The Sirens Call

June 2017 issue #33



Horror-struck!

Short Stories, Flash Fiction, Poetry, and Artwork for Horror Fans!

'A Warning on Wings'
by Jonathan Fortin, winner
of the poetry challenge
of The Next Great Horror
Writers Contest by
HorrorAddicts.net

Artwork by Lukę Spooner of Carrion House

An Interview with Sam Mortimer, Author of ''Screams The Machine'

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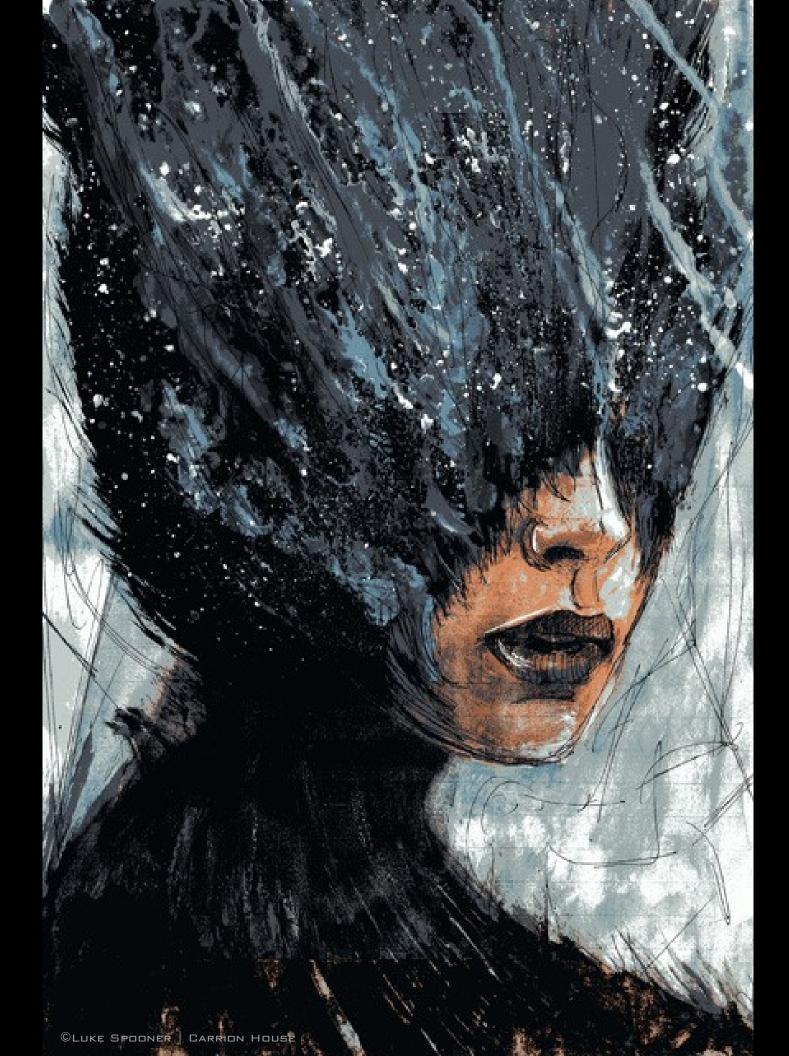
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Crying | Jon Olson

The house was silent.

James' wife Kate was in bed, no longer nagging him while his son slept quietly in his room. His cries had a way of penetrating deep into James' head.

Sitting on the shitty brown couch his in-laws had given them as a wedding present, James enjoyed the silence.

Then his father spoke.

"Is that kid of yours going to cry tonight?"

James talked to his father every night, whether he wanted to or not; he always told James how to live his life.

The old man was more overbearing now than when he was alive.

"No, he's not," James replied.

"Yes, he will."

Ignoring his father, he tried to find something decent to watch until Kate called from their bedroom.

"Honey, the air conditioner cut out again! Can you come take a look at it?"

"Tell her to suck it up," the old man spat. His lifeless eyes blinked at his son as his crooked lips spread into a grin. "Or are you going to give in to her again?"

"Butt out," James muttered. "She knows better now."

He pushed off the couch, and made his way down the hallway. As James passed his son's bedroom, he made sure to tread lightly so he wouldn't wake the baby.

James did not want to go into that room again.

His own bedroom was dark when he stuck his head in. The air conditioner had indeed shut off and James could see his wife lying in their bed. To him, the temperature wasn't too bad.

"You'll just have to make do," James whispered. "And keep your damn voice down so Garrett won't wake up."

James shut the door as he turned back to the living room. He veered off to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. Squinting in the fridge's light, he took a bottle of beer from the top shelf.

"He's going to cry."

James twisted the cap off of his beer, took a gulp and then said, "Don't go there." He bumped the fridge door closed with his hip.

"Don't go where? I never tolerated you or your sister crying for no damn reason so you shouldn't either."

"How many times do I have to tell you to butt the fuck out?" James spun around to face him but the living room was empty.

He sighed, letting his shoulders slump, and took another drink.

That was always the problem. His father would show up every night, spit out his nonsense and then scram before James could argue back.

James walked back into the living room. Just as he sat down on the couch, a high-pitched

wail erupted from Garrett's room.

"See? I told you he would."

"Kate!" James yelled down the hallway. "See to the baby, will you?"

He grabbed the remote and thumbed through the channels.

Garrett continued to cry.

James found a football game on and took another drink.

"Did you not listen to me last night?" his father asked, sitting at the other end of the couch.

"Shut up," James replied.

"I told you how to deal with it."

"And I did as you said."

"Doesn't sound like it."

The quarterback dropped back into the pocket and threw a completion to his receiver in double coverage. It was an amazing play that warranted replays in slow motion.

Garrett's crying intensified, sounding raspy.

"You have much to learn."

"Fuck off you dead prick," James said, grimacing. He leaned over the armrest of the couch and yelled, "Kate, for fuck sakes, the game is on! Go check on Garrett!"

James tried to enjoy the replays but the announcers were overpowered by Garrett's seemingly endless wails.

"I may be dead but at least I knew how to run my family."

"Goddamn it!" James threw the bottle toward his father but the old man was no longer there. The bottle bounced off of the cushion, spilling beer as it fell onto the carpeted floor.

He jumped off the couch and stormed down the hallway. Slamming his bedroom door open, he could see Kate still lying where she was earlier.

"Are you fucking kidding me? You're still in bed?"

His father laughed from the hallway and added, "Great wife you got there."

"Get the fuck up!" James screamed, grabbing Kate by her arm. "Now!"

He hauled her out of their bed and into the hallway. James kicked his son's door open and dragged Kate inside.

Releasing his grip on her arm, James grabbed a handful of her wet and sticky hair, holding her face toward the crib.

"I'm at my wit's end, Kate!" James cried. "I tried feeding him, rocking him and even singing to him. Despite all of that, he cries! Hell, I even shook him!" He let go of her hair and she dropped to the floor. "When none of that worked, I did what my old man told me to do. I caved his head in with my hammer!"

The one good eye Kate had left that hadn't been mangled by James' hammer stared lifeless at the crib.

There wasn't much left of Garrett's pulverized head. Blood, skull fragments and brain matter were splattered on the wall and ceiling. His blue Superman jumpsuit was now purple, having soaked up the blood.

James backed against the wall and slowly slid down.

Resting his face in his blood caked hands, he sobbed.

James felt his father's hand rest on his shoulder.

"He wouldn't stop crying..."

"You did alright, Son. How do you think I got your sister to stop?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Jon Olson is a Security Checkpoint Coordinator at the Halifax Robert L. Stanfield International Airport. As an author of horror and dark fiction, Jon also has a passion for science fiction and comic books. A proud member of Pen of the Damned and the Horror Writers Association, he resides in Eastern Passage, Nova Scotia with his wife, their daughter and three cats.

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Friends Even After the End | Joe Giatras

Six months ago my friend Edward died. Tonight, he sat in the arm chair in my bedroom. He was much paler then I remember. Half of his right cheek was gone, leaving a hollow opening that exposed the rotten and discolored inside of his mouth. He no longer had blue eyes; there were only empty sockets now, wet and filled with dirt. A darker fluid I did not recognize leaked from those sockets, rolling down his left cheek and staining the gray suit we buried him in. The blue tie that matched his eyes looked as though it had been gnawed on. The bottom of it was gone, thin ragged strands of fabric dangling like entrails, and the knot had been loosened around his neck as though some creature of the underworld had worked hard to devour it but couldn't quite pull it away. He smiled at me, the way he always did, and the dead skin around the corners of his mouth ripped away as the silver wire they used to keep his jaw shut during the open casket protruded out of what was left of his gums. I felt like retching. I bent over before him, intending to unload all the sickness that his image had embedded into my body. The feeling passed though as I heard my old friend's voice. Finally he said, "Hey buddy, how's it going?" And I was no longer frightened.

"I'm fine, Edward. How are you?" I responded.

"Dead," he said flatly, the grin never leaving his face.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking," I said quickly, feeling a deep burn in my cheeks. I turned away from him and put my hands over my face, burying the redness deep within them. I

addressed him as though he were alive. I wondered how I could have been so stupid. It had simply just felt too much like old times.

"Buddy, don't worry about it," he chuckled softly, "I know I'm dead."

I turned back and looked at him. He adjusted in his seat, and I shivered. The movement was accompanied by the sound of liquid moving around within his hollow cavities. I knew it was the embalming fluid. Edward's organs were long gone. He was empty. With most of his hair lost, I could even see the place where the embalmer had cut open Edward's cranium to remove his brain. Still, there was something in his grin that put me at ease, a smile from death that might have killed another human being instantly if he had come to sit in *their* bedroom. I knew Edward though, before death had taken him. I had seen that smile too many times to mistake it for anything sinister. In retrospect though, I believe I saw what I *wanted* to see so I could get what I wanted. I needed to ask him the question that had not left my mind since the day I walked into the church and saw his still body resting in a casket below the altar. I grabbed a folding chair from the corner of my room and unfolded it in front of Edward. I sat down, keeping my eyes on that grin, the only thing keeping my *old friend* in the room with me. "What's it like to be dead?" I asked.

"Eh, could be better," he said.

I laughed and nodded my head. That was typical of Edward, never satisfied. He could always do better or find somewhere more fun to go. Edward was the kind of guy who wanted to get to the final step of something without going through the process. He always wanted to get more out of everything. That was what killed him of course. Edward had one too many vodkas and ended up choking on his own vomit. By the time they found him in the morning, he had been dead a long time. They said there was never a chance to save him. That was the part that always stung the worst for me, *never a chance*. I was with him that night, and in the last six months I'd thought a lot about watching him down those shots. Who would have known that the moment his lips hit that shot glass, there was never a chance.

My laugh faded though as Edward kept silent. The quiet went on for longer than I wanted it to and eventually I had to say something to get rid of it. I was starting to see the dead thing that frightened me instead of my friend Edward. The first thing to pop out of my mouth was, "Did it hurt?"

"Hurt?" He asked, in that same flat tone from before where his voice was neither happy nor angry, just there. The rubbery skin around his empty sockets shriveled, as though he were trying to squint at me. If he was alive, I would have said he looked confused.

"I mean death," I clarified, my voice wavering between curiosity and nervous fear. "You know what I mean Edward!" I shouted. He knew what I was talking about. He always loved to play the fool when he was alive, but in reality he was smarter than I will ever be. I always used to get a kick out of it when he acted like I was talking crazy, but now wasn't the time for kidding around. "Did it hurt when you died?"

His head leaned back and I heard that sloshing noise again as he moved. Edward's grin grew longer as he stared at my ceiling. He slapped his hands jovially against the padded arms of

the chair and laughed, a high-pitched cackle that sounded as though it could go on forever as it echoed throughout my room. One of his hands reached for his side, though only by pure habit I believe. The chance of him experiencing any pain from shortness of breath was long gone now that his nerves had been shut down and his skin had lost its sense of any touch. Edward laughed for a long while before his head rolled forward again. He shook his head at me as the last of his chuckles eased away. He smiled, putting his toothless gums on display, and yelled, "Of course it did!" It was then I noticed his tongue had shriveled up and looked more like a piece of coal that was falling apart, piece by piece. I watched that tongue wiggle around in decay as he elaborated, "Dying fucking hurts, man! All that he went peacefully stuff is ridiculous!"

"Well," I felt a sudden fear creep up in my belly, making me pause for a minute to stifle it. I swallowed and shut my eyes, processing something I hated hearing. I always thought *it* would be quick. I never imagined that I would feel something too. In all the time I had wondered about death after Edward passed, the thought had never occurred to me. I thought there would be a white light or a floating feeling, not pain. I pressed on, as the tingle in my belly began to simmer, and asked for Edward to tell me what the pain was like.

"I can't explain it." He responded in shock, "That would be like trying to explain how God exists!"

"So there is a God?" I immediately asked.

"There's something." Edward's grin returned.

"Which one did you go to then?" I asked, excitement beginning to overpower my fear.

"What do you mean?" His taunt brow creased and he chuckled breathlessly again, "Like, upstairs or downstairs?"

I nodded.

"There isn't either, my friend."

I laughed and waited for a punch line that would never come. I thought he was pulling one over on me, the way Edward always did when he was alive. I waited for him to laugh, tell me how good he got me. He only stared at me though. His empty sockets were still and the corners of his mouth uncoiled until his ragged lips settled into a drooping frown. My own laughter faded then. He was serious. I allowed the dryness in my throat to subside before speaking again. "What is there?" I asked.

"There's just death." Edward said.

I thought he looked hideous then. The sickness he had instilled within me before was starting to flare again. I looked him over once more as I thought about his answer. I saw the way Edward's fingers were gripping the arms of the chair, pressing into the soft fabric. Only a few of his fingers were still intact, the others looked as though they had been bitten off by some creature that had burrowed into his casket. I shut my eyes and tried to force the image out of my mind. I began thinking about the things that had entered my friend's body since we buried him, all the small creatures that had made nests in his cranium or crawled through the spaces where his entrails once were. The smell was beginning to become more potent too, adding to my imaginings of the things that had made homes within the body of my old friend. It was becoming

unbearable to breathe with the stench of rot and decay closing in around me, the smell of roadkill sizzling in the summer sun. I shut my eyes and put my hand around my throat to stop the vomit.

When I opened my eyes again, Edward was leaning over in the chair. He was closer to me, the smell making my eyes water. Burning tears trickled down my cheeks as I blinked repeatedly, watching the image of my dead friend before me blur and then refocus again and again. Despite my discomfort, there were still questions in my mind that I had to know the answers to. It had been all I thought about in the last six months and I was not going to let the sickness within me stop the answers from coming. I spoke again, fighting through the grotesque bile building in my throat, and asked, "What is death then?"

Edward smirked, "I'm afraid I can't explain that either, buddy."

"Why not?" I asked, a little upset. "You're dead, aren't you?"

"Well yeah, but that doesn't mean I know a thing about what death really is!" He threw his hands up at his sides, acting as though I were the crazy one.

"Then just tell me what it was like when you died! I have to know what it's like! I want to know what you felt and what you saw, Edward. You have to tell me at least that!"

He leaned closer. I felt his scaly hand, fingers missing, rest upon mine. I could feel the cold fluid that leaked out of those spaces where his fingers once were, the hard knob of bone left over where the knuckles began. Warm piss ran down my cold leg, flattening the goosebumps like fire melting ice. Edward's distorted face became inches away from my own. No breath was released as he parted his lips to speak. I felt the whole world silence around us as his words dominated my ears. His grip tightened around my hand and he began, "The night I died, I felt as though a sledge hammer had come down upon my chest. I felt something break through my sternum, exploding my heart instantly. If I could have screamed, I would have. I couldn't breathe in or out. I just laid there, watching my bedroom fan go around as my mouth hung open. I thought my eyeballs pushed their way out of my skull. I swear to you I felt my right eye when it popped out and landed upon my cheek. That's how my parents found me, you know. They found me with my tongue hanging out and my eyeballs dangling over my cheeks. I remember the pain being so great, I couldn't wait for it to end. There were no last words, no last looks at anything meaningful. The last thing I saw was my fucking ceiling fan. No, all I could think about then was an end to that misery."

Edward was almost growling in my face then, puss dripping from the corners of his mouth and onto the floor. I felt some of it spray onto my face as he spoke. I was shaking, causing Edward's hand to shake along with me. His whole body seemed to vibrate, bringing back the sickening sloshing sounds, as the grip tightened upon my hand. He tried to smile but it was twisted, filled with darkness. "The pain did end though," he said when he continued, "when it did, I saw a white light cover my bedroom. It spread over my vision as though I were sinking beneath it. Brightness was all I could see."

"Was it heaven?" I asked, petrified.

"I thought so. I thought I'd see Jesus, God, my grandmother or my first dog for god's sake. I saw *nothing* though. Absolutely nothing. Poof! I was just *gone*."

"That can't be!" I shouted, more frightened of his answers than I was of the corpse that was slowly pulling me toward it. "There has to be something after death! I mean, you're talking to me right now!"

"This is the first thing I've seen since I died," Edward responded, his face less than an inch away from my own. "To me, it feels as though I just died minutes ago. Yet, I still know that it's been six months. It's all quite strange."

"I don't understand!" I shouted, I didn't realize it then but I was screaming.

"And you won't," Edward said, the grin from before beginning to take shape again. "You won't understand until you're dead, like me."

"Can't you tell me anything at all? Anything about what it's like to be dead?"

Edward moved his hands around me, placing them on my back as though he were going to hug me. He put his lips close to my left ear. I could feel my heart in my throat. The sickening way his decayed skin touched mine made the air within my lungs cold as ice. It hurt to breathe and the sweat that dripped down my face fell to the floor in droplets the size of rain drops in a heavy storm. My body was in shock, in panic. Death had me in its embrace and I wouldn't stop it, I wouldn't stop it until I *knew*.

Edward began to whisper to me, "The best way I can describe it is this, death is when the biggest *something* in the world becomes the biggest *nothing*. There's absolutely nothing behind a dead man's eyes, same goes for his eyes even *after* death."

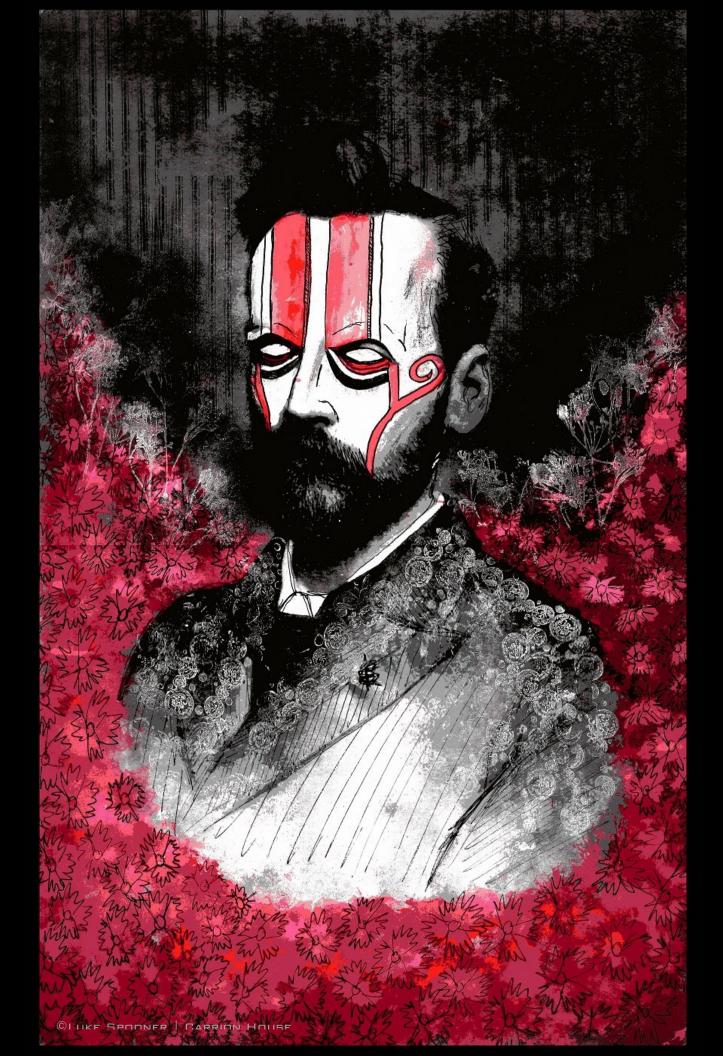
I hated what I was hearing. I wanted to hear that Edward was in a better place. I wanted to hear that I was going to a better place. I was angry and hurt. Death wasn't a curiosity anymore. Death was scary. Everything I had ever hoped for, that my accomplishments and good deeds on Earth meant something, was gone. Edward had told me very little, but still too much. I was sorry I even dug him up and brought him to my house in the first place.

That was when my parents came into my room. They probably could hear me screaming by then and assumed I was having a bad dream or something. I knew they never expected to see what was really going on. I could tell from their reactions. Mom wouldn't stop screaming. Dad fell to his knees and threw up. They were like that for a while, screaming and asking me what I had done. Conveniently, Edward stopped talking when they came in. He just sat there, slumped over in my arm chair with that stupid grin on his face.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Joe Giatras is an author from the suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. His stories explore the supernatural, whether it be an author who hides the secret to his success or a visitor from beyond the grave. He is the author of *The Ghost Writer*, previously published in the anthology *Between the Cracks*.

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In the Absence of Light He Finds You | Logan Fourie

The flashlight's light looks like a lost pin prick in the vastness of the thick, inky darkness. It surrounds Sarah like a black velvet shroud and threatens to swallow her whole. She remembers how, when she was younger, she believed something in the dark was out to get her. She remembers, when she got older, thinking how silly that was. She doesn't think that it is silly anymore...

It all started a few weeks ago when, as a psychology student at Tukkies, she sat in a session with a teenager named Gary who suffered from night terrors. She recalled listening to his stories and experiences and felt a cold shiver down her spine. The story stuck with her like a bad song that runs continuously through your head, repeating itself over and over again. The boy believed he was being stalked and hunted by a presence that only comes out when there is no light. He spoke of the malevolent presence that wants to take him, devour him. She was reminded of the stories that her Gogo used to tell her and how many similarities there were. The only real difference was that the Tokolosh is traditionally a Zulu mythical figure where Gary is a white English boy, but besides that the stories were uncannily similar.

The last session was cancelled due to the fact that Gary had seemingly escaped from his locked cell the previous night. Nothing more could be done so Sarah decided that relaxing in the tub filled with hot water and bubbles and a glass of red wine in her hand, and Katie singing softly in her ears was just what the doctor ordered. Suddenly the lights in the flat went out and it gave her a start. It was slightly unnerving how first there was light and now there was only complete darkness. Damn load-shedding. Sarah carefully climbed out of the warm bath and draped her bath robe over her lithe, wet body. She quietly and carefully opened the bathroom door and stepped out into her bedroom. The deep shadows created an otherworldly scene in her otherwise familiar bedroom. What was that? She started. She could have sworn something moved. Of course that wasn't possible. There was nobody there but her. The darkness and the memories of Gary's story stirred at the melting pot of her vivid imagination. Fear of the dark, what nonsense she tried to reassure herself. She slowly headed for the wardrobe and took out her flashlight. She flicked on the flashlight.

There it was again. She could have sworn she saw movement. As if something scurried away from the light. She shone the flashlight over to where she imagined she saw the movement and saw...nothing. That story must really have gotten to me, she thought. She moved towards the kitchen to get some candles when she stopped suddenly and began breathing heavily. She definitely saw movement out of the corner of her eye. Sarah was almost too scared to shine the light in that direction, she may not like what she sees but she needed to know. Sarah slowly slid the shaft of yellow light towards the movement but saw nothing. What is going on? she thought to herself. Could this be somebody's idea of a sick joke? She moved the flashlight's beam of white light around the small living room in an attempt to find the intruder but it was as if it melted away before the light. There! Towards the kitchen. No! There by the window. Sarah

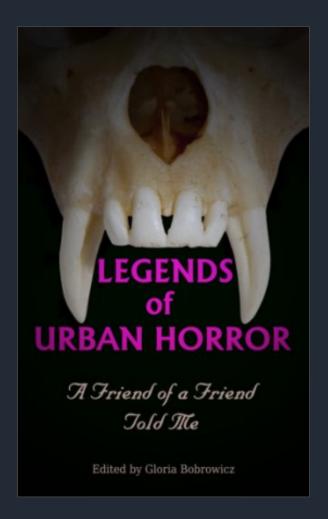
frantically swung the flashlight back and forth making it look like one of those swords from that sci-fi movie, and try as she may she could just not get a fix on the intruder.

Sarah backed up against the wall and looked towards her flat door. Only a few strides away but it may as well be miles away for all that it mattered. Sarah could feel the terror well up inside of her. What was she afraid of? She wasn't a child. She wasn't afraid of the dark. She was a logical, educated, young lady. She sank to the floor as the panic took over completely. She could feel the thing move towards her. Hungering for her. Wanting to devour her. She held the flashlight up close to her face. The warm yellow light offered little solace as she sensed the thing in the dark creeping closer and closer.

She remembers when she was younger she was scared of the dark and now that she is older how silly it was. But now, as the light begins to flicker, she doesn't think it is that silly any more...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Logan Fourie is a 36 year old teaching English at Pretoria Central High School in South Africa. He has enjoyed literature much his life and has hopefully sparked that passion in his students. Logan has a fascination for the weird and wonderful, and the dark, and guesses it makes sense he would enjoy writing about it.

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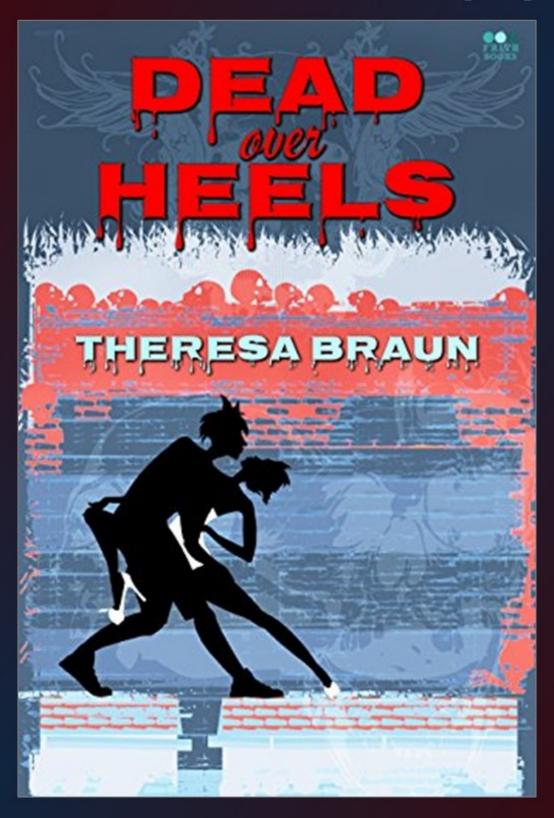


Legends of Urban Horror:
A Friend of a Friend Told Me

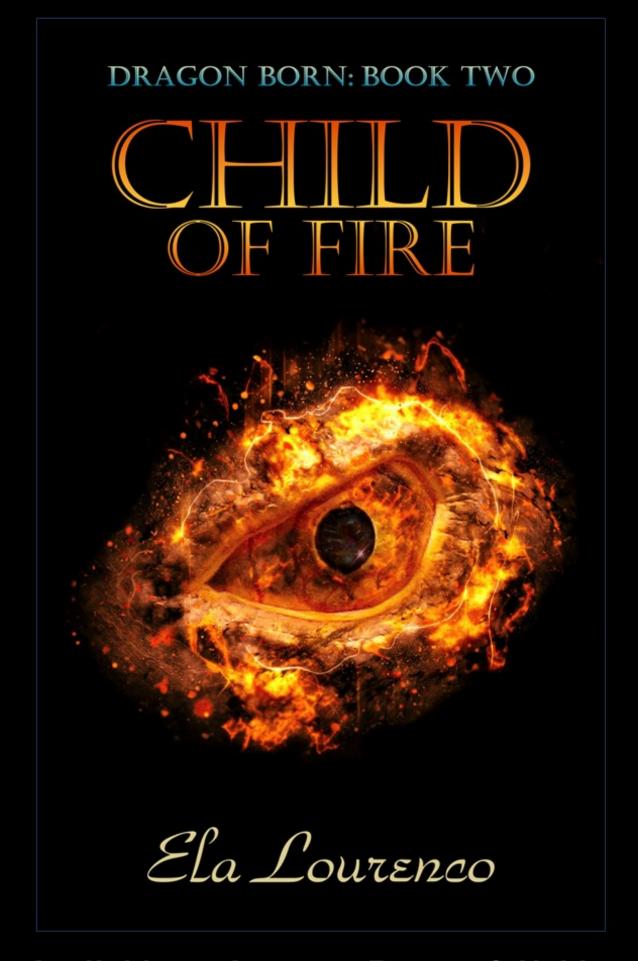
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"...creepy, concise ghost story with a shocking twist."

—Unnerving Magazine



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An Overlooked Note | *Dimitar Fabijanic*

"I never did tell you how I lost my left hand," ran a voice in the drab, dimly lit bar whose twilight threw an uncanny look over them all. It made them appear as nothing more than immovable objects whose shadows seemed more substantial than they were. He sat at the far end of the counter, remembering something that brought him there in the first place. For he tried to forget that something which crept craftily in his thoughts, budging his conscience, visualizing itself in his memories like a well-remembered dream he didn't want to have. He came there with the hope that he would be heard, that he might transfer a little from his burden to the rest of them, if only in words.

"What I want to convey to you is the experience of the whole thing, the *reality* of it." After he said this he exhaled a grayish smoke from his mouth while a red dot moved along with his right hand, getting ready for the next drag. He cleared his throat and looked at the cigarette.

"I will have to use the clichéd phrase about the curiosity and the cat, but in my case the curiosity killed my left hand, or rather snapped it off It is hard to think of anything else these days. When I try to think too hard on it I sometimes ask myself whether it was real at all. But the final verdict I come to is always 'real' since my left hand is gone apparently.

For a few seconds he didn't say anything, his eyes fixated beyond the windows, as if brooding upon something inexplicable, something that he began hesitating whether he should relate at all to those present. His eyes now moved and glanced at each of them with a monotonous expression on his face, as though looking for a final approval to begin relating his experience. His face was now half-concealed in the haze of smoke while his eyes were focused and unmoving.

"If you remember the three-story house close to the town's center, the one that recently got knocked down for the new building," he nods, "well, I suppose that you remember the old recluse, Dr. Garret, who rented the house for many years before he died some months ago in circumstances not revealed to the public after some noisy business inside the house took place. Some said that it might have been a suicide; others said a burglary, because the old man was seen carrying a gold ring and bracelet every time he went for a walk, so someone might have thought that he had more of the stuff hidden somewhere in the house. Anyway, no one knew exactly what happened that night.

"As you know I worked for the local newspaper then, and this was a story waiting to be written. When I came that night to inquire, I was told to back off the scene. I only saw one police car, an ambulance that carried the body of Dr. Garret and some bystanders. That same night they'd put the yellow stripes on the door and chained it. But it was easy enough to find a way in; I used the old public building next to it, because they were connected with an underground tunnel for some reason.

"After traversing the short length of the tunnel, I entered the basement full of old crates on which the labels were hardly readable; the damp air was unendurable and suffocating, and in it I could smell a trace of some vague odor which reminded me of rotten plants and rotten meat.

"I entered the first floor of the house, the hall that is. It was dark; the only light came from the lamp-posts outside, and was not enough to enable me to see the interior. I didn't want to turn on the lights and attract attention, so I used the flashlight on my phone. The moment I turned it on I saw a door wide open. The room behind it was completely empty and spread on the floor and walls there was something like slime mixed with soil. I then turned to the closed door opposite and opened it. It was the room that preceded the library, with an old chest of drawers in one of the corners, and a fireplace at the wall opposing the windows; above the mantelpiece on the wall there was a recent portrait of the old man. In the middle of the room there was a circular wooden table with four chairs, and on it was a silver candelabrum caked with wax.

"The creak of my footsteps on the uncarpeted floor filled the room when I walked to the door of the library. The walls of the library were covered with wooden bookcases from the floor to the ceiling; only the windows were left untouched. At the far corner, near one of the bookcases, was a writing desk apparently made from the same wood as the bookcases. When I threw the light on it I saw many yellowed papers scattered on the desk, some lying on the floor, and two old books whose covers betrayed that their content was written in the Latin language.

"I sat on the chair and opened the drawers. All of them were empty. It started to seem to me that someone came there and in a hurry wanted to find something. I rummaged through the scattered papers; they all seemed to be research papers of some kind or another. They ranged from biology, botany, geology, geography, chemistry and astronomy, to such obscure and discredited studies such as astrology, alchemy and the occult. On some of these papers were diagrams and illustrations, some familiar from the modern sciences, while the others incomprehensible and even eerie and hideous when I come to think of it. There was some kind of celestial map on which dots were connected to form some route that led to what looked like to be our solar system. I came to an old photo showing the old man, then younger, with some man that looked like a Chinese, and behind them a desert landscape filled with sand dunes. On the back of the photo was written 'Taklamakan, 1971'.

