of my horror is pure, but without it I would not be able to acknowledge my divine existence of unrest.

I am now in the cocoon stage of my dark existence, slowly morphing into something else. Even though the caterpillar that was once my body has stopped crawling I'm in my cocoon stage of death; a lost moth without a soul, unable to fly away. I scream inside myself, unheard by any God or Netherworldly Anti-being.

Now fully awake inside my shell, I languish here in a coma of my soul. I cannot scratch this internal itching -organs on the brink of popping - those palpating batteries within me that now forsake my flesh. When will my physical brain stop acting as nerve fibers sending pulses of thoughts to me? I am but a lost insomniac in my bodily prison, resting but wide awake, knowing but not seeing; dreamless but not quite dead.

Thus my horror is lingering and personal without an end; ongoing and eternal as I bequeath this internal continuum all alone, slowly suffocating within myself. The creeping insanity is divine as it is malevolent. *Let me die! Release me from this shadowy effigy of me.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Steven Nicholas Marshall is a writer, editor and publisher. He has 6 published novels and 5 print anthologies and has owned and operated an award winning on Preditors & Editors press since 2008. He hails from sunny Florida with his baby black panthers, and supports new and up and coming horror and dark fiction authors.

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The bells tolled for the dead, but could only be heard by the living. These words rang through my head as a bell softly chimed somewhere nearby. Whether real or imagined, I can not say. Above me, a crescent moon guided me on my maddening quest, although I am not mad. I knew what I was doing, and what I had to do. The grass was slippery with the day's earlier rain shower and I fell to my knees several times, like a worshipper in the house of God. Undeterred, I continued my journey up a slight incline until I came to my destination.

There on the other side of the hill was the burial site. Freshly dug soil marked where my companion was interred. I shifted the satchel that held my tools on my shoulder and continued on. I reached the mound of dirt moments later. Sweat poured down my temples and stung my eyes. I dropped the satchel on the ground and wiped my face. My body shook with trepidation at what I was about to do. Never once, remind you, have I resorted to body snatching to pay my debts before this. And as long as I am allowed to live on this earth, I will never do so again.

Taking my shovel, I began to dig into the fresh soil. It was sodden with rain water and became heavy quickly. I heaved and shoved and finally began to see a hole open up in the earth. As I reached about a foot deep into the grave, I heard the bell start to chime again. It was faint but nearby. Then I saw it. Beside the grave a bell had been placed that ran on a string into the coffin underground. Alas, my companion had been buried inside a safety coffin.

I was so excited about my discovery that I did not immediately come to terms with what the implications of that were. Alive. Could he be alive, I wondered. I stared at the mechanism beside the grave. Never have I seen one previously. I waited many minutes for the little bell to chime again. It remained still. With a shrug of my shoulders, I continued on with the digging.

Hours seemed to have passed by before my shovel hit the top of the wooden coffin. Dropping to my hands and knees, I wiped at the lid. Tired and sore from my exertion, I fell on top of the coffin, embracing it like a lover. Worms and other creatures of the night slithered by me. Disgusted with myself, I shot back up to my feet and heard the blasted bell again. Faint as before. Just a soft melody on the night breeze. I looked down, below my feet at the lid of the coffin, and wondered if my companion lived inside the box. Was it possible, I pondered. Above me, the bell chimed again. I tell you, in that moment, my blood froze in my veins. A cold overcame me, making my entire body shiver despite the suffocating heat of the grave.

I strained my hearing, listening for the bell to chime again. Silence. The silence of the dead was the only sound that found my ears. I climbed out of the hole I had dug and made my way over to the bell mechanism. It remained still as I observed it. I remained there several minutes waiting for the soft chime, before returning to my satchel and trading my shovel for the crowbar. The job was nearly finished and I was ready to be done with it and out of the cemetery. Somewhere in the night, a carriage passed along the street. The horse's hooves clattered off the cobblestone.

I jumped back down into the hole landing with a solid thud on the top of the coffin. Underneath me, the lid creaked under my weight, but held fast. I climbed off the lid and stood beside the box in the narrow gap that I had created for myself. With the point of the crowbar I

pried the nails up and out of the wood. Then I slid the lid from off the coffin and saw my companion inside.

He laid flat on his back with his eyes closed. As I stared at him with only the pale moonlight to give me illumination, I saw that his body was not at rest. I picked up the hand that was closest to me and held it up to my eyes. His fingernails were broken and bleeding. I dropped the hand and it fell to his side, limp. Inside my chest, my heart thundered as the tiny bell above the ground began to softly chime.

Staring at the body of my companion, I saw that a string was hooked around the fingers on the hand furthest from me. It was the string that was connected to the blasted bell. The sweat on my body chilled, raising goosebumps on my arms underneath my tattered and dirty garments. Alas, you see, that is when it happened. As I reached to pull his body from his resting place, his eyes shot open and a gasp escaped his lungs. I felt the wall of the grave behind me, holding me in place, as I tried desperately to get as far away from the monster before me as I could.

Vampire! The word flashed in my mind as the body of my companion shot up, rising from the coffin. With speed and agility, I did not know I possessed, I scaled the wall of the grave. As I was pulling my legs from the hole, I felt the fingers tighten around my ankle. Ah, I tell you, I screamed so loud, I feared that I would wake the rest of the dead. I kicked and lashed out at the creature that held me in his grasp while the tiny bell beside me kept ringing. I felt the nails of the monster digging into the soft flesh around my ankle before I finally managed to break free. I crawled away from the hole on my hands and knees, searching in the darkness for a weapon to defend myself. Finally my hands found the smooth edge of a large rock. I picked it up and turned back to the open grave. My companion was pulling himself out of the hole. He stared at me with blank, unwavering eyes. I made it to my feet and rushed at him, holding the rock in both of my hands. I smashed the creature in the head sending it sprawling back into the pit.

My body crumbled to the ground, exhausted. It seemed I laid there on my back gazing up at the stars for an eternity. In actuality, I am sure that it was only a few moments. After my heartbeat slowed in my chest, I mustered the strength to roll over. From there I crawled back to the edge of the grave and peered inside. The body of my companion laid still at the bottom of the hole, dead for the second time at my hands.

With a sigh, I forced myself back in the pit to finish the job that I set out to do. I hefted the body of my companion up onto my shoulder, ripping the string from his hand, finally silencing the bell. I placed him over the lip of the grave and let the corpse fall back onto the damp grass. Then as fast as I could, I climbed out of the pit and scooped up all my belongings and the body of my companion. From there I made my way to Harvard University where I knew that the medical students would pay me good money for the body and I could pay off my debt collectors.

I reached the University without being seen and met the student who wished to purchase my companion's body. Of course he did not know that I was responsible for his death. Well as I laid the corpse on the examiner's table, I heard it. Faint at first, but gradually gaining in pitch. The blasted bell had started ringing again. My eyes grew wide as I stared at the body. The student looked at me as if I was the fiend. I backed away from the remains of my companion, knocking surgical tools to the floor where they clattered with a metallic clang and echoed throughout the room.

The last thing that I remember is sliding down the wall and placing my hands over my ears to stop the bells. Alas, that did not work, for they still rang without mercy. Now I sit in this tiny jail cell confessing my crimes. I have come to realize that the bells may toll for the dead, but not only can the living hear them, but also the damned.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dusty Davis is an author living in East Liverpool, Ohio. When he is not working on a story, he can be found at home with his wife and two children.

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Obey | *B.E. Seidl*

They acted brainlessly after Leila's zombification. While it was discussed how to make use of her, she lay on the muddy floor, like an empty envelope waiting to be filled with meaning.

“Let her work in the fields...” one muttered, reluctant to make a decision.

“Let her attend to our pleasure...” another one hissed, his breath moist with desire.

“She should be a warrior for our cause!” the eldest proclaimed, “Let her strike down every barrier standing in the way of success!”

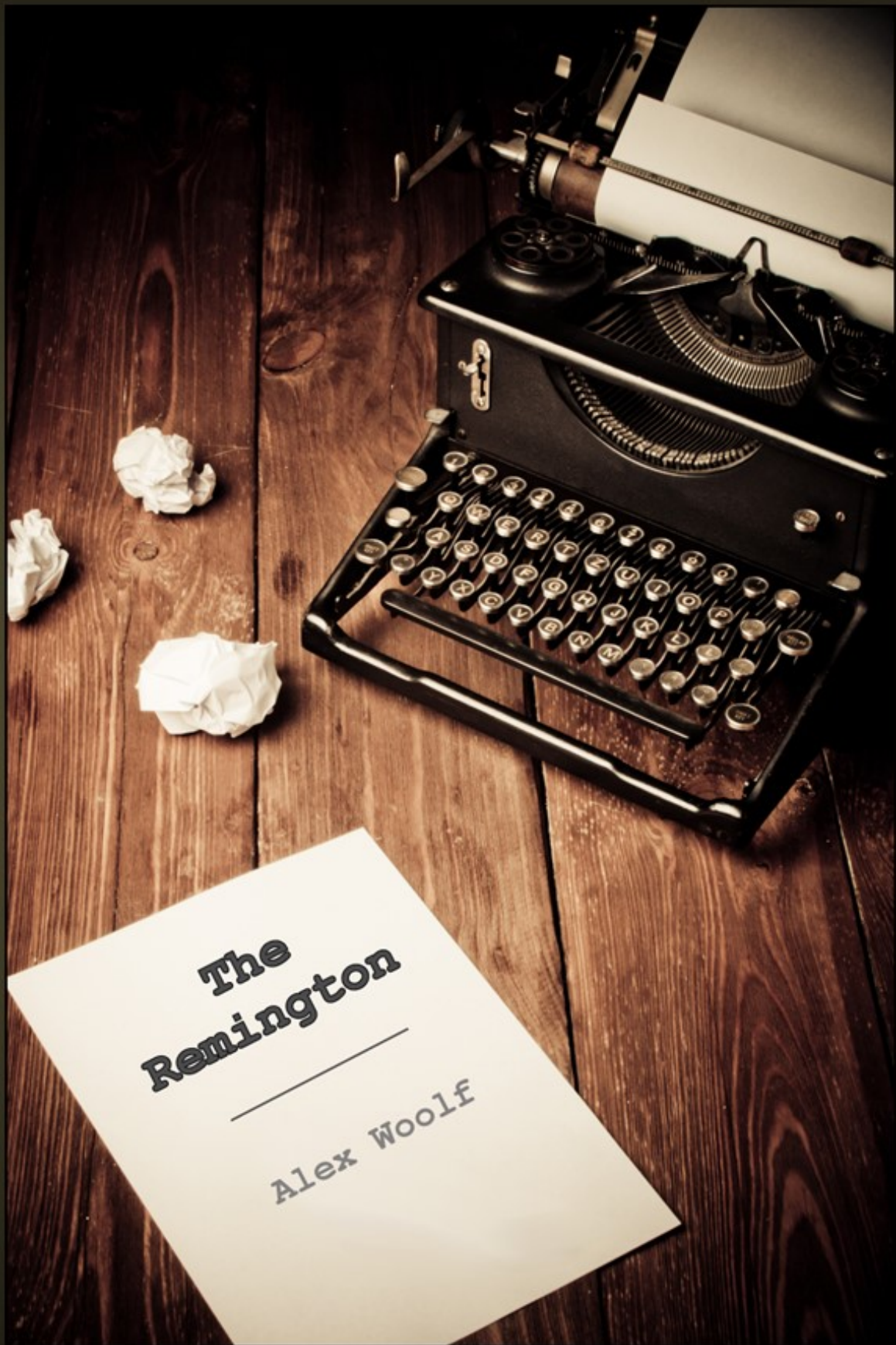
At the sound of these words, Leila got up, took hold of a sword and cut them down.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: B.E. Seidl is a bilingual fiction and nonfiction writer. Her work has appeared both in print and in online anthologies and magazines such as Flash Fiction Magazine, Tethered by Letters and Microfiction Monday Magazine Best of 2015. In her writing she seeks to collect kafkaesque moments and transform them into mysterious tales. She lives in Vienna, Austria.

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Children Should Not Play in the Graveyard at Night | *Winnona Vincent*

Graduation night was finally here. For months, Tristian, Dillan, and Rodney had been planning their graduation party in the graveyard. They had always been monster fans. Any and every horror story they could find. Every horror movie ever made, they had watched. That was the basis of their friendship. They lived, breathed and dreamed of Monsters.

Their parents did not understand. The boys had tried more than once to spend the night in the old graveyard and their parents forbid it. Not one parent would even think of letting their son go there. Months ago the boys had come up with a plan. Graduation meant an all-night party. One where the students were supposed to be locked in the gym. No one could leave before 8 am the next morning. It started right after the graduation ceremony.

So if the boys told their parents that they were going to the party, their parents would think the boys were there. The parents could not check up on them. As long as they made it home by 8:30 the next morning none of their parents would ever know. It was the perfect plan. So each boy started looking up spells and incantations to bring ghosts, demons and ghouls out.

This would be the last chance they could do something like this together because they were all going away to different colleges. They had to do this now or never. They had also discovered that the town was planning on relocating the graves, to other spots and building some shopping center over the old graveyard. No one had been buried there for over a hundred years.

They had taken the time to compare everything they had found. It was decided that they wanted to see a witch, a demon and if at all possible a real vampire. Of course, they expected to see real ghosts also. They copied the spells and memorized them. They pooled their money and bought a special night camera and sensitive sound recorders. As the day of graduation got closer, they could barely contain their excitement.

When graduation day finally got there, they were as ready as they would ever be. The day before they had snuck their backpacks full of the equipment they had gathered up out and hid them in the graveyard.

Graduation seemed to drag on forever. They got their diplomas and finally when it was over they rushed into the audience to give the diplomas to their parents and say goodbye to them. Each had to suffer through the parents lectures of being good at the party. No pranks, drugs, alcohol or messing around with girls. They were all reminded that their whole lives were ahead of them, and one stupid mistake could destroy their whole lives.

Finally, the parents were gone. The boys took off staying to the backroads so no one would see them. They made it to the graveyard over the fence and found their backpacks. They went down to the old part where the family crypts stood. They had one, in particular, they wanted to get into. All the research they had done told them that this particular family had been shunned by the original founders of the town. It had been believed that they were evil. Part of the family were supposed to be witches, and the other part were supposed to have been demons.

They found the crypt and as they approached it they saw an old woman sitting on a bench in front of it. Stopping and staring at her, they did not know what to do. They were not expecting to run into anyone here. No one was ever here. The old woman had her back to them, but she had heard them.

“Hello, boys what brings you here on a night like this. Shouldn’t you be at your graduation party?”

The boys looked at each other, None of them recognized her or her voice.

“Excuse me, mam,” Rodney said. “But a do we know you?”

“I don’t think so. But I know you. You have been researching my family for years. You, boys, have tried and tried to get down here to look in my family’s crypt. Well, boys, tonight is your lucky night. You are all going to get what you wanted. Now come and sit with me and I will introduce you to the family.”

The boys decided this was just a little too real and turned to leave. Except they couldn’t. Instead of their legs taking them away. They walked towards the old woman. Two long stone benches appeared on the other side of her and Dillion, Tristian and Rodney found themselves sitting on one.

They still could not see the old woman’s face because her hair hung down over both sides of her face blocking her face from view. The crypt door slowly opened, and the old woman looked up at the dark entrance. Then something large appeared in the dark doorway. When he stepped out, the boys took a deep breath and tried to move away. But they were still stuck in their places. The thing standing in the moonlight was not human. While it had the body shape of a person, it had the face of a demon with a long hooked nose. Its face was covered in an ugly yellow skin with orange warts. Its bloodshot eyes made it look worse. It grunted at the old woman, walked to her, bent over, and wrapped two clawed hands around her kissing her on the top of her head.

“Well, boys this is my oldest son. Urkan. He is a demon, of course. The only one of my sons that was born with a human-shaped body. Which of you boys are the oldest?”

No one answered. “Oh come on you children have spent years preparing for this night and know that you are getting what you want you are going to be scared and not talk. Well, let me see. Rodney! I believe you are the oldest. Urkan, please sit next to him.” Urkan walked over and sat down almost on top of Rodney. Rodney looked at Urkan and shivered.

Then something was standing in the doorway again. This time, the thing that stepped out of the darkness was not humanlike at all. It stood about five feet tall with shaggy blue fur covering its round body. It had no head or shoulders but a face protruded from the middle of its body. There was a hole where its nose might have been and two dark bulging orbs where it should have had eyes. An open hole below the nose had dozens of small teeth. It had a dozen or so small tentacles beneath its body and scurried more than walked towards the old woman.