"Among the papers scattered on the floor I found a torn piece of paper with a note jotted on it. It said: 'about their growth, diet and cycles consult the second volume of the Hypostasis'. Suddenly there was a sound from somewhere in the house, and I hurried to take a few photos from the scattered papers and the old photo. I then turned to retrace my steps and exit the house.

"I was now at the hall when I heard the sound again. I could more distinctly hear that it came from somewhere on the upper floors. Somehow I felt that I couldn't bother less if it was someone from the authorities who would throw me out of the house; I took some photos anyway, and it was enough for few speculations. I checked the second floor only to find the two rooms empty with traces of that slime and soil mixture as in the previous room. When I got to the third floor I noticed the same vague odor from the basement, but now more penetrating to my sense of smell. What looked like the door to the attic was locked, so I turned to check the last door.

"It was different from the other doors in the house. This was made from what looked like some strong wood fortified with steel frames. There was no handle on it, but there was a rectangular spyhole in the middle of the door. This opening was wide enough for one to put his whole arm through. I first illuminated the interior of the room; I couldn't see anything, only damp walls. And that terrible odor!

"The next thing I did was to put my right arm through the spyhole and check whether there was any inner lock on the one side I could use to open the door. I couldn't find anything of the sort. I then put my left arm through only to find the other side without a lock as well.

"The second I started to pull my arm out of the hole I felt a firm grip above the elbow. It was some sort of appendage, like a thin, cold and slimy rope tightening around my arm. I tried to pull but it held very firmly. I then heard a sound as of something crawling on the wall behind the door, something wet. A moment later I felt my arm submerged in a very warm mass of what felt like pulsating flesh. I was so bewildered that I actually didn't panic, as if I was hypnotized in a way. The odor was now so pervasive that I felt nausea.

"I can't remember exactly the moment when I fainted, but it was probably when I heard the sound of my hand being *snapped*. When I came to my senses I was lying a few feet from the door, my left hand gone. Now, my first thought was that I would scream the moment I saw that my left hand was gone, but what averted this from happening was that when I looked at my arm there was no blood where the wound should be and I felt no pain; actually, there was only well healed skin, like I never had any hand in the first place."

When he finished that last sentence, he revealed his left arm under one of the bar lights above him. He caused their shadows to stir a bit when in bemusement they saw the arm; it looked like he never had any hand at all, just smooth skin at the end of it. No traces of any scar, not even a blemish on the skin whatsoever.

"It amazes me, it baffles me, and it terrifies me. It is not entirely because of the hand, but because of the whole thing. I didn't dare to approach the door a second time and I hurried to the hall. It all started to seem like I was in a dream, but I wasn't. I exited the building the way I came in and simply went home.

"The following day I called the editor and asked for a few weeks leave, I plainly told him that I lost my hand in an accident; I didn't want to baffle everyone at work with my miraculous healing wound, and even when I got back to work I had to put a bandage over it so as to look plausible. I got fired, of course. Why keep a cripple when you can hire someone with two hands? I decided not to publish the story anywhere because of its *improbable* nature."

He abruptly fell silent. They probably expected more, for this was not the way they thought the story should end. But it was all *he* had to say. All of a sudden he didn't seem as distressed as before. Maybe he felt some relief in the telling, or he was already affected by the alcohol. "I think that I will go and get some good rest," he said. He got up, left the cash and said goodbye. Through the windows he could be seen disappearing between the buildings, with cigarette smoke trailing behind him.

It was less than a week later when rumors spread of a peculiarly beheaded body with a missing left hand. It was said that someone found it in an alley and thought that it was some discarded wax doll, until a vague odor was smelled and trails of slime mixed with soil were

detected all around the body.

We will never get to know how he felt when the thin, cold and slimy appendage was tightening around his neck and drew his last breath before his head was submerged in a very warm mass of what felt like pulsating flesh.

Among the scattered papers in the empty library of the late Dr. Garret, a torn piece of paper was lying on the floor with the note he previously read. What he failed to notice was that the other side of the paper was filled with words as well, and these words made up the following lines: 'It seems to know exactly how much sustenance it needs and then closes the wound of its victim as a means of conservation for the next cycle of feeding. It is written in the second volume of the Hypostasis that they sometimes follow their victims, but this is yet to be demonstrated'.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Dimitar recently started writing short horror stories. For quite some time he indulges in the words of Gogol, Maupassant, Bierce, Poe, Lovecraft, Ligotti, Ramsey Campbell and others pertaining to the weird and the macabre. He lives in Skopje, Macedonia.



Reaper and the Runaway | Livingston Edwards

Laura Kinsley stuffed her phone back into her backpack's pouch as her whistling waitress returned.

"Yeah?" asked Laura.

"Want anything else?" asked the woman between whistles of a Christmas jingle. Laura shook her head. "Sure, ma'am? We got a Buy Two, Get One—"

"No."

The waitress stared for a moment. She raised an eyebrow, nodded, and left. Laura pulled her phone back out and flipped to her voicemail. Thirteen calls. Footsteps caught her attention. She looked back up.

"Listen," she said, "how about you go whistle somewhere—"

She stopped short as she noticed the serrated scythe first, then the figure in the long black cloak holding it. She stared at Death.

"This for real?" asked Laura. She glanced around the empty booths around her and the waitress behind the cash register. She was too busy dancing to notice. Death loomed over her.

"Very," said Death, his voice cool. With a finger bone, he pointed at the seat opposite her.

"This taken?"

Laura gave a slow shake of her head. Death glided into the seat. He laid his scythe across his lap. The curved tip dangled into the aisle. He smoothed the wrinkled, tattered folds of his cloak. He raised his hand. A moment later, the waitress returned.

"Coffee, please," said Death. "Black."

"Sure thing, sweetie."

The server left, whistling a Christmas jingle. Laura lifted a gold-pierced eyebrow. She looked from Death to the server.

"Only you can see me," explained Death. "To her, everyone else, I'm you're handsome boyfriend."

"Define handsome."

Death looked at the girl up and down.

"Picture skinny, with lots of piercings and tattoos. Likes the color black. Hard metal fan."

"Oh cool, so I get a bag of bones, they get a hottie. Lucky me." She tapped the side of her coffee cup with a polished black fingernail. Laura looked at the specter, peeking under his hood. "So, really Death, huh? Grim Reaper and all that shit?"

"In the flesh." Death paused, titled his skull. "Usually gets a laugh."

"Prove it."

Death paused again.

"I better not. Tends to deaden the mood."

Laura raised her eyebrow again. Death raised his hand.

"Either you don't have a sense of humor, you're acting tough, or you're one of *those* people," said the specter and looked over his shoulder. "Fine. Fond of our whistler?"

Laura looked at the woman dancing behind the counter, who was sucking on a peppermint stick now.

"Nope."

Death nodded, snapped his fingers, and turned back around.

"That's all?" asked Laura. She looked at the scythe laying across Death's lap. "Then what the hell is that for?"

"For show," said Death and he tapped the scythe, and the blade wiggled. "Always been fake. This century plastic. Next 3D printed or something. Everybody thinks I actually use a scythe—you know how hard it is to kill someone with one?"

Laura opened her mouth until she heard the shattering of porcelain on tile. She looked at their server, now crumpled on the floor, convulsing. The woman mouned and spat on the floor and the cupboards in front of her.

"The fuck?"

"Too bad," added the Reaper, "daughter just flew in."

Two more convulsions and the woman grew still. The woman's wide brown eyes remained open, unseeing. Her fingers stiffened on the white tiles.

"Stop!"

"What?"

Laura shook her head, running her hands through her shoulder-length black hair.

"Okay, shit," she said. "Come on, okay, okay, I get it. I get it, you're fucking Death. Stop!" Death held out his palms.

"Don't look at me."

"Please!" shouted Laura. The specter shook his skull. Laura leapt to her feet.

"Fine, fine," he said. He snapped his bony fingers together. Tears rolled out of the girl's green eyes. She wiped them away and smeared thick eyeliner on her cheeks. She reached for her backpack and pulled out her phone. She turned it on. Death watched without a word.

Four minutes later, they watched as an ambulance tossed their server onto a gurney and hauled her away into the howling snow. Six minutes after that, a second server shuffled over and placed a cup of black coffee on the table. Death took a sip.

"Would it have killed you to reheat this?" shouted Death after her. "Coffee's colder than me!"

Laura cried harder.

"Anyone ever tell you," said Death as Laura returned from the bathroom ten minutes later, a napkin clenched in her fists, "you look better without that mess on your face?"

"Anyone ever tell you, you suck at being a boyfriend?"

"You believe me now."

"She almost fucking died!"

The cheekbones shifted and pulled upwards, and the mandible widened and the cracked white teeth shifted. A low cracking noise filled Laura's ears. She stared.

"...you get constipated?"

The skull relaxed.

"That was a smile," grumbled Death. He took a sip of his cold coffee. "Look, this isn't the job where I get to practice a lot. Anyway, you're lucky I like you. Otherwise, she would have been a goner."

Laura looked out the window at the snowflakes falling against the glass. She stared at the streetlamps lining the sidewalk, snow gathering on the concrete. She looked further into the quiet darkness and spotted a row of houses half a mile down. She focused on the them.

She looked back down. Her slender fingers pulled and tugged a napkin until it ripped. She picked up one halve and tore that into strips. A beeping filled the booth. Laura jumped and looked at the cellphone in her lap. Death peeked at the screen.

"Seventeen messages," he said.

Laura turned the phone facedown. She shrugged and took another sip.

"Let's get out of here," she said, "go for a walk or something."

She picked up her backpack and stood. Death raised a finger bone and she stopped.

"First you pay. Then we go for a walk. What? Hard to carry money when you're all bones."

"No sob stories," said Death as the pair walked down the sidewalk, the snow to the middle of Laura's boots. Death's cloak rippled on the ground behind him. The clouds drifted away into the blackness. The moon glowed silver and bright above Laura's right shoulder. "They bore me..."

Laura rolled her green eyes.

"Still nothing?" Death sighed. "Okay, wow. So who called?"

"Mom, Dad, I don't care."

"Wow, both parents."

"Whoop-dee-fucking-do."

"Tell me about them."

Laura shoved her hands inside her jeans pockets. Mist filled the air between her breaths.

"They don't think I can take care of myself. I'm mean, almost eighteen, and it's like I still got the diaper on."

Death shook his skull.

"I think you're doing all right," he said and Laura froze, mid-step. The corner of her glossy black lips curved.

"Really?"

"Oh sure," said Death. "You're doing better than fine. Superb, dare I say. Phenomenal. First day out on your own and you end up having a heart-to-heart with the Grim Reaper."

"Anyone tell you you're an asshole?"

The Grim Reaper stopped, turned around, and raised his scythe high above him. The tip caught the silver flicker of the moon. The blade sent a shadow falling over his face. His eye sockets vanished briefly. The bridge of his nose, cheekbones, and chin caught the shadow.

"Only once."

Laura froze. She swallowed as Death continued to stare at her until he lowered the scythe and glided forward.

"So," said Death, his voice lighter, "that the only reason you're throwing this tantrum?"

"No," said Laura, staying five feet behind the tall, hooded specter. She shrugged her backpack into place. She waited a couple minutes before answering. "Other things."

"Like...?"

"My boyfriend's acting like a real asshole. Hasn't found what he wants to do, so he doesn't do shit. Except smoke. It's like sleeping with an ashtray."

Death chuckled. The grinding sound echoed through the silence as they trudged through the snow.

"That bad, huh?" asked Death, rubbing his chin. "You have his address?"

"This isn't funny!"

"No, no it is. A wonder you all aren't still wearing diapers. Eighteen! You know how many years you have left? Well, I mean, *I do*, but never mind that. Look at me, eons old."

"Don't look a day over sixteen," muttered Laura.

"And you know what? I don't have a clue what I'm doing."

"For real?"

The specter nodded.

"Maybe I'm like you in a way," said Death. He looked at the moonlit sky. "A runaway. Just trying to find something else. Or maybe not. Whatever the case, here we are."

Laura followed the silver tip of his scythe to a cul-de-sac behind her. She stared at the familiar house with the yellow brick and the black pickup truck in the driveway. Her heart pounded in her chest.

"The fuck is this?" she screamed at Death.

"Home," said the specter quietly.

He stared at the house and a moment later, the front door opened. A man walked outside, his cane hitting the concrete. Laura held her breath as her father turned her way. He stared at her and his mouth opened.

"Do it!" shouted Laura. She lunged for Death's scythe. He lifted it out of her reach, shaking his skull. "Damn you, do it! Kill me! Now, do it—"

"Laura?" shouted her father from across the yard. He dropped his cane and limped forward. "Oh my God, is that you? Maddy, Maddy, get out here, she's back! Laura's back!"

"You fucking asshole!" continued Laura. Tears spilled out of her eyes into the slush. "Fucking coward, fucking asshole, do it! Damn you, do it, do it!"

"It's not your choice," said Death and glided back. The darkness curled around him. "It's mine. Take it from someone who knows only how to take life: don't waste yours. You have no idea just how lonely Death can be."

The Grim Reaper vanished.

Laura collapsed. Her father rushed up to her. Sweat poured down his face. He wrapped his arms around her.

"My God, Laura, you scared the hell out of us! Where were you, where did you go—"

"Coffee," interrupted Laura and her father paused.

"What?"

The teenager looked up, glancing at her father, then at the silent blackness behind him.

"I went for coffee," she added. "Really cold."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — A lifelong Los Angeles native, Livingston Edwards was born with an insatiable desire to write. If there's a rare moment he's actually not writing, then he's certainly writing in the little computer in his head. Taking inspiration from human emotions, he delights in taking his readers on a trip through the bizarre, the thrilling, and the heartfelt.

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Lost Time | *Theresa Braun*

I sit in my '57 Chevy in the driveway, not able to feel my feet. The rest of my body is numb, including my mind. All I know is that there's something dreadfully wrong with me. There's nothing I can do about it...

The meeting of the Experimental Aircraft Association ended. Just as I hoped, I gleaned several tips from other pilots also building planes in their garages. Mine is almost fully assembled, but I wanted extra assurance my maiden flight wasn't going to crash and burn. Rachelle secretly hoped I'd never fly it. I saw it in her eyes each time she had brought me just-baked cookies.

In the parking lot of the EAA, I examined my map, looking for a shortcut. Main highways from Mankato to Minnesota Lake were several extra miles. Sure enough, I spotted a direct route on a backroad. Less time. Less traffic. Less speed traps. I'd thrill Rachelle by arriving home early. One less thing for her to fret over, especially on a school night when she'd have to teach the next day. And, maybe she'd even be in the mood before lights out.

I drove off the lot, onto the road. As I crossed the train tracks, the car shaking me like a martini, I hadn't seen the massive pothole on the other side. The Chevy plunked and rattled, and I had to hit the gas to get out of the crater. I shot out of the car and stuck my head under it to view the damage. I sighed, noticing the vehicle's one brake line dangled onto the asphalt.

After getting back in the driver's seat, I tapped the steering wheel, convincing myself things weren't really that bad. Having no brakes was all the more reason to take the road less traveled. The plan was to downshift when making any stops, which would be few and far between, at least until I got into my neighborhood.

The twilight pastels of the darkening sky blazed overhead, thick clouds drifting in. Each side of the road dropped off into swamp, and I was glad to be the lone vehicle. I switched on the radio for some company, The Marcel's "Blue Moon" settling my nerves.

Eventually, I came upon a sign warning 'curve ahead' and fortunately spotted it in time. Had I been going any faster, I'd still be in the swamp. Passing the dangerous turn, I congratulated myself, accelerating on the straightaway. My watch indicated about half past eight. I was making great time.

Having a few close calls that night, I pitied the big black Lincoln tilted off on the embankment ahead. Oddly, it resembled a hearse. By now the night had taken hold and with no streetlights or any sign of the moon, the only light came from my own headlights and the lights of the Lincoln. As I rolled closer, two figures surveyed their predicament. My car slowed to a walking pace, and I lowered the window. "Can I help you?" I asked.

A person dressed entirely in black wore an Amish-looking felt hat, but I couldn't make out any facial features. Somehow his car's brake lights didn't cast a red illumination—there was no effect at all. It was like his skin was immune to even the faint hint of moonlight or twinkling starlight, making me wonder if he had a face at all.

My Adam's apple lurched in my throat. My hands went clammy.

The figure glided toward me, and my brain wasn't processing any of it. I don't think there

were any legs under his cloak. He came at me so slowly. The second shadow blocked the Lincoln's brake lights and the headlights on my vehicle dimmed. A bird squawked, but it was eerily muffled, as was the clock on the dashboard. The radio shorted out. Blood surged loudly in my ears.

"Can I help you?" I asked again. My shirt was soaked with sweat. I heard Rachelle's voice in my head, reprimanding me for being a hero. Why did you stop? And I wondered why myself, my heart beating out of control.

The dark shadow continued to slowly glide at me. I was paralyzed. Even my eyes were transfixed. I thought I'd gone deaf because I heard nothing at all, not even the blood still pounding through my head. Contracting my bladder and bowels, I thought about stepping on the gas and getting the hell out of there. My body wouldn't move. It was the first time in my life I prayed to pass out.

What happened between that moment and the one where my body finally let me gun the gas pedal, I have no flipping clue. All I know is that the night went even darker, even though the moon suddenly came out of hiding. Those dense clouds were gone. My aviator watch, which was supposed to be state-of-the-art reliable, still read half past eight. The car's clock's dial spun out of control.

As my car sped away, exhaust hazing behind me, I glanced at the rearview mirror. One of the figures floated along, reaching into his cloak for something—a weapon to obliterate me? The gas pedal still pressed down as far as it could go, I finally got out of there, by the skin of my teeth.

The rest of the drive was so automatic that I don't even know how I made it home.

Stepping out onto the driveway, I have the sensation I'm moving on an invisible conveyor belt. And I'm not quite myself anymore. I can't describe it.

The bedroom light is still on, but I'm afraid to go inside, afraid of what I might do. I go in anyway. When I see Rachelle in bed, she's reading. She throws the book aside and springs up. Touching my face, her expression contorts, noticeably perplexed. "You look terrible. You eat those pickled pigs' feet again?"

I don't answer, wishing indigestion from my favorite gas station snack was my only problem. My own thoughts dim, and I reach into the inside pocket of my jean jacket. Not thinking of what I'm digging for, I pull out my car keys.

"Want to go for a drive?" I ask, my awareness slipping away.

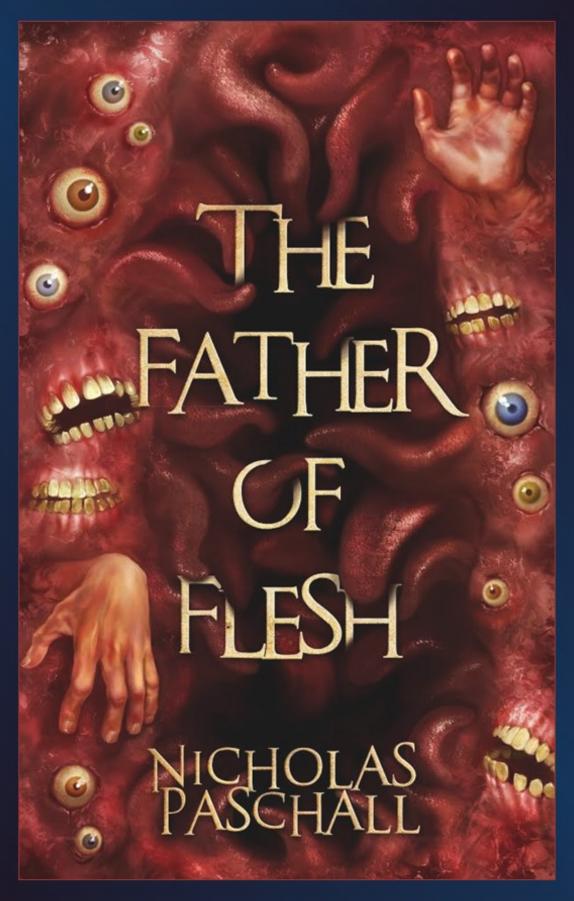
ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Theresa Braun was born in St. Paul, Minnesota and has carried some of that hardiness with her to South Florida where she currently resides. Traveling, ghost hunting, and all things dark are her passions. Her stories appear in The Horror Zine, in Schlock! Webzine, and by Frith Books, among others; upcoming work will be in Monsters Exist at Deadman's Tome and Hardened Hearts at Unnerving Magazine.

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AVAILABLE ON AMAZON, BARNES & NOBLE, KOBO, AND ITUNES

SLITHERING FROM THE DARKNESS, THE FATHER CALLS... WILL YOU ANSWER?



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

The Ladies in Black | Melissa R. Mendelson

I was ten when my uncle passed away. I didn't know him. I didn't know anyone on that side of the family, and now I was surrounded by strangers, pushing past their dark pants and long, black arms and trying not to get entangled in weird embraces. Somebody slobbered on my cheek, and I wiped their drool away with my sleeve. It was like being caught in a torrid sea, I think. My father used that word a lot, and I don't know where he is. This dark mass has inhaled my family, and it's nearly crushing me. And then someone tripped over me.

My brother swung me up and then caught me in his arms. He spun around, making me dizzy. Then, I realized that this weird room was circular. There was a long, black couch in the middle of the room, and if people weren't gathered there, they were standing in the doorways and alongside the walls. Then, I was riding on top of my brother's shoulders, surfing through that dark mass, and looking for those that I knew, my parents and grandparents, but I couldn't find them. Neither could my brother, but as he spun around and around, looking for them, my eyes fell on the box in a corner of the room.

"Don't move," my brother said to me as he placed me back down onto the ground. "Stay right here," and then the dark mass inhaled him again.

I didn't listen to him. I was curious about the box. It was a large, brown box, plain and placed on top of a table, maybe. I'm not sure what it was resting on, but I never saw anything like it. I could fit in there, but that thought bothered me for some reason. Still, curiosity got the better of me, and I hurried over to it. It was closed, and I reached for the lid.

"Oh, no, son," a strange, old man said as he grabbed my hand. "You do not want to look in there," and he squeezed my hand against his dry, wrinkly skin. It reminded me of a snake, and then he said, "Do you want to look in there?"

"Henry," a woman nearby snapped, and he jumped, dropping my hand.

"Just kidding," he said as he hurried over to her. "What do you think I am? An idiot?"

I quickly ignored them and their questions about where my parents were. Maybe they should find them. *I'll stand right here. They can't miss me. I'm right by the box*, and again, I reached for the lid. What was inside, I wondered, but then a cold breeze fell across me. And I jumped back.

I turned just in time to see three ladies dressed in black enter the room. They wore long, dark veils in front of their faces. One woman had white hair. Another had almost gold hair. The third had red hair. Even with their faces covered, they looked beautiful, but then I noticed something strange. Nobody was looking at them. They moved through the dark mass as if they walked through air, and people just moved aside like they knew that they were there. But they weren't looking at them, and then I realized that these three ladies were walking toward me. And I backed up against the wall, cringing, wanting to run, and their hands reached out toward me.

I shut my eyes. I pushed my small body against the wall. I could feel the cold air kiss my skin. Then, nothing. Nothing happened, and I opened one eye and found those ladies gathered around the box. They were whispering. I couldn't make out the words, but it reminded me of the

priest at church, who would chant his prayers. Were they praying? Were they praying for my uncle, a man that I met maybe once, if I was lucky? Was he a good man? Was that why they were praying for him, and why wasn't anyone noticing this? People were just talking. Endless talking, as if the three ladies in black were not standing there beside me.

I suddenly heard my name called. It was my mother. Then, my grandmother called my name. Then, my brother, and I jumped up to get them to notice me. But as soon as I jumped up, I bumped into the woman with red hair, knocking her to the side, and her veil fell to the floor. I felt foolish as I reached for the veil, but when I touched it, it felt sticky. It reminded me of a spider web, which was weird. Why would she have that on her face, but then I realized that the other two ladies in black were looking at me. But the one with red hair continued to face the floor.

"I'm sorry," I said, handing her the veil, and she reached for it without turning around. Her hand missed it, so I moved closer. "Here," and I placed it in her hand. And she grabbed me, turning around to reveal a face that looked like wax after a candle had burned it, and pieces of flesh dripped to the floor. I screamed.

My father came to my rescue, lifting me up and carrying me away, but I continued to scream. I pointed at the three ladies in black. I pointed at the one with red hair, who placed the veil back over her face. That face, and I screamed again, pointing madly. And people were whispering things like, "Why did they bring him?" "He's too young for this." "He's pointing at the coffin." "That poor, poor child."

"The ladies in black! The ladies in black," I screamed as my mother took me out of the room and into the hallway.

"Oh, honey. You're shaking. I should have left you home."

"Mom, she had no face," I cried.

"Who, honey? Who had no face?"

I wanted to answer, but then I looked up. And she was standing right there beside me. I could feel her eyes on me, but she had no eyes. She raised one long, black gloved finger up to her lips, but she had no lips. Still, I heard something, something like, "Shhhhhh," and it chilled me deep inside.

"Oh, honey. You're ice cold," my mother said as she wrapped her arms around me, oblivious to the dark stranger nearby.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I made it up," and I looked at the lady in black with the red hair, and she nodded. And then she walked away. "Can we please go home now?"

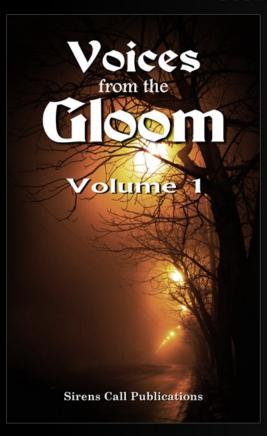
"Soon, honey. Soon. You want to go back inside?" My response was a wild shake of my head. "Okay. Okay. We'll stay out here."

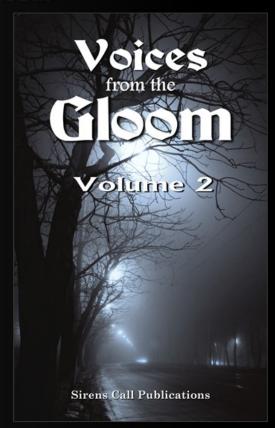
I wanted to tell my mother the truth. I wanted to tell her why I would wake up screaming in the middle of the coming nights. I wanted to tell her about that face I saw every time I closed my eyes, but that wasn't the worst thing. I was only ten, but I knew. I wish I didn't know, but I knew that I would see those ladies in black one day again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Melissa R. Mendelson has an AA in Liberal Arts and BA in Mass Communication: Critical Analysis. She was once a news reporter and now works for the State of New York. A variety of her writing has been published by Antarctica Journal, and she recently finished writing her first Horror/Sci-Fi novel, Lizardian. She is now writing a new story based off John Carpenter's movie, Starman.

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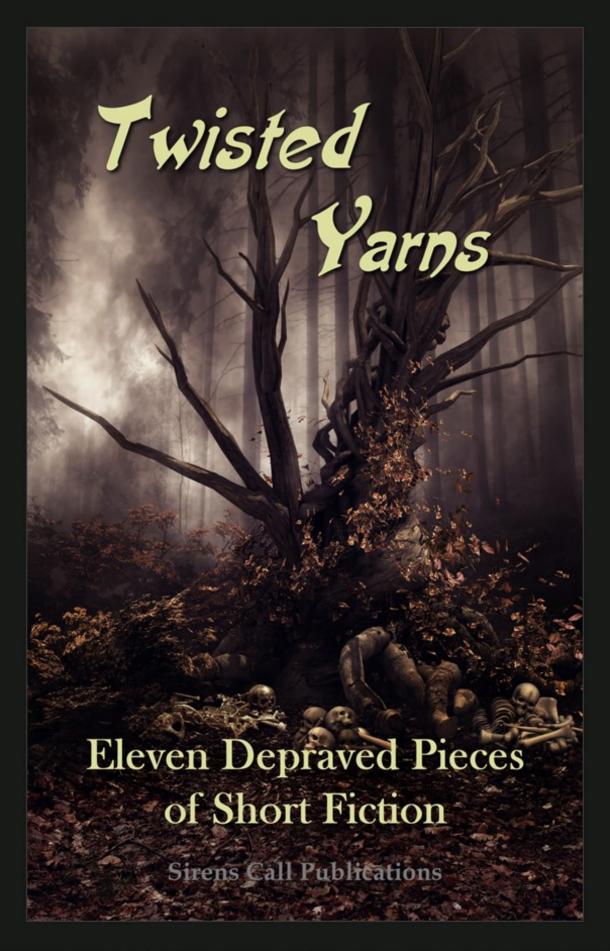


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The Silences Between | *R. J. Meldrum*

The fire-door was unlocked, as he'd been told it would be. He pushed it open very carefully, suspicious he was being set up. He didn't want to spend any more of his life in the joint. There was a brief hesitation, but then he made a balanced judgement. No one had enough of a grudge against him to frame him and he needed the money. He really needed the money.

It was 3 a.m. Outside, the dark streets were empty. The late-night revelers had finally gone home; it was still too early for the street cleaning crews and early morning commuters. He took one last glance at the outside world, then the fire-door closed behind him.

As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he thought back to the previous day. He'd been contacted by his usual guy, Bob. Bob was an arranger, a conduit between those who needed scores doing and those who could do them. He thought back to their conversation. Bob had been sitting in his filthy basement office as usual.

"Okay Paul, this is an easy one. In and out. Five hundred if you do it right."

Back in the day he'd have laughed at five hundred, but these days he couldn't be so choosy.

"What's the job? I'll decide if it's easy or not."

Bob looked at him, a slimy, knowing look. Everyone knew Paul owed the bookie six thousand and was desperate for money. Good old Paul was in a tough spot and Bob knew it.

"It's a straightforward heist. From the Museum of History on Broad Street."

"That place? I remember it from high school. We went there once. It was boring."

"Said the true connoisseur," replied Bob. He continued.

"The client is a wealthy collector of artifacts. In the museum is something he wants. You collect it and deliver it to him."

"Museums have got good security. Tough to just to walk out with something."

"You'll go in at night. A fire-door will be conveniently left open for you, with the alarm disabled. You go in, disable the cabinet alarm, take the items and drop them off at a pre-arranged spot. Easiest five hundred you'll make this month."

"Security?"

"Front desk with hourly patrols. Got the timing, so you can avoid them."

"Cameras?"

"Of course, but our inside man will ensure they're disabled."

"Why can't this inside guy do the job?"

"Because these items are valuable. Once they're taken all the staff will be under scrutiny. Our guy has gone on vacation and will be able to prove this once the heat comes down on the museum."

Paul paused. It all sounded plausible.

"Okay, I'm in."

"Good. Now here are the details of the items."

The rest of the conversation was all business.

With the fire-door closed behind him, Paul found himself facing a dark corridor. The place smelt musty, forgotten. It was absolutely silent, no noise from the outside world disturbed this place of study and reflection. He checked his map, a scrap of hand-drawn paper illuminated by the light from his phone. Down to the end of this corridor, turn west into the South and Central American room and then straight through into the European exhibits. The items were on the south side of that room, next to the stairs that lead up to the Arabic room.

He set off down the wooden paneled corridor. The wooden floorboards beneath his feet made no noise as he crept forward on rubber-soled shoes. His mind wandered.

Earlier that evening, willing away the long hours waiting for the clock to crawl around to 3 a.m., Paul had done some background reading on the items he was about to steal. The internet was very informative. The items he was being paid to remove from the museum were called The Silences. Three tiny figures, no more than four inches high. Crudely made from pottery, they were supposed to be three hundred years old. The configuration of these figures was unusual. Normally the sequence for these types of figures was see no evil, speak no evil and hear no evil, with the eyes, the mouth and the ears of each figure covered in turn. For these particular figures it was different, all of them had their mouths covered. That's what made them so interesting, valuable and collectable. They had been nicknamed The Silences by a collector in the 1960's. The name was very apt and had stuck.

Their origin was unknown, but it was considered they'd been made in Germany in the late 1700's. They'd surfaced in the late nineteenth century, having been discovered during the excavation of a church crypt in Bavaria. Bequeathed to a museum in Munich, they'd sat unnoticed and unstudied until 1945, when they disappeared. At that point, they were just a curiosity and in the chaos of Europe at the end of the war, no one sought to find and recover them. In 1956, a French antique dealer found them for sale in a flea market just outside Paris. He recognized them, having seen them on display in Munich in 1936. He bought them for a song and placed them in his shop. Since that time, they had been acquired by various private collectors and public museums, moving from owner to owner, gradually increasing in value as their rarity and antiquity was acknowledged. Now they were in the Museum of History, having just been purchased using a government grant.

Paul had been intrigued to find out that there was a dark history associated with these little figures. He had been half-amused and half-disgusted as he read the so-called genuine tales associated with The Silences. There were dozens of such tales on the internet. Some of the owners had died in mysterious, usually violent ways. Others had simply vanished. The conspiracy nuts reported that people had disappeared simply after merely viewing the figures. Paul had closed his laptop, shaking his head at the naivety of some people. Some folk believed anything and everything they read online. Not him, he was too sensible.

Paul reached the end of the corridor and turned left, careful to make as little noise as possible. The quiet in the museum was so deep, so intense that even the tiniest squeak of a shoe was a huge, vast intrusion. There was absolutely no sound from anywhere in the building; no wind against the window panes, no creaking of wood as the temperature changed, no skitter of

mice. Nothing. The silence was so profound he could almost hear it.