The old woman reached up and scratched the top of the second sons head. “This is Icka, my middle son. He has a very high I Q. He used to outsmart many an ignorant farmer in his day. They never really gave him a chance to prove himself. They took one look at him and were always trying to hurt him. I think you can sit next to Tristan, Icka.”

Icka scurried over next to Tristan and hopped up next to him. Tristan was very pale and looked like he was going to faint. Icka began sniffing at Tristan, which did not help matters any.

“Oh good,” The old woman said, “Icka likes you, Tristan. That will make things so much easier for everyone.”

Tristan was about to ask what she was talking about when a third figure emerged from within the crypt. This demon was about half the size of the others and was shaped more like a large rabbit. Except it had no ears or fur. Its body was raw colored mussels. The eyes, mouth and nose holes were there, but the muscles grew around them. "This is my youngest son Thellan. He used to have skin, fur and eyes, but the townspeople back in the early 1800's thought he was the cause of their children's disappearance. They captured him and skinned him. Took his eyes out and cut off his ears. They were trying to make him tell them what happened to the children. He could not tell them what he did not know. So when they were done, they buried him alive. I was gone and did not return until a few days later. I could not do much to help him. But at least he survived.

"The sick thing was a few years later they discovered it was their local preacher that had stolen and killed the children. But do you think they were sorry for what they had done with my son? Oh no, they never said a word about that. By the time, they discovered the truth the preacher who had been a vampire was gone and well on his way to a new town. Then the ironic thing was he did the same there, and another poor demon suffered because of him.

Well, the last I heard he is still in New England somewhere. But there are two of his offspring still here. Which we will get to in a few minutes. But then, Thellan you can sit next to Dillan. On second thought, I think we will leave the Vampire's descendants alone. Our quarrel is not with them."

The three boys and Demons sat side by side watching the old woman as she reached under her bench and brought out a large bag. She removed three large glass containers and sat them on the ground. Then she removed a large bottle containing a green substance. Then another bottle with an amber liquid inside. She walked a few feet away from the benches and in the moonlight, she drew a group of symbols on the ground. As she drew them, she uttered an incantation that none of the boys could understand.

She returned to the bench and took out a bowl and a long knife. She cut Dillan, Tristan and Rodney's arm with the knife and drained some of their blood into the bowl. The boys watched in horror as she put some of the amber liquid and green substance into the bowl also. Returning to where she had drawn the symbols she stepped into the middle of them and drank the contents of the bowl. Then she changed into a middle aged woman.

The three boys could do nothing and when they tried to speak no words came out. The woman now stood in front of them and slowly talked. Her new voice was much younger sounding. "Well, children now you and my sons will be merged. In the morning when you return home you will pack your things and tell your parents you are leaving early to go to your new schools. You will need the time to find rooms and get settled. My children will be inside of you so do not even think of telling them what is going on. Besides, they will not believe you. You do not want to feel the pain my sons can cause you either. They might even decide that your parents need to die. You never know, it has been a long time since they walked in the human world and they do have a lot of hostility pent up inside of them.

You will meet me back here tomorrow evening and then we will be taking a long trip. I have a Vampire to find. Oh, by the way, has your evening in the graveyard been everything you hoped it would be?"

No one said a word. The woman now took the two bottles and mixed the amber liquid with the green substance and as the demon and the boy drank some of it, the demon faded and became translucent. Then it moved sideways and covered the boy it was sitting next to. For a moment, the two were as if sitting one on top of the other. Then the demon disappeared, and only the boy remained.

“Oh yes, that reminds me said the woman. You boys wanted to see a ghost, or should I say a real ghost. With my sons help you three should be seeing more than one right about now.”

She, of course, was right because as the three boys looked around, they were amazed to see a graveyard full of ghosts. Some were talking in groups. Some were sitting alone atop their graves. Small children were playing games.

The three boys and the demons took a while to get used to each other being in the same body. Dillan felt a lot of pain, but it was not so much his, as it was Thellan's. He felt what had happened to him and felt the hatred for the humans and the Vampire that had caused it all to happen to him.

As the sun was coming up the woman slowly gathered up the jars, bowl, and knife. She put everything back in the bag. Dillan, Tristan, and Rodney walked back slowly to the school and then to their homes. They told their parents they were leaving for their new schools early packed then said goodbye. That night they were back in the graveyard.

As the moon was rising the four of them left. The parents never heard from their sons again. They had no idea what ever became of them. A year later a story hit all the major news networks in the country. A very prominent New England Preachers remains had been found. He had been tortured and then incinerated. There were no suspects, and everyone was baffled. It was believed that his death was linked to a recent rash of children disappearing in the area. He was thought to have tried to stop the culprit and been killed.

When the old graveyard was moved to another location, one of the very old crypts was empty. There were no remains in the coffins, and no one knew anything about the family except it was thought to have been evil. The mother was supposed to have been a witch and the children demons. The town decided to just destroy the crypt and coffins as there were no living relatives left.

Dillan, Tristan, and Rodney shared their bodies for almost two hundred years with the demons. Finally, when they were dying the witch found new bodies for her sons. As the three died she asked them if they had learned anything in their lives, all three said the same thing. “Children should not play in the graveyard at night!” The old woman laughed and laughed!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Winnona lives in Northern California under Mt. Lassen. She is currently ghost writing children's horror stories and working on her own book of adult short horror stories. She was included in the Sirens Call issue of women horror writers and had other stories previously published in the Sirens Call and a few other online horror magazines.

The cat is licking my beard again.

That's how I wake. My eyes open to an ever-changing barrage of colors and shadows casting themselves upon the living room walls. The television is still on, and loud, and I wonder how I can sleep like this. I turn the TV off, nudge the cat away, and slowly roll to my feet from the couch. Before I even stand, I notice a slight breeze coming from my right in the dark.

The sliding glass door leading onto our deck stands ajar.

I rise, start to shut the door. And as I do so, I hear something. Something faint, but something there. Voices in the distance. The words too far, unclear, just sounds.

Why would anyone be outside at this hour?

I slam the door shut and move swiftly towards our bedrooms. The door to our girls' room is closed, as it should be. I open it, quietly then quickly.

Neither girl is in their bed.

I dash to our room, fling open the door. Our bed is empty. Our window wide open.

Fast as I can, I race back through the house, tripping over toys on the way, before exiting through the sliding glass door in our living room to the deck beyond.

I stop. Scan the yard. All is silent, unmoving.

Then I see it. And something about seeing it makes time change. Makes time shift. I'm no longer in the moment, but beyond it, looking back.

The cellar doors stood open. And the screams began.

I raced to the cellar and down the stairs.

My family was there. Together. Holding each other.

As was a man.

Dressed in all black. His gaze sharp, penetrating. His grin wide, wide.

He looked to me and said, "Good. We're all here. Let's begin."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Brian Burmeister teaches writing at Iowa State University. His work has appeared in *The Furious Gazelle*, *Thin Air Magazine*, and *The Feminist Wire*.

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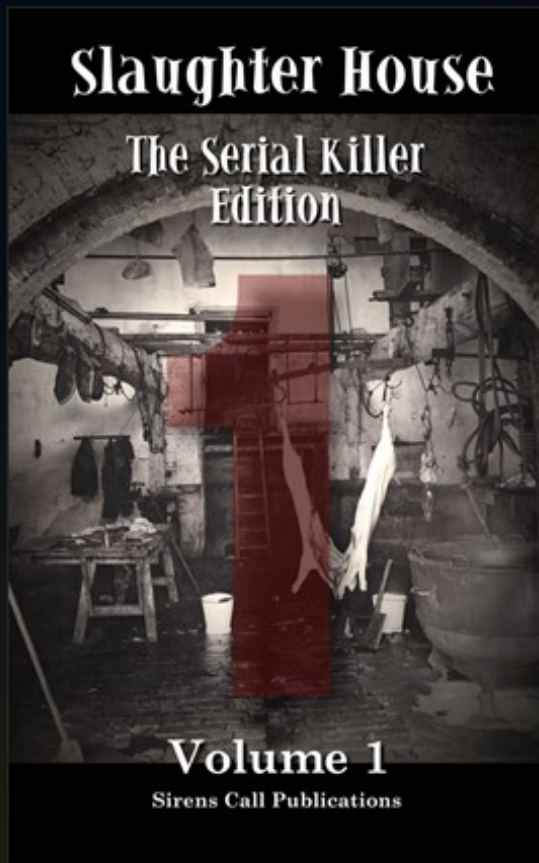


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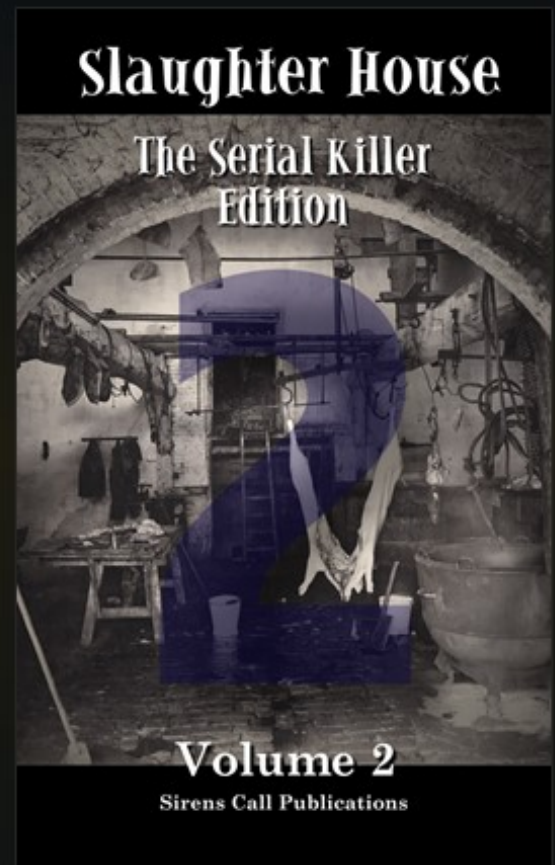
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Mama Spider | *Dave Ludford*

She sits and watches the blood course down the young man's chest from the deep vertical incision she's made that stretches from the sternum to the navel with the fascination a child might show viewing the shifting patterns of colors through the bottom of a kaleidoscope. Her head is cocked to one side and her tongue hangs out of the side of her mouth idiotically, like that of an exhausted dog. For twenty minutes, perhaps a little longer, she feels an overwhelming thirst that she has never before experienced; a desire to lick and suck at the flowing, dark-red liquid that is already starting to congeal in places on her victim's flesh.

The blood runs in rivulets and splashes onto the tiled kitchen floor to form miniature lakes below the camp bed on which the man- no more than a boy, really- is secured tightly. He's still drugged and barely aware of what is happening to him, so there is no screaming, no begging for mercy, which is a pity; her excitement would be greatly enhanced by listening to the pointless pleas of a victim slowly bleeding to death. But she is small in stature and not physically capable of overpowering another human being without chemical assistance. No matter. She determines to content herself with what she has- for now. The next time may be different. She rises suddenly, and moves forward quickly and eagerly, no longer able to contain her bloodlust. The chair topples over backwards as she does so. She bends down and begins to drink greedily, as if she were lapping up water from the fountain of life itself. The man begins to writhe and move his head slowly from side to side and he lets out a small groan and she hopes that some feeling is returning to his naked young body along with some small semblance of consciousness. She wishes for her victim to experience and share some of the exquisite pleasure she's feeling right now.

Luring him to her apartment had been so easy. Ralph Sadler, eighteen and fresh out of school, the new office junior: inexperienced in sex and life in all its intricacies, temptations and possibilities. But seemingly willing to learn, as she'd discovered when she'd flirted with him during their lunch hours, sounding him out as her possible first victim after she'd managed to persuade him to put down the habitual poetry books he read at the same canteen table he'd sat at every day of the three weeks he'd been with the company. For a geek he was quite muscular and well-built although he'd told her that he didn't work out- nature had just made him that way, he'd joked. Every day of those three weeks she'd observed him with an increasing desire that was bordering on an overpowering, insane lust.

Ralph hadn't taken much persuading when she'd invited him over to her place that evening for dinner and the promise of long hours of uninhibited sex afterwards. It was Friday, and a glorious weekend of reckless carnality stretched ahead of them, she'd assured him, running her lips seductively around her mouth and placing her hand on his crotch. She'd felt his virgin member throb and begin to rise to the occasion. Ralph had hardly been able to contain himself as she'd planted a light kiss on his lips and whispered "later..." in his ear, letting the word linger before walking away and breaking into a triumphant grin as she returned to her office. Poor fucker: she'd lured him into her web with hardly any effort required. Men were so pathetic and so predictable; driven by the instinct and desire of pure animal lust. Well, she had a few instincts

and desires of her own, although hers were nothing to do with such base things as fornication. They needed sating in a wholly different way...

An hour before Ralph was due to arrive she sat at her dressing table, lovingly brushing her luxuriant jet black hair with its bluish tint like the feathers of a magpie, and admiring the mirrored reflection staring back at her in an act of pure narcissism. She wore the minimum of makeup; she didn't need it to accentuate her natural beauty. Her skin was porcelain-white and as soft and delicate as early morning mist. The lightly rouged lips of her small mouth gave it the appearance of a rose newly into bud. She ceased her brushing and began to give some thought to what she would wear. Black; it would have to be black. The color of midnight and the color of her deep, dark soul. She moved to her closet and selected what she instinctively felt was the right dress; it was short and would show off her slender legs perfectly. "Come to me, Ralph," she said out loud as she held the dress to her slim body. "Come and see what Mama Spider's got waiting just for you."

She'd spiked his glass of red wine with a liberal dose of Rohypnol, a drug obtained from a friend of a friend who didn't ask any awkward questions. After several minutes he'd complained of feeling dizzy but put it down to the fact that he was a lightweight when it came to drinking alcohol. Then he'd passed out completely; dragging him onto the camp bed had been difficult but after much effort (and being spurred on by the thought of the delights to come) she'd managed it. She'd secured him in place with thick green garden twine: chest, arms and then his feet. His body was an inert, unresponsive mass that she was now free to do with whatever she desired; a fly trapped in her terrible, deadly web. She'd pulled his shirt open and taking a sharp knife from a drawer had made that first incision; had then taken up her position on the chair: watching, waiting...

She thinks she will never be able to drink her fill. The bitter, iron taste of the blood is like nectar, a sacred draught sent from the gods. Her whole body becomes electrified with an energy she has never known or experienced before. It feels as if she has been reborn as the person she knew she was always destined to be, that her time has finally come and she can live without being in denial. Ralph has started to thrash his head more violently; the drug is wearing off now. She picks up the knife and slashes wildly across his throat, severing his jugular; blood begins to spurt in an arc and she leans in to drink as if she were taking refreshment from a water fountain on a hot day. Her face and the upper part of her body are covered in the sticky mess pouring from the young man's body. Ralph gurgles horribly, gulping and gasping for air and she feels a fresh wave of excitement as she gulps at his life-force; she's eager to consume as much of him as possible before he expires. A patch of wetness trickles from between her legs.

After a few more moments of a pointless struggle to hold on to life Ralph finally expires with a last heaving exhalation. She ceases drinking, and wipes her mouth with the sleeve of her dress, and smiles a huge smile of satisfaction. She feels invincible, energized, like nothing on earth, giddy with power. She rises somewhat unsteadily to her feet from beside the bed and walks towards the kitchen wall by the door. She resolves that tomorrow she'll cut up what will be by then the dried husk of the body and place the parts in plastic bags and dump them in the canal.

She opens the door then turns back to look at Ralph once more.

“Night, sweetie,” she says. “Mama Spider loves you so much.”

She wipes her mouth with her sleeve once more, switches off the light, and then moves through the door towards the stairs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dave Ludford is a poet and short story writer from Nuneaton, England. His stories have appeared in *Fever Dreams* and *Schlock!* magazines in the UK and his poetry at *Poetry Superhighway* in the US and *The Wagon Magazine* in India. He is currently at work on his first novella. Writing is his number one passion.

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Questions | *Domenic Betters*

"I am alone."

The static cold of the monitor flashed those words in the face of Jeremy. His brow wrinkled and his eyes squinted. He looked for a hidden message that wasn't there.

Why was that written?

Did he write it?

No of course not.

His hands were on the keyboard.

They pulled back, as if they were suddenly on a hot stove.

Jeremy rubbed his eyes and went back to the screen. No, the words were still there.

Why?

The smell of cinnamon and flowers curled up in his nose.

His wife's perfume.

Her baking.

It was a scent that was hard to place but all too familiar.

Sunlight flowed in through the window of his small bedroom. Its rays wrapped their arms around him like a long lost lover.

Lover...

The rays shown like a spot light on the photo framed on Jeremy's desk. Someone's wedding day played out in the photo. The beautiful bride's veil fluttered in the light breeze of the day. Laughter danced in the wind and "I love you" bounced back and forth between the smiling faces. Claps and cheers folded his lips into a smile as his eyes softened.