Paul found it unnerving. Not the most imaginative of people, even his crude senses were tingling at the complete absence of noise. He had to physically stifle the urge to make some sort of sound, to cough or to mutter. He wanted to giggle.

He entered the South and Central American room, pausing on the threshold to check if the room was empty. It was a large space, full of display cases and cabinets containing a multitude of treasures. He traversed the room without paying any attention to the contents. He was entirely focused on the goal and the money that he would be paid for successful delivery. And, even if he wouldn't admit it to himself, he was trying to ignore the all-encompassing silence. It was still unnerving him. He was on edge. He tried to smile. Here he was, in the most silent of places, trying to steal three little figures called The Silences. He wasn't immune to the irony of the situation. His head began to hurt.

Heading through the open doorway that marked the transition between South America and Europe, he realized he'd successfully reached his destination; all he had to do now was find The Silences, disarm the display case alarm, take the items and get the hell out. He felt relieved, this place was freaking him out. The silence weighed down on his mind, sweat poured from his forehead. His head thumped with pain.

He found the display case and, without thinking, he bent forward to study the three little figures sitting all by themselves on a piece of black cloth. They weren't very impressive. Three little pudgy robed figures, each with his little mouth covered with both hands. Monks, maybe? He thought about the creepy tales surrounding these little guys. The deaths and the disappearances. Urban legends, had to be. He didn't believe such nonsense; his take on it was that if a group of statues managed to survive for over three hundred years then chance would occasionally place them in locations where bad things happened. It was all, no doubt, simple coincidence.

He found himself staring intently at the figures. His heart suddenly froze. He wasn't sure whether it was his headache or the poor lighting, but he could swear that they were moving. Tiny hands dropped from tiny mouths, exposing tiny glittering teeth. They seemed to be looking directly at him. He shook his head. This place, the darkness and the silence were getting to him. The silence and The Silences. What was going on? The atmosphere was making him hallucinate, imagine stuff that wasn't there. Shaking his head again, he did what he did best. Action, not emotion.

Crouching down, he used a small flashlight to examine the alarm system on the display case. It was simple enough, if the glass was broken or the cabinet moved then an audible alarm would sound in the room and a silent alarm would sound in the central security area of the museum. Easy enough to breach, it was intended to foil a daytime visitor, stealing on impulse, not someone who came at night. He checked his watch, he was on schedule; the security patrol was still forty minutes out. Plenty of time. He tried his best to ignore the pain in his head, focusing on the job at hand. He glanced up at the cabinet, now at face level as he worked on the electronics of the alarm. Three tiny faces stared back at him, grinning. He fell backwards, his

flashlight spinning off into the darkness, its light extinguished as the delicate bulb broke on impact. He managed not to scream, but it was close. Very close. What the hell was happening to him? His head was splitting open with pain, the endless silence ripping through his skull. *Screw this*, he decided. *Something is wrong, I'm getting out of here. I don't need the money that much.* The rich collector could steal these vile things himself. He turned to leave, but some instinct drove him to turn once more to look at the figures. They were still staring at him, their gaze capturing him, binding him. And then...they spoke. There wasn't even enough time for him to scream.

The security guard was a bored man of some forty-five years old. He'd been doing this job for about two years; it suited his sluggish nature. Entering the European room, his flashlight examined the dark nooks and crannies. Apparently, he thought to himself, the museum authorities considered that this garbage was worth protecting. Not him though, it wasn't as if there were diamonds or gold on show, just some moldy old pottery and statues. They were only valuable because they were old. He wouldn't buy any of it. His foot bumped something on the floor. He focused the beam of light to see what it was. It was a small broken flashlight. Strange. Picking it up, he looked round the room, seeking for anything amiss. Nothing, everything was normal. Must have been dropped by a visitor. His own, powerful flashlight picked out the latest acquisition by the museum, those three little pottery figures. They were still there, in their display cabinet, all lined up, all with their little pottery hands firmly clamped over their little pottery mouths. He shivered. Those little figures gave him the creeps. Rubbing his forehead to dispel the beginnings of a headache, he moved on towards the next room, whistling to break the silence that seemed to hang heavy over the museum.

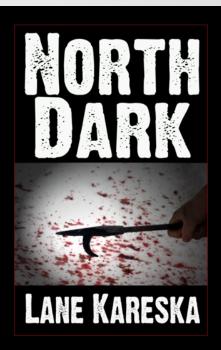
ABOUT THE AUTHOR — R. J. Meldrum is an author and academic. Born in Scotland, he moved to Ontario, Canada in 2010 with his wife Sally. He has had stories published by Sirens Call Publications, Horrified Press, Trembling with Fear, Darkhouse Books, Digital Fiction and James Ward Kirk Fiction. He is an Affiliate Member of the Horror Writers Association.

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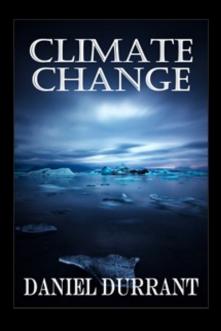
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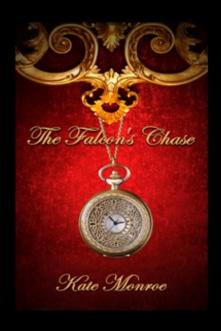


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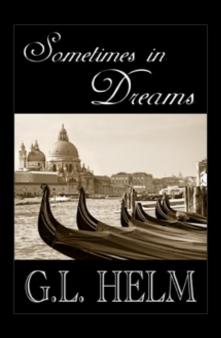






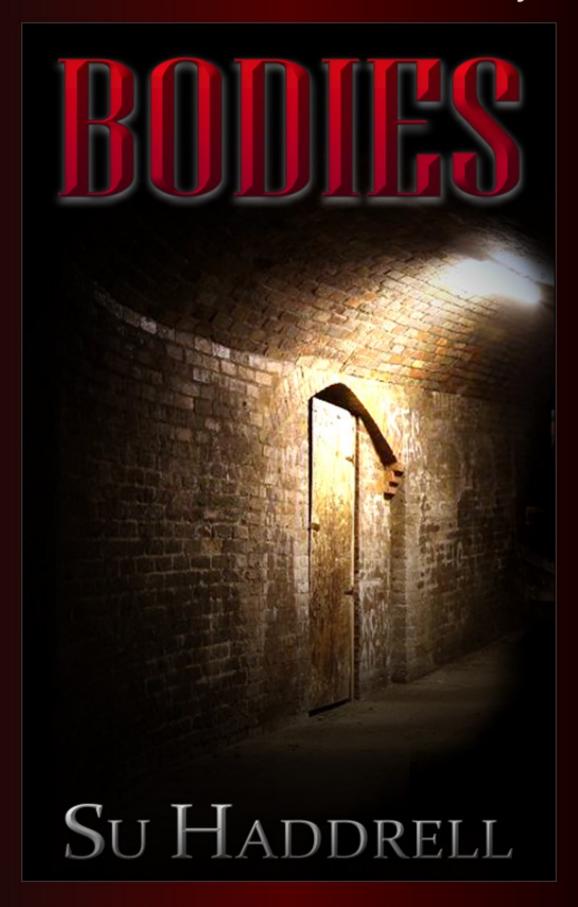






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Critic's Choice | Diane Arrelle

Harris took Yolanda's hand as they sat in Chez Xbrxz.

"These alien bastards, taking over the business, thinking they can cook like a human! Well, I'm gonna skewer Xbrxz... roast him over the coals. He'll be sorry he invited the world's most famous food critic here!"

- "Good evening," the lizard-like waiter said, "Wine?"
- "Local?" Harris sneered.
- "Yes sir, an excellent year, perfect for a reduction over oven roasted meat."
- "You're planning to serve me a roast?"
- "Actually we are planning to serve you as a roast sir," the waiter said and left the room which began glowing red and hot.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Diane Arrelle, the pen name of Dina Leacock, has sold more than 250 short stories and two books including Just A Drop In The Cup, a collection of short-short stories. She recently retired from being director of a municipal senior citizen center andresides with her husband and her cat on the edge of the Pine Barrens (home of the Jersey Devil).

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The Deep Dogs | DJ Tyrer

"All of them are quiet," Bronson had told Styles when he began work at the hospital. That was why he had been assigned to C Ward; all the new recruits were started there so they could learn the ropes without dealing with any of the serious cases. The hospital was a place of healing for the mind, not the body, and for many of the patients, would be home till their dying day.

But, they weren't quiet tonight. Well, to be precise, most of them would still be quiet, but one in particular was causing a disturbance, setting off the others into an accompanying wail.

The inhabitant of cell C27 would normally rock back and forth, mumbling softly to himself. Styles had tried talking to him, but he seemed not to even notice his presence, just continued to mumble. Bronson had told him not to waste his time. It was patient C27 who was making a commotion, disturbing his neighbors who disturbed, in turn, those next door to them until the entire ward was engulfed in a primal, ululating cry.

The patient who was locked into C27 was dashing manically about the enclosed space, turning about wildly and bashing against the padded cell walls. He was shouting one sentence

again and again, over and over until Styles ceased to hear the actual words and they just became an unending moan. They were the same words that the patient had been mumbling since his arrival at the hospital, with just one emendation. Where before he had just shouted: "The Deep Dogs! The Deep Dogs!" he now shouted that they were coming.

"The Deep Dogs are coming! The Deep Dogs are coming!" he cried, his shouts merging with the howl filling the ward.

Styles had asked Bronson about the man and why he was admitted. The senior attendant said he had been admitted just a few months before, being the sole survivor of a subway accident. The details were sketchy, but Bronson believed it had been terribly messy and what the man had experienced there had left him traumatized. What 'Deep Dogs' had to do with anything was unclear. Sometimes, he wondered if the man had lost his pet in the disaster.

Bronson was in a foul mood; the noise was enough to drive anyone barmy. He was wandering up and down the corridor that bisected the ward, rapping on the cell doors and yelling at the inmates to be quiet. It didn't help.

Styles glanced down the corridor to where Bronson was yelling futilely through a door. Out of curiosity, he decided to look in on the inhabitant of C27. He was still pacing wildly about and shouting his continual refrain, froth spitting from his mouth with each cry. He shut the hatch and moved on to check others of the patients.

Suddenly, there was a cry from cell C27, a high-pitched scream in place of the previous stream of words. They both ran to the door of the cell, Styles arriving first, and snapped open the hatch to discover the inmate missing from within. Bronson pushed the junior attendant out of his way and yanked the door open, before dashing inside the cell. It was empty; the man was gone.

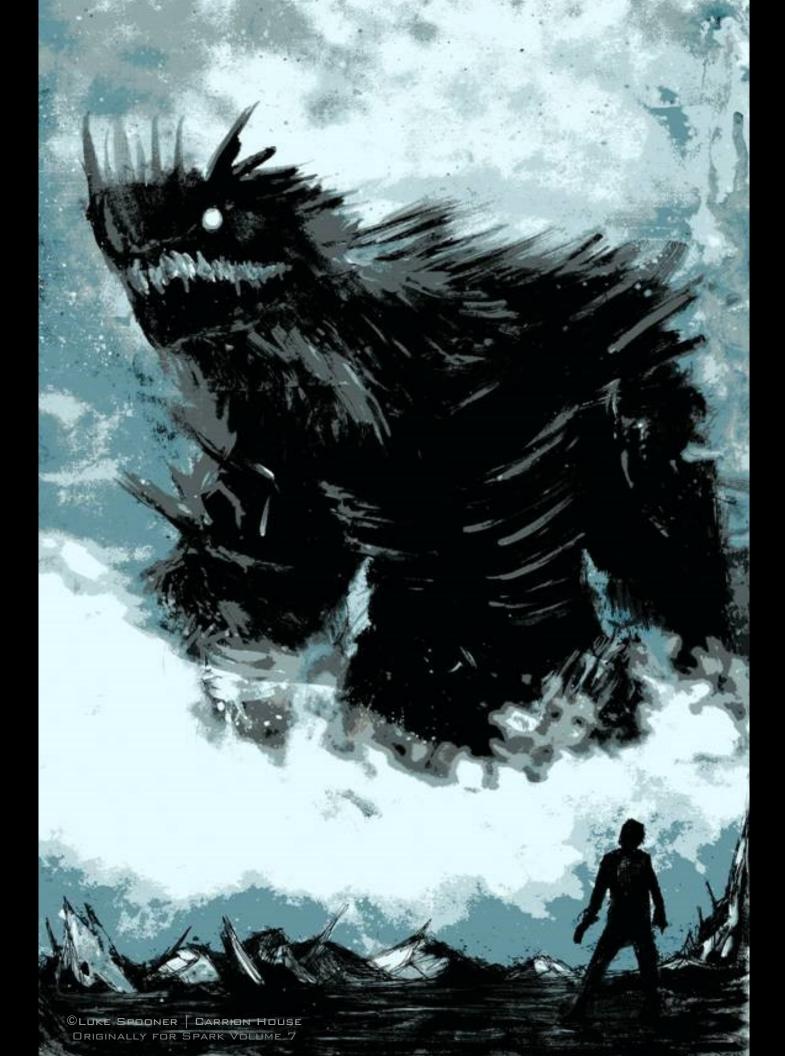
It was clear where he had gone; there was a hole torn through the floor and soil scattered about, with a smear of blood on the tiles. It was not a hole he had dug, but one that had burst up from below, scattering tiles aside. One that had smashed up from beneath his feet and sucked him down into darkness.

Bronson looked timidly down into the hole, but could see nothing in the inky blackness. Styles turned away, feeling sick. He kept quiet, unwilling to say what he had seen: beings with the bodies of men and the heads of hounds; loathsome silhouettes disappearing into the darkness. Now, he understood what the inmate had meant by 'The Deep Dogs'. They had returned for their prey.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — DJ Tyrer is the person behind Atlantean Publishing and has been published in anthologies and magazines around the world, such as Chilling Horror Short Stories (Flame Tree), Snowpocalypse (Black Mirror Press), Steampunk Cthulhu (Chaosium), Night in New Orleans (FunDead Publications), Miskatonic Dreams (Alban Lake), and Sorcery & Sanctity: A Homage to Arthur Machen (Hieroglyphics Press), and has a novella available, The Yellow House (Dunhams Manor).

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Not Today | *Joe Zito*

Warm, balmy air drifted through the tall trees at Dorian Park as my son and I sat on a pair of swings.

He was still shaken up from the incident at the restaurant where the little girl started choking on a piece of bread and no one knew what to do other than gasp and cover their mouths and pray to angels that weren't there.

My son Bradley, who is thirty-five, knew exactly what to do. He had trained hard to become a paramedic, but even with all his experience the lump of bread lodged in the girl's throat had gotten the best of him. It was testing him. Two and a half minutes went by and it still had not popped out of her mouth. The little girl was dying. Her mother was hysterical and crying as Bradley worked to save the girl's life. The mother's breakdown, understandably so, wasn't helping things. A few people had already dialed 911 but my son continued to do the Heimlich maneuver until miraculously, the stubborn piece of bread made its way out of her. The blue hue coloring her face started to drain away as death was blindsided by the efforts of my son. The crowd sighed in unison and started to clap. My wife and I and our youngest son Michael, looked at Bradley in proud amazement. The little girl's mother gave him a hug and he made eye contact with me. I could see the stress and terror in his eyes. It had scared him. He looked pale. I knew then that it was time to tell him about what happened when he was eight years old.

"Why did you want to come here, Dad?"

Still swinging slowly back and forth, I stared out into the tree-lined park, remembering that day when I was thirty years younger and gray free and my sons playing on this very same swing set.

"Son, do you remember what happened to you when you were eight?"

He shook his head.

"No. What happened, Dad?"

I wasn't surprised that he didn't remember dying and then coming back to life all within a five minute time frame. If he did remember, I'm sure he blocked it out. Then again my wife and I never really talked about it afterward. This was the first time since.

"I remember it was a late Friday afternoon. I was on vacation the following week. We were gonna go down to Funland Express. Do you remember that place?"

"Yeah, how could I forget. They had that creepy clown standing out front welcoming people in. I hated him."

"I know you did," I laughed. "Anyway, that Friday after I got off work, we went to Big Boy's for dinner and then came here to Dorian Park so you and your brother could play off all the sugar you guys had. You each had a large sundae."

"I do remember that." Bradley smiled at the memory. It was nice seeing him smile because he had looked so haunted earlier. But I was beginning to wonder if his memory was coming back and if he would remember what happened.

"You and Mike, he was six at the time, were swinging on these exact same swings. You

both were going real high and I told you to be careful and not go so high. You did and then your brother got the notion in his head to play that game... oh, I forgot what you call it."

"Ah, roadkill," Bradley laughed.

"Yep, that was it. One of you would swing while the other would run in front or back of the swing trying not to get hit. Not the safest game, but you and Mike were a team of terror and you did it anyway."

Bradley was smiling at the memory of his childhood.

"At first Mike was going kind of slow and you both ignored your mother and me when we said to stop. Then he started getting higher and you would run in front of him and then in back. You both were giggling and carrying on until Mike came swinging downward and you were right behind him and got slammed backward head first into the swing set pole. And I mean you nailed that pole, Son. Your mother swore later that she could hear it go ping when it happened. I went *oohh* and we ran to you. You were holding your head but you weren't crying. I think you wanted to but were too embarrassed. It scared the hell out of me seeing you hit that pole like that. Your head snapped and bobbed. Amazingly, son, you were fine. There wasn't even a bump or anything which I thought was odd. I picked you up and held you for a minute and rubbed your head but you still weren't crying.

"So we left the park and went home. You played with your trucks for a while, took a bath and watched Wheel of Fortune and went to bed. Like I said Son, you were fine. That was until later that night at around two a.m. when your mother came running in our room screaming, turning the light on crying that something was wrong with you."

I paused for a moment, trying to keep myself together. The fond memories that were making Bradley smile had taken a very dark turn. His look was now serious and shocked..

I went on.

"I ran into your room not knowing what to see or expect. It was bright from the ceiling light. Your mother kept saying over and over, 'He ain't breathing, he's not alive', but you were alive. Your eyes were wide open and staring straight up at the ceiling. You were stiff as a board and kind of trembling a little. I think you were having a seizure and then I realized what was happening. You were *dying*. The accident from earlier when you hit your head had caused your brain to bleed or that's what I assumed it to be. I heard about things like that happening to children who hit their head and then suddenly die in their sleep hours later of a brain hemorrhage. I knew that's what was happening to you. I kneeled down by your bed and gently picked you up, holding your head in my hands. I could hear your mother crying on the phone to the EMT in the background. You were still shaking. All you had on was your pair of boxers. I remembered you like to sleep with no shirt on in the summertime. Saliva was oozing out of your mouth and then you went limp. All the shaking stopped and you felt so cold. You weren't moving and it took everything in me to put my hand on your chest to see if I could feel your heart beating."

And now, sitting on this swing on a summer evening telling my son the story of how he almost died, it took everything in me to look at him. I did and there were tears in his eyes.

"An overwhelming wave of shock and disbelief washed over me at that moment. I was holding you in my arms and you were dead. I couldn't accept it even though it was true. My mouth opened up to scream but nothing came out. I swore I heard myself screaming but there was nothing. I looked up at your mother and she dropped the phone and fell to her knees and she screamed the scream that I couldn't. I started rocking back and forth as I held you. My mouth was stuck in that horrified maw of shock. Tears fell down my face. I held you close to my chest and you felt so cold. Your little brother woke up crying after hearing all the commotion. He walked in on us, all on the floor, crying and screaming and that's when you opened your eyes and looked at me. I made eye contact with you but I thought it was a hallucination. Then you closed them. A few seconds passed and I felt the beginnings of a great cry forming inside me and then your eyes shot open just as you sucked in a breath of terror and jumped off of me like you done seen a pit of spiders crawling for you. Your mother was twenty-seven years young at the time and I'll never forget that terrible, haunting scream she made when you came alive and jumped out of my arms. It was a short scream but its memory has served me long and well. But even more terrifying was the silence after she screamed. That and the buzzing tone of cicadas outside attached to the old oak tree. Her hands covered her mouth and I still had that open mouth look of horror.

"You scampered away from me like I was a ghost. You were so pale looking and breathing heavy with wide eyes of terror. The silence seemed to go on forever as we stared at you and you stared back at us. After a few minutes your breathing slowed down a bit and a little color drained back into you, but then you said the most peculiar thing and that was, 'not today, not today they said'.

"I was so in shock that after hearing your words I didn't even bother asking what you meant by them. I just couldn't believe my eyes. I went to you and held you and so did your mother and brother, even though Mike hadn't a clue what was going on. He just loved his brother.

"We took you to the emergency room to have you checked out. We explained everything that happened, including the incident at the park. They did x-rays and were baffled when they found nothing wrong with you at all.

"A few weeks later, I was lying in bed on a Saturday night. I had the window cracked just a bit to let in the warm, summer night air. It felt good. The sound of crickets was nice. I was thinking about what you said, *not today, not today they said*, and I could only sum it up to being a miracle and that someone or something was watching over you, angels perhaps, letting you know that it wasn't time for you to leave this world."

I stared down at my feet for the last part of my story. I raised my head and looked out into the darkening park.

"You see, Son..."

I paused for a moment to collect my emotions and thoughts. It was getting close to dusk.

"You see, Son, I think what happened to you wasn't a fluke or some sort of freak accident. It wasn't your time to go yet. I think that whoever or whatever kept you alive that night, kept you

alive for a reason. And it wasn't just so you could be with your family a little longer, which I am so grateful for, but to be there at that restaurant tonight to save that little girl. That was your purpose for staying alive, but..."

I froze when I looked at my son. He was staring at me. His mouth was partly open with a wide, scared look in his eyes. For a moment I thought he was having another seizure like when he was eight.

He was looking at me like I'd lost my mind or had seen the devil standing behind me, grinning and dripping with blood.

"What is it, Son?" My voice elevated slightly. He looked away, blinking his eyes as if coming out of his trance. He gazed down at the ground and laughed nervously. He looked at me.

"It's funny... that little girl said the same thing to me. Not today, not today they said."

My skin turned to ice.

I looked out into the park again, noticing that dusk was finally here and that we should probably get going. But we didn't leave right away. We continued swinging gently back and forth, side by side, not talking, just staying quiet, lost in our own separate thoughts of death, love and miracles. A light gust of warm wind touched my face and I thought of the little girl that died and then came back to life and wondered what kind of test the angels would have in store for her someday, whenever that may be.

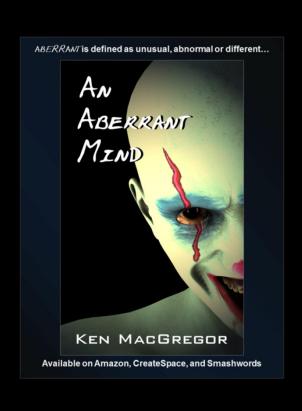
ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Joe Zito has been writing short stories and novellas in the horror genre since 2011. His first novel, The Garage, was released in March of 2014. When he isn't working and or writing he likes to spend time with his wife and three kids. Joe reads every day and drinks ridiculous amounts of coffee. Black, two Splenda.

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An Aberrant Mind

Ken MacGregor

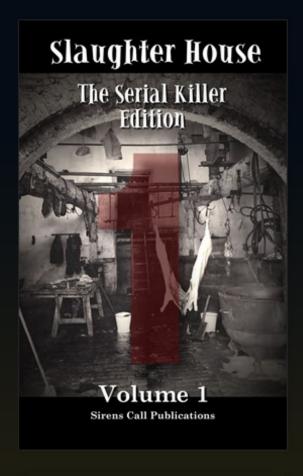
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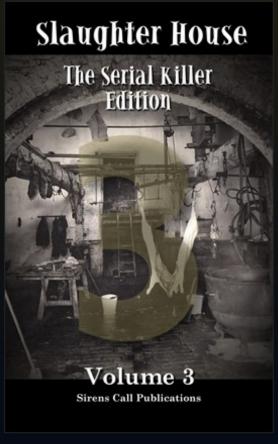




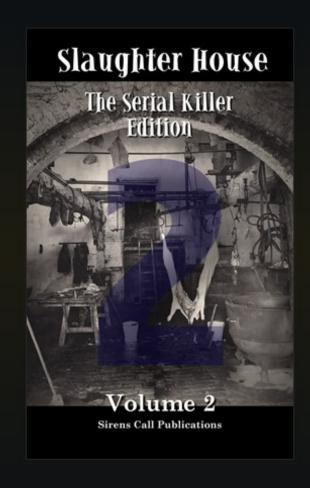
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The Visionary | *Mark Steinwachs*

I stare at the first four words of the letter I'm writing.

I am a Visionary.

Then I put pen back to paper and continue.

The majority of my life has been spent watching others' lives end. My body used as a signal to Death when it is time for someone to leave our world. The night of my eighteenth birthday I watched my two best friends die in a car accident. I didn't know what I was then.

I thought the tragedy with my friends was nothing more than a case of really fucked up deja vu until not long after it happened again. I was at my mother's house when she said, "Honey, what's wrong with your eyes? Go look in the mirror."

An image of my mother on the kitchen floor clutching her chest flashed inside my head. "Hev, are you okay?" she asked.

My vision of her blinked away. "Yeah, I'm fine, Mom. Let me go look." Had I known then what was about to happen ... not that I could've done anything about it.

My reflection in the bedroom mirror stared back, my pupils no longer round, but shaped like the ace of spades. The sound of my mother dropping a pot in the kitchen reverberated through the house. A moment later I stood transfixed as my eyes returned to normal. She was dead before I walked back in the kitchen, a massive heart attack the doctor told me later.

I knew I was different and began to piece it all together after a few more visions. My ace of spade eyes showing me a person in their last moments, then returning to normal when the deed was done. Sometimes Death doesn't come for a couple of hours so I started carrying sunglasses to hide my spades. I learned to read the subtle changes in my body to know when my eyes were normal and my wait for the next person had begun.

I've never met another person like me, but there must be more of us. Right? I can't be the only one of my kind, can I?

I lean back in the dining room chair, looking over the words I had written. The last two lines hanging there. Years of being alone living with this curse ... the final part of the thought slips away from me. There is still so much more I want to say and explain, but I don't think it's going to be possible. I run my fingers through my hair, breathing deep. A sharp pain shoots through my still-raw throat, reminding me of the acidic bile that had filled the toilet in the airport bathroom. I couldn't handle the visions, they were too much for me, too many people. Men, women, children, I watched them all boarding. My body was shaking as I tried to calmly walk out of the airport, when all I wanted to do was run. I couldn't speak to warn anyone, and even if I could, no one would have believed me.

When I got home I didn't need to turn on the television to learn what happened. I felt the all-telling subtle shift within me. All of them are gone, and now ...

I can barely keep my eyes open. Pushing the chair back, I get up from the table, leaving the letter sitting next to the empty pill bottle. I waver and put my hand on the wall to steady myself. My eyelids are heavy and it takes all my effort to make it the last few feet to the bathroom.

Something about this feels very familiar. I slowly look up and see myself in the mirror.

The ace of spades stares back at me.

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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The Caretaker | Lori Tiron-Pandit

I'm hiding. They should be coming soon.

See, I'm a not a traveler. What I am is a settler who's been forced to move around. We thought a small suburban town would be a good new start. They're all the same, these towns, we thought: bland and boring. But we were wrong. This town we happened upon was a world away from anything we thought we knew.

With every day that passes I realize with more certainty that they're never going to let me go back into the world. Not into the real world, which I know still exists out there, unlike my neighbors, who look like they have no idea, like they have never conceived anything else but this. Maybe that is why they are not hiding under their beds every night, like I do.

Sure, after all this time, I don't go under the bed anymore. That's just a figure of speech. I have actually made myself a much more comfortable and safer hideout, in the laundry room.

When we bought the house, we discovered that the bedroom had this small room connected to it. The door was somewhat camouflaged, as if cut directly from the wall, and it gets sort of hidden when the bedroom door is flung open. This means that I always have to get here every night before they reach the bedroom.

They should be here any moment now. With her. They always bring her.

Anyway, the room is small. But I'm comfortable here. I have set the place up with a small mattress, pillows, and blankets. I have plenty of entertainment too: some books, magazines, a notebook, and even a TV. A few weeks ago I also brought in a small fridge. Every night I light a candle, I pour myself some wine, then I make a plate of cheese and nuts. That way maybe I'll last longer. Although I know it won't be long before they drag me out.

How clueless we were when we moved in! We thought finally, a place where we can settle and start a new life, with no memories, no pain. I didn't realize how wrong we had been until the day I finally followed up on the invitation and visited their church.

I'm far from a religious man: raised Catholic but not churchgoing. I do recall a time when my mother took to praying in the morning to a Virgin Mary plastic statue in the kitchen. I found later that my grandmother was in the hospital dying that month. She died anyway. Did you know that research has proven definitively that prayer doesn't work? I mean, they made these masses of people pray for some sick kids in the hospital and the kids didn't get better. But the people who prayed felt better about themselves, like they were performing some miracle on their own. I've been looking into prayer. Been reading a lot, actually, at night, in the laundry room.

The invitation to visit their church came on the first day we moved in. It was a Saturday night. The neighbors from across the street, Ed and Carly, brought us cake from a birthday party of one of their kids. I asked them in and offered a beer, but they turned me down.

"Oh, we don't drink," Ed said. "But thank you so very much. We appreciate you asking. We're glad to have you as our neighbors. Please, feel free to stop by any time, if you need anything." Then he leaned closer toward me and said in a lower voice, as if only for my ears: "And try to visit our church tomorrow night if you can, all the guys will be there, so you'll get a chance to meet everyone."

"We're a small community, but we embrace all newcomers without any reservations," the woman said with a large but tired-looking smile. She leaned on his arm as they walked away. He didn't receive the burden happily.

I didn't go to church that first week, busy with the unpacking and settling down and foolishly imagining a happy new life in this small town. It now feels so long ago, almost like it never happened at all. How could I have been so oblivious?

Must bring myself to remember that first night in their church, although it still makes me shiver to think about it. You'd have expected one to get used to anything, no matter how unusual, after a while. The concept of abnormality is one of the most relative because different people tend to hold different definitions of normalcy. But this, I'm sure you'll agree, is too abhorrent to be considered ordinary in any circumstance and by any group. Except for my town.

I can hear them. Yes, it's the front door. They must be many tonight. I can hear their voices and steps downstairs. They're not coming up yet. I wonder what's going on. Usually they set camp in the bedroom. Right next to me. They sit there and wait. But I have more patience. I don't go out. I never go out at night.

How naïve I had been up to that Sunday when I went to their revolting church. It was a very hot August evening, and I eagerly entered the large stone building. The church was unusual: a truncated pyramid, with walls that leaned in gently at the top. There was no tower, just a flat platform for a roof. The building's gray stone façade kept it dark and cool inside. The only window was at the opposite wall from the door, and the light coming in barely made a difference. They do have electricity, but the lights were dim and scattered scantily around the walls. I could barely find my way through the pews.

They call themselves the Caretakers, I found out that night. It was all written on the walls: an ancient ancestor cult had become the main pillar of their belief. The dead were not dead, their faith said: their soul remained in the body and watched over the following generations. But there was more to it: they wanted to harvest the power of their dead, so they broke away from the rest of their community, came here and became this.

As I walked in, I noticed the figures in the wall alcoves around, but couldn't make them out too well and assumed they were sculptures. A man approached me and showed me to a seat before I could tell how wrong I was.

I sat through the service without understanding a word of what was spoken that night. I did notice that there was no woman there, unless of course you counted the statues in the alcoves. A smarter newcomer would have seen something into that, and maybe gotten out in time. I didn't.

I was about to doze off when everyone started to get up from their seats. They were not leaving yet, though. My pew neighbor showed me the way toward one of the walls. Everyone gathered around us as I approached the first of the alcoves.

Never in a million years would I have guessed what those alcove figures actually were. Even now, if I look at it with different eyes I see the impossibility of it. How unnatural, how barbaric. But then, it's easy to judge people who are different, isn't it?

These people felt like they had no choice, they told me. Their belief is as valid as any of ours. They think that the women protect them. If they're well taken care of.

See, I have been trying to understand them lately. I'm not an ignorant man. I don't want to be too quick to condemn or fear the unknown.

I want to believe. If only I became one of them, then the terror would be gone. Until maybe another poor soul stumbled upon this town and reminded me again of what's real and what is not. Like I reminded my neighbor. In his own way I think he tried to warn me.

It was after the visit from the people across the street that I met the next-door neighbor, the one with whom I share one wall. He had long, wild hair, and an overgrown beard. I met him in front of the house when returning from work one day. He was standing outside, looking at the front staircase as if it was insurmountable. He ignored my greeting so I just walked past him and was unlocking the door when I heard his voice right behind me.

"I'd go to the next town and buy a sturdier lock if I were you, he said. If you plan to stay, that is. If you're really sure. Although I don't know why you would. This is not a place where anyone would want to live. I don't understand how people keep coming." He shrugged, then went to his door and unlocked four different locks before disappearing inside.

I should have understood his warning: I had reasons to be afraid.

It became self-evident that night in church, when I finally came close to one of the alcoves. Up close it looked like a doll, not a statue. Like a full-size, ugly, antique doll, that had been through maybe a fire or two in its long life, but was dressed now in new, shiny clothes. That was what I thought, until I saw the hands. They were not only dark and wrinkled like tree bark, but the nails were unnaturally large and bulbous, and entirely black, seemed to be covered in a fine, sooty mold, that had overtaken them and enveloped them like a glove. The hands were not those

of any sort of doll. Nobody had tried to make them look beautiful, natural, or alive.

I felt then as if the entire building had started to move around slowly and to compress, all the walls narrowing towards me, all the mommies in their alcoves coming closer.

They are the caretakers of the dead. Caretakers of their dead women. Dead wives and dead mothers. Their dead are their goddesses, the protectors of the family, mediators between the two worlds.

They kill their women, you see. Not all of them, just the ones who have had a daughter. And those who cannot bear children. They murder the women and then they worship them.

It sounds grotesque, I know. But, listen, it only sounds unconceivable from our framework of thought, because it is so unlike anything we've known from our own culture. It's not that barbaric, if you try to understand. I have tried. I'm still trying.

My neighbor, the mother from across the street, talked to me about it. The women chose this, she said. They were all grown, intelligent women, who have understood and accepted everything freely, she told me. There was a lot of pride and satisfaction they found in their way of life. They felt like they were valued and their deaths were the ultimate gift that they bestowed upon their children, their families, and community. That was what she said. The women lived very full and rewarding lives and felt honored by their community and appreciated more than the women from where I came could ever understand or experience in their long and suffering lifetimes. "We don't need anyone to feel sorry for us or feel like they need to save us," she said. "This is what we want."

I get it, you know? It's all about optimizing life's chances, that's all they're doing. And their life is not given much of a chance here.

Oh, they are here now. They have come up and are entering the bedroom one by one.

Breathe. Yes. I'm fine. They will not come in here.

I need to peek through the keyhole.

They brought her and laid her on the bed.

I must admit that I still find her beautiful. Is that delusional? I know it is. I am one of them now. It's the truth. Not so inconceivable as it might have seemed a few months ago.

What are they doing? They're going already? I don't understand. Every night they usually stay until dawn, and now it's barely midnight. Maybe they have given up on me. Maybe they're releasing their hold and letting me go. I need to look.

They left her on the bed! She is lying here, on the bed, facing me!

Breathe. Breathe.

She is wearing a green silk gown and her hair has been waved to frame her face and fall gently off her shoulders. She looks frail and delicate. Like she needs me. She needs me to save her, to take her away from them all.

They got to her, you see. She was lost after the last miscarriage, two years into the fertility treatments. We moved here looking for a new life, but she didn't want to live anymore. They say she chose this, and I believe that she did, but that didn't give them any right. No right! She was my wife!

How did this happen to us? Why didn't they kill me too? Why didn't I have the courage to do it, all these months? Next to the washer I have a large bottle of bleach that is looking at me every time I turn my head in that direction. But no, I couldn't.

Is she looking at me? Why do I keep watching? Because I still love her. That doesn't change.

What is that sound? Did she move? I'm hallucinating. Of course she didn't. She's right there. Still waiting for me. But I don't want to go! I don't want to go.

If only I had a faith of my own to rely on. Ha! No apocryphal god in heaven could ever save me from this. Like it couldn't save her. She's gone now. And she doesn't want to rest for eternity in a forgotten grave; she wants to keep on living. And she could, as long as I cared for her.

Xenophilia is not exactly the opposite of xenophobia. It's not about loving the different, experts say, but about freeing yourself from the fear of it.

This is it. I'm suffocating in here. I'm going out.

She didn't move when I opened the door. I don't think. I didn't notice anything. But isn't her right hand hanging outside of the bed, when it was resting on the folds of her dress before? I'm going to sit here in this corner and watch her. I won't miss a thing this time. If she moves, I'll catch it.

What is that? Did she blink?

It would be a small mercy if I were to lose my mind. But I am not imagining it. Look, she's smiling now.

She looks so fragile. She would want to be wearing lipstick right now, I think. The red one would look good with this dress. And her hair needs brushing.

Yes, she nodded. Her head moved.

"My love, you're back! How I've missed you! Let's have some wine and cheese. We can talk about it all night."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Lori Tiron-Pandit is a writer, editor, and translator of Romanian extraction. Her work explores women's lives and universes, with the legends, dreams, horrors, and labors that shape them. Lori Tiron-Pandit self-published her first novel, *Spell of Blindness*, and is currently working on a second book.

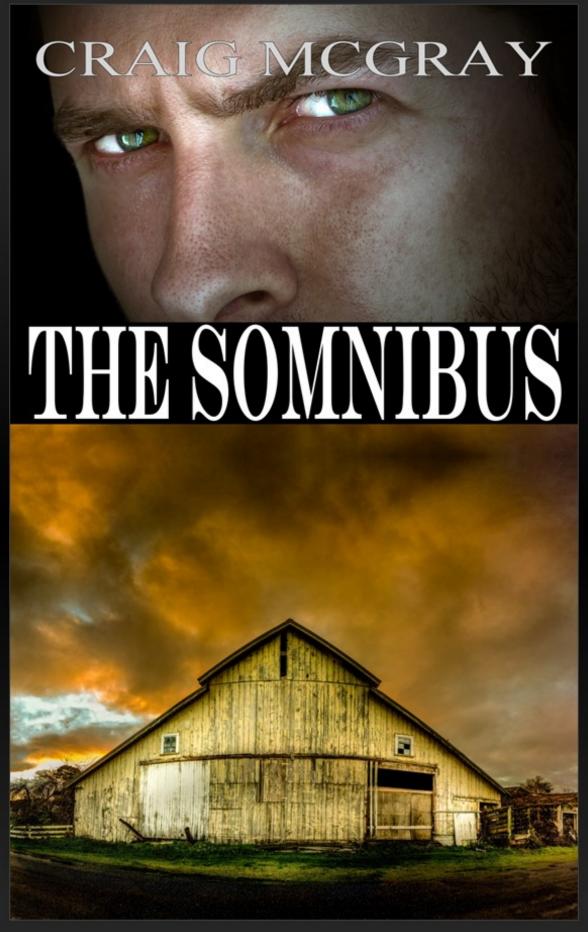
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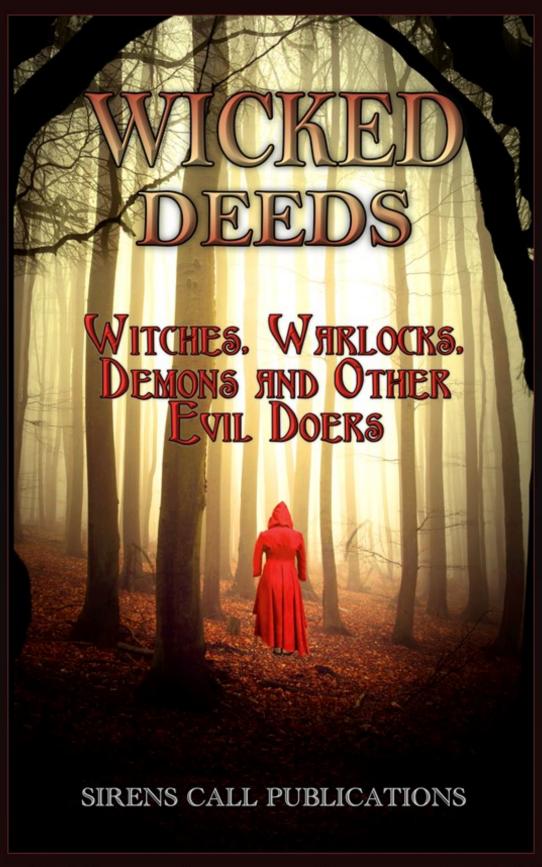
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Still Breathing | *Samuel L.F.*

Memories of his husband flashed through his mind like snapshots in a photo album. The two of them, dressed in black at the altar mere weeks after their love was declared legal; years of engagement, waiting for the day their flag could fly; the day they met in high school, only to come out months later.

Matt's thoughts were interrupted by the smell permeating from the kitchen; last night's meal had gone untouched.

Murdering the woman had been easy, pushing her off the rusted motel balcony. They all believed it was suicide. The affair was over.

Trevor was the worst of it, the part that stung. He nearly hesitated slipping the pill in his lover's midnight drink, but it had to be done.

Matt stood, blinked a few times. If he hadn't found out, his lover would be in the same motel with a new mistress, a new prostitute.

He thought of the way Trevor's limbs jangled on the way to the back yard, a marionette with broken strings. His form was that of a rag doll—feeble and limp. The earth turning over on the makeshift coffin was all that sounded in the night. As Matt tossed the shovel aside, he stared into the clear plastic tube protruding from the ground.

Maybe he could forgive him, or maybe he should let the grass grow; after all, he had still been breathing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Samuel L.F. is an avid fan of horror, sci-fi, and all things macabre and chilling. He is inspired by the works of John Saul and George Orwell, along with many psychological thrillers. In his spare time he paints, reads, and spends time with his cats.

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Ash and Ember | Kevin Holton

I woke up in an empty bed with the taste of her smoke on my tongue. It was a one night stand that left me stranded in a stranger's home. She hadn't told me her name, just said, "Call me Em." Figured it was short for Emily.

Her place was an apartment just off Main Street. Far enough to block out the traffic, but

close enough that the neon signs and well-lit billboards had sent a blast of 70's psychedelic coloring through her window through most of the night. Now that the sun had risen, the signs had been switched off, leaving the bulbs on standby, feigning sleep until they were needed again.

A cheap clock on her bedside table read a quarter past eleven, which meant I was overdue for a cig. She'd been kind enough to leave a pack and lighter by the clock. My phone—dead with no charger in sight—sat on top of a note that read, *Off to work. Call me sometime. XOXO*. I guess she remembered me telling her about my morning routine: wake up, light up, then get up. Sure, there were probably health code violations and all sorts of laws about smoking indoors, but my fingers were stained yellow from years of nicotine abuse. There's something nice about discoloring the world around me, like my bad habits aren't really mine. Like they're buried in the walls, ready to infect whatever poor soul inhabits the place.

Grabbing the pack, I rolled out of her bed, walking toward her window. I had no problem ruining *my* apartment, but Mom raised a man with manners. She'd have been livid to find out I'd ashed in someone else's sheets. If I lit up my bedding by accident, that was my problem. Couldn't do that to another person, no matter how I knew her.

The pack still smelled faintly of nail polish remover. "Ugh," she'd said, rolling her eyes when I pointed out the fumes coming off her hand. "I had this coat on, right? But it was chipping. Better to go out with no nails than to show that I'm too lazy to repaint."

I'd just laughed. "Smoking's killed my sense of smell. I'm surprised I even noticed." That wasn't entirely true. My nose worked, just not as well as it used to.

Tapping a cig out, I put it to my lips and traded the pack for the lighter, aiming to puff out the window. Of course, it wouldn't open. Would've been nice, too. The whole room smelled like acetone. Guess she spilled some when she was getting ready the night before. It wasn't until I had already gotten a flame going that I realized there was another smell under the remover: gas.

A rush of heat flew through the room as fumes ignited, arcing under the closed door, blowing out something in the next room that splintered the door to her bedroom and threw me backward. My head collided with the wall, leaving a hole in the plaster. In my impact-driven daze, I wondered if she'd get pissed about the damage. There was a lot worse damage to worry about going on in the rest of her place.

Stumbling into a living room already filling with smoke, I saw her whole kitchenette was gone, the stove just a black crater in the cheap linoleum. Parts of the wall were missing, jettisoned into the next apartment, but no one reacted. Everyone must've been out for the day. But it was almost noon on a Monday; only the unemployed chumps like me weren't busy at their nine-to-five. If anyone was calling 9-1-1, it was me, except my phone was dead, and I couldn't breathe, and I might not have gone to college but I knew opening the windows was now a very, very bad idea. Add fresh oxygen to the mix and *whoosh*, I was a goner.

There was a chance the neighbor's windows were open, meaning the hole to the next apartment would save me, but I wasn't taking that chance. I'd have to try the door.

Racing around the arc of flames dancing across her hardwood flooring, I reached the door and stopped dead. There were four locks on it. Each required a key. No knobs to turn, no easily

unlatched deadbolts, no sliders with chains, each of her four god damn locks needed a key, and there wasn't one in sight.

Coughing, I grabbed at the dresser nearby, smoke clouding my vision. Crouching down to avoid the toxic haze, I ripped out the drawers and rifled through their contents. "C'mon, c'mon!" I yelled, but found nothing. There weren't any on top, either. No bowl to safely house her keys while she was tucked safely away in this fortress. No clue or chance toward my getting out alive. Even from a distance, even with a countertop in the way, the heat was starting to hurt.

The walls danced with red and yellow, as if it were still night, like those horrible signs were still glowing, watching, laughing as I scrambled back to the bedroom, hoping to put some distance between myself and the growing inferno. My eyes watered. My head wasn't screwed on straight, and each attempt to stand sent me crashing to the ground. Embers seeded themselves in my nostrils and throat.

Banging on the window frame, I yelled as loud as I could. There wasn't anyone in sight.

Then I heard ringing. Faint, tinny, canned, locked-in-a-box ringing, barely audible over the crackle and hiss coming from the blazing living room. Following the sound as best I could, I found a cell phone, a cheap call-only, inbound-only kind you get from shady pawn brokers in the parts of town your parents tell you not to go to.

"Hey, hot stuff," came a familiar voice once I answered. "Enjoying the weather? It's scorching out, isn't it?" She laughed a loose, barely controlled laugh, the sound of a storm door rocking about in tornado winds on one rusty hinge.

"What did you do? Why—" I doubled over, coughing. "What's happening?"

"Just having a little fun. No need to get *fired up*. But hey, I'll tell you what: I left you something in the closet. Maybe it'll help you get out. If you do, I'll let you ax me a few questions."

The line clicked, then died. She was insane, torturing me like this. Had to be.

If there was a way out of her madhouse, I'd have to follow the psycho's trail. I ran to her closet, throwing open the door so the already-hot handle wouldn't scorch my palm. There was a trunk on the floor, the kind with a heavy latch. The top read: *In case things get heated*. The words had been emblazoned on, crudely, by someone who just wanted to watch things burn.

Inside the trunk was a heavy, charred trench coat. A fire-retardant one that had seen plenty of use. And an ax, the metal edge blackened but sharp. Beneath were tons of newspaper clippings about other fires: homes that had burned down, apartment 'accidents' with few survivors. There were dozens. Most pictures showed the buildings, pointed, gray-black husks of their former selves. I threw on the coat and curled my fingers around the handle, shoving my head into the trunk. The air inside hadn't been tainted yet. I took a few deep, gasping breaths, ruffling the papers inside, before backing out.

The phone rang again. Against my better reason, I answered it. Who knows what she was planning now? I put her on speakerphone and kept low, heading for the front door. "I'm so glad I got that *burner* phone so we can keep in touch. Maybe you'll really be my twin flame." These last words didn't have her manic pun-addicted twang. She was sincere. Vulnerable, almost.

"Why would you think that?" I snarled.

"Oh, come on. Your name is Ash. Don't you think that's destiny?"

Raising the ax, I brought it down hard against the wood by the handles, hoping to notch out the locks, or at least weaken the area and kick my way to freedom. Her door opened to the outside, no hallways or lobbies, so if the fresh air created a backdraft, I could stop-drop-and-roll with ease.

"Oh, sounds like you're on your way to freedom! I really hope you're the one to keep me warm at night. I so, so wish that. On a shooting star."

I swung again and again, making little progress. Shouting rang from outside.

"That's the funny thing. We wish on shooting stars, but they're just rocks burning up as they enter the atmosphere. We *don't* wish on *real* stars, which burn for eons, giving light and energy to everything their rays touch."

Splintering made me jump, excited, until I realized the sound wasn't the door giving way, but the floor collapsing behind me. Her refrigerator groaned as it tilted, sliding toward a growing chasm in the floor. Flames leaped about below, ready to consume the wayward souls cast inside.

"Don't you agree? Don't you think it's all so... underappreciated?"

One lock jerked, and I reeled back, slamming my right heel into the fractured door. The lock popped out, and the fissure ran down, freeing the others too. I kicked another few times, knocking the door wide open.

"Sounds like you're outside. Ready to join me?"

Ax gripped tight in one hand, I picked up the phone and said, "You're a god damn lunatic, you know that?" Then, not waiting a moment longer, I ran down the stairs.

"Stop where you are!" a man yelled. At the bottom now, I turned and saw a SWAT team waiting for me. Guns drawn. "Drop the weapon!"

"Somehow, I knew you'd say that," she sighed, voice crinkling through the speaker. "That's why I called the police about the suspicious man I saw lurking around my building's gas lines, the one who looked like that guy in the news. The Fifty-State Fire Starter. And it's why I coated the handle in a strong adhesive just before I left."

I tried to let go, but couldn't. My fingers were stuck fast. "I—I can't!" I yelled back. "My fingers are stuck, I can't let go!" I wondered if 'Em' hadn't been short for Ember.

"Drop it, now!" he screamed.

"I'm close, you know. I could intervene. Protect you. Take credit, even. Just say you love me. Even if you don't mean it."

She'd planned this. Beginning to end, I was either a scapegoat or partner-in-crime. Either way, my life was over.

"Drop! The! Weapon!"

"What's it going to be, hot stuff?"

Hanging my head, I replied, "Burn in Hell."

Then the man in front yelled, "Fire!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Kevin Holton has published more than sixty short stories with companies like Thunderdome Press, James Ward Kirk Fiction, Fossil Lake, Radiant Crown Publishing, Sci-Phi, and Mighty Quill Books. His creative life has also made him a poet, novelist, screenwriter, actor, comic enthusiast, and amateur Batman. When not involved in these, he's an archivist for the US Navy.

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Beg to Differ | Ray Zacek

Wilmer sat at the kitchen table, sobbing. Blood splatters blazed bright red on his white oxford shirt.

"Get a grip," Jimmy said to him. "Get the plastic. The plastic and the bucket and the sponges."

"This is awful," said Wilmer.

"Will you get the fuck'n plastic?"

"There's so much blood."

"Clean it up!" said Jimmy. Actually, there wasn't that much blood, unlike the others. It trickled from the perforations made by .22 caliber bullets in the girl's throat and thorax.

Wilmer looked at the body sprawled on the kitchen linoleum. "It's too terrible to contemplate."

Jimmy rolled his eyes. "Fuck'n drama queen!" He plopped down in a chair opposite Wilmer. "Let's look at this analytically. What happened was what any reasonable person would do under similar circumstances."

"How can you say that?"

"Any reasonable person," said Jimmy, "if that person possessed *true insight*, unclouded by conditioned response and the arbitrary *norms of society*, if instead they had *insight* as to the nature of the so-called *victim*." He gestured toward the body.

"It's murder!"

"Take a good look at Echo here."

"That's not her name."

"It is now. She got rechristened Echo, one of a series. Delta before her, Foxtrot comes next. Echo was a crack whore. I mean, *repulsive*. We've done society a service removing this parasite."

"There won't be a next one," said Wilmer.

"Yes there will be," Jimmy insisted. "Foxtrot, Golf, Hotel, Indigo and Juliet and so on, to

Zulu. I want to find a big juicy ebony one for Zulu."

"You sound so confident."

"I am! You ought to be confident too. We're on a roll. Let's be confident together and stay pals."

Jimmy extended his hand and flashed a wide, jack o' lantern grin. "Come on, Wilmer, my man, shake hands with Mr. Jimmy. I said *shake*."

Wilmer demurred. "I am not a violent being."

"Beg to differ." Jimmy, leering, pointed to the nude body on the floor.

Wilmer shuddered. "I wish I could get rid of you. Quit you and quit this horror."

"We're not quitting. Get your shit together," Jimmy said. "Relax."

"How can I relax?"

"I don't know. Any way that works. Drink. Do push-ups. Jerk off."

"You're a monster."

"But you got equal cred."

"No, I am filled with revulsion," said Wilmer.

Jimmy sipped his can of beer, pulled a flask from the pocket of his jeans and took a swig. "You know how hollow that sounds?"

"Hollow?"

"Yeah, hollow. A little tinkling sound like a stream of piss in an empty can."

"An innocent human life has been snuffed out."

"Innocent? This skank? Give me a break."

"Every life," said Wilmer, extending his soft white hands. "Has ... dignity ... has value."

"Hollow *and* bogus." Jimmy paced, stepping over Echo. He raised his flask, slammed down more fiery tequila and glowered. "You know why you say what you say?"

"Because it's the truth."

"Because you've been brainwashed to think that's what you're *supposed* to say, the conditioned response. Thinking that the human species, *rhymes with feces*, are, swallow this big lie, *civilized*. No, no, no! We're descended from killer apes."

"That is the mother of all lies," said Wilmer, voice cracking.

"That is the mother of all truths," said Jimmy.

"I'm not like you." Wilmer made fists and pounded his face. "I am not like you, not like you."

"Oh, beg to differ once again. Take a look at what we've done. What you did under my supervision. I said look." Jimmy grabbed Wilmer and wrenched his head, forcing him to look at Echo's body. He jammed his thumbs into Wilmer's face, lifting his eyelids. "Look at her!"

Wilmer moaned, broke away and plunged toward the sink, heaving and choking, forehead hitting the sink with a clunk. Jimmy sat back and drank more.

"Now we dispose of it," said Jimmy.

"I can't do this."

"Yes you can. You will."

"Not this time."

Jimmy towered over him. "Get the plastic! Not telling you again!"

Wilmer traipsed to the added-on room in the back of the house where there was a washer and dryer and a utility sink. Cleaning supplies sat on wooden shelves along the wall. Wilmer fetched sheets of plastic, a roll of masking tape, a bucket and sponges and rags.

"Stop crying," said Jimmy. "I hate crybabies."

"I can't help it."

"Pussy."

Wilmer kneeled on the floor. He wore an apron now and took a towel and folded it to place under his knees and then pulled on blue nitrile gloves.

"She's so young."

Jimmy shrugged. "Who cares? Plenty more where she came from."

Echo was Hispanic, probably. Thin, with small tits, the size of pears. Blond hair, black roots. Piercings. Tats. Contusions on her body predated her arrival at the house where she died. She had worn a silver sequin skirt, skimpy halter top and a black thong. Her body on the kitchen floor remained supple, rigor mortis still hours away. But skin sagged, growing cool and pallid in death, blood receding from surface veins. Her dark eyes, fish-like, stared into dead space, pupils dilated, mouth agape. She had been shot with a .22LR pistol equipped with a homemade suppressor.

"She didn't beg like the others," said Jimmy.

Wilmer said nothing.

"Too fucked up to realize what was happening to her. Like a string of fish, aren't they? Hey, are you deaf? I asked you a question."

Wilmer looked up. "What?"

"Like a string of fish, aren't they?"

"You're a monster."

"You said that before. Shut up and get the job done. Pick up the sequins. Write her name too."

"I can't."

"Sure you can. Write her name. Do it."

Wilmer took a Sharpie and wrote 'Echo' across the girl's bare abdomen.

"So when they find her they know the score. So they know my work."

Jimmy glowed with pride. He liked suborning Wilmer too. Wilmer played his bitch. How it worked, had always worked, always would work. The partnership stretched back decades. Jimmy had realized early that Wilmer was a *puke*, defined as that to be used without scruple or paying attention to his *please don't make me this isn't right*. Pukes possessed no power and wouldn't know what to do with it if they had it. Wilmer remained under Jimmy's thumb, where he belonged.

Wilmer closed Echo's eyes and, gently, cleaned her face with a damp rag. He scraped under her fingernails and cleaned orifices that had been penetrated, to remove semen and fluid.

He folded her arms across her chest, lacing fingers together and fastened her ankles with a flex cuff and wrapped the body first in a clear plastic sheet, which he sealed with duct tape. Then he wrapped Echo in a tarpaulin and placed her clothing and possessions in a black plastic trash bag and picked up the sequins fallen from her skirt.

"You're thorough," said Jimmy. "I like that."

"This is agony for me." Wilmer stood and faced Jimmy. "I'm warning you."

Jimmy got in his face. Insubordination had to be met. "Warn me what?"

"Don't get overconfident. Don't you worry that the neighbors heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Gunshots."

"With the suppressor, all it makes is a pop."

"The screams."

"Echo didn't scream."

"Others did."

Jimmy shrugged. "So? This is a mind-your-own-business neighborhood. If they hear anything, they assume 'alternate lifestyles' or some shit."

Wilmer shook his head. "People are isolated and become indifferent, without any sense of community, or empathy."

"Works for me."

"It's wrong on so many levels."

"Suits me fine the way it is, this neighborhood, this city, my stomping grounds. Now let's get going."

Jimmy heaved the body over his shoulder and walked from the house into the attached garage, flipping on the stark overhead light. Wilmer followed. He popped the trunk of the Volvo and laid the body inside.

"You drive," said Jimmy.

"I don't want to drive," said Wilmer.

"You drive. I ride shotgun."

They got in the Volvo. Wilmer already had the keypad. Jimmy tapped the opener and the garage door rattled open.

"Where are we going?" said Wilmer as he shifted the car into reverse.

"I'll decide where on the way there."

As the garage door closed, the Volvo backed into the deserted street and cruised down the block, past the old wood frame houses on tree-draped lots. Dying elms, a few oaks with spreading branches, like long talons. Section 8 apartment blocks lined the next street; Jimmy referred to this as the EBT-American community.

"Left on Summit."

Wilmer flipped the turn signal.

"Your other left."

Wilmer flipped the turn signal again, the opposite direction. He braked gently and the

Volvo came to a full stop at the stop sign on the corner by the 24-hour convenience store. Swarthy young men sat idle on the pavement in the blaze of light from the store, smoking cigarettes, drinking, staring, hostile.

Jimmy stared back at them. Assholes.

The Volvo turned left, going away from downtown. Summit Avenue was a main artery, but at this hour on a week night, absent of traffic. Wilmer maintained the Volvo just under the posted speed limit. The Volvo glided past used car lots, pawnshops, a Syrian grocery, beauty salons for ethnic hair and cramped strip shopping centers with signs for *joyeria* and *abogado*.

"You're the better driver." Jimmy chuckled. "Got to give you that. This is like automatic pilot. Allows me time to think about where we're going. Got me a plan. Industrial zoning past 178th Avenue."

"That's a long drive."

"So?"

"Longer the drive, the more risk."

"Got to vary," said Jimmy. "Leave another one in a dumpster downtown and you've got a pattern. Can't get too predictable. They look for patterns."

"You mean the police?"

"Who do you think? Fuck'n sanitation department?"

"They probably have a 'make' on the car, by now."

"How could they?"

"Green Volvo seen in the vicinity of crime scenes."

"They don't know dick," said Jimmy.

"Homeless person in an alley comes out of an alcoholic stupor long enough to see a green sedan on the street in proximity to a dumpster where a body is later discovered. Police put two and two together. Only a matter of time before you're apprehended."

"Drive, don't talk."

"Uh oh," said Wilmer.

"Yeah, I see him," said Jimmy. A cop car, turning onto Summit Avenue from a side street and going in the same direction as the Volvo.

"No big deal," said Jimmy.

The cop car pulled alongside the Volvo. The cop looked at them, a hard stare, like an X-ray. He dropped back behind the Volvo, in the same lane, keeping distance.

"Nice and easy does it," said Jimmy.

"You're scared," said Wilmer.

"Shut up! Nothing suspicious about us, nothing at all. Play it cool."

"He's running your tag."

"No he isn't."

"They have computers in the patrol cars."

"Shut up."

"Green Volvo, late model. They may even have one or two numbers of the license plate."

The cop stayed on the Volvo's tail. The Volvo sped up. The cop sped up too. The cop car changed lanes.

"Slow down, let him pass," said Jimmy.

But Wilmer jammed his foot to the accelerator. Tires screeched and the Volvo leaped forward.

"What the hell are you doing?" Jimmy said.

"It's no good, they know the car."

"No, they don't!"

"No, James, it's too late. Season's over."

The Volvo careened wildly, pedal to the metal, side swiping a truck parked on the street and ricocheting into the middle lane. The cop car gave chase, siren blaring.

"Now we're fucked!"

"Has to be this way," Wilmer said with preternatural calm. "Only way to stop this horror."

"I don't want to stop it," said Jimmy. "I just got good at it."

More sirens, in the distance, beginning to converge, coming closer. Summit branched into a warren of factories and warehouses.

"Now it ends," said Wilmer. "The nightmare ends."

"Drive, drive!"

The Volvo jumped the curb on the right, ramming a chain link fence. The fender and side scraped along the fence, sparks flying, until it hit an aluminum pole and skidded to a stop. Jimmy's head bounced off the windshield. He sprawled on the front seat of the Volvo. Wilmer calmly flicked the inside latch for the trunk and then stepped out of the car.

"Where you think you're going?"

Jimmy fumbled in the glove compartment for the pistol but remembered he had left it back in the house. Cops surrounded the Volvo with weapons drawn and shouted commands. Jimmy, shattered, confused by the flashing lights, only dimly perceived their presence. Time had unspooled. Jimmy clamped his feet on the ground, raised his hands and stood up. In an instant the cops glommed onto him.

Wilmer was nowhere to be seen.

The detective looked at his DL. "This is you? Wilmer J. Acosta."

"I go by Jimmy."

"OK, Jimmy. You can call me Mr. Acosta."

The first detective said: "Want to talk to us? Mr. Acosta?"

"About what?"

"About the dead body in the trunk of your car for starters."

"Oh, that." He laughed.

"Like about how it got there?" the second detective said. He had a gravelly voice and halitosis.

"Got no idea."

"Sure you don't," said the second detective.

Jimmy Acosta sneered while the first detective read him Miranda. Jimmy demanded counsel, public defender to be appointed because he was indigent, and refused to make any statement. *Not at this time*, he said.

They left him in the interrogation room, manacled to the chair that was bolted to the floor.

They're getting a search warrant.

Wilmer emerged from a corner of the room.

"A search warrant for your house. You know what they will find there."

"Like I care."

"Your tools and toys. Souvenirs. All incriminating."

"They can have a fuck'n forensic picnic," said Jimmy. "I can deal."

"You're never going to see daylight again. Isn't that what they say? Never see daylight again."

"I got information to trade."

"So arrogant."

"They never found Delta where we put her. Never ID'd Alpha. Reconstructed her face but never got an ID."

"Meaning you can string this out and bargain for small favors. How repugnant."

Jimmy grinned. "You're up to your neck in this too."

"No," said Wilmer. "Beg to differ."

"We're accomplices."

"There is no we. We're finished."

Jimmy leaned forward, straining at the manacles. "You got me into this fix. If you hadn't hit the gas... and then run like chickenshit!"

"It was inevitable, a matter of compulsion. You know this to be true."

"Rat. Stinking rat."

"You will get the recognition you seek: your acts revealed in all their cruelty. The public will know your name and infamous deeds."

A smile illuminated Jimmy's face. "Yeah, there is that."

"I've suffered enough for your sins. I'm gone." Wilmer turned away.

"Like hell you're going! You can't leave, puke!"

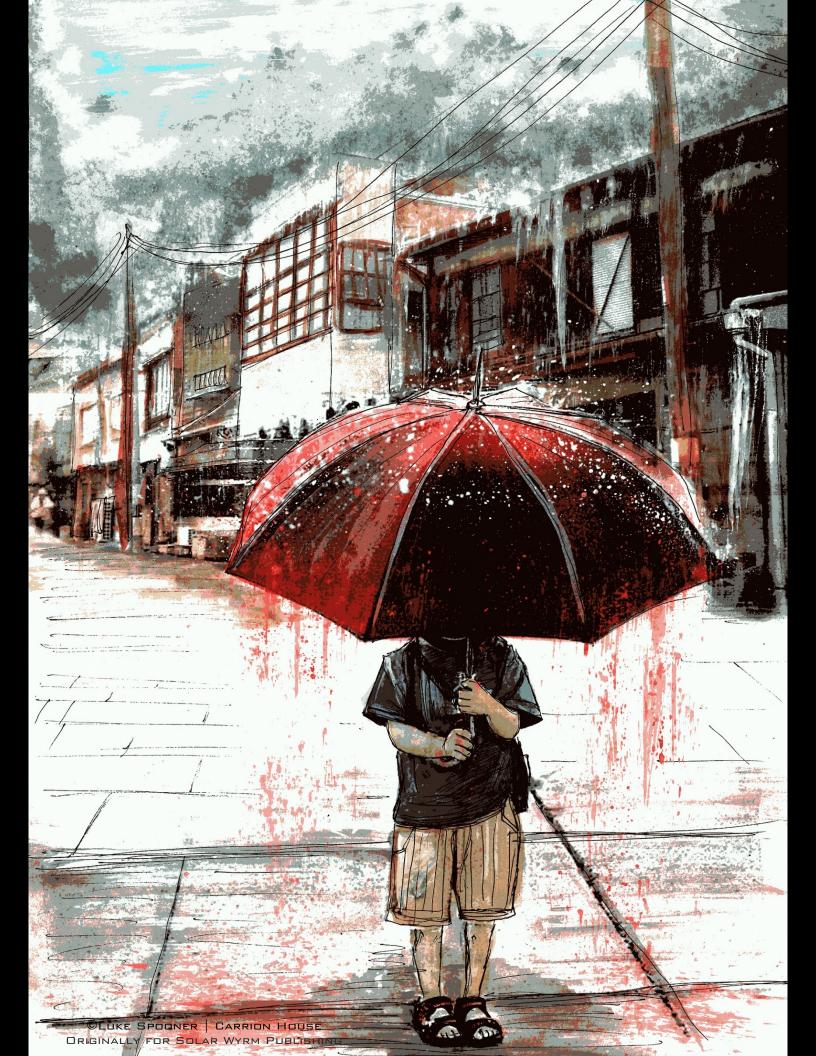
No, I was never here. I don't exist.