There he was, holding the cake, the beautiful bride across from him, warding him away with her outstretched hands and empty threats. He laughed and she screamed as the cake made contact with her face. More laughter as another piece came out of nowhere and covered his own.

He heard a baby's chortle and turned to the small crib in the opposite corner of the room. The small white wooden railing was the safe haven and tender frame that housed a love like no other. Jeremy's heart beat a little faster and a sigh escaped his lips. The little mobile atop the crib, adorned with tiny whales and dolphins, endlessly spun with the pace of a dream and the soft melody of an angel. Between the railings laid a small bundle of blankets, moving ever so slightly with the steady breath of a newborn.

The crib was empty.

Jeremy stood up and took everything in.

The bed was freshly made and ready for slumber and whatever else may come. He remembered the first night he had lain next to her. The squeak of the springs, the cool touch of the sheets against his skin, the warmth that flooded him head to toe.

His eyes rested on more photos that lined the walls.

A child playing at the beach, the salty air hitting Jeremy's face as the child built a magnificent tower out of the sand around him. He laughed as the child threw rocks at him. He was Godzilla, stomping and roaring through the sandy metropolis. The child was the most

enthusiastic soldier that ever lived. His laughter and playful shouts washed over the mightiest of ocean waves.

A hospital delivery room showed a proud new father with a smile wide as the world with only the slightest bit of hesitation. Minutes before there were calm, yet rushed, hurried, precise orders being delivered. People in green gowns swarming like bees, chaotic yet organized and aware. Behind them somewhere in the green cloud were the cries of a woman barely cognizant of her surroundings. The unknown played a terrible song on his heart strings. And just like that the unknown was gone and the fear was joy. And everything was right.

Above and below the world went on. Below Jeremy's feet, music played with the soft sung words of a woman added to the melody. Above him, tiny feet padded across the floor, chasing some imaginary friend or foe.

And yet a chill pinched his spine.

The words were still there on his monitor. Somehow they had shown just a little bit brighter than anything else. They were trying too hard to make him believe they were real.

He wouldn't fall for it. He'd prove them wrong. It doesn't matter if his hands were their father and mother, he would deny their existence, and he would prove them wrong.

He opened the door and entered the narrow hallway of second floor. The staircase ran to the left, down to the first floor. The lights were off, leaving everything out of focus. The white walls were lined with several more photos.

A family smiling at anyone who walked by, wishing any would be traveler safe passage.

A painting of an owl looking down at those that passed by, watching every step with trepidation.

The hallway turned sharply leading to more stairs. These ones lead up to the third floor. Each step moaned beneath his feet, imploring him to reconsider his accent. Their creeks grew louder and louder with each passing step. Jeremy refused to acknowledge them, and wondered why they even protested so.

At the top of the stairs the hallway looked almost the same. Almost in that the walls were a little whiter here, a little icier. The air had more of a bite here and the door he faced stood more rigid and stern.

Jeremy pushed open the door, ignoring these changes, and entered his bedroom.

The computer monitor cast the only artificial light into an otherwise dim world. The clouds outside afforded him very little comfort.

Jeremy's eyes cast themselves upon their surroundings looking for some warmth in what they saw. The room, however, offered him little. The air was harsh, almost violent. Everything was cast in hues of gray. There was something, almost like a buzzing, tugging on the back of his neck, telling him to turn around and leave.

His bed lay in ruins with a single pillow, still damp and crumpled. The walls stood bare with pin sized holes dotting the landscape, like tiny eyes watching the every action of anyone who dared to remain. The shifting of the floor beneath his feet offered up the only sound to be heard as he moved further into the bedroom.

Jeremy's face tensed up when his eyes fell upon the indentations in the carpet in the corner of the room.

Something was moved from that spot that had been there for a while.

What was it?

And why did something as simple as an impression in the floor cause a single tear to roll down his face?

Could he hear someone crying?

Jeremy turned to his computer desk. It lay bare, except for the monitor that cast its hateful glow.

There were words written on it.

Many words.

His eyes traveled from word to word, widening with each letter they took in. His mouth curled down and his hands began to shake.

He took a couple steps back, bumping into the ice cold end board of the bed behind him.

They were all wrong. All wrong.

Who wrote that?

Why?

Was he still here?

Where was everyone?

Were they safe?

He had to know. He darted out of his room, his footsteps echoing behind him. He didn't even stop to consider the scuffs and scrapes in the door frame on his way out.

The hall was almost black. The empty walls afforded him the only guidance as he felt his way along. The feet that carried him up the stairs grew sore and heavy as they performed their masters bidding. The boards beneath them buckled and fought for every fiber that held them together.

At the top of the stairs, Jeremy stood. His hand hovered over the door knob, waiting, hoping that Jeremy would reconsider his actions.

But why?

What was there to fear?

What did his hand know that he didn't?

To hell with it.

He threw open the door and threw himself into the dark of his bedroom. It smelled old. It smelled rotten and damp with something else beneath those smells.

Something sweet and made of iron perhaps.

The walls and windows, the size and shape of it all, all told him that this was his bedroom. But it was empty. Nothing remained.

Where was everything?

Why was it all gone?

Who would have moved it?

Was somebody else playing a cruel joke on him?

He was wrong though. The room wasn't completely empty. There in the middle of the floor, there in the carpet, was a dark stain. The stain practically bubbled and frothed. It sent Jeremy into a panic. He had to remove it. It couldn't be there, it couldn't. He wouldn't allow it.

His head darted everywhere looking for something, anything, to help. His hands worked themselves into a frenzy, tearing at his shirt. He tore the scrap off and hurled himself to the floor and scrubbed. He scrubbed so hard that the veins in his arms bulged from the pressure. The stain was embedded too deep, it refused to release its hold on the carpet.

Jeremy spit on the floor, the only moisture he had readily available. He scrubbed even harder. His knuckles turned a bright red and the skin began to split and crack in places. His blood began to run into the carpet, and as the tiny little red creaks met the carpet, his blood became one with the stain. Blending perfectly and joining the dark patch that laughed in his face.

Jeremy stood up and looked between his bloody hand and the stained carpet. The wind howled with glee and lightning banged across the windows, streaking his face with a harsh glow like that of a computer monitor.

Jeremy's breathing grew sharp and ragged. He sucked the air in, in hungry gulps through clenched teeth. His pulse was felt through every vein of his body, throbbing to match his breath.

Calm down. You have to calm down. It's just a stain.

No, it's not.

Why is it not?

What is it?

Don't let it bother you.

I have to let it bother me.

Why?

If it's here then I'm...

I'm what?

What am I afraid of?

I'm afraid.

I need to get rid of it. Everything will be fine if I get rid of it.

I can get rid of it once I have the right cleaner. The cleaner is upstairs.

Yes, upstairs.

The hallway outside his bedroom was torn to shreds. The carpet was lifted up and ripped in places. The paint was chipped and peeled away. Scuff marks and scratches littered the small place as if a hurricane was used to help move furniture.

He hurtled the steps leading upstairs two and three at a time. The wood beneath him cracked and splintered with each bound. The top floor presented to him a door. Jeremy hesitated. The door didn't.

It creaked open on hinges that were rusted with eons of neglect. The door unveiled to him his bedroom. It was draped in a living darkness.

One that throbbed and pulsed, squirmed and crawled.

Jeremy's legs took an involuntary step back. The black of his bedroom actually began to stretch out for him, reaching, caressing, craving.

The room began to take on a rhythm. Its pulse picked up the tone of a heavy base drum.

BOOM BOOM.

BOOM BOOM.

BOOM BOOM.

Jeremy stood hypnotized by the pounding of the walls and ceiling and floor.

BOOM BOOM.

BOOM BOOM.

BOOM BOOM.

BOOM BOOM.

The pulse slowed.

BOOM BOOM.

His pulse slowed.

BOOM BOOM.

BOOM...

The black was almost still now. Jeremy could feel it. He was almost at peace with it, Ready to step in and embrace it.

Ready to...

NO!

He ran.

And the darkness followed. Its tendrils became claws that ripped and tore at the walls behind him. Its center turned into a gaping maw, lined with teeth and tongues.

He rounded the corner and leapt on to the stairs.

His foot went crashing through the step sending a sharp pain up his ankle and shin.

The darkness was in there too, grabbing and ripping at his leg, holding him down until he was consumed.

He shouted from a dry cracked mouth that gasped for air. Tears streaked his vision. There were shapes forming in the darkness now, gaining strength and form. Its hands ran along his shoulders and arms, up and down his back. He turned from it. He wanted nothing to do with it, knowing full well that it didn't care.

The darkness was going to take him. There was no doubt.

What would it do with him?

He didn't want to know.

He didn't.

As the last inky tendrils curled around his face, the top of the stairs became lit with a light that was full of hope, full of warmth and wonder. He could feel his strength return and the black behind him falter. It answered a prayer that he didn't even realize he was making.

His hands tore at the black, ripping it like a fine tissue paper, its husk floating away like a leaf in the wind.

He was free.

He ran for the light with a new found strength. His legs felt lighter. The stairs actually seemed to help carry him up, cushioning his feet and bouncing him higher and higher. The light grabbed his arms and pulled him the rest of the way.

His bedroom door was lined in gold, the doorknob a solid diamond. The seam of the door glowed with a brilliance that Jeremy couldn't even comprehend. Its brightness was unparalleled and yet it didn't hurt his eyes in the slightest. It only called him forward, reassuring him.

"Everything was going to be alright," it sang.

He closed his eyes and smiled. Everything was going to be alright. Of course it was. The door opened and he stepped forward into....

Nothing...

Where was the light?

Where was the comfort he expected, the comfort he deserved?

There was only his bedroom.

Empty.

Hollow.

Cold.

The room was quiet. The only noise heard was his breathing, uneven and shallow.

The floor was barren, the carpet gone. Everything was gone.

However the only thing missing that Jeremy cared about was the light.

Where did it go?

Why did it abandon me?

“Groooooo”

Something answered him.

“Greeeeeeooooo”

The noise, whatever it was, rattled his skull and hammered his ear drums.

“GRRREEEEEOOOOONNNNKKKKK”

Jeremy’s body trembled like it never had before. The screams and roars, now discernibly coming from beneath him, ripped and tore through him, pulling on his spine. The floor boards beneath him began to rise and fall, as if he stood on top of the chest of some massive creature.

Jeremy’s thought of running became a jumbled mess in his head, all he could do was move his legs a couple steps before they gave out on him, sending him head first into the far corner of the room. His bladder gave out shortly after.

He must have cut his head when he fell because something warm was running down the back of his neck and down his forehead, into his eyes. He couldn’t check if he wanted to though. His hands wouldn’t do what they were told; all they could do was twitch at his side, leaving him helpless to look on with a twisted grimace. A grimace worse than anything fear could produce in a human being.

Were the roars not so loud, he would have been able to hear the floor crack and splinter.

It didn’t matter though; he saw the splinters fly in the air and the dust flow around him like gnats buzzing about his head.

With one final great shout, the floor exploded into a confetti of wood, dirt, looked like ribbons of flesh.

A massive tendril, fully formed of a dark ichor and tipped with a red hook like claw, swayed in the air, back and forth.

The site froze Jeremy, rooting him to the floor. He was no longer even capable of shaking. And in the eternity that followed, Jeremy’s eyes locked with it, and for the first time he finally understood the answers to all of his questions.

The answers offered him no relief though, only sorrow, only regret.

The tendril sensed this. It knew what its purpose was, just as Jeremy knew. It shot forward and hooked its red claw through Jeremy's chest, right through his heart. It dragged him forward and down, through the black mouth of floor into an eternal dark.

Jeremy didn't even try to struggle.

He fell and fell, now accepting his fate for what it was. There was calm on his face, laced with pain.

Pain, not for the hook in his chest, but pain, for the loss in his heart.

Jeremy's eyes closed as he dwelled on that pain. He heard the laughter and cries that came with it, heard the chortles and "I love you." It all filled him and ran through him like an electric current. And when he could bear it all no more, he opened his eyes.

There was a white door.

In the endless black, there it was.

Jeremy opened the door into his bedroom.

The smell of cinnamon and flowers greeted him on a soft breeze. He made his way across the sun lit floor, and sat at his computer desk, and smiled at the framed photo next to the monitor. The monitor flashed a blank screen. His hands, steady and sure, reached out for the keyboard and typed,

"I am alone."

Why was that written?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Domenic Betters was born on October 15, 1985. Before he even knew how to spell, he was trying to write scary stories by dictating to his mother and having her write them down. Now he works full time as a butcher and is the creator of 'Black Market Beef Jerky'. Domenic lives on the Northside of Pittsburgh, PA with his wife and three children.

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Birth of a Ripper | Olivia Martinez

Jack the Ripper they call him. Ha!

More like Jack the imitator. God, men are such children. He's going around catching tantrums and cutting up prostitutes all because of the death of his wife.

Well, murdered wife.

It's not like he was exactly faithful. He came to me so much I stopped charging him. He fell in love with me.

Or so I thought.

One night, he slipped away from his wife and we met up at a nice little pub and inn. He bought me a drink, we flirted - oh, he was so charming - then he took me to the rented room for the real fun. But see, this is where he changed the rules. After we made love, he gave me *money*.

'I can't see you anymore,' he said. 'My wife is with child.'

I was in shock. He *paid* me and left.

He thought he could leave *me* for that wench? After all we've been through? Oh, no. I followed him.

I watched their home until I noticed her belly swell with child. One day, when he left her home alone, I went in. She didn't even see me coming. And yes, she suffered. I slit her throat, and as she choked on blood I ripped open her abdomen. I made sure the bitch stayed alive long enough to see me rip her baby from her. The thing was already dead by the time I got it out. I dropped it next to her corpse and left.

'Jack' wasn't too happy about that. Oh well.

The poor man can't get me out of his head now. He's been trying to find me ever since and leaving all these love notes in his wake. Too bad I'm over him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Olivia graduated from SUNY Oswego with a B.A. in Creative Writing and a Minor in English. She writes fiction, poetry, and dabbles in playwriting. She loves to read her poetry out loud to an audience, and loves attending poetry readings. She is very excited to have her work published with *The Sirens Call*.

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PURVEYORS OF DARK & EDGY FICTION



The Promise | *Larry W. Underwood*

He woke in total darkness, the air thick and still. Sleep beckoned, calling, lulling, pulling him back, but through sheer effort of will, he forced himself into consciousness, into the now. She needed him. Helen needed him. He reached up, running his hands along the silk-lined surface above him. He ripped away the material and felt smooth, polished wood beneath. With an unearthly strength he had never before known he began beating against it, pounding repeatedly until he heard a splintering sound, accompanied by a thin zigzagging line shooting across the surface. He continued hammering until grains of earth trickled through the crack and spilled onto his face.

He dug frantically upward, pushing and pulling, working his fingers through the fracture into the soft earth above. The wood gave abruptly and cold earth dumped onto his body, covering him completely. The weight of six feet of dirt pressed down upon him, pinning him flat. He struggled to move, twisting and straining against the pressure. He flexed his fingers and moved them slightly, loosening the dirt around them and working upward ever so slowly, centimeter by centimeter.

He felt a sense of urgency, as he knew Helen was in danger, he could feel it. As he strained to dig through the musky earth, he thought back to happier times when, as newlyweds, they had bought a house on the outskirts of town, an old farmhouse complete with a barn and small pond. It wasn't what they'd initially had in mind, and was farther away from the city than either preferred, but Helen had always loved older homes, and it came with several acres of land. They couldn't believe it was in their price range, and Helen eagerly told the real estate agent they would take it even before the inspection was complete. The agent, a perky, blonde woman named Rae, had a word of warning for the couple before she would sell the place. She told them that she was required by law to let them know the place was haunted. That was why the previous tenants had moved, and why the place was offered so cheaply.

Neither of them believed in the supernatural, so they laughed off the agent's warning. After all, they decided, they would be foolish to let such a great bargain slip through their fingers. They bought the house and spent the next few weeks moving their belongings into the place, unpacking boxes and getting settled into their new home.

It was during the sixth week that they first experienced anything strange. They had just turned in for the night and were settling into bed when their dog, Bogie, started growling and barking. Helen flipped on the bedside lamp to find the mutt backing up against the far wall, barking wildly, his gaze locked onto a spot near the closet door. They tried calming him, but he continued to bark, and they eventually had to lock him downstairs in the kitchen for the night.

This happened again the following night, and again the next. Helen began feeling uneasy, remembering the realtor's warning. The fourth night there was a crash from the adjoining bedroom, and when they went to investigate, they found a shattered vase and overturned chair in the room. Helen suggested they call an expert to look into the possibility of a haunting. Perhaps a paranormal group could help, she suggested, or maybe even a local priest.