Wilmer slowly faded into the sound-proof wall panels. Ciao, he said, and vanished.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Ray Zacek lives in Tampa, Florida and writes horror, dark fantasy, and crime/noir, available on Amazon Kindle. His fiction has appeared in All *Due Respect*, *Shotgun Honey* and *Out of the Gutter*. Gator Bait, a horror story with a Florida setting, will be included in the Sirens Call Publications anthology, *What Lies Below*. As an actor he's performed David Mamet and Martin McDonagh in local theater.

Twitter: <u>@Zhombre</u>

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/ray.zacek



Drabbles by Jason Pere

Demon

Jennifer sobbed as she pulled down page after page. Veronica had gotten ahold of her diary and taped photocopies of the most intimate pages to everyone's locker.

"Don't be so sad," came a soothing voice.

Jennifer turned to look at the speaker. He was a handsome man dressed in black. "Who are you?" she asked.

"My name is Lucy. Would you like some help?"

"I'll take what I can get. Are you some kind of guardian angel?"

"Something like that," Lucy said with a malicious grin.

The next day the school was abuzz with the news of Veronica's mysterious disappearance.

Echoes

The traveler walked the Untaken Path for the twelfth. The man had abandoned contemplation of when the seemingly unending black obsidian corridor would give way to daylight.

The cold touch of the freezing hall did not vex the traveler, nor did the preponderance of darkness that filled the Untaken Path. It was the silence that tortured him. The echo of his footsteps were the only source of sound.

On the thirteenth day the traveler heard the echo of a second set of footsteps. He longed for silence once more as he felt the evil of the Untaken Path surround him.

Feast for Giants

English regained consciousness and the first thing he became aware of was the rampant throbbing below his waist. He looked down and, to his horror, saw that his leg was gone.

Once his shock passed, English noted that he was confined to a large cage inside a cavern. He tried to reason how he had gone to bed in his home and woken up here. English's panic reignited when he heard a booming voice echoing within the cavern.

"I'm not full. Let's see if the rest of him tastes as good as his leg," sounded the voice with abundant hunger.

One Shot Left

I had only minutes left, if that. The sound of their claws raking at the door filled me with dread. The deadbolt would not hold them much longer.

I checked the magazine of my rifle. There was only one shot left. Even at point blank range that would not be enough to stop a single one of them, let alone the pack behind the door. I was going to be the one to get the bullet. I just had to pull the trigger.

I sat with my rifle in my lap. I wasn't ready yet. I wanted every last second.

Prodigal Child

Tess looked at her son with soulful eyes and wiped away her tears. "I never thought I would see you again, my love," she said with a sniffle.

"I had to come back, Momma. I couldn't stay where I was," said her son coldly. His eyes were dead but somehow accusatory at the same time.

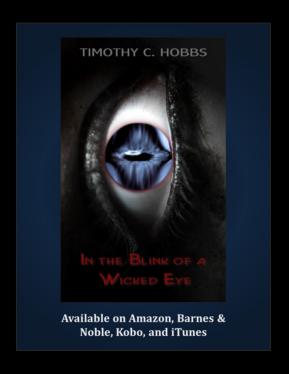
"I'm so sorry that I left you like that. It was a mistake," Tess said as her sobbing left trails of eyeliner down her face.

Tess's son was unmoved. He spoke like a hollow thing. "I had to know. Why did you kill me, Momma?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Jason Pere resides in his home state of Connecticut with his darling wife, two maniacal felines, and sweet hound dog. Since 2012, he has published a multitude of work across many genres, including two novels, *Calling the Reaper* and *World After Death*, anthologies and collaborations with CWPH, and his own fiction blog. He has a propensity for dark content. Fantasy, however, is his favorite genre.

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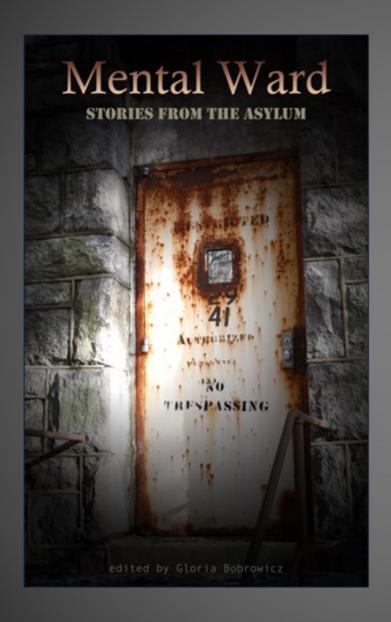


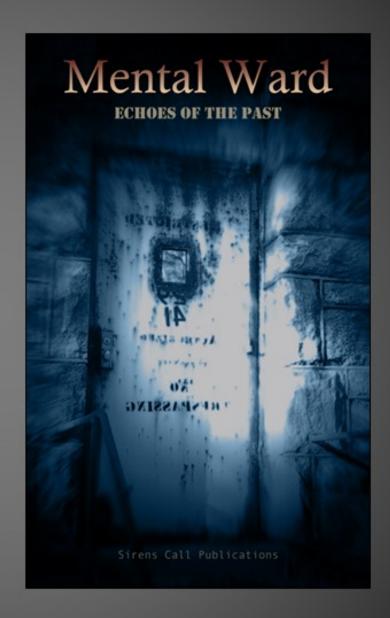
In the Blink of a Wicked Eye

Timothy C.Hobbs

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





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The Castle at the Edge of the World

Sheldon Woodbury

There are mysteries within mysteries worlds within worlds unknown forces waiting to unfurl she awoke with a moon lurking and dreary a haunting orb shining so eerie

Her husband was cloaked as black as a crow clutching a candle with a sputtering glow his eyes still shimmered with gloomy delight on this their sacred wedding night

Please come my love he urged with a swoon gazing out at the lurking moon she slipped out of bed with a stumbling chill the shadowy room silent and still

It felt like a dream as they descended down the echoing stairs to the outside grounds my beloved she implored where are we going the dread in her heart suddenly growing

A ghost like mist clawed at the towers a macabre sight at this midnight hour the ocean thrashed with watery growls like a giant behemoth beginning to howl

They appeared from some unknown beyond where all our mysteries are secretly spawned the lurking moon became a monstrous eye a horrifying sight in the midnight sky

Goodbye my love her husband whispered clutching her hand with a trembling shiver there are mysteries within mysteries worlds within worlds unknown forces waiting to unfurl

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Sheldon Woodbury is an award winning writer (screenplays, plays, books, short stories, and poems). He also teaches screenwriting at New York University. His book "Cool Million" is considered the essential guide to writing high concept movies. His short stories and poems have appeared in many horror anthologies and magazines. His novel "The World on Fire" was published September, 2014 by JWK Fiction.

Amazon Page: https://www.amazon.com/Sheldon-Woodbury/e/B001K86VBI/Blog: https://sheldonwoodbury.blogspot.com/

In a world once ravaged by a terrible war, Katra is a hunter...



Available on Amazon, CreateSpace, Barnes & Noble, Smashwords, and the iStore

Poetry by DJ Tyrer

Alone with the Kids

No problem
Don't worry
Get going
Reassures the parents
Settles down for a soda
Catch a little TV
Alone with the kids
Watching them for the evening
Not knowing that
The kids are watching back
Watching, planning
Sharpening their knives
Ready to play

Bone Pit

Venomous grubs crawl undulatingly
Over carrion full bone pit
Devouring every last scrap of flesh
Leaving only white bones
Bleached bright white by drool
That melts flesh to food
Bones whiter than the off-white grubs
That flop and tumble in grotesque swarm
Across the interlaced remnant
Of luckless humanity
Whose doom it was to fall here
Into this pit of despair
Feeding the venomous grubs that crawl
Undulatingly within

Red & Black (II)

Fireworks flash red in the sky
A devil stalks the night
Seeking prey who will not fight
Someone is going to die
A cause to laugh, not to cry
So laugh with all your might
Slay them no matter what they do
Blood is red upon jacket black
As the blade is used to hack
Laugh at the bloody view

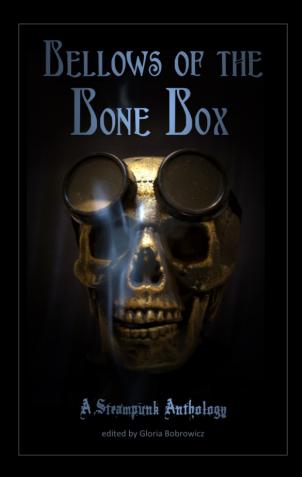
Cyäegha Bound

Five statues to bind it
Five spirits to ward it
Against those fools who find it
A single eye in the darkness
Beneath a single hill
None recall their sins to confess
A multitude of tentacles
A multitude of slaves
To serve the god of the cavern hells
The one they say that they found
The one they pray remains bound

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — DJ Tyrer is the person behind Atlantean Publishing and has been published in anthologies and magazines around the world, such as Chilling Horror Short Stories (Flame Tree), Snowpocalypse (Black Mirror Press), Steampunk Cthulhu (Chaosium), Night in New Orleans (FunDead Publications), Miskatonic Dreams (Alban Lake), and Sorcery & Sanctity: A Homage to Arthur Machen (Hieroglyphics Press), and has a novella available, The Yellow House (Dunhams Manor).

Twitter: <u>@djtyrer</u>

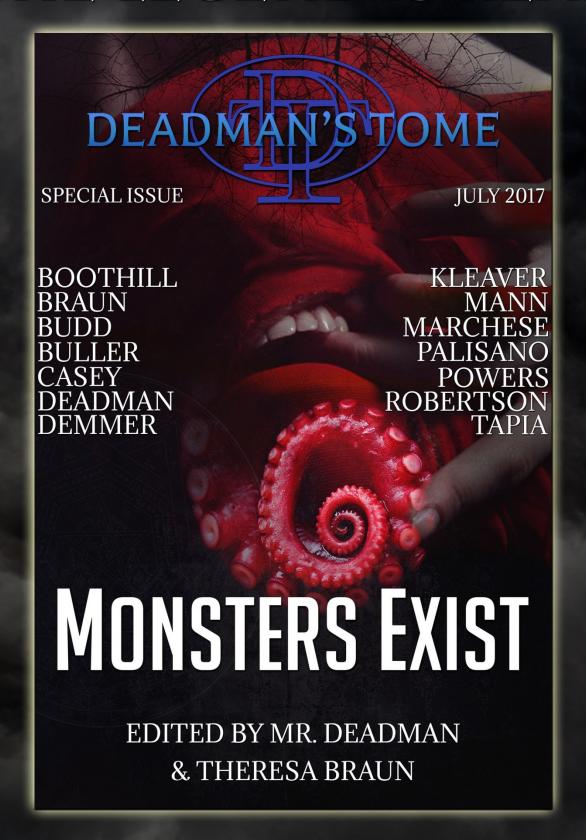
Blog: http://djtyrer.blogspot.co.uk/



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HorrorAddicts.net is looking for the Next Great Horror Writer and they've been putting the 15 lucky contestants through their paces with challenges designed to test their talents. The grand prize is a publishing contract and each of the challenges are judged by HorrorAddicts.net along with a few guest judges offering up their expertise and time.

Nina and Julianne of Sirens Call Publications were pleased and honored to be guest judges for the Poetry Challenge and this is the winner:

A Warning On Wings | Jonathan Fortin

His prayer was drawn in blood, the circle like a door He sat beside the threshold, book open on the floor *This will never work*, to himself he sighed But he was so lonely that every night he cried He was a somber man, not blessed with good looks Hated by his village, he found solace in books Tonight he stripped naked, legs crossed, arms spread He whispered the words that from the pages bled: "For you I'd be the greatest that I could ever be I would do it all, anything you ask of me."

The circle was no prison; he did not seek a slave Nor mindless copulation, which would bore him to the grave No, he sought the thing that was most beyond his reach: A love felt too deeply to be bought or breached. But he waited, and waited, and no answer came So he curled up in bed and wept for all his shame. But at midnight he woke to something gliding to his bed Winged and voluptuous, she smiled as she said, "I have come to answer all the yearning you express For I seek a mortal to corrupt and to caress But if you wish to love me, there is something you must do: Trigger the becoming of the darkest, greatest you You must leave behind all that you hold most dear All you love and cherish, and become your greatest fear. I'll interweave our souls, so I'm always inside Filling all your cracks like soul-rending knife. I'll make you the strangest that you could ever be. But you will be your happiest, if you embrace me. "I warn you with honesty, I warn you in earnest

The part of me that cares for you hopes that you resist. For if you accept me, you'll be as cursed as I Forced to join in battle with the armies of the night Your heart will grow withered, your body will be warped Until you are discarded, a cold and lovely corpse But I'll be with you always, and on the day you fall Then I will die beside you, together after all Knowing how dreadful the end of us would be, I'll ask you again: would you still love me?"

He listened, and considered, and he knew that he should flee Instead he fell into her arms, and to the ecstasy
She had tried to warn him; had truly done her best
But now that he was in her grasp, she pulled him to her breast
What did it matter that for him there was a cost?
she wondered in her pleasure, for now she too was lost.
He suckled her sweet milk until he was corrupted
Wings tore from out his back; within her, he erupted
His flesh became stronger, and his head sprouted horns
Doubt dissipated within his heart of thorns.
She said, "What delights and decadence await us in the night!
You always knew deep down that for this world you weren't right.
This devilish new form is who you were meant to be.
And I delight in knowing that you belong to me."

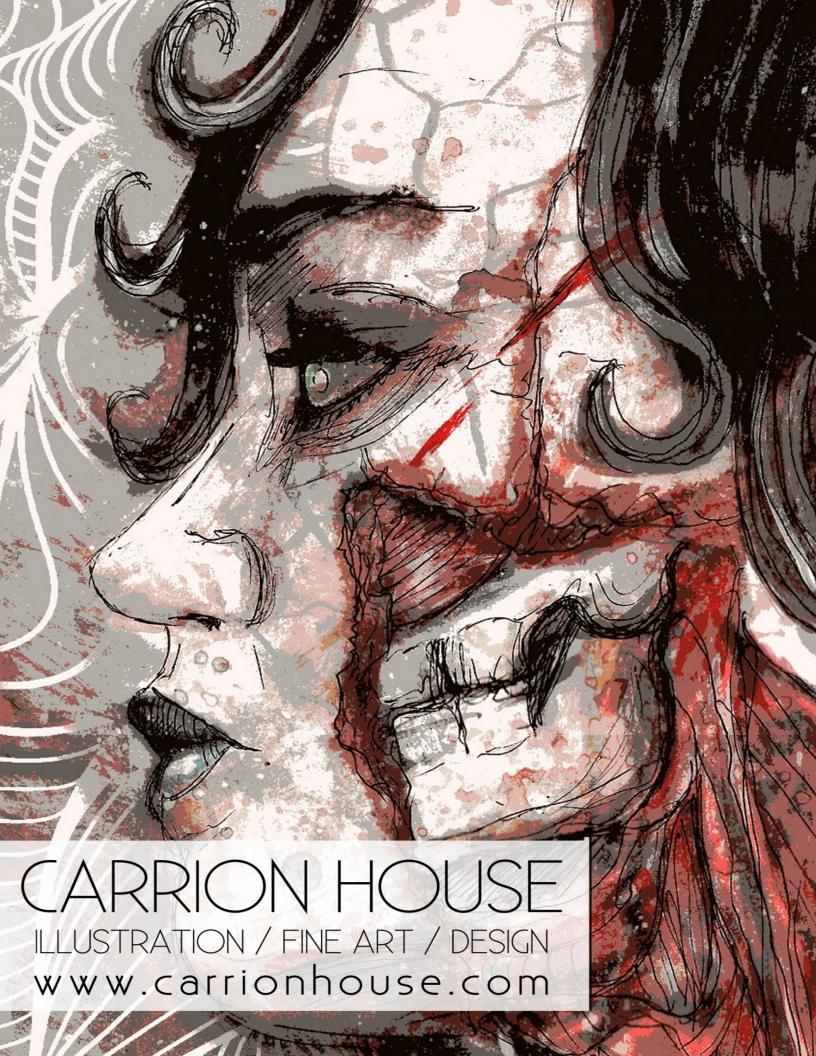
He spread his new wings, and chased her through the night Until they reached Necropolis, where he could join the fight On red ashen fields, in realms beyond our own They battled holy angels who possessed hearts of stone It made her sad to drag him into this endless strife But he said, "I'd fight a thousand wars to remain by your side." Each day was spent in battle, each night in an embrace Whips and chains and even teeth were used in either case When one was in danger, the other, without fear Would race to rescue them, and whisper in their ear: "I know that any minute we may die horribly. But you make me the happiest that I could ever be." But little did he know what she would not tell him: What he saw as angels were innocent children.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — As a child, Jonathan Fortin was perpetually terrified, so of course he grew up to be a horror writer. Haunted by tales that grow in his head like demonic children, Jonathan believes that a good horror story is first and foremost a good story—just one where particularly awful things happen.

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Interview with Luke Spooner, Artist

The artwork featured in this issue of The Sirens Call is courtesy of artist Luke Spooner. We sat down with Luke to ask him a few questions about his art and this is what transpired.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Luke! Why don't you take a moment and introduce yourself?

Luke Spooner: I go by a couple of different aliases depending on what kind of artwork I'm producing but my most popular style of work is my darker style which I pursue under the name 'Carrion House.' A lot of work in this vein can be seen at www.carrionhouse.com.

I have a First Class degree in illustration from the University of Portsmouth in England which I attained about five years ago and today my projects and commissions include illustrations, both interior and exterior for magazines, books, graphic novels, album artwork for bands, children's books, ebook covers, character design as well as branding and logo design. I also recently illustrated, as part of an anthology, stories by Neil Gaiman and Clive Barker and another anthology containing a story by Stephen King.

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

Luke: I like to remain fairly open to all sorts of mediums and never rule out the idea of picking up something new and playing with it to see how it could potentially benefit the way I make my work. I tend to work in a style which is essentially a mix of ink, watercolour, pencil and charcoal. A lot of my art teachers from years gone by would be wincing at the very notion of that mix but that's what gets the job done and it's what I enjoy. It also plays to my strengths of drawing and making a lot of mess. I also use various digital techniques as a means of editing my work and lifting it that little bit more through changes and alterations that would either be too time consuming or impossible by hand. I think there's a huge amount of value in the bespoke aesthetic given to anything by the simple fact that it was hand drawn but I don't like to rule out digital means of boosting a piece as I believe you should be open to anything that makes your artwork the best possible version of itself that it can be. I will say though that if something doesn't work for you then, as long as you've tried it, feel free to cast it aside. I recently had an attempt at incorporating oil paints into my style of artwork, as I had visions of painting like the old masters, mixing my own paint etc. but it did not gel with anything I wanted to do—drying times took days, the paint itself required all sorts of additional prepping to work and it wasn't giving me anything I didn't have already for about half of the trouble. But; at least I know, and I like to think I'm all the richer for it and have even more faith that I am making work in the way I'm supposed to.

SCP: What are some of your main influences?

Luke: Visual artists, especially illustrators, often find inspiration in all sorts of other visual mediums that people wouldn't immediately consider 'art movements'; video games, film—anything with a captivating and involving narrative is a potential wellspring of creative fuel therefore I tend to just keep my eyes and ears open and allow myself to be inspired rather than cherry pick. Admittedly though I do tend to lean towards topics with darker subject matter, and that's probably a good thing since that's also what I'm purveying as an illustrator, but I do draw vast amounts of inspiration regularly from music. It is always playing whenever I sit down to work and comes from all ends of the spectrum as opposed to one specific style or genre.

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

Luke: One of the reasons I became a freelance illustrator is because I don't enjoy collaborating with other visual artists. It's not a reluctance to share ideas that causes this—it's simply that I prefer to be solely responsible for my work, I like to know every inch of it intimately and be reliant on only myself for the project's progress. I think it might also be because illustration, at least for me, is a very personal thing; I draw and paint in my bespoke way and have been do so since I could hold a pencil so the idea of allowing someone into that bubble I've built over my life time and sharing all the eccentricities of how I do what I do is unfathomable.

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

Luke: This used to be a daily occurrence for me when I first started out as I had huge



expectations and solid vision for each and every piece I did. I'm also very self-critical as I believe it helps breed a certain brand of productivity in my practice that allows for good work to spring forth regardless of the type of project I'm working on—so the two factors combined meant there were many angrily scribbled sketches hurled around my work area during my first year of professional illustration. However; over time I realised that better work actually appeared if I was open to certain things simply falling into place as I worked, happy accidents and certain aspects of a design simply finding their place within a piece. Whereas before, if an alternative option revealed itself, say a character's expression or colour choice, I would have simply ruled it out because it didn't match the vision in my head. As a result I've had more success in pieces

being well received by clients with increasingly fewer edits required and I am far happier when looking back over pieces once a project is over and I take stock of how I did.

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

Luke: I don't think it's exclusively a writer's problem and I dislike the fact that they seem to have claimed an ownership of the notion. I feel any creative person will suffer droughts and inconsistencies in their creative output here and there—it's simply a part of being human. I have very little time to be creatively blocked as I regularly have clients telling me what I need to paint or draw for them but in the rare moments when I do find some free time to make what I want to make I do find myself wondering what I should do. You could argue that this is because I've become conditioned to work for people rather than myself but I think it's just hard for myself to commit to one idea and see it through. I have so many ideas and desires to explore a certain piece or subject matter on a daily basis and so little time to do it in that something has to be really special for me to go; 'this is it, everything else can wait.'

SCP: Where do you find your inspiration?

Luke: As I mentioned earlier; I draw inspiration from all sorts of media; films, books, video games, visual art, music etc. but dark subject matter seems to be the common thread that appears most frequently in all of the things I get fuelled by.

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

Luke: Quite often I'm subject to what a story I'm illustrating offers me as opposed to what I'd like to pursue out of choice. I've illustrated stories that sometimes don't mention any obvious visual cues and that's usually a sign that my work can get quite abstract without upsetting anybody. Other times I might see something in a story that sums up everything I'm trying to convey about the story really well and so I capitalise on that.

I'm also heavily influenced in my choice of what to use in a composition by what the client in question has requested. Sometimes I've been told 'hey, go with whatever you feel' and other times I've received hefty word documents attached to the briefing email that details what a client wants, where they want it, what colour it should and why it should be that way. I have no problem with either option as it lets me know what's expected of me and let's me do my job which at the end of the day is what I want to do effectively and to the best of my ability.

SCP: What is your favorite piece you have ever completed? Why is it your favorite?

Luke: I'm incredibly self-critical and, like most artists, don't really ever consider a piece finished because I can always see things I'd like to change, try, test etc. However the need for clients to receive a piece as a result of all this artistic process means that at some point you have to admit that it's probably ok for the client to use that particular incarnation of what you're trying to put together. If it was up to me I'd just rework each piece constantly and therefore I can't really throw the spotlight on any piece in particular that I'd consider my favorite as I don't see

any of them as being finished. I apologize for what a boring answer that must be but it's better than lying.

SCP: Have you ever completed a piece for a client and thought it wasn't good even though it was exactly what they asked for? What did you do?

Luke: Much to my shame this happened fairly recently. I illustrated a certain book's front cover about 3 years ago and it was very well received by the people putting the book together. This meant that when it came time to put the sequel to the book together, about 2 years later, they came back to me to ask for a new front cover. The pressure to create something that lived up to the reputation that the first book's cover had gained was a lot more than I was used to and I ended up creating a piece that I personally wasn't very happy with. I ran it by the publishers and they liked it but requested some changes. I was happy with that as I was hoping it would help fill the gaps that I felt my design had but instead the opposite occurred—the cover turned into what I considered to be a bad remake of the first cover, a cheap imitation that I wasn't entirely happy with calling 'my work.' However I didn't have time to rework the cover and the publisher, despite my secret belief that they didn't like it either and were just being polite in their acceptance of it, seemed to be happy with using it as their cover and shared it across social media to help with the publicity of the next release before I could make any grievances known. So I moved on—it was already associated with the project in the eyes of the public and there was no guarantee I could best it with further attempts.

A year went by and the second instalment of the series still hadn't been released but then I received an email asking if I could provide interior illustration for it as the release was fast approaching. The illustrations weren't an afterthought either as every story in the collection would need to be illustrated. I was blown away as I assumed that the less than favourable cover may have soured the publisher on the idea of ever using me as an artist again but here they were, asking for me to put my stamp on other aspects of the book and I was deeply moved. Therefore I decided that I would not just provide the requested illustrations—I would provide a brand new cover that I firmly believed in, would be proud to call my work and did it for free as a surprise thank you for believing in me as an illustrator. The book itself is set to be released later this year and has the new and updated cover which I can firmly say I am behind 100%.

Thank you Luke for taking the time to answer our questions and for allowing us the opportunity to share your work with our readers.

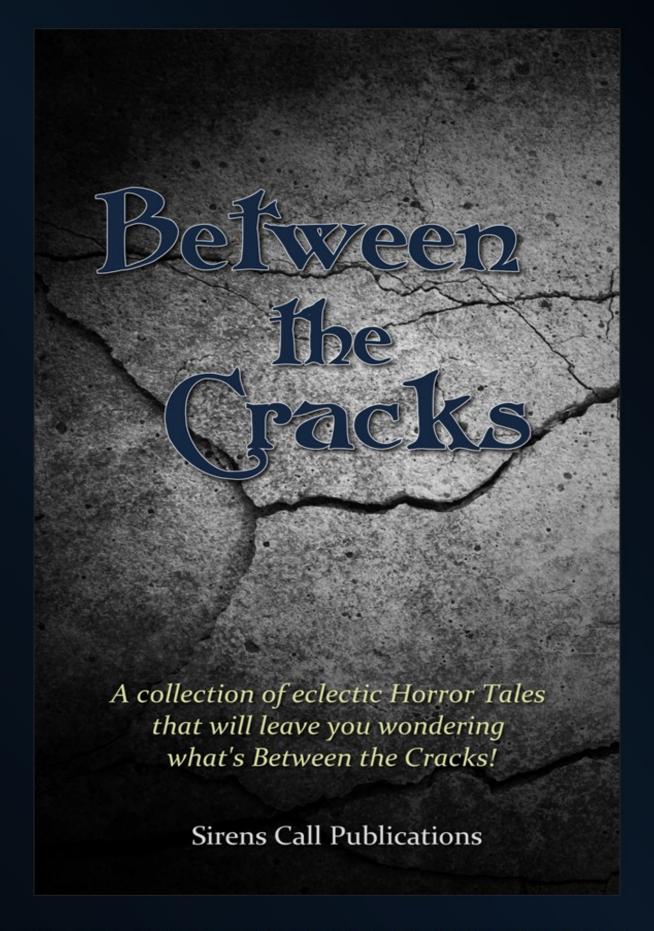
If you'd like more information about Luke and his artwork, please visit www.carrionhouse.com.



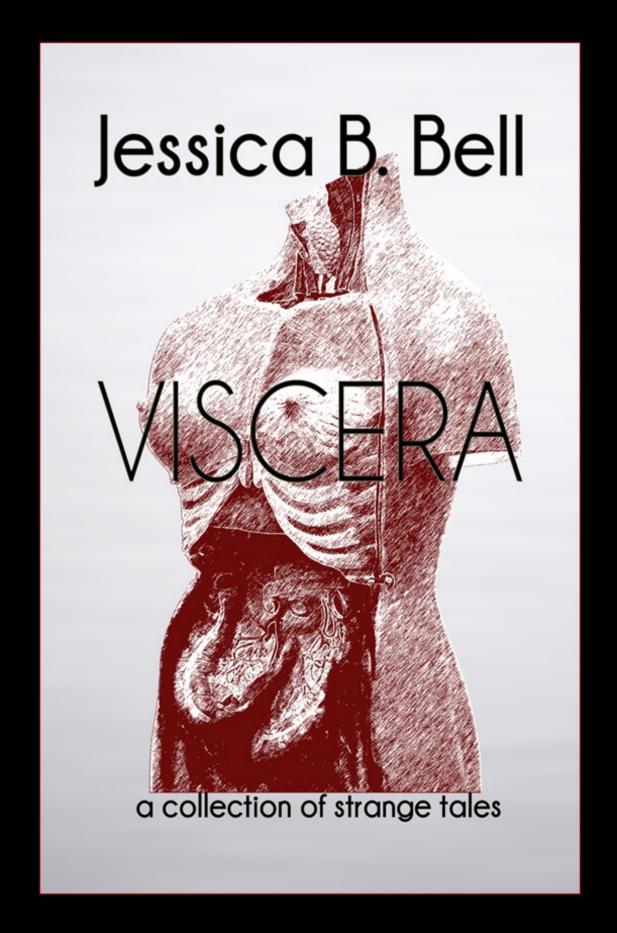
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Jupiter | *KL Dantes*

Hunter Desmond stood rigidly, every muscle taut with fear. Though his heart raced he tried to keep his breathing quiet, his ears straining to pick up every single step. When he first heard them two days ago he wrote them off as a trick of his imagination, a manifestation of working too hard and countless hours spent alone. But as they kept him awake that night he began to think maybe it was his current quarters, the SV Zeus 2, protesting as it cruised through the chemical laden seas of Jupiter.

Deep down, however, Hunter knew.

Just beyond the secured door someone or something paced the hallway. It sounded to him like the heavy footsteps of a man in boots. Every once in awhile there would come the telltale beep of a door being opened, and for a short time the walking would stop while whatever it was poked around another room. The tension would ease from Hunter's body and his brain would start trying to rationalize what it heard.

But the silence never lasted.

The longest stretch he'd been granted was an hour, in which he fell asleep, exhausted from maintaining a hyper-vigilant state. Every time it started walking the tiny hairs on the back of his neck stirred, like someone waited just 'round the corner. Hunter couldn't shake the feeling that whatever it was, it searched for something, and the thought he might be that thing petrified him. To the point where he stopped venturing to his bunk or any other part of the ship. The cockpit was the only safe place.

After all, when Hunter embarked on his historical mission he'd been the only living, breathing being aboard.

And he wished desperately that his unwanted passenger would vanish just as mysteriously as it appeared.

Back and forth the steps went.

Sweat trickled down Hunter's cheek. Nervously, he licked his lips. In one hand, his grip tight enough to turn his knuckles white, he gripped a hefty wrench taken from the main engine room. It was the only viable weapon he could find. With his back to the reinforced windows and the instrument panel, Hunter's gaze never wavered.

What if he turned away?

What if it wanted in?

An entirely new terrorizing thought popped into his mind. When it went in the other rooms, in those brief moments of silence, what if it was trying to find its way in?

A whimper escaped Hunter.

The pacing stopped abruptly, sounding right outside the door. Unshed tears burned the backs of his eyes, each thunderous beat of his heart came with the surprise it hadn't quit on him. Had the intruder, for how else was he supposed to think of it, heard him? Did it stand on the other side of the entryway hoping to wait him out?

Did it *hunger* for him?

This time Hunter bit down on the heel of his free hand, momentarily closing his eyes. A tear slipped free. His bladder threatened to let loose and soak his pants. The sound of silence began to build. No help at all, his imagination began to toss out pictures of what might be standing there waiting for him and none of them were in any way pleasant. Aliens weren't new territory, the human race having encountered two different species of highly intelligent beings. Was it possible that some undiscovered creature lurked in the depths of Jupiter?

He had no desire to find out.

The radio crackled, a voice coming across the airwaves. "Hunter, how's it going buddy?"

The Olympus, his so-called mothership, hovering in the atmosphere, keeping tabs on him. Somehow hearing the voice of the first mate snapped him out of his trance. Hunter dropped the wrench, the tool falling to the floor with a clatter. He smashed a hand down on the button, never taking his eyes off the door.

"Get me out of here." His words came out in the tremble of a kid certain there was a monster under the bed.

"What's up, buddy?"

Something hit the door. "Oh god, it's trying to get in."

"Hunter, man, what the hell is going on?"

The cockpit shiver under the impact of his visitor, the creature tired of waiting.

Metal groaned.

Hunter's eyes bulged at the sight of the dent in the door.

"Hunter?"

Captain Roger Knight, brow furrowed, gazed down on his first mate, Gary Newlin, neither of them sure of the transmission. The readout on the screen indicated everything was fine with SV Zeus 2, but its sole occupant, Hunter Desmond, was experiencing a heightened heart rate, one that worried the captain.

"Tell me, Gary, what do you make of this?" he asked, gesturing at the screen.

Gary shrugged. "Unsure, sir. Whatever's going on down there, Hunter's definitely in distress. I suggest we bring the craft to the surface. Permission to do so, sir?"

Captain Knight nodded. "Permission granted."

"Hunter, we're going to bring you up, hold tight, buddy."

The radio crackled.

They jumped, surprised to hear an agonizing scream.

"Hunter?" bellowed Gary. "Hunter, talk to me. What's going on?"