Just as she mentioned the holy man, there was another crash from downstairs, and Bogie began barking hysterically from the kitchen.

“Pete, what was that?”

“I’m not sure, but I’m going to find out.” He grabbed a baseball bat from the closet and moved toward the door.

“Don’t go,” Helen said, grabbing him by the arm. “Wait until morning - *please*.”

“What if someone broke in, a prowler or something?”

“Well then, let’s call the police. Please, Pete, don’t go.”

“Oh it’ll be fine,” he assured her. “You stay up here by the phone. I’ll call out at the first sign of trouble. But I’m sure it’s nothing. Bogie probably just knocked something over in the dark and spooked himself.” He hefted the bat playfully. “Besides, I was clean-up hitter on last year’s company softball team, remember?”

She shook her head worriedly. “I have a bad feeling about this, Pete.”

“I’ll be careful.” He raised his hand and crossed his chest. “Cross my heart and hope to...” He saw that she looked even more worried, and quickly rephrased himself. “Listen, it’ll be fine” he said seriously. “I promise. I’ll keep you safe and sound. From prowlers...” he paused for dramatic effect, and winked at her, “...or ghosts! Woooo!”

She playfully threw a pillow at him as he stepped from the bedroom and flipped the hall light switch, but nothing happened. *Of course*, he thought. He felt along the railing until he reached the stairs, and then paused, listening. All was silent downstairs. Maybe he was right, and Bogie did knock something over. He took one step down the stairs and felt an icy chill wash over him, followed by a shove in the small of his back. He tumbled headfirst down the stairs, landing hard on the slat floor below.

That was his last living memory.

His thoughts were interrupted as his hand broke the dirt surface, reaching into the cool night air above. He grasped at the dirt as his other hand broke free as well. He worked himself up to his elbows, and then forced the rest of his body up out of the earthen womb, reborn into this world with renewed purpose. He rose on unsteady feet, his head lolling loosely side to side on a broken neck. He took survey of the surroundings, moonlight reflecting off the bone-white tombstones.

He forced one wobbly foot in front of the other in the direction of his home, his body stiff from the formaldehyde preserving it. A thin layer of fog rolled across the graveyard, pushed forward on brusque November winds. He cut through fields and woods, moving unerringly toward the aging farmhouse. He soon reached the pond on the edge of the property, startling the croaking frogs into silence. He saw his reflection in the water, the cheap funeral clothes caked with mud from his earthly escape. He barely recognized the grey and sallow face rippling before him.

He continued along the edge of the pond, each footstep accompanied by a sucking sound as he left deep dragging footprints in the muddy bank. He shambled towards the house, the wind blowing leaves across the yard in front of him as he made his way to the back door. It was locked – Helen always kept the doors locked, even during the day, something she’d insisted on as long as he’d known her – but he heaved his weight against it and the wooden frame gave easily. He shuffled through the dark house, up the stairs and down the hallway toward the bedroom. As he neared he heard a wheezing, raspy sound, and Bogey barking.

He opened the door and found Helen on the bed gasping for air, a panicked look in her eyes. Bogey was backed against the far wall, barking in her direction. Above her, straddling her on the bed, was a nightmarish figure; roughly human-shaped, but transparent, with wispy tendrils trailing off in all directions. It had both hands wrapped tightly around Helen's throat, squeezing. It turned its head and looked directly at Pete, glaring hatefully at him through glowing emerald eyes.

Pete advanced and swung at the creature, but his fist passed through it with no effect. He swung his other arm, and it too passed through the creature harmlessly. The thing released its grasp on Helen's throat and turned toward Pete, then dove toward him, hands outstretched. It scratched and clawed at him, rending long gashes in his clothes and flesh alike. Pete stumbled and knocked a side table over, spilling its contents onto the floor. A drawer popped open and a silver cross skittered across the floor, coming to rest between the two combatants.

The creature recoiled at the sight of the holy relic, retreating like a child from a hot stove eye. Pete noticed and scooped it up, then raised it to eye level. The apparition retreated a few steps. Pete took one step forward, and it turned to flee. As it passed by him Pete swung the cross wide. A hissing sound filled the air as it passed through its body. The thing collapsed in the hallway, wailing in pain. Pete started after it, but heard Helen stir behind him.

"Pete?" she asked hesitantly. He paused, and glanced back at her briefly. Her features were barely discernible, highlighted by moonlight streaming through the blinds. He wanted to hold her, tell her he loved her, but he knew his time was brief. He heard the thing moving down the hallway, writhing in pain, and turned back toward it. He followed it down the hall and swung the cross again, striking it just as it topped the stairs. It screamed aloud and tumbled down the stairs, just as Pete had weeks earlier.

He followed it through the house and out the open back door. It moved across the lawn toward a far corner of the lot, Pete in pursuit. A form slowly became visible in the darkness as they drew closer, and Pete recognized it as the well. Before the city expanded utility services this far out, the family that owned this house had gotten all its water from this well. Pete recalled the agent saying it had dried up long ago.

Pete lost sight of the thing as he neared the well, and looked around cautiously. Not spotting it anywhere, he moved to the edge and peered down into it. At first he saw only darkness below, but after a moment he thought he spotted something. There was a sudden flurry of movement as the thing lunged up from the depths, sinking its claws into either side of his face. Pete felt himself yanked forward and over the lip of the well, falling in pitch blackness for what seemed eternity. He struck the bottom with a sickening sound, his body twisting unnaturally from the impact.

He could hear the thing descending toward him, howling in rage. He looked to his right and saw the cross he'd been carrying lying faceup in a half-inch of water, glistening in the pale moonlight. He reached for it just as the entity pounced on him, ripping his back with razor claws. As his fingers closed around the cross, he spotted an object beyond it; a skull, bleached white with age, perched atop a pile of moldy clothes and bones. He lifted the cross and felt the creature flinch instinctively, backing away from the accursed item. It moved in front of the pile of bones, and hissed angrily at him.

Pete noticed the thing was taking a defensive stance, trying to hold its ground, almost as if it were protecting something. He saw the bones behind it and realized the thing was guarding it, trying to keep him away. He lifted himself off the floor with one arm, and raised the cross into the air with the other. The thing howled in hatred, its eyes glowing brightly in the darkness. Pete lunged forward, bringing the cross down in an arching swing directly onto the brittle skull. The base of the cross smashed through the eye socket, buried to the cross bar. The creature screamed aloud, writhing in agony, flailing wildly in the darkness. It slowly dissipated, the light of its eyes dimming like a flickering candle until it was extinguished.

Pete collapsed against the stone side of the well opposite the former body of his adversary, his energy completely spent. He could feel himself drifting slowly away, but felt at ease. He knew that Helen was safe, that the evil spirit that had tormented the inhabitants of the farmhouse would never again harm her, or anyone else. He glanced at the pile of bones and smiled slightly. He had kept his promise to keep her safe.

Now he could rest in peace.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Larry Underwood has had stories published in a number of anthologies and just published his first short story collection, *Tales From Parts Unknown*. He is a columnist for Scary Monsters Magazine and hosted horror movies on late-night TV for close to two decades in the Nashville, TN area as Dr. Gangrene, Physician of Fright.

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An Interview with Author Craig McGray

One of our upcoming releases at Sirens Call Publications is Craig McGray's *The Somnibus*. We sat down with him ahead of its release to ask him a few questions. Keep reading to see what transpired...

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Craig! Why don't you take a moment and introduce yourself to our readers?

Craig McGray: I live in Florida with my beautiful wife and two wonderful daughters. I have a full time career, write as often as possible, and I enjoy the mental and physical torture of triathlon training. I like meat and potatoes, and my favorite color is green.

SCP: What made you decide to become a writer?

Craig: I guess the short answer is I write because I can and I enjoy creating something out of nothing. I love the fact that a fleeting thought can be turned into a 'what if' situation and from that, a character is born. An entire world can be created and I can manipulate and mold it however I want. Since I was a kid, I always loved to write. Most times, I'd write a story and keep it to myself. A lot of my stories have always been on the dark side and I was never sure how it would be received by others, so I'd often throw them away after writing them and reading them over a couple times. I finally decided I'd share my writing with others and *The Somnibus* is my first full-length story to be published. The process of writing with a purpose as opposed to writing for my eyes only are completely different. When writing just to write, it is more therapeutic. There is no plot, no character development, and no rules. When writing pieces to be published, there is a responsibility to the readers that I have to consider. I owe it to my readers to deliver a complete story that fills in certain blanks but also allows them to form their own ideas and mental images. In my writing, I enjoy giving vivid description while avoiding the flowery, bloated descriptions I often see in other books. That's not a knock on that type of writing, but it's not something I enjoy reading or writing and it has its place sprinkled throughout a story. Some authors really pack it in there though, and I find myself skipping through pages sometimes when I get to a point where an author spends huge chunks of writing to describe a basic room.