Captain Knight leaned on the back of Gary's chair, his eyes scanning the screen. Nothing had changed, aside from the steady decrease in Hunter's vital signs. It had been his idea to send Hunter down below the clouds of the gas giant, having found no better candidate. There had been numerous missions taken to Jupiter, countless files filled with research, and none of them ever revealed any sign of life.

He wasn't about to lose a man.

He hadn't lost one yet.

"Hunter, this is your captain, please tell us what's going on down there."

Silence.

"He's not answering, sir."

"Hunter."

The blinking light indicating Hunter's location aboard the submersible winked out.

Gary and Captain Knight exchanged a look.

The radio crackled.

But all they heard was the distinct sound of heavy footsteps.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — KL Dantes lives in southern Wisconsin where she writes every chance she gets.

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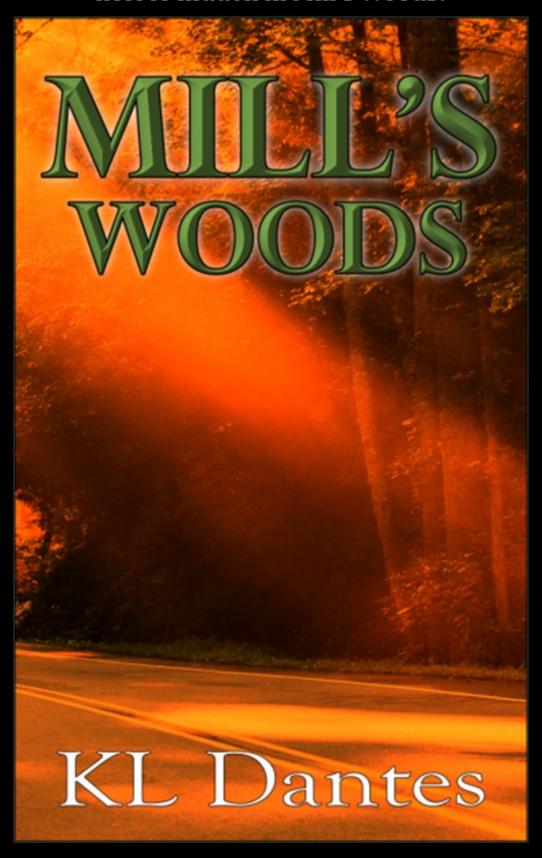
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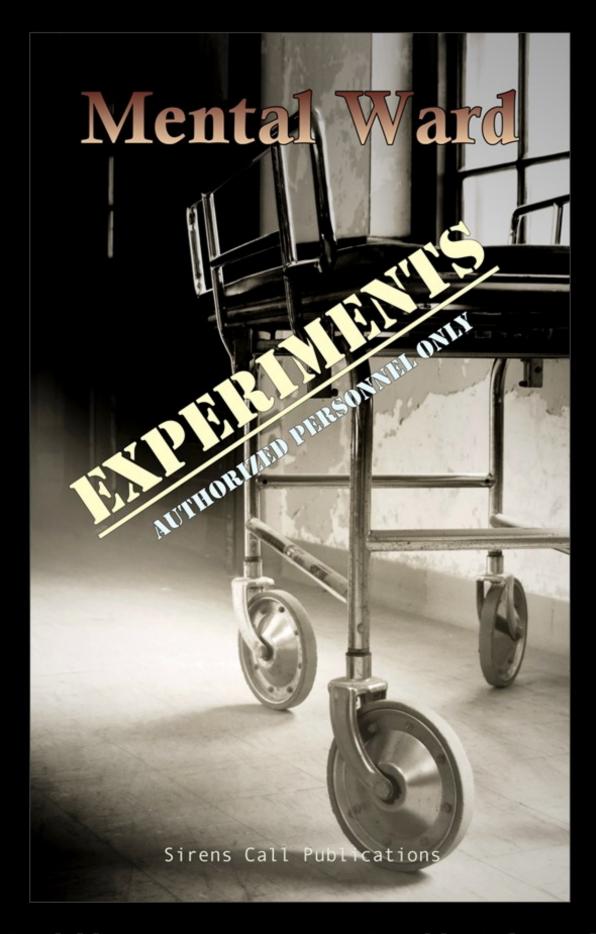
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Everything We Do | *Charles Roland*

"They're simply not old enough," said Catherine, "to understand the sacrifices we make for them."

"Of course not," said Eunice, returning the wallet-sized photographs of her grandchildren to her purse. "Thomas is eight, and Nell only six. You can't expect them to understand at that age."

Catherine nodded. Of course, Eunice was right. "Their parents were too young to understand, once, too," she reminded both Eunice and herself. "But now they're doing everything we used to do."

Eunice smiled to herself, and shook her head appreciatively. "Good kids," she said. "They really are good kids. And now their kids are good kids."

Catherine eased herself to her feet and patted Eunice on her knee.

"Everything we do, we do for them," she said, as she opened the large wooden doors. Eunice rose as well, walked to the end of the bench on which they'd been resting, and followed Catherine inside.

Herbert Rose sat just inside the door. He rose to stood as the two women entered, then curved his body forward and put a hand to his back, grimacing just a bit.

"Back still bothering you, Herb?" Catherine asked.

"I'm afraid it is," said Herbert, with a rueful smile. "Not that I mind too much. Reminds me that I'm alive."

The two women smiled in return. They'd known Herbert for as long as they could remember. He was a good father and grandfather.

"Nonetheless," said Catherine, "we can and should ask about that today. There's no sense in doing nothing, when it may be possible to get some help."

"Right you are," said Herbert, who knew better than to argue with women of a certain age. And, of course, Catherine was right: no harm in asking. Some good might well come of it.

He'd seen, with his own eyes, far more remarkable things happen. They all had.

"The visit went smoothly, I assume," he said.

"Yes, perfectly," said Catherine. "The fellow wanted to see the Hoyt place. He drove alone, up from near the city. Matt helped, and Peter Stengeller, too. No trouble at all."

"You bragging about me again?" asked Matt, Catherine's eldest son, as he walked through the doors. Eunice and Herbert both smiled as he gave his mother a hug. When the two drew back from the embrace, they could see how proud Catherine was of her boy.

"Shirley's with the twins at home?" Catherine asked.

"She is," Matt said. He turned to Eunice. "She's watching Thomas and Nell, too. Raymond and Beth should be along any minute."

Eunice nodded and smiled. She was glad that her daughter and son-in-law would be able to attend. It was only too bad that Shirley, Matt's wife, had to stay home with the children. But next time someone else would stay home—perhaps Raymond, or Beth, or Matt himself—and so Shirley would have a chance to participate. Besides, she was sure that Matt would ask anything necessary on her behalf.

As if reading Eunice's mind, Matt took a scrap of paper out of his pocket and passed it along to Catherine.

"Shirley asked me to put this in for her," he said. "One of the twins is having a little bit of trouble at school, not making friends as easily as she'd like. Work's getting complicated, so I've got a heavy ask of my own. Could you put this one in for us, Mom?"

Catherine smiled and accepted the paper. She and Eunice exchanged knowing looks. *Everything we do,* the looks said, *we do for them.*

The doors opened again and again, and the large room began to fill. Individuals and families milled around, greeting one another and exchanging pleasantries.

Catherine and Eunice made their way across the room slowly, clasping hands with friends and neighbors as they passed. When they reached the far wall, Catherine looked over the assembly. Everyone was present who was expected. She rang a small bell hanging from a wall-mounted fixture, and Peter Stengeller closed and locked the front doors.

The crowd fell into silence. All eyes turned to Catherine, and to the heavy metal door on the far wall next to which she stood.

Herbert moved to the heavy door—Catherine noticed he was shuffling as he walked; she was going to make sure and ask about his back—and inserted a small key that he wore on a chain around his neck. Catherine, Eunice, Matt, and a great many other of the building's occupants wore similar keys. Matt stepped forward, as did two other men, and together the four got hold of the large handle and wrenched the door open.

Catherine entered first, followed by Eunice, Herbert, and the rest of the assembled.

As the crowd filed in, they filled the stiff-backed wooden benches lined up six deep along three sides of the room. Soon all of the benches were occupied. Some stayed standing behind the last row; these assisted in closing the heavy metal door and turning the lock.

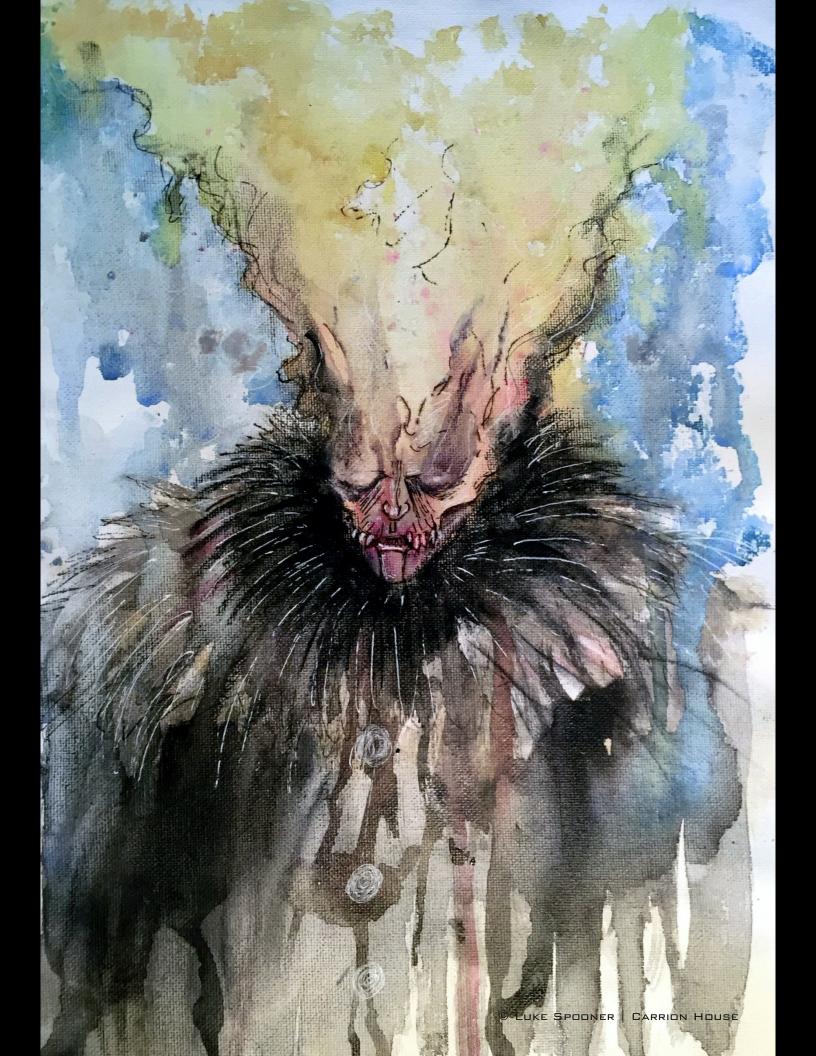
Catherine approached the black felt-covered table at the front of the room. She fingered the knife that rested there, then took it in her hand.

All eyes were on her. She would perform the service, but all of their hands would be with her hands as she acted. All of them would be in her as she performed; she moved as all of them. Whoever had something to ask could ask, in their own voice, once Catherine had performed, because her service was their service.

She began to speak, and as she did she moved toward a larger table, this one made of gleaming steel, directly at the center of the area left open by the rows of benches. She raised the knife and lowered it slowly, continuing to speak, her words building in rhythm. Strapped to the table, the man who'd driven up alone from near the city writhed as the knife entered his flesh.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Charles Roland lives in an area convenient to several major southern cities. His work has appeared in Workers Write! Tales from the Casino, Mystery Weekly Magazine, and Akashic Books' "Mondays are Murder" series. He can be reached at charlesrolandauthor@gmail.com.

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The Nite Rail | Anna Vizard

Ruby had dreaded this day for years. She prayed for it to never come. It came anyway, and it was horrible.

They all did it, especially the newcomers, though the novelty eventually wore off. It was easy, put your penny on the rail and after the train passes by collect your flattened copper loot. Abe Lincoln's face, a smear on the coin's new oblong surface. Over the years, Ruby had collected an old mason jar full of the disrespected coins from her yard and near the tracks, discarded by kids in favor of other childhood activities.

The freight train ran flush beside the little rundown trailer park. Ruby could look out her window and wave to the engineers and once in a while they would wave back. They were headed for the paper mill a town over. Four times a day it ran and Ruby could set her watch by its approach. Her first few months in the park the train would wake her and cause her heart to beat like hummingbird wings. Now she slept right through it

As a retired teacher it was hard for Ruby not to be authoritative to the park's many children. Most families were transient, all of them broken, sharing similar stories of dysfunction. None stayed long, but all stayed much longer than they wanted to. A few like Ruby squirreled away here long ago, lacking the courage to move on. Ruby owned her little yellow trailer and paid lot rent which was reasonable.

She worried about the children's safety daily, forever warning them or their parents about the dangers of the tracks. A train had a way of fooling the mind. It would make one think it was further away than it was, or make one think it was moving slower, and it could even make the mind think it was coming from a different direction. A train was a deceitful killer.

There was no Welcome Wagon to greet new tenants and really no rules, only Ruby's warning. She was grateful to the parents who minded their children and kept them away from the tracks, but not all parents wanted to hear her advice. She could tell by the narrowed eyes that sent a clear message. 'Mind yer own business ole' woman.' Some of the tweens, as they were called now, once flipped Ruby off and laughed as they walked the tracks down to Sentells Grocery for candy and drinks.

It was Andy who first raised the alarm that something was dreadfully wrong. She had dozed off during Oprah who was yapping about more of her favorite things, when Andy's furious barking woke her. The first thing she heard was the train whistling frantically. The second thing she heard was the sound of metal against metal. Dear Lord, she thought, they are trying to stop the train! She ran outside as fast as her orthopedic shoes could move, but it was too late. She ran up to the tracks towards the engineers to see if hope beyond hope, she could help, but it was too late. She recognized the men, though now they both had tears in their eyes. It was tiny Megan Cooper, Gwen Cooper's youngest of three, no one could save her, it was too late.

Gwen and her children had moved in about three or four weeks earlier. Gwen tried to be a

good mother, but she was a slave to the system, to poor choices in men, and to a family history of women who did not think they could do better. Ruby looked back to the trailers and saw two men holding a screaming Gwen back from the awful scene. She saw other mothers dragging their children into the deepest recesses of their unloved rentals in an effort to spare their young'uns and themselves from the growing horror. Gwen's children had already been swept in, Ruby reckoned. She wanted to go hide in her own little nest with Andy, but she knew she couldn't just yet.

"I'll go on an' call Gwen's mama, I know her well, and Gwen will need her."

Ruby could hear the sirens, but she had seen what was on those tracks and nothing would ever restore Lil' Megan to her mama. They had all been too late. Ruby walked back towards her trailer, she felt tired, and yet there was so much she had to do. Something caught her eye and she stooped down for a look. Her hand flew to her mouth as she realized that it was Megan's boo. A boo was a security blanket to southern babies. Megan's boo was an old receiving blanket that she had probably had since birth. Like many children with mothers too busy for the youngest, Megan carried her boo everywhere. Ruby swallowed down the lump in her throat and continued on. She reached her trailer and picked up the phone to tell Eleanor Bass that her youngest grandbaby was dead, and that her daughter might go crazy with grief. Eleanor, was a faithful follower of One True Southern Baptist, and Ruby knew the troops would be here soon, and though Ruby herself wasn't the church goin' kind, she knew that right now these ladies would take care of the shattered family.

It had been a month since Gwen had buried Megan and had packed her remaining two children up and left the trailer park. Ruby no longer had to worry about warning anyone about the tracks and now the rails stayed bare of coins. New people came, but like all the others they would only stay as long as they had to, not a minute more just as they always had. Ruby fed the birds and played with Andy, and tried to forget the horror of what she had seen that day on the tracks.

Andy was showing off this morning, her commands ignored. The game of waiting for her to catch up, then running off, was such a puppyhood tactic. Breathing heavily, Ruby decided to ignore him and walked back home. He would come soon as he noticed her out of his sight. Ruby was determined not to play the game. She tried not to miss his absence and puttered around the house, but an old woman and one little dog make little mess, and it was a big day to find a cobweb to sweep away.

Later as she predicted, she heard Andy scratching at the door, and as she also predicted, she couldn't wait but five minutes before feeling sorry for him and letting him in. Andy slunk in with something in his mouth. She tried to take it and they were back to the game of Keep-Away. He ran behind the couch and Ruby opted to let him have it, she would throw it away in the morning.

Ruby had been asleep for hours when she awoke. Her room was cold, her breath coming

out in smoky puffs. Impossible in a North Carolina August, she thought. Andy whimpered at the end of the bed. In front of him, Ruby saw what was making things so cold. The poor Cooper child was crying. So pale she was hardly there, but there she was, and still wearing the Winnie the Pooh t-shirt she died in.

Ruby somehow found the courage and said in a shaking voice, "Megan, you're not supposed to be here, Honey."

Megan curled her little white-blue hand into a fist and cried, "I want my boo!"

"Aww Honey, I don't have your boo," Ruby said.

Megan was sobbing harder now and pointing to Andy who was shaking.

"Oh Andy," Ruby whispered. She remembered the item that Andy had brought into the house earlier and cautiously got out of bed. Ruby kept her eye on the little dead girl and went to the living room. Heavy as it was, she got the couch moved out far enough to grab the item and saw that it was indeed Megan's boo or rather what was left of it. Filthy and faded, she could almost see the little sheep that once ran this way and that throughout the flannel. It was falling apart, but it still belonged to Megan, this new Megan, and Ruby just wanted the nightmare to end.

"Megan Darlin', here is your boo," Ruby said as brightly as she could, but she knew her smile was a rictus of terror. "Come on now, take it."

Megan entered the room, still sniffling. Ruby set the boo on the carpet in front of Megan and backed away, afraid of making contact with the ghost child. Afraid her blood would freeze in her veins and heart. Megan picked it up making no move to leave, instead she curled up on the end of the couch and instantly fell asleep.

"Megan, you can't stay here," Ruby pleaded. Her old heart was racing, and she wondered if it could take much more.

Ruby sat in her recliner, at a loss of what to do. She had never been in the presence of what the old timers called a 'haint'. A ghost toddler, also acted as such, reasoning with the child would not work. She huddled under a throw with Andy, trying to keep them both warm. The trailer had become an icebox. Megan continued to sleep as children do, and it broke Ruby's heart to see it. Unlike her siblings, the child would never grow, or go to school, or marry.

Later she heard a train, but was surprised. The last train had passed an hour before and this one sounded different, louder. She ran to the window and saw that it was an old passenger train, semi-transparent just like Megan. It stopped alongside of Ruby's trailer and that was when Megan rose from her sleep.

The child toddled to the back door, clutching her boo tightly to her chest and passed through to the outside. A man, a conductor, stepped out of the train and waited. Dressed in a uniform of days gone by, he was smiling at them. Ruby watched while the man gently picked up Megan and tickled her cheek, causing the child to giggle. Ruby noticed that Megan's boo was once again filled with little blue lambs in different states of leaping over fences in a clean field of white. And though still pale her hair shined and she had a look of health to her. Then the

conductor looked at Ruby and held his long gray hand out to her patiently. It took her a minute, then Ruby knew, and went into action. She found what she needed and took it out the same back door that ghostly Megan had passed through minutes earlier. Her hands shook as she held the mason jar up to the man and child. Megan bit her lip in concentration as she looked into the jar and then reached in and drew out one of the flattened coins with a chubby white-blue hand.

"Mine!" The child declared proudly in a baby voice. The ghostly conductor smiled and accepted the coin. He looked back at Ruby with a solemn expression then whispered into Megan's ear. Megan turned her face to Ruby and said, "Fank you Miss Wooby."

Ruby nodded, her throat thick, and watched them vanish into the train. Large plumes of smoke puffed out of the locomotive as it pulled away and faded down the tracks. She watched till she could see it no more.

Once inside Ruby turned on the television, but she wasn't paying any mind to it. She could only think about the train. Megan would not be back, Ruby knew this. She did wonder if the train would one night stop for her, for surely she had the fare. She looked at the jar full of copper coins and hugged Andy a little closer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Anna Vizard walks and talks in New England, but her ghost haunts North Carolina. She writes horror, but dabbles in fantasy with her wing-dog, Meeko by her side. She loves humanity, and sees a potential hero in everybody she meets. She collects teacups, vintage photos and... other things.

Twitter: <u>@NovStormbringer</u> Facebook: <u>Anna H. Vizard</u>



The Jigsaw Puzzle | Wies Blaize

"I might be ninety-two years old, but I am not daft," Tosca mumbled as she was looking around the new environment with suspicious eyes. A nurse was talking to her daughter, giving her time to take in this building they brought her to.

'Sunny Views Retirement Home' said the sign. A dark entry with two old chairs and a table with a pot of daffodils. Pictures of ugly old men on the wall, a desk with a nurse sitting behind a counter busy taking calls. A few old men in pajama are passing her by, eyeballing her with funny smiles; an old lady with a walker entering the elevator. It all was very spooky and she didn't like it one bit.

"I think I will go home now," she touched her daughter's arm. "I've seen it and I don't like it at all."

"No, ma," her daughter said, trying to keep her calm. "This is the fifth home we've visited

this weekend, this is it. You are going to live here.

"I will sign the papers as soon as she has settled in," she turned to the nurse. "We have spoken about it for months now, she is just silly, she will get used to this new place I am sure."

"I know nothing," Tosca said with a tight voice, "I just don't like it here. Take me home, please?" Tears welled in her eyes as she turned and slowly walked towards the exit.

But the nurse grabbed her gently by the shoulder and spoke with a warm voice.

"Now Mrs. VanderBosch, can I call you Tosca? I will show you your room first, and then we are all going to have a cup of tea. Pete? Paul?"

In an instant, two males came out of a passageway, each held her by an arm and directed her into a small corridor. There they opened a door leading into a room with a view.

Tosca felt overwhelmed, but the view was beautiful so she walked to the window. Trees were in full bloom, birds were singing and the sun was shining bright.

Within minutes she felt more comfortable, a little smirk on her face. When the nurse offered her a cup of tea in a nice china cup she almost smiled. Her daughter looked at her, a sigh of relief exited her mouth. "You see ma, you'll love it here in no time."

And it was true, within weeks Tosca felt like she had lived in Sunny Views for years. She had befriended a Mr. Baldwin and a Mrs. Tilton, she made jokes to the male nurses Pete and Paul and enjoyed her room with her own bed, two cupboards and a sofa with a round table. A picture of her daughter and the two grandkids stood on a pedestal next to her chair near the window.

That morning she had taken her walking stick and wandered around in the big building on her own. With the elevator, she had gone to the top floor where she found an attic. Dark brown wooden panels, lots of cobwebs and stacks and stacks of piles of furniture, probably from residents that were deceased. It was a gloomy sight and she would have turned and left but her eye caught a pile of boxes on the floor.

"Well, what have we got here." Tosca moved closer and saw they were a pile of jigsaw puzzles. Since she loved puzzles she went through the pile to see if there would be anything of her taste.

She gasped suddenly, number three of the pile, underneath a funny kitten and a house with trees there was this jigsaw puzzle with the photo of a woman. She looked at it again, it almost seemed... but that could not be... it almost seemed like a picture of herself! She took the box and looked carefully at the photo of the old woman portrayed. Yes, definitely, she saw a lot of resemblance to her own freckled head. With a smile, she took the box with her and descended with the elevator. This had to be examined more closely in the confines of her own room.

She put the jigsaw on the table and looked at the photo once more. In the bright morning light its resemblance was striking. It could have been a picture taken a few months ago. She opened the box and put the pieces in front of her. By the look of it only was a hundred pieces so that would not be difficult to make. As she was a fervent player of puzzles she immediately found the pieces at the side and made a grid.

For the next half hour she was busy combining and looking and piecing together the

jigsaw. Strangely enough, she didn't get anything done; it looked like not one of the pieces would fit into the frame. So she stopped and joined the others for morning coffee and lunch, leaving the jigsaw on her table.

The following hours she would sometimes stop by her table to examine the puzzle and try to make sense of the pieces, but she never was able to put the puzzle together.

That evening after a final try she shoved every piece back into the box and left it there. Maybe another time. The woman looked at her from the photo at the top of the box. Smiling. Tosca smiled back and went to bed.

That night she tossed and turned in her sleep. Night terrors would fill her dreams of daffodils, sunny weather, and grandkids. Once or twice she woke up, sweaty and afraid, not her usual self at all. She couldn't remember what she was dreaming, but it felt dark and definitely not comfortable.

In the morning she woke with tears on her cheek and a hollow feeling in her gut. But the sun was there to greet her, the nurse welcomed the day with a smile and in no time she forgot about the night and was drinking her morning tea, enjoying herself.

The box with the jigsaw was still on her table when she sat down. "Let's try once more," Tosca said and opened the box. The woman was still smiling at her, or was she? Tosca couldn't remember if she was laughing or smiling, but this morning she almost seemed to laugh, teeth showing and eyes sparkling. The resemblance to her own face was even more striking.

The first ten pieces seemed to fit and enthusiastically, Tosca continued. Five pieces at the side, ten pieces in the middle, twenty pieces in the upper left corner... suddenly she was working the whole puzzle and the front of the woman grew and grew quickly into a photo covering her whole face.

Then in an instant the picture turned into a mirror, showing the woman's face and Tosca's face as one and the same. Tosca froze.

Two hands came out of the picture frame and pulled around her neck. She could not breathe. The hands wrapped around her shoulder and she was dragged into the jigsaw.

Within minutes the room was empty.

The box on the table showed a frightened Tosca, mouth wide open, fear in her eyes. The jigsaw lay beside the box, finished.

The following hours everybody at Sunny View was alarmed by her disappearance, but she was never to be found.

The jigsaw found its place in the attic again, on top of the funny kitten and the house with trees. Waiting?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Writer and poet Wies Blaize (pseudonym) from the Hague, the Netherlands has only twelve months writing in the English/American language under her belt. She activates her Muse every day writing blogs, short stories and poetry in English. This is her second publication abroad.

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Depot | Rivka Jacobs

Benjamin Marlow sat alone on the wood and metal bench that backed against a brick wall. His head was bowed into his hands, his brown hair sticking out between his splayed fingers. His elbows rested on his knees. His scuffed wood-sole work shoes were firmly planted on the smooth terra-cotta tiles.

Behind him, floating through high, arched, stained-glass windows with mahogany mullions, came the chattering and clinking sounds of the Fred Harvey lunch counter patrons. His stomach growled and twisted.

"Hey mister," said a small voice.

He raised his head slightly, rolled his eyes up. A little girl in a red and black checked gingham dress stood in front of him, her gaze level with his. She wore a red ribbon around her entire head, holding back a mass of short black curls; the ribbon was tied into a large bow above her left ear.

"Hey," she said again. "Watcha doin'?"

He waited for the concerned voice of a mother, or some stern command from a father, to call the child to them. But nothing happened, so he said hoarsely, "Please go away."

"Here, you can have mine," she said in a tiny, tinny voice. She thrust out a half-eaten sandwich.

"Go away," he said again and lowered his lids, running one hand over his overgrown hair.

"I saw ya go in there and you don't have no money. Are you hungry? You can have mine." She thrust the bread and filling that was wrapped in brown paper, right under his nose.

He grabbed it out of the wrapper, and immediately began pulling mouthfuls off with his teeth. "Now... get," he said between swallows. As her face was screwing up and she looked ready to cry, he added, "And if you pretend that I took this away from you, I'll wallop you good!"

She calmed at once. "Okay," she said, and smiled into dimples. She abruptly took one step backwards, turned, and skipped a few yards down the paved area, where she stopped and glanced back at him. She giggled.

Marlow straightened as he finished the last of the bread and chicken salad. He wiped his mouth with the back of one hand, and peered to the right and the left, surveying the expanse of the station's platform. He wasn't even sure where he was—maybe somewhere in southern California. To him, all the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe depots looked the same. He stared directly across to the far side of the wide track bed where a train undergoing repairs stretched along an outer siding. Between him and those empty cars were six or seven sets of gleaming steel rails.

A couple of porters pushed carts filled with baggage to a point where the little girl had stopped. They paid no attention to her.

A conductor ambled into view, checking his pocket watch. He was portly and tense in his neat uniform and hat. Passengers began strolling from the double doors that led to the lobby.

Marlow watched the slick-looking men in their fedoras and summer caps, the ladies in their smocks and midis and long tapering dresses. Some of the women wore white blouses with beadwork and lace, the collars of which were tied or ruffled above the deep v-necks of elaborate summer jackets that were almost as long as their skirts. All sported their most fashionable headwear pulled down low, nearly covering their eyes. A few of the girls glanced at him, perhaps blushed, and quickly looked away as they hurried to the boarding area.

The conductor, standing near Marlow, called in a booming voice, "Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention pleeease... eastbound train arriving, track one! Eastbound, arriving from Barstow! All passengers bound for Phoenix, Arizona ... your train is arriving, track one!"

Marlow slowly unfolded his body and rose to his feet. His once smart two-button coat, vest, and creased trousers were now stained and torn.

Another conductor emerged from the lobby and paused as he strode past the bench and restaurant windows. He twirled one end of a large mustache and squinted at Marlow. "Do you have a ticket, sir?" he asked, sliding his piggish eyes up and down, inspecting the tall young man.

Marlow opened his mouth to speak, but no words emerged. He made a dry croaking sound instead.

"I see," said the conductor. He exhaled impatiently and continued toward his coworker, who was directing people to queue and wait and leave room for the disembarking passengers of the incoming train.

Marlow had used up the last of his money to buy his last ticket, when he arrived a few days before. He expected to find work, even some charity for a veteran who had left a farm in Illinois to serve his country in France. But the welcome-home parades were done, and the war to end all wars was over. It was every man for himself in this new booming and bustling decade of jazz and prohibition, and no one wanted anything to do with him.

Perhaps they were afraid of him, he considered. But the longer he went without finding a job and a place to live, the worse his appearance and demeanor became, and the less likely it was he'd find work and shelter. He attempted to straighten his coat and dust himself off. He walked towards the collection of people, noting that he could no longer see the child who had given him the food.

"Ah, sir," the conductor with the mustache called to him, holding up a hand that was probably a signal to stop. He was positioned about ten feet ahead of Marlow, and had been happily answering questions from some pretty young women holding bouquets of flowers.

Mournful and low, an extended whistle wailed in the distance.

"Ladies and gentlemen, eastbound, eastbound, arriving from Barstow, track one..."

Marlow turned and faced forward. The exquisite tiles beneath his feet—the colors of sunset—came to an abrupt stop just inches from the dark gravel of the track bed. Somewhere behind him was the yellow line, behind which he was supposed to remain. He inched the toes of his heavy leather shoes so that they extended just beyond the pavers. The parallel rails flashed like lightning in the direct midday sun, beyond the shade provided by the depot's colonnade roof.

He could smell tar and oil and static electricity. The air was pleasant, not too hot for the season. Was this the town of San Diego? He might have enjoyed living here.

The whistle blared again in repeating bursts; it was much closer this time. The ground began to tremble. Marlow focused on the tracks immediately in front of him—they appeared to hum.

"Eastbound, eastbound, arriving from Barstow! Passengers for Phoenix, departure three of the clock! Please keep all belongings and body parts behind the line!"

Marlow felt a slight tug on the rear of his coat. He ignored it, and it happened again, only with more force this time. "Mister, Mister, whadda ya doin?" came that tinny voice. "The man says we gotta move back."

"I told you, get away from me, leave me be," he said, his voice nearly a snarl. He felt the urge to swing his arm without looking, to throw her backwards. "Go away!" he cried.

The whistle howled now, a bell rang, and the Santa Fe 2-10-2 locomotive was squealing and steaming and puffing into the station.

Someone took hold of his right arm and was trying to wrest him from his position. He didn't look to see who it was, but resisted, flinging his fist upwards and knocking the other away.

"Sir, you have to move back!" came a man's shout, and then the sound of someone calling for help.

Marlow leaned forward and turned his face slightly to his left. He watched the front of the massive black oil-and-coal burning engine, a magnificent sight, as it hissed and screeched and bellowed toward him, even while slowing to a stop. He took one step...

"Oh God," a woman screamed. The depot was overtaken with a rising wave of inarticulate noise and high-pitched calls to "My Lord" and "Sweet Jesus." The small knot of waiting passengers suddenly broke apart like a rack of billiard balls, spinning away from the clouds and hot metal and sparks, running off in different directions. Men attempted to embrace and calm their wives, daughters or girlfriends while mothers grasped the hands of their children and ran dragging them back into the lobby.

The depot staff gathered on the platform and were joined by an engineer and conductor from the train, the latter hastily letting himself down the three-step stairs at the front of the first passenger car. The man with the large mustache was darting back and forth alongside the engine, bending over and trying to see under and around the immense wheels, pistons, main and side rods. There was no trace of a man, or parts of a man. Not a drop of blood. Several of the porters joined him, one flattening himself on the tile floor to better inspect the gravel surface. Steam continued to billow from the engine.

The porter who was on the ground abruptly stood, almost leaping to his feet. "It's so cold," he said, grabbing himself with both arms as he shivered and backed away.

"You there, bring some kind of light," the overweight conductor called to one of the station's trainmen.

The engineer raised his arms for attention. "Look, everyone, I'm going to have to back 'er up. You need to keep current passengers on-board, and move everyone else away."

"It's freezin' cold," the porter said again, more loudly.

"What?" the engineer asked. But then he stopped and lowered his hands.

They quieted. They looked at one another with widened eyes. The conductor with the mustache stared at the crank-shafts and pistons of the huge locomotive as these moved slightly and expelled a small amount of vapor. It seemed as if an invisible ocean of chilled air pressed down hard, squeezing their lungs, plugging their ears. He wagged his head, coughed, tried to restore his hearing; the light caught his breath where it condensed and frosted in front of his nose and mouth; in July, in California. He shuddered.

Benjamin Marlow became aware that the little girl with the red bow and inky curls squatted beside him. He was lying flat on his back, his knees slightly bent. He could see the plaster of the colonnade ceiling. It looked fuzzy. He raised himself on his elbows.

The child popped up like a jack-in-the-box. "You're awake!" she piped. She trotted in front of him, into his field of vision.

Marlow stared at the dainty ribs and small embroidered flowers on her white socks, the straps of her black patent-leather Mary-Jane shoes. He raised his chin, looked her in the face. She was small and round and very pale. Her eyes were washed-out blue. "What the hell happened?" he mumbled.

"Here..." she reached out a small hand, as if to help him up.

"Get away from me," he said, and forced himself to his feet in stages, as he felt dizzy. He tried to orient himself. He noted that the train was still there—the engine hrumphed and huffed like an immense, dark beast while the boiler primed and the cylinders filled. But no other person could be seen. He circled in place. He could not see another soul. The atmosphere was grainy. The mission-style Edwardian flourishes of the depot and the colonnade seemed bleached of brightness, like the world was a photograph covered by a sepia stain.

"Come on," she said, oblivious to his disdain. "This is our train." She began skipping up the platform, to the first passenger car. It was gray in color, with rounded corners and neat lettering on the sides. The three-step stairs were lowered, waiting.

"I don't have a ticket," he said, feeling uneasy. He advanced a few paces, and tried to make out the words painted on the passenger car. They didn't appear to be English; Latin perhaps, or Greek? "No," he said. "That isn't right. Where am I?"

"Come on!" she prodded, like any child irritated by a slow adult. She was pulling herself up the steps with great effort, as her arms and legs were so short.

He moved closer to the doorway into which the child disappeared. It was opaque and impenetrable. He glanced at the windows of the car. These glowed a phosphorescent green. He grasped the handrail of the small stairs and climbed

After a moment he became aware he was inside, standing rooted in the center aisle. The light was low and dull and he could see several people already seated scattered about the car. They turned to him, in unison, as he stepped forward. He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands; he couldn't focus on them, he couldn't decipher what they were wearing, or any details

about them.

"Benjamin Marlow, here, here, come sit with me here, would ya?" came the shrill voice of the little girl.

He located where the sound was coming from. She was about midway towards the back, next to a window.

"Oh please, please sit with me," she begged, bouncing up and down. "You can be my daddy now. I've been all alone a long time. Would you be my daddy now?"

Marlow swayed as the train jerked. It felt like they were moving. A loud, long, moaning blast from the whistle split the air. The bell began to clang. He thought he saw a shadow, or a mass of darkness move at the opposite end of the car. He darted to one of the empty seats, several rows ahead of the little girl, and slid himself onto the upholstered surface, over to the window. Everything felt clammy and ice cold. He pressed his forehead to the glass and studied the scenery as it sped-up and zipped past. It looked like the south of California, it appeared to be the same place, but something was not quite right. "It looks," he said out loud, "as if someone put a piece of black silk over the sun."

"Hi," the child with the red bow in her hair said, alighting beside him. "Can I sit with you? This train ride takes forever."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Rivka Jacobs currently lives with four Siamese cats in West Virginia. She was born in Philadelphia and grew up in South Florida. She has sold stories to such publications as The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, the Far Frontiers anthologies, and the Women of Darkness anthology. More recently she's placed stories with The Sirens Call eZine, The Literary Hatchet, Fantastic Floridas, and Riding Light Review. Rivka has a BA in history, MAs in sociology and mental health counseling, and a BSN. She most recently worked as a psychiatric nurse.

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Deliver Us from Evil | Sheri White

"Mama, come away from the window. You know better."

"I want to see the sun."

Anna sighed. Every damn day. "There's no sun today, Mama. There hasn't been sun for months, remember?"

"If your father were here, he'd let me out. He treated me like a queen."

"He wouldn't because it's dangerous now, so don't even bring him into it."

"You treat me so disrespectfully. I don't deserve it, especially from my only daughter. God gave you to me for a reason. Daughters are supposed to care for their mothers."

You don't deserve respect or anything else from me. "I'm sorry, Mama. I just want you to be safe."

"Just make me some tea; at least you can do that for me. God knows you don't do anything else."

Anna walked to the kitchen, fists so tightly clenched she winced when her fingernails broke the skin on her palms.

You're damn lucky we don't have rat poison in the house, you miserable witch.

She closed her eyes and rubbed at her temples, waiting for the water to boil in the kitchen fireplace. She jumped at the shrill whistle of the kettle, the high-pitched sound mirroring the screams in her mind.

The electricity failed about a month after the murky clouds rolled in. Thankfully they had kerosene lamps and plenty of firewood in the cabin, but still, the darkness was oppressive.

Anna prepared the tea and added saltine crackers to the plate, just as she was taught as a child. God help her if she forgot the damn crackers.

"Anna! What is taking so long? It's just a cup of tea, for God's sake!"

"I'm sorry, Mama." She scurried from the kitchen and placed the tray on the coffee table.

"Open the blinds, Anna. This house is so gloomy. Let a little of God's light into this room."

Oh my god! I can't keep doing this. "Mama! The sun isn't out. God is not up in the sky. It's dark and miserable everywhere! And if we do open the blinds, we will be seen."

"You watch your blasphemous mouth, missy. God is in his heaven and looking down upon us. He will shine his love through those clouds for us, so let there be light!" She stalked over to the window and yanked on the cord.

"Mama, no! Leave it closed, damn it!" Anna ran over and grabbed her mother's arm and pulled her away from the window.

"I swear, the way you treat me..." She pushed Anna away and mumbled the rest under her breath.

Anna didn't bother responding. She made the mistake of trying to let some brightness into the house a few days after the clouds gathered, and wouldn't make it again.

The clouds weren't just regular gray rain clouds. They were black, blacker than storm clouds on the ocean horizon. Her mother was wrong—it wasn't gloomy, it was *dark*. Anna didn't think the sun was ever going to come back, especially after what happened when she looked out the window.

The darkness hid everything from sight, but her eyes caught pinpoints of light when she pressed against the glass and focused. It began to dawn on her that the tiny lights were eyes when something jumped and slammed against the window. Whatever the creatures were, they had *teeth* She didn't open the blinds again after that.

She could hear them, though, while she tried to sleep. Scratching at the siding beneath her window, occasionally letting out screams that chilled her blood.

It was clear now that no help would arrive. Anna and her mother were alone in the woods, even more isolated than usual. Anna had escaped the dreary cabin a decade ago when she went to college against her mother's wishes. With her father's encouragement, Anna began to build a life of her own. No longer subjected to her mother's criticisms and insults, Anna blossomed, making friends and earning her own money. Earning her freedom.

Then her father died and her dream came to an end.

"Sit down and quit your moping, Anna. You're depressing me. Find something to do, for God's sake! There's always something to be cleaned, you know. Laziness is not an attractive trait, especially if you want to find a husband."

"What? Are you kidding me, Mama? A husband? Even if the sun came back, how do you ever expect me to 'find' a husband when you won't even let me go into town by myself? *Wake up*, Mama. There are *things* out there in the dark—and they aren't going away. We need to figure out what to do, because we can't stay here forever. We need to get somewhere safe."

Mama shook her head. "You must think I'm stupid, Anna. I know there are things in the darkness. Those are Satan's minions out there. God will wrap me in His arms, protect me from those creatures. But you, Anna—you are a sinner who doesn't honor God or your mother. You will be carried off to Hell. It's not too late, though—if you accept God into your heart and soul, He will save you too."

Anna gaped at her mother rocking contentedly in her favorite chair. Mama had always been religious, but Anna didn't realize until now that she'd gone completely crazy with it. It was time to go.

As if Anna had spoken out loud, her mother said, "We are staying here. We belong here. Satan will call his demons home soon after they rid the world of sin. You must have faith."

"Yes, Mama. I understand." Anna hurried to her room and locked the door. Quietly she went into her closet and grabbed her battered suitcase with its 'Go Crusaders!' sticker on the side. She didn't even look at what she threw into it; she just knew they had to leave as soon as possible.

"Stop packing, Anna. You aren't leaving, and neither am I." Anna whirled around at her mother's voice. Her mother stood in the doorway, a key held up in front of her. "We will wait

here for God's glory, no matter how long it takes."

Anna's heart pounded painfully. "What about food, Mama? We don't have much left. How long will the well water hold out? We need to go find food and shelter with people who can help us. Please, Mama!"

"Faith, Anna. Faith. Now come sit with me while I finish my tea."

"Okay, Mama." Anna left the suitcase on the bed, but grabbed her car keys from the dresser as she walked by it and quietly put them in her pocket.

It was morning, or at least hours had passed since Anna had slept as well as possible with the scratching and screams under her window, when she tried one more time to reason with her mother.

"Here's your coffee, Mama." Anna sat it down in front of her mother. "We pretty much only have oatmeal packets—which flavor would you like today? We have brown sugar or strawberry."

"Brown sugar is fine. Sit and say grace with me first."

Together they gave thanks to God, then Anna got up to fix the oatmeal. "Mama, how about if we just take a drive and see if we can find an open store or something. I mean, God doesn't want us to starve, right? He'll protect us on the way to the car, I'm sure."

"He will protect me, yes. I worry about you, though, Anna. You still haven't accepted God into your heart. We will stay here until both of us can leave."

Anna patted her pocket, making sure she had put her keys back in there after getting dressed. "All right, Mama. We will stay for now."

Mama covered Anna's hand with her own. "Mother knows best, dear. You should know that by now."

"I know that now, Mama. Thank you."

After breakfast they made their way to the living room. As they passed the front door, Anna grabbed her mother by the arm and threw the door open.

"Here's your chance to prove God's love for you, Mama!" Anna pushed her mother out the door. She fell into the front yard, screaming for God's help as the demons covered her.

Anna ran for her life, several steps from the car, shining the keychain flashlight ahead of her. She felt claws and teeth on her skin, blood dripping to the ground, but made it to the car. She kicked and punched at the creatures until she was able to open the door and fall into the passenger's side seat, closing it behind her. A wing got caught in the door, but Anna scooted over and turned the engine on.

She breathed a sigh of relief and closed her eyes as the car roared to life. She glanced over at the demon hanging from her car, scratching and screaming as it tried to get free.

"Fuck you." She rolled her window down a tiny bit. "And fuck you and fuck your God, Mama!"

Anna peeled out of the driveway, the demon slamming against the side of the car.

Headlights exposed creeping shadows. She didn't care if darkness covered the whole world. She was free.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Sheri White lives in Maryland with her family. She's a mom to three girls, ages 28, 21, and 19, and has instilled a love of all things scary in them as well. Her husband Chris is very understanding. In addition to reading and writing horror, she's also the editor of Morpheus Tales magazine. Sheri's fiction has been published in many small press magazines and anthologies.

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Paid in Full | *Taye Carrol*

I regret not trying harder. I gave what I could, there was always tomorrow. Until there wasn't. First comes your tongue. FedExed. Note: "For everything I should've said and all that I shouldn't." Next, your stormy blue eyes. Note: "For failing to see who you really were." Your lips. Note: "For when I was too angry to kiss you goodbye." Finally, your heart. No note. It's for me to decide what of your heart you'd given. I carve off a sliver, return the rest to somewhere in Omaha. Note: "Repaying excess. Thank you for understanding what no one else could."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Taye Carrol is a psychologist by training, a freelance writer by choice and a fiction writer by the seat of her pants. In addition to Sirens Call, her work has been featured in Haunted Waters Press, Weirdbook Magazine, Zero Fiction, A Mother's Love ~ An Anthology of Murder and Mayhem, Fatherly Instincts- An Anthology of Murder and Malice, and Family Memories - An Anthology of Murder and Mischief among others. Taye lives in Chicago but has dreams of relocating to a water villa in the Maldives.

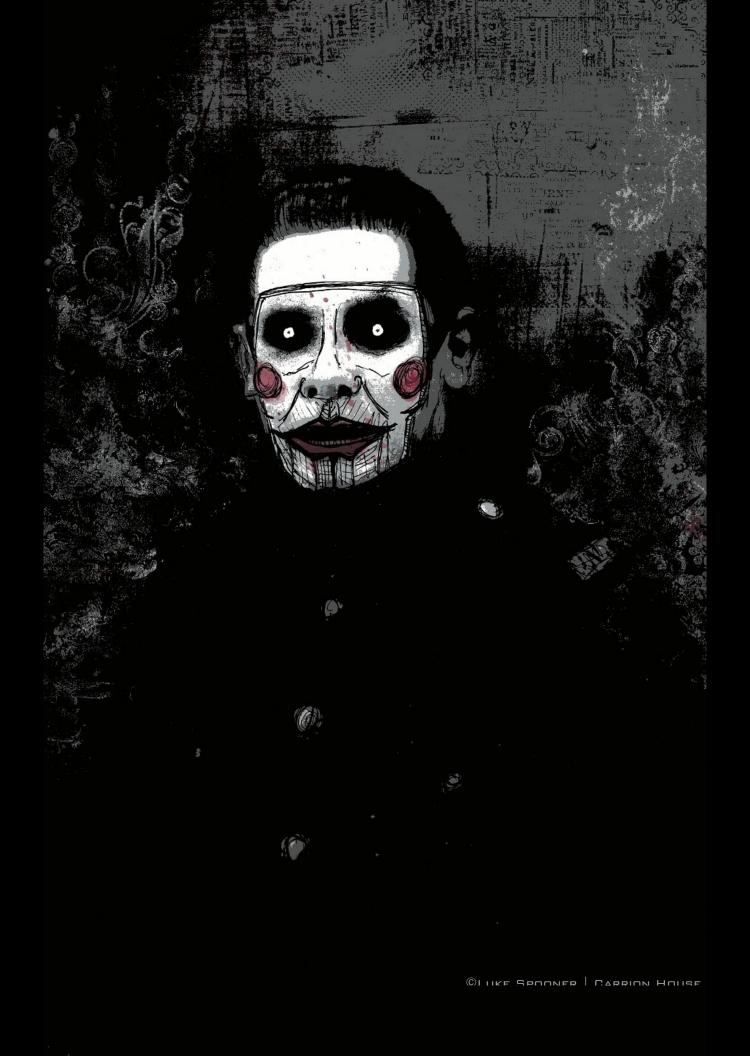
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A New Day in the New World | R. J. Meldrum

I sip my warm beer and watch the dead couple kissing. Something small, scaly and green chews on the man's foot. It looks like a cross between a rat and a lizard, but not quite. After a few moments of concentrated effort, the green thing's exertions are rewarded and it runs off, clutching a toe. The man doesn't notice, he's too busy enjoying himself. I smile at the ridiculousness of the situation, but I don't feel the urge to laugh. My mood is too dark.

Before last month the vision of dead teenagers making out in a bar would have sent me screaming to the nearest psychiatrist. Not anymore. Last month was when, quite without warning, the dead returned. A few days later, *they* followed; the hell spawn. My theory is that they were sent to gather the dead and return them, but then they decided to stay. Of course, I don't know that for sure, but no matter the reason, here I am, a mere four weeks later, sitting in a bar while the world crumbles around me.

I finish my beer and leave.

Outside, I glance up and down the road, making sure nothing is lurking, planning to attack me. It isn't very likely, but I've seen a few instances of violence from the hell spawn, mainly directed towards the police and military who were dumb enough to attack them. The road is empty. Food is next on the agenda. I walk to the supermarket.

There isn't much left, stocks are getting low. I stare at the limited choice of cans. A few feet away a demon is choosing champagne. He's over seven feet tall, a slightly disturbing burgundy color and has all the expected demonic features; a long sinuous tail with a barb on the end, pointed ears and long teeth. It's amazing how accurately all those Medieval artists portrayed the denizens of Hell.

The demon picks up a bottle of Bollinger and plucks out the cork with a claw. It takes a swig and wipes its mouth. It looks at me and speaks.

"Nice."

"I'm sure it is."

He offers me the bottle. I take a good long swig and hand it back. He sticks his hand out and after a few seconds, I realize he's offering to shake my hand. I place my hand in his, feeling the incredible roughness of his skin. My hand is returned to me, bleeding. He smiles, exposing all his teeth.

"Sorry."

"Not a problem. I quite understand."

He smiles again, then leaves. I follow him, after gathering up a few cans.

I wander to one of the many city parks. The place is empty. I feel a sudden depression. My life is so... boring. I have no job and no friends anymore. I have no purpose. Every day is exactly the same. The birds are chirping happily, but even that sound fails to raise my mood. I consider suicide again, but, as always, I conclude there'd be no peace in death. Every person I've seen killed reanimates within a few hours, even those shredded by demon claws.

Despite it getting late, I decide not to go home, and instead head to the river. There are

tentacles scrabbling on the bank, but most of the creature is still submerged. The sheer variety of the demons' physical characteristics is fascinating. I almost want to write a book about it. The Natural History of Demons.

I notice some figures on the grass near the road and decide to check it out. As I get closer, I see they belong to the living, but something isn't quite right. One man is lying on the grass, his face a rictus of fear, surprise and pain. He's been shot, his torso is covered in blood. Three others are standing above him, shouting. Cans are scattered across the grass. It's suddenly clear what I'm seeing; a robbery. I realize how vulnerable I am. I start to run, but they notice me. They see my bag, full of salvaged cans.

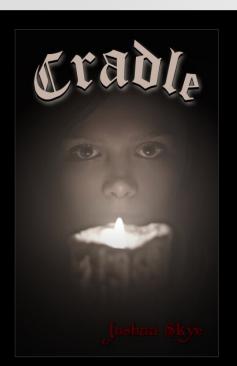
As I race towards safety, I glance back at them; only one is chasing me, the others are still gathering the cans from their previous robbery. My pursuer shouts something, but I keep going. There's no way I'm stopping. I hear a crack and immediately feel a searing, hot pain in my back. All sensation leaves my body and I collapse onto the grass. I have one last vision of shoes and a hand picking up my cans.

I wake. My first revelation is that the silly bastard killed me for a few measly cans. All he had to do was ask, I would have told them where I'd got them, especially if it meant my life. I lie on the grass. I knew I was going to die one way or another, but not this soon, not this way. However, I realize there's an upside, I now have a purpose. I'm going to hunt those bastards down and take great pleasure, and a great deal of time and effort, converting them from living to dead. I may even seek out my new demon friend and invite him to help. I smile, feeling reenergized.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — R. J. Meldrum is an author and academic. Born in Scotland, he moved to Ontario, Canada in 2010 with his wife Sally. He has had stories published by Sirens Call Publications, Horrified Press, Trembling with Fear, Darkhouse Books, Digital Fiction and James Ward Kirk Fiction. He is an Affiliate Member of the Horror Writers Association.

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Cradle

Joshua Skye

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Julie and the Beetle | Jacob Mielke

The beetle's shell was brown with dark yellow portions running across it. Its antenna were almost as long as its body. If it noticed the shadow of the massive mammalian creature standing over it, watching it cavort across the white flower, it didn't seem to mind.

It was a banded longhorn beetle, one of the multitudes of species Julie had yet to catch. She watched it for a few moments more before plucking the insect from the flower and depositing it into her portable terrarium, where it joined the other captives. It crawled around rove beetles and grubs, earthworms and ladybugs, before finding a spot to hide underneath a lilac leaf.

Julie stood up and brushed the dirt off her knees, which were scabbed and filthy from kneeling down to watch bugs all day. She grabbed the handle of her portable terrarium and headed deeper into the woods.

Hunting bugs was way better than what her parents had planned, which amounted to little more than quality family time around a campfire where the adults would get drunk and swap stories that didn't interest the children present at all. Julie was more interested in experiencing nature than the human connection part of their annual vacation. At least her parents picked a camping site they'd never been to before, allowing Julie to explore new woods. While her parents nursed their beers with their many siblings and cousins, Julie slipped away from the camp. She doubted anyone would notice her absence for some time.

A few minutes after capturing the banded longhorn beetle, Julie entered a clearing in the forest. At the center of the clearing was a massive boulder covered in moss and vines. Curious, she walked over to it and examined the sides. There were no snails or caterpillars on the leaves or aphids on the vines. No ants crawled through the moss and no pill bugs gathered at the base of the stone. Strange, normally all manner of tiny creatures would be present on such a structure. She walked around the stone until something caught her eye: a rusted piece of metal sticking out from the foliage.

Julie cleared away vegetation and was shocked to find the metal was a door handle and the stone was no stone at all, but rather a tiny building of some sort.

Her curiosity knew no bounds and she tried turning the handle, which stuck fast. She set her terrarium down and pulled at the handle with both hands. There was a screech and it broke off. A sharp piece cut her palm.

Irritated, she threw the broken handle away and wiped the blood on her shorts. With no way to pull at the door, she put her shoulder against it and pushed. It was slow going but she felt the door turn inward, millimeter by millimeter. Eventually she'd opened a gap large enough to slip through. She squeezed herself in and, after yanking on the door inside to widen the gap, pulled her terrarium in as well. Maybe there'd be some cool bugs inside for her to catch.

Julie switched on the flashlight on her cell phone. It wasn't very bright but at least she could see in front of her. The building was small, no more than a shack. In the center of the floor was an opening and a set of stairs leading down. Cool air oozed from below.

She made her way down the stairs slowly, the light aimed at her feet. She didn't want to miss a step or trod on any cool bugs that might be waiting for her.

The walls, floor and ceiling were identical shades of gray concrete. Thick cables ran along the walls and were attached to dead lights spaced out every eight feet or so. The air was cold and damp, which was nice at first but it didn't take long for Julie to start shivering. The novelty of her discovery wore off fast and she'd made up her mind to turn back when something darted in front of her feet.

The creature was a white centipede nearly a foot in length. It halted in front of Julie for a split second then turned to flee.

There were no known native species of centipede in Wisconsin that grew that large. If she could capture it, Julie would be famous for discovering a new species! Maybe they would name it after her or, even better, let her name it.

The centipede was fast but its large size and bright color made it easy to track, even in the darkness. Julie pursued it through the corridors, hoping to trap it in a dead end or exhaust it enough to capture. She paid no heed to the many twists and turns they took as she chased her quarry. Getting lost never even crossed her mind.

In the dim light of her cellphone, she saw the centipede dart into a large mound of debris several meters ahead of her.

She stopped running and doubled over, breathless. In her terrarium, the many bugs she'd captured were crazed at all the shaking as she ran.

The mound was a godsend. The centipede would huddle inside it instead of running and all she had to do was dig through the pile of... what was the mound made of, anyway?

Julie's first reaction upon realizing what was piled in front of her was not fear or disgust, though both would have been appropriate in that moment. She was fascinated; this was her first look at real human bones. The dry, almost chalky look of them told her they were real. The plastic skeletons hanging in every science class in the country were nothing like these. She counted the skulls and found there to be nine people in the pile, though those were just the ones she could see. Had she stumbled across a mausoleum in the woods? She knew some rich people preferred to be put into stone tombs after death and she'd always wondered what the inside of them looked like.

There was a noise in the darkness behind the pile, muffled by distance and its own echo.

Even in the frozen silence of the corridors, Julie had to strain to hear the sound. It happened again, much closer this time. Something down here was chirping. It reminded her of crickets and grasshoppers.

There was a soft pattering and another chirp as something moved closer to her. No insect was making that noise. Fingers of fear worked their way up Julie's spine. Her heart was suddenly hammering in her chest and it was getting harder to breathe. Something moved behind the mound of bones, barely perceptible in the cell phone light. She turned and fled.

There was a crash behind her as the unseen creature smashed through the bone pile in pursuit. Julie didn't dare look back as she ran.

She'd paid no mind to which turns she took when chasing the centipede, and she didn't know that she was the one being chased. Whenever the corridor branched off, she'd pick a path without consideration. There was no time to stop and think things through, for no matter how far or fast she ran, the chirping and pattering of feet were never far behind.

The tiny stone shack in the middle of the forest had become a subterranean labyrinth. Julie didn't even encounter any dead ends on her run, much less an exit. She might have been running for hours or maybe it was less than a minute. Either way, she couldn't go much farther.

Pure adrenaline fueled her escape but her legs were in the worst pain she'd ever felt and the cramps in her midsection prevented her from breathing. The decision to stop running was made for her by fate. The top of her foot smacked into the floor at too awkward an angle and sent her crashing down. The cell phone cracked on impact, extinguishing all light. The terrarium flew from her hand and burst open. Her lower jaw slammed onto the concrete floor, breaking her teeth.

She lay there for a time, sobbing with fear and the pain of her ruined jaw. Blood gushed from her mouth and pooled on the ground around her. She tried to get to her feet but only fell back. There was no strength left in her.

There was a deafening chirp right behind Julie's head. Something brushed the back of her neck.

The container that held the bugs captive burst apart when it hit the ground. Most of the others raced to escape. Even the slug was making a mad dash for freedom, or as much of a dash as slugs can make.

The banded longhorn beetle didn't move. It clung to the underside of its lilac leaf and waited. The human who captured it and the others was still in the area. The larger creature, which the beetle had never before encountered, was also close by. No, it was too dangerous to risk leaving now.

The unknown creature was in the process of devouring the small human. When it was finished, it would hopefully leave and then the path to safety would be open.

For now, the beetle waited.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Jacob Mielke is a horror writer living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. His work has previously been published in various magazines and anthologies, including The Sirens Call Issues 29 and 30.

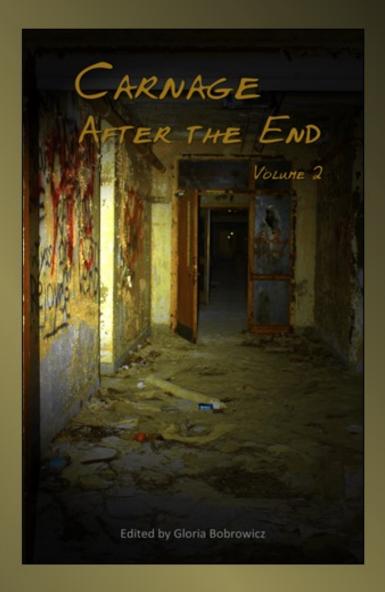
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In a world where society has collapsed and terror lurks around every corner, no one can be trusted and nothing can be taken for granted...





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Taking Care of Family Business | Diane Arrelle

The shiny black eyes, reflecting back the candlelight that barely lit the small, log cabin, actually seemed to stare up at her this time. The soft, leathery skin felt oddly warm as she held it.

And the hand-painted red smile looked different than the others, more like an angry smirk than a grin.

"Oh well," Henrietta shrugged, knowing each doll she created was unique. She continued to study and admire her handiwork, so painstaking, so exacting. But worth it as she pictured the little ones' faces when she arrived with another basket of lifelike, homemade toys.

The little ones, those poor, orphaned souls who were kept in the care of her family, appreciated all she did for them. Henrietta's momma and daddy lived in the big house with the abandoned children and she stayed here in the cabin at the edge of the woods, sewing the dolls and baking her very special pastries.

She gently patted this newest doll. "You are beautiful!" she sighed and put the last strands of garish, orange-red hair in place. She chuckled so soft it was a whisper. "Little Mary will just love that you have the same hair that her mommy used to have."

As she gently inserted the needle to tie a knot, the doll thrashed in her grasp and mumbled, "Owwww, sto at."

Henrietta jerked, screamed and dropped the small figure to the floor. "What?" she stammered, her voice shaking.

"I ed it hurs!" the leather and cloth creature said as it jumped up and ran to the table.

Staring with a horrid fascination at this monster, this child's toy she had fashioned, Henrietta watched the small plaything shimmy up the table leg and then pull itself over the top. It hesitated for just a moment, then rushed to the small scissors Henrietta used to cut thread. Using both mitten-like hands it jammed the sharp, pointed tips into its own face.

Henrietta screamed and covered her mouth, then realized the toy couldn't feel pain, not ever again. She watched, hand over her own lips, as the little, impossible creature sawed away at the painted smile until the scissor hole became a full slash through the ruby red dye.

"Ah," the doll said through its new mouth, "That's better. I said stop it, that hurts." It giggled at Henrietta. "Hard to talk, you know, when your lips are sealed."

A shudder ran through her, from the base of her neck to the bottom for her spine, yet, Henrietta didn't back away from the abomination in front of her. She was too interested in what was happening. After all, it was only a little toy, and animate or inanimate, she was the powerful being here.

"What's going on?" she demanded, "why are you talking? Moving? You're dead."

The doll turned and Henrietta involuntarily shrank back into her chair as the doll's grotesque caricature of a face confronted her. Those lips were now open into a full smile, a smile of loathing and contempt and victory.

Without thinking, Henrietta reached across the table and swept the doll off. As it hit the floor, she grabbed the huge shears she'd used to cut the leather and jammed them through the

small wriggling thing, impaling it to the floorboards. "Gotcha!"

The doll laughed.

Henrietta stared at it with revulsion. "Go ahead laugh, you monster, but I'll burn you to ashes." She turned away from the cackling creature to relight the half-burned logs in the cold hearth.

"What, kill me again Henrietta, my good-hearted benefactress, my best friend, my betrayer. You can kill me a thousand times, but it doesn't matter. You can't kill what's already dead."

It started laughing again.

Sounds from behind her made Henrietta's spine stiffen. She slowly turned to look at the doll she'd nailed to the floor, then she screamed.

The doll was now directly behind her and with the help of all the other small hand-crafted figures, they were all holding the shears in front of them like a spear.

"How... what... how...?" Henrietta sputtered trying to make sense of the scene in front of her. Fear switched direction and crawled up her spine as she focused on the little figurines. Suddenly, she didn't feel so powerful anymore.

"Oh, I had a little help from my new friends, my real friends," the doll replied.

Staring at the shears, paralyzed with terror, Henrietta didn't move, not even when they drove the sharp cutting edges into her calves, first one and then the other, so quick it was a blur.

The pain, like fire through her legs took away the power to run.

"Don't hurt me anymore. I did all this for the little ones!" she said through clenched teeth, fighting to talk through the pain. "For the good of the children. Leave me alone, you godawful abominations from hell. I demand that you leave here at once!"

The dolls stared at her, amazement reflecting in their shiny button eyes. "You murdered us, turned our skin to leather, shaved our hair then used it all to make us into dolls to give to our own children," the doll leader shouted at her. "You befriended us, pretended to help us, poisoned us with your pastries and took our children just to keep your family orphanage in business! No Henrietta, you are the abomination, not us."

Henrietta sputtered through tears of pain, "But...but you were all poor... uneducated... no husbands. You weren't fit to raise children. We give them food, warmth, an education. We give them a chance for a good future!"

"What about love. We loved our children and now they'll never know our love ever again," another doll piped up as all the small figures swarmed in, covering her under their mass, jabbing her with pins and needles. Henrietta fainted as an unbearable agony worse than anything she'd ever felt before blanketed her.

When she woke, she realized that she'd been wrong, this new pain was even worse. "Mii mou!" she mumbled, as the burning, tearing pain surrounding her lips brought tears to her eyes. She touched her freshly shaven head and then the blood-caked, thick thread holding her mouth shut.

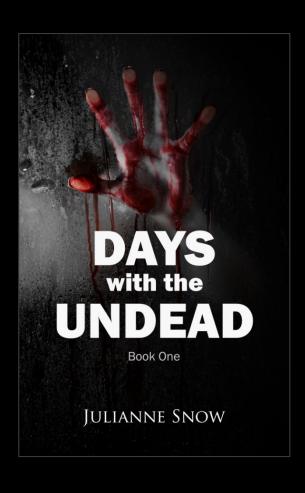
She screamed but couldn't get more than a muffled sound out. Then she saw them coming at her, holding shiny black buttons, locks of her own hair, threaded needles and she futilely tried to scream some more.

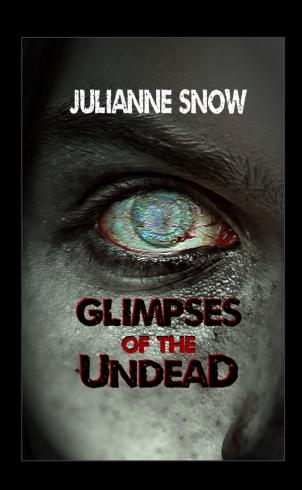
ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Diane Arrelle, the pen name of Dina Leacock, has sold more than 250 short stories and two books including Just A Drop In The Cup, a collection of short-short stories. She recently retired from being director of a municipal senior citizen center andresides with her husband and her cat on the edge of the Pine Barrens (home of the Jersey Devil).