SCP: What is *The Somnibus* about?

Craig: In *The Somnibus*, I wanted to create a character that readers would enjoy seeing develop as he deals with the horrible situations he finds himself in. Michael Black is a young man who is just finding his way through life when his parents are ripped from him in an awful accident. In that tragedy, he finds that he possesses a 'gift' passed down to him. With this gift though, comes a power he can't comprehend. There are others though, others who also know of the power and who will stop at nothing to take that power from him. Michael must wind his way through a maze of deceit and danger in order to fully understand his 'gift' and keep the power he holds

away from those who seek it out for their own malevolent desires. It's got a little of everything; tragedy, triumph, fear, and even a little love. It's a great book if I do say so myself!

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

Craig: Just that a lot of work went into it and I appreciate them spending a very limited resource, their spare time, reading my book.

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

Craig: Geez, this question is one that I don't even have a straight answer to. I've done both, but I'm not consistently either one. I've started outlines and done my best to follow them through only to have a character throw me off the tracks and onto a completely different path. I've also started with just an idea and written well into a story only to find myself cornered so the only way out was to set up an outline to find my way out. I am my own worst enemy at times. I struggle to keep writing through a draft without editing as I go. I've gotten much better about it, but I still find myself wasting writing time on editing an incomplete story.

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

Craig: For me, I think it's the same obstacle as many writers out there. Writing while working a full time job to keep the lights on and having a young, growing family makes the time hard to come by. Many nights are spent writing in the wee hours of the night when the wife and kids are sleeping. Many times they have no idea that I'm up in a dark corner of the house writing. Lunch breaks are often spent jotting down plot points or squeezing in a few paragraphs when I can. So I guess time is my biggest obstacle.

SCP: In your opinion, what sets *The Somnibus* apart from other books of the same genre?

Craig: *The Somnibus* is a story that can be read and enjoyed by a wide range of readers. I'd like to think that I've added some touches in my writing that will leave readers thinking, *That was a cool way to write that. I really enjoyed that.*

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

Of course Stephen King is on the top of my list, though I tend to like the older stuff from him. One of my favorites is *The Long Walk* which was published as Richard Bachman. I loved that story and to me, that is classic King. I also loved *The Shining* as well as his short story collection *Nightmares and Dreamscapes*. I also liked *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* books by Stieg Larsson for a good thriller series. That last one is a bit of a guilty pleasure for me so let's keep that one between us.

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

Craig: To me, success as a writer simply means that you have written something and at some point during writing it, you got goosebumps or had a smile sneak onto your face because the words came together in just the right way that, if only in that moment, those words were perfect. In that sense, I am successful. If I can write something that allows a reader to pick up my book and leave the everyday stresses behind while they are reading my story and travel to a world I've created, then it doesn't get any better than that.

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?

Craig: I have no real words of wisdom that aren't plain old common sense. If you like writing, keep writing no matter what and enjoy the process. Like with anything in life, don't look for money, fame, or what others may define as 'success'. Do what you love to do and do it a lot.

SCP: Anything you'd like to add?

Craig: Thanks for your time and to all the wonderfully creative people at Sirens Call Publications. This has been quite a process and I've enjoyed working with everyone to make my book the best it can be. Of course, I hope every person reading this picks up a copy and I'd love to get a review from everyone who reads it. I love reading reviews of my work. Whether good, bad or indifferent, I learn from each one and value everyone's opinion, well most everyone.

Thank you Craig for taking the time to answer our questions!

An Excerpt from *The Somnibus...*

Chapter 1

The passing of time can be a strange thing. Sometimes it speeds by, while other times it seems to slow down; like when you're forced to watch your parents die.

Another semester of college was in the books and I went to meet Mom and Dad at the restaurant for our usual Thursday night dinner.

"So, another step closer to finishing up," Dad said as he browsed over the menu.

I never understood why Dad continued to look over the menu since he'd gotten the same meal of fried chicken and beans for as long as I could remember. "Yeah, one more semester and I'm done."

"Have you decided if you want to take the summer off or are you going to try and finish up your last few classes and be done with it?" Mom asked.

"I don't know why you wouldn't just do it and get it over with," Dad said as he placed the menu on the table.

"I was going to try and get it done, but one of the classes I need isn't offered during the summer."

The waitress came over and took our order and then Mom headed up to the salad bar.

"Since you're going to have the summer off, were you thinking about maybe picking up a little work for some extra cash?"

Dad meant well, but he'd been on my case more lately about getting a job. He never talked to me about it, but I knew he had lost a good chunk of his retirement when the market tanked, and since Mom didn't work I think they were struggling a little. I overheard Dad say one time that he had to take a loan against one of his life insurance policies when the bank was on his back about the mortgage.

The waitress returned and set our drinks on the table.

"I'll try to find something, maybe Home Depot or something like that."

"Home Depot? What do you know about hardware?" Dad chuckled and took a sip of his beer.

"I know about as much as you do, which isn't saying a whole lot."

"I guess you've got a point, son. I never have been very handy around the house I guess."

We both laughed as Mom returned to the table. "You two sure are having a good time."

Dad took another sip of his beer and shot me a smile. "We were just talking about Michael here getting a job over the summer."

"What kind of job?" She said taking a bite of her salad.

I looked at Dad before answering. "Maybe Home Depot or Lowe's."

Mom smiled as she tried to hold in a laugh and finished chewing before she answered. "Oh, well that sounds good. Do you know anything about hardware, Michael?"

Mom always was the more diplomatic of my parents and Dad grinned as he took another swallow of his drink.

"I think I can handle it. I'm sure they'll give me some training."

"Sounds like a plan," Dad said.

A few minutes later, the waitress brought our food and we ate while talking and laughing about life.

Once we finished eating, we left the restaurant and stood in the parking lot deciding whether or not Dad was okay to drive. Mom tried to take the keys from Dad after he'd taken full advantage of the buy one-get-one happy hour deal, also part of the Thursday night routine. I followed them to the car, trying to coax the keys away from Dad, but as usual, he insisted he was fine.

They pulled out of the parking lot and I sent a quick text to Mom before following them onto the highway.

Thnx for dinner. See you back at the house. Luv u guys.

I sang along with the radio as I followed them down the interstate. Without warning, my parents' car swerved violently, the rear end swinging wide before catching and veering the opposite way, fishtailing several times. Dad didn't have a chance to control it. Their car swung off the side of the road, rolling several times, throwing clouds of dirt and debris into the air.

After what seemed like an eternity, the tumbling finally ended. I skidded to a stop and dashed for their car. A small fire on the underside of the vehicle ignited, quickly maturing into an inferno. The blast knocked me backward, but I scrambled to my feet while fire illuminated the darkness and acrid smoke filled the back of my throat. My mother's tortured screams pierced the night air. Entwined in the wreckage, my father lay on the ground, peering at his exposed torso, his guts spilling onto the pavement.

I ran for them again, trying to save them, but heat raked across my skin, pushing me back. Orange light splashed over the trees that lined the rural highway and I fell to my knees while the tortured screams of my mother ripped through my mind.

She remained trapped, her peeling face pressed against the passenger-side window. Our eyes locked, her fingers bleeding as she pawed at the window sealing her inside. I tried to reach the car but the intense heat savaged my arms and neck. I stumbled before lunging again, wanting to save her. As I did, flames leapt from the wreckage, spitting on my hand as I again lurched towards her. The heat held me back, forcing me to become a helpless observer as hungry flames ravaged my mother's face until her struggle ended.

I backed away from the gruesome scene while the firestorm lashed out engulfing my father's living half, and for a moment, I thought I caught a glimpse of his soul as a shadow lifted from his fallen body. Within seconds, he was gone, swamped in the fiery chaos. I sat on the road sobbing, clutching my knees to my chest, while my parents melted away in the raging fire.

Traffic came to a halt and bystanders tried to reach them, but searing heat shielded the wreckage. My senses went numb as sirens rang out in the distance...

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