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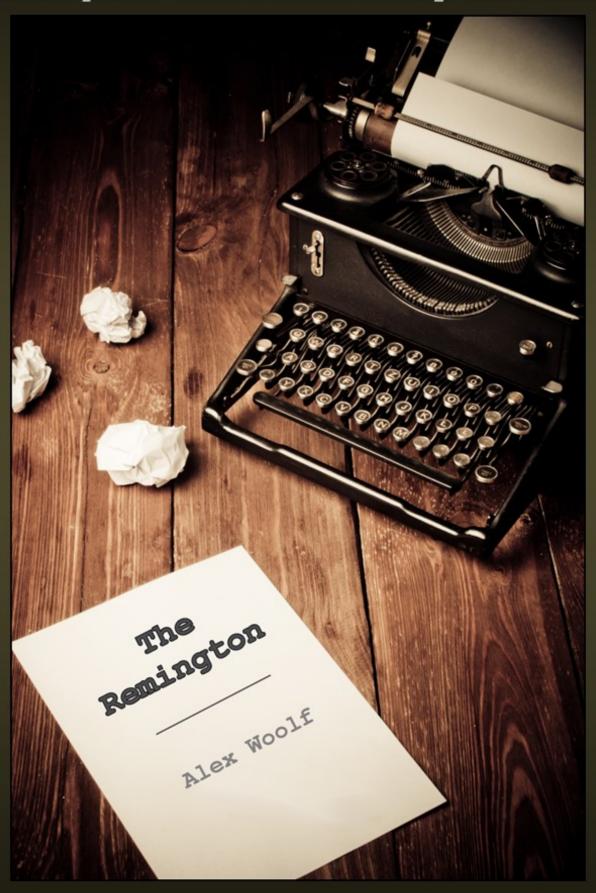
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Reach for the Light | *J.W. Grace*

Why is everything so dark?

The question rolls around his head over and over again. He turns his gaze around the empty room to catalogue his surroundings for the hundredth time. Or maybe it was a thousand? He's lost count since he awoke in this desolate place.

The walls are bare and covered in streaks of dark liquid. It could be water or rust or blood, but he can't be sure since there is no color. Everything is a mix of black and white and every shade in between. There is another dark stain on the floor, an amorphous pool of darkness that seems to shift and flow like water. The pool extends under the only piece of furniture in the room, a single bed with a tattered, stained mattress on a metal frame that is pressed up against one wall.

A small barred window set high in another wall is the only source of illumination and on the opposite wall is the room's only exit. The thick metal door is solid and forbidding and every time he looks at it, a feeling of dread washes over him. Dozens of times, he has forced himself to walk toward that door but it feels like walking against a heavy wind. A few times, he's made it close enough to reach out for the knob, but every time he tries his hand seems to be pushing through some thick viscous substance that becomes increasingly difficult to move through.

He turns away and paces the small confines of the room, trying to piece together what happened to him. He looks down at his clothes but sees only shapeless white cloth in the vague shape of pants and a shirt. White slippers cover his feet. His skin looks pale and sickly and when he runs his hands over his torso, he can feel his ribs. There are no memories of how he came to be in this place and only fleeting images of anything before.

A sudden noise from beyond the door makes him jump—the first sound he's heard since waking up in this room. Hands clenching in anticipation and anxiety, he strains to hear more clearly. A clanging sound and the thud of footsteps becomes louder. Someone is approaching and a thought jumps into his mind, a guard! Another ringing blow shatters the silence and he flinches as an image forms—that of a heavy stick held by thick, calloused hands.

He presses his back against the wall, the fear rising up in his chest until he feels like he's choking. He shivers and wraps his arms around his stomach. Other emotions begin to well up inside: anger, hatred, hunger...

Clang! Another blow of the nightstick. Thud, thud, thud, thud. Rhythmic footfalls coming ever closer. He hisses to himself and bunches his legs under him. Another unbidden memory forms, this one much more distinct.

The door opens. A dark hulking figure lit from behind. The light is blinding and the only details he can make out are the nightstick rising and falling into the guard's hand and the gleaming white teeth of his smile.

"Time to go to sleep," he says in a cold malicious voice. Without another word, the guard rushes at him and swings the club down, beating him until there is only searing pain followed by darkness.

He can hear voices now, but he pays no attention to the words. All he wants is to get revenge on the man who hurt him, to slake his thirst and ease his hunger.

"This is the room!" says a voice from the hallway. "They say that a prisoner was beaten to death by a guard. You're supposed to still be able to see the blood on the floor and on the walls."

A second voice answers in a shaky voice. "We banged on the doors, just like the stories said. Go on! Open it!"

He can see the knob twisting and a screeching protest of metal on metal rings out in the silence. The rush of dark emotion swells and he licks his lips in anticipation. A soft click echoes through the room as the knob stops moving. The door shudders and dust falls from the frame as the metal slab creaks and swings inward, inch-by-inch. A band of light fills the crack and slowly grows wider, brightness spilling across the floor towards the crouching, shivering form against the opposite wall. He raises a skeletal hand against the harsh glow of the flashlight.

Two figures stand in the doorway and they seem to glow with light and heat. He watches them as they look slowly around the cramped interior of the room, swinging their lights back and forth. The beams pale in comparison to the glow of life inside their bodies. With a howl full of anguish and longing, he lunges forward and throws himself at the first figure, clawed fingers outstretched. The heat washes over him and he impacts with the first man, causing him to topple to the floor with a shriek of fear. He plunges his clawed hands into the body to rip and tear at the vital essence inside. Shoving the dripping hunks of spectral flesh into his mouth, he groans with pleasure at the warmth.

The second man looks at his friend as he lurches backward but all he can see is a hazy shadow sitting on the fallen man's chest. The flashlight falls from his limp hands, his face locked in a hideous silent scream. He finally cries out in panic and runs back down the hallway. The ghost looks up from his meal, the light of his victim's soul dripping from his lips like glowing blood. The blazing heat from the second man is a shining beacon. He tears out another handful of light from the limp form in front of him before rising to his feet.

He is finally free and there is so much to eat.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — J.W. Grace started writing seriously in 2009 and self-published two novels in a genre he calls "Action-Horror". Based on his work, schooling, and hobbies, he is both a Geek and a Nerd, but he's also a Husband, a Father and a Musician. When he's not writing or spending time with family he's usually gaming with friends or on the computer.

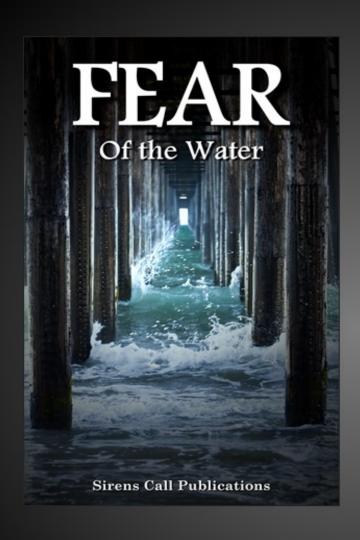
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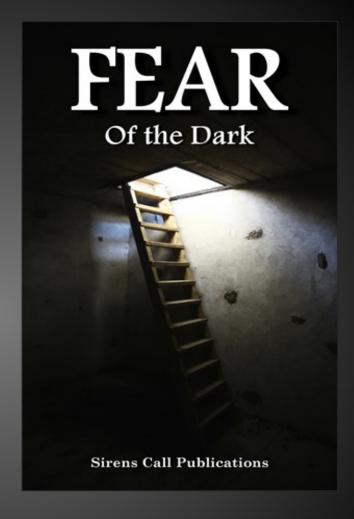






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Disgust | Danann Hawes

"Every Tuesday I go to the YMCA for a swim after work and most Saturday mornings," said Alice, a hefty woman, long stringy auburn hair, large brown eyes above dark circles, in her mid-thirties.

Across a table from her, in a small drab room with one window, sits Avery, deep grooves etched like railway tracks across his forehead. He's wearing a hounds-tooth suit jacket that uncomfortably wraps around his middle-aged accumulations. Avery holds a pad of unlined paper in his hands, carefully taking notes.

"And that is where you met... Carole?"

"I only saw her a few times—usually in the sauna. She's young, early-thirties, very fit, always very well mannered, had a very... dignified way about her. She would put her long flowy hair up in a bun with a towel. She always looked so fresh faced, so peaceful. She would sit and soak in the heat, back against the sauna wall, always a big smile on her face. I even said to her once— "You look so unbelievably peaceful."

"And what did she say?" Asks Avery.

"She said 'I work at it."

"What else would you two talk about?"

"Nothing really. Temperature of the pool—I know she liked it warm."

"Could you give me a more specific physical description? Her face—cheek bones, nose?"

"Sure but her picture would be in the system. You need a photo to be a YMCA member," Alice stammers out.

Avery shifts in his seat. "Well actually, she's not."

"How is that possible?"

"I don't know," Avery replies.

"I couldn't be the only one to have interacted with her. There must be many members who could give you a description."

"You seem very nervous to give me a full description."

Alice glares at him and says, "Given what happened, you would be too."

Avery turns a page in his notebook. "Why don't we get back to the timeline? Tell me about Saturday morning."

"The pool was busy that day. Carole was trying to swim laps but there was such a crowd."

"Did she seem bothered by this?"

"There were these two kids, one very young, the other a bit older—he was maybe 8. They were playing in the water but not in the open area. They were moving in and out of lanes, jumping and splashing around. They were disturbing people."

"Carole especially?"

"We were all annoyed. The pool is very important to us. We go there to relax, to recharge our batteries, to keep our sanity in this world. Some of us made some comments to the kids but they would just slough it off. You know how kids are, Detective—they are quick to apologize

and almost as quick to reoffend."

Avery nods.

"Where were the parents?"

"I don't know. I just moved over to the other end of the pool and tried to ignore the kids."

"Why didn't the lifeguard intervene?"

"We have this new one—she looks like a teenager. She doesn't pay attention."

"And Carole?"

"She stayed in her lane and swam around them. She had the right to use her lane."

"What happened next?"

"I swam my laps—Saturdays I like to get a really good workout in. I need to keep up my routine, keep my body strong. I eventually hit the showers, around the same time Carole did. I could still hear those kids with their ruckus. I always like to get that chlorine off of me. Really dries you out."

"Was it just you and Carole in the shower?"

"No, the parents of the kids were there as well."

"Was there some sort of altercation?"

"Carole went up to them, very polite. She introduced herself, relaxed, well spoken. She asked if it was their kids in the pool. They nodded. She calmly explained that they had been very loud and had caused a disturbance. She asked whether they would supervise them more closely next time."

"And how did they respond to that?"

"Not well. The one women said, quite abruptly, 'Get out of my face!"

"What did Carole do?"

"She was quite taken back, as she had made such an effort to be polite and respectful. You know, it's not an easy thing to do—to confront a stranger. She ended up restating the issue, that she was not the only one that had been impacted, that she was being pushed out of her swimming lane. That they should be supervising their kids. I mean, they were gabbing in the shower and their kids were still in the pool, young kids. That's when the other women lurched toward her and with a large almost grotesque expression shouted 'Shut your mouth!'"

"And then?"

"The two mothers left the shower, went into the sauna."

"And what did Carole do?"

"I'm not sure. She had this expression on her face. It wasn't anger, exactly. A look in her eyes, her face had kind of wilted. It was... disgust. I walked out of the shower. I couldn't bear to see that look on such an otherwise peaceful face. She didn't deserve that. I left her in there, alone. That was the last I saw of her."

"You didn't see her go back into the pool?"

Alice shakes her head.

"But you went back in the pool, is that right?" Avery asks.

Alice hesitates, crosses her legs.

"I sure wish I hadn't. A few minutes after I left Carole I heard some screaming, coming from the direction of the pool. I thought maybe someone was drowning. I rushed in and there was a crowd on the deck. Everyone around me was screaming."

Avery stares at her, waiting to hear more.

"The two kids, they were both face down, floating in the water. They were just floating and the water was so still."

Alice tears up. Avery hands her a tissue.

"And the lifeguard?" Avery asks.

"I didn't see her. Do you really think that Carole could have had something to do with this?"

"That's why we're talking—to try to get to the bottom of this. But I need you to tell me what she looks like."

"I know—I'm sorry. I'm scared to. I don't know why but I am. There were so many other people there that must have seen her. What about the mother of the kids? The lifeguard? What did they say she looked like? Didn't they give you a description?"

Avery sighs, then flips over a few pages on his pad. "They did actually. We had a composite sketch made."

He shows her a pencil sketch—it's a woman, hefty, mid-thirties, long stringy hair, with large brown eyes. It's ALICE.

"I'm sorry, Alice. The lifeguard was distracted but eventually pulled you out. But it was too late for the kids. You did it quick. The point of this interview is try to ascertain your state of mind, your legal culpability."

Alice stares at the photo, face wilting, lip quivering. Not anger, mind you. Disgust.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Danann Hawes is a Toronto based horror writer. The author of 5 screenplays, he also enjoys writing short horror fiction. He is currently working on his 6th screenplay, a genre mix of horror, comedy and romance. Danann is also a Publisher for a small legal publishing house. He is interested in collaboration and enjoys interaction with his readers so please feel free to reach out.

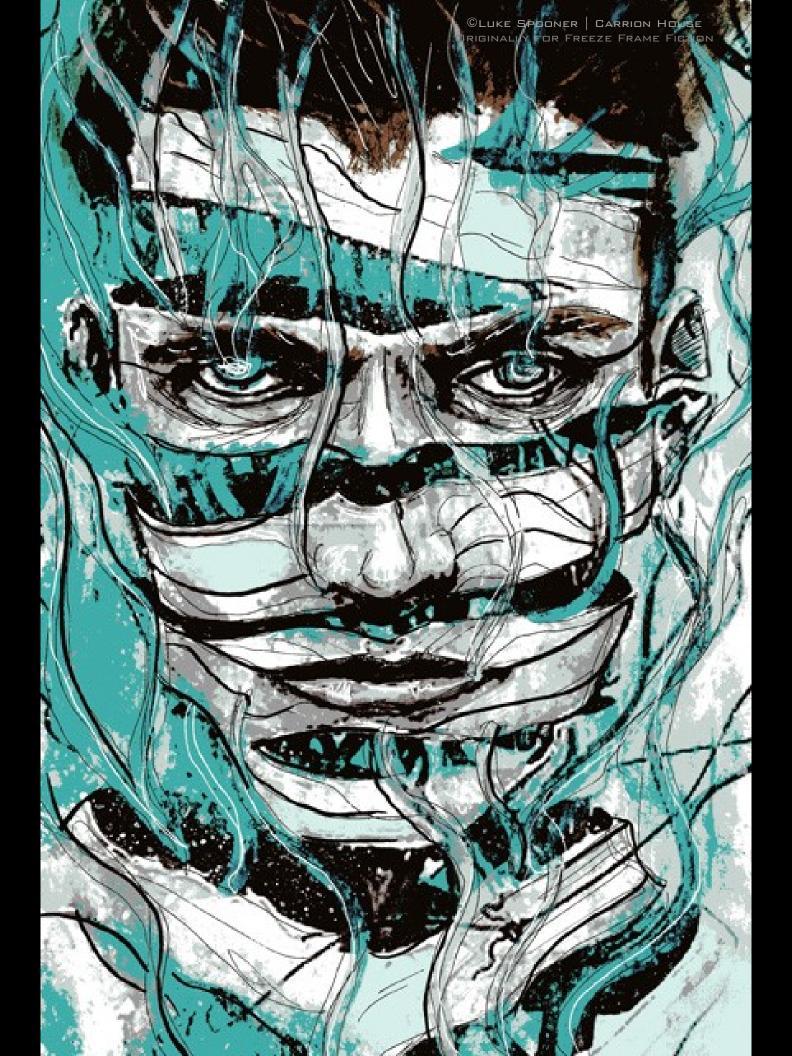
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The Lake | G. Clark Hellery

The Lake is beautiful at this time of year. The leaves are just starting to turn, but there is enough green to make the pockets of rusty brown burst like fireworks. The sun warms my skin and I lie luxuriating in its glow. Autumn has always been my favorite season at the Lake. As I relax, taking in the tranquil surroundings, I turn to ask what her favorite time of year at the Lake is, but I'm guessing she doesn't feel the same about the Lake as I do. Looking at the expression on her face, I bite my lip and decide that some questions are better left unasked, so I return to looking at the lake, her tranquility covering me like a blanket.

The hint of a breeze flutters the leaves and cools my skin. The Lake is wide, but from this position I can see all around. We're on the north bank, catching the dying sun as it glides across the sky in the south. Surprisingly, given its sunny position, this isn't a popular spot on the Lake because there are no inviting beaches and most of the ground is knotted with tree roots. The 'best' places are on the east and west of the Lake and those are always the most busy. There's even a cafe at one end and a restaurant on the opposite side which are always filled with people during the summer. However, it's all quiet now. The mass of people who jostle for space in the sticky summer sun have all returned to their lives in the city. Stuck in their office spaces, they can only dream of feeling the rejuvenating powers of the Lake. There are locals who know different hidden pockets around the Lake for weekend fishing, or an illicit late-night meeting. But for now, she is all ours and I selfishly guard her against intrusions.

There is a wooden swimming platform at the eastern end of the Lake. The platform has been there since before I was even born and the wood has been worn smooth by countless swimmers over the years. In peak season people swarm like bees for a space from which to watch the last honey rays of the summer sun. I'm tempted to suggest we swim out to watch the sunset but know she won't want to, so I don't break the silence between us. Thoughts and memories buzz like bees into my brain, of sunbathing on the platform next summer, and the summer after that. The Lake and all that is in her are constant.

Unchangeable.

The water has that crystal quality normally only reserved for Hollywood movies, and then only created on a computer. It constantly pulses back and forth like a heartbeat, caressing the neck of the shore. The water level is unusually high for this time of year. There were storms and a lot of rain recently which has boosted the water level, leaving the Lake swollen and full, pregnant and life giving. Close to the shore I can see tiny minnows bravely searching for food before fleeing as bigger fish glide closer to investigate the tiny electric pulses their prey give off with each beat of their hearts. Leaves have landed on her surface and drift aimlessly like boats willingly lost at sea. And who would not happily lose themselves on the Lake?

A splash!

I search for the source of the noise and see a fish jumping out of the water. I nudge her arm and gesture to the growing ripples as my eyes search for another jump. She ignores me as I point excitedly. The fish jumps again and the droplets of water fly high before becoming one with the

Lake once more. Their presence can still be seen though as little ripples undulate out across the Lake, causing the fallen leaves to bob and dip uncertainly. The fish keeps jumping and from my position I can just make out a darker shape under the water, stalking it. One more splash and then silence.

All is not safe here at the Lake. Predators can appear and disappear, the Lake offering perfect camouflage within her embrace.

The recent rains have left a slightly damp mossy smell in the air but the ground is dry. I roll back onto my bed of leaves and stretch, easing the cramps in my arms and back. The recent exertion has tired me and I'm feeling knots in my muscles. I could ask her to rub them, but I know she'll say that I brought it on myself so not to complain. The sun filters through the leaves of the trees and permeates my bones, helping unwind the knots. I feel so relaxed, as if I could melt like ice cream and my body run down into the Lake.

With the sun behind them, the leaves become x-rays and I can see their veins sending life-giving nutrients right to the tips. The breeze has dropped but the leaves are moving of their own accord. I wonder why they do that? Even on clear and motionless days leaves move on their own. It's almost as if they are jealous of those animals that can move freely, without being held to the ground by roots. Perhaps they feel that if even one leaf can move, the rest of the tree will follow. The leaves at the Lake which have turned their various shades of red and brown cling stubbornly to the branches. They spin and shiver as if they know death is only a short time away and they need to enjoy the tiny amount of life they have left. The breeze rises again and forces one leaf to give up its struggle. It pops off the branch, circling slowly down to the expectant, welcoming surface of the Lake.

I sit up as I catch movement out of the corner of my eye. It's a line of ants, marching to their own rhythm. I skip along the ranks to discover their destination. Frowning, I see they are making their way towards a discarded cola can. It rises like a red pimple on the otherwise perfect complexion of the Lakeside.

She ignores me as I crawl after them, but I can almost feel the contemptuous roll of her eyes. I watch as each ant collects a ball of sugary liquid in its pincer jaws before setting off again on its return journey to the nest. Taking the base of the can I upend it, shaking out the last residue of the dark drink. The sickly smell of the drink mixes with the smell of decay as moldy leaves drop from the can. Some ants fall from the can as well, landing awkwardly amongst their brothers. There is chaos in the squad of ants as they run in all directions. However, as with all disciplined creatures, order is quickly restored and they soon fall back into line, with scouts leading them on to their next mission. I return to my spot in the sun and carefully place the empty can in my bag, ready to recycle. Nothing should detract from the pure beauty of the Lake.

High above, floating in and out of the spotlight of the sun is a bird of prey, its long black wings barely moving as it catches the wind. Its head scans back and forth as it looks for prey. It stares at me for a while, sizing up if I am within its range. I stare back unblinking. The sun burns my eyes as the bird moves out of its way. Seeing something which obviously takes its fancy, a slight change in the arch of its tail and it's gliding in ever smaller circles. For a second it seems

to hang motionless in the air, suspended by magic before the stronger force of gravity takes over and it plunges towards the Lake. Head down, wings tucked close to its body, it's the perfect hunting machine. I sit up in time to see it grab a large fish from the Lake. The Lake doesn't even have enough time to form a reflection of the bird before it's spreading its wings and effortlessly taking flight once more to the shelter of the trees. I wonder if the large fish dripping from its claws is the one I saw hunting the minnows.

Hunter and hunted. How those roles merge here at the lake.

There is movement in the trees behind me. I turn languidly. I cock my ear like a dog, trying to pinpoint where the noise came from. Nothing. My mind skips from one topic to the next while she is wrapped in her own silent thoughts. There is another loud crack. I immediately focus on the source of the noise as it bounces around the Lake. The echo would prove disorientating for most people, but I am used to the sounds of the forest and like the bird of prey searching for its next victim, I scan the area where the noise came from.

I am absolutely still.

I know we are exposed here on the shore, but the best view of the Lake is from here and in my excitement I had forgotten some of my usual caution. She doesn't react. I'm not sure she heard anything, but then she doesn't have my skill. I force myself to breathe through my nose to stop the sound of my ragged breath. The pounding in my chest is sending blood rushing to my ears, making it difficult to hear anything.

Wait!

There it is again. There is definitely something watching me. I feel like my heart will burst through my chest. One part of my mind is racing about possible threats and the other is making plans of escape, discarding them as quickly as it is thinking of them. I carefully shuffle my feet under me, ready to leap up as I continue studying every detail of the tree line. Just then a young deer breaks his cover and comes to the Lake side for a drink. He regards me with curiosity, completely unthreatened. Tiny horns are pushing through like buds in spring. I relax and my breathing returns to normal as I slouch back. The sun bounces from the water and blinds me momentarily. I pat her arm reassuringly but her senses aren't as keen as mine and I'm sure she didn't even hear the deer.

Rolling onto my side, I look at her and smile lovingly. I am still a little blinded from the bright sun. Sunlight pushes its way through the skeleton leaves, catching the highlights in her hair. I look at her through half-closed eyes. The sunlight from her hair forms a halo. She's an angel now, not always, but the Lake has transformed her. I look down into her eyes as a bubble forms on her lips and bursts. I cannot believe how much love I feel for her, lying beside me.

Sharing this special time at the Lake together.

There is a mosquito buzzing around her head but she makes no move to swat it away. It lands on her cheek and its body slowly swells as it sucks her blood. She doesn't flinch as I grab the insect between my thumb and forefinger and pluck it from her cheek. A small drop of blood oozes out and, licking my thumb, I wipe it away. The pinkness of the blood merges with the flush of her cheeks.

I caress her face with the back of my hand, slowly trailing it down her soft neck. I make little circles as I continue down, catching my finger slightly as it nudges her shirt, green with tiny pink flowers, exposing forbidden flashes of skin. Blue veins stand out against her pale skin like the x-rayed leaves of the trees which protect our liaison from unwelcome intrusion. She doesn't move but her breathing becomes more shallow. I give her a shy smile as my fingers walk their way over the buttons of her blouse. She sucks in her breath in anticipation but continues to lie motionless as my fingers pluck teasingly at the flimsy fabric of her blouse, moving south.

My fingers stop their teasing.

I slowly grip the bone handled knife embedded in her chest as a gurgling escapes her dry lips. The contours of the handle perfectly fit my fingers after years of use. Pulling, the knife sticks. It's caught on bone. Twisting it anti-clockwise I hear the bone grating, but the knife comes loose. Congealed blood claws at the knife, not wanting to let it go, but eventually cracks as I slowly pull. Blood emerges from her chest and spills over, joining the small red lake around her body. The smell of metallic death fills my nostrils. The shirt is glued to the knife and rises along with the blade.

One final tug and the blade is free of the shirt. Some of the pale green fibers have stuck to the blade; the blood makes it look rusty. Shaking my head at this unacceptable mess, I wander down to the Lakeside. The mud sucks at my boots as I squat and wash my knife. Look after your knife and it will look after you is a proverb I live by. I tear some grass to dry it as I walk back to her. Dropping down I watch as her hand spasms up and down, shivering like the leaves on the trees. Is she trying to tell me something? Some hidden secret? I don't know and she's certainly not in the mood to explain.

Studying her face I focus on her eyes, they tell me so much: about her family who will now be missing her. About friends she will never see again. Of passionate arguments and petty romance. It's clichéd to say that the eyes are the window to the soul but they are the windows through which we see the world and I wonder what she is looking at right now as she looks past me. I follow her eyes. She is staring straight up, as I was earlier, looking through the leaves at the life-giving, energizing sun above. With a final childlike gurgling noise her chest stops moving and dullness drifts from her eyes, enveloping her body.

A single tear has fallen down her cheek. It reminds me of the small rivers which feed the Lake as it mingles with the blood in her hair.

Lifting her ankles, I walk back to the Lake shore. She flops about behind me over the rough roots like a fish out of water. The mud clings to my boots, pulling me in, not wanting me to leave, daring me to defy the wants and needs of the Lake. I fight against the clawing mud and the tide which tries to trip me as I plunge into my mistress. The Lake can be mischievous in her attentions.

I brush her hair back from her face as she slides into the Lake. The water quickly covers her in a special embrace as she bobs on the surface like autumn leaves before silver fingers encircle her body, slowly dragging her under the surface. With a final look, I leave the soothing clutches of the Lake.

Once more I lie back on my bed of leaves and enjoy my solitude and the view of the Lake. All is quiet.

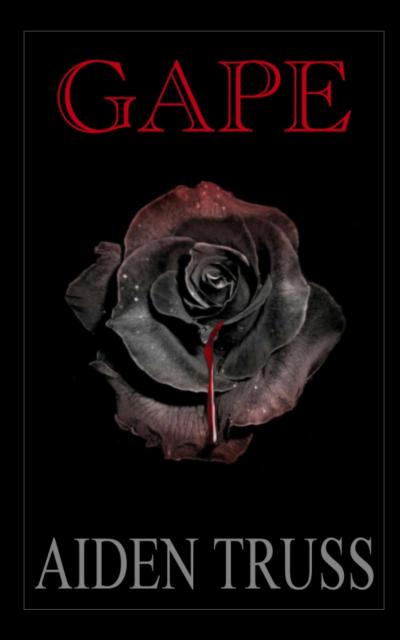
All is still.

Here at the Lake.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — 'The Lake' first appeared in a collection of short stories by G. Clark Hellery called 'Weird Wild', published by Fox Spirit Books. Her works have appeared in assorted anthologies and cover all things dark, fantastical and weird. For short stories, horror movie reviews, interviews with authors and more, check out her website.

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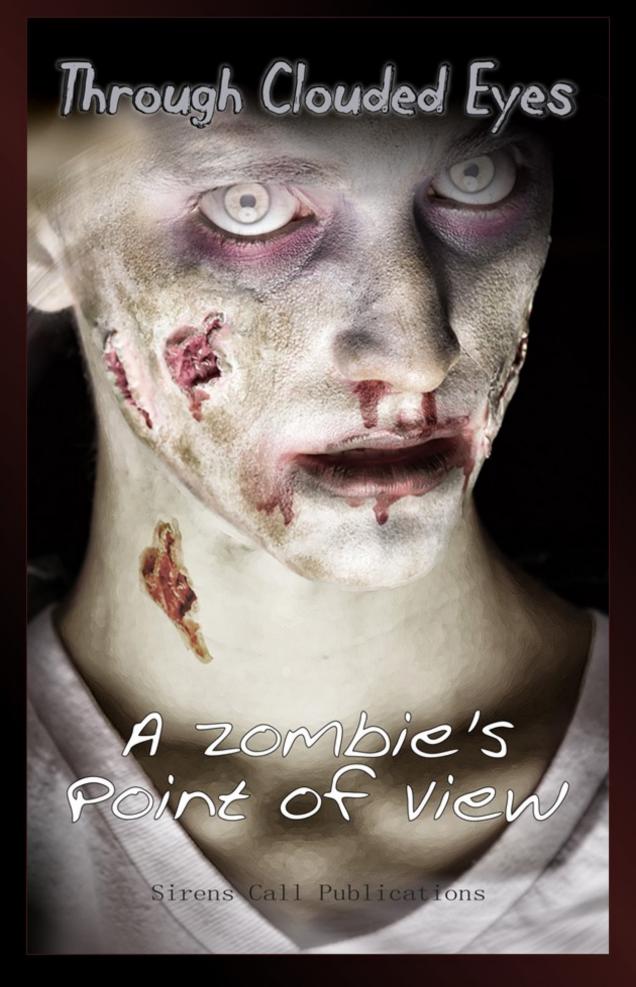
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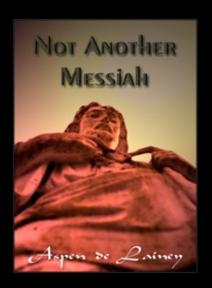
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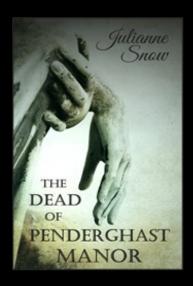


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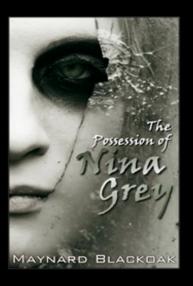
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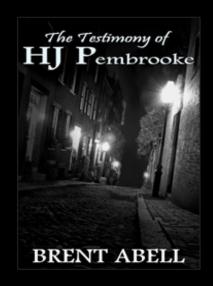












Camila | Aki Kaza

"Mama, she's here again."

The knocking on the door started around 1:32 a.m. this time. It was earlier than usual, but Camila didn't mind. The sooner the old lady was dealt with and gone, the faster she could get back to sleep.

Camila's mother mumbled something in her slumber and turned over in bed. Camila reached out and shook her mother's shoulder, calling her name again.

"What is it, mi vida?" her mother said, voice laden with sleep.

"The lady at the door." Camila stepped back and pointed in the direction of the front door.

"Okay," her mother grumbled, slipping out of bed and padding towards the living room. Camila followed quietly behind her.

They walked through the short hallway towards the front of the apartment. Camila glanced inside her room as they walked past. Her nightlight threw a soft glow across her sister's sleeping face. She didn't know how Luciana managed to sleep through the racket.

Camila stopped at the edge of the hallway and watched her mother go to the door and look through the peephole. A second later, her mother turned the doorknob and opened it to reveal the woman who had disrupted so many of their nights.

"Ah, Señora Chavela," her mother said, reaching out and taking the older woman's hands. "Do you need some help finding your apartment?"

Camila didn't hear the old woman's response, but was doubtful she'd understand anyway. On other nights when she'd dared to stand closer to the door, she could barely make out the slurred speech of Señora Chavela.

"Let's get you home," her mother said, stepping over the threshold and closing the door behind her. As soon as it shut, Camila ran to the door and twisted the lock. She placed her ear against it and listened as her mother walked the old woman down the hall towards the stairs. She wished she were as tall as Luciana so that she could see through the peephole.

The hallway went quiet and Camila pressed her palms to the wood, listening hard for her mother's footsteps.

She didn't know how long she was standing there, but it felt like longer than normal. She was about to turn to go and wake her sister when she finally heard the soft sound of footfalls coming down the hallway. Letting out a sigh of relief, she raised her hand to the doorknob, preparing to turn the lock for her mother, when a sound stopped her cold.

It was nothing more than three simple taps; the soft sound of knuckles knocking on wood. But... it was... wrong. The knocks came in three evenly-spaced raps, not the simple pattern her mother had shown her. They'd come up with the secret knock so that Camila would know when it was safe to open the door.

Feeling uneasy, Camila pulled her hand away from the doorknob and stepped back, staring at the wood.

They came again. Knock. Knock. Knock.

It wasn't her mother. Camila *knew* it wasn't her mother. Had Señora Chavela come back to their apartment? How had her mother lost her so quickly?

Then the sound of a fingernail scraping against the wood chilled Camila to the bones. Señora Chavela had never scratched on their door before. The sound came again, longer this time, as though someone were dragging their hand down the length of the door.

Camila turned and bolted for her room. She shut the door behind her and stood there in the dark, gulping down air as quietly as she could. She hurried over to her sister's bed, shaking her fervently.

"Luciana!" she whispered angrily. Her sister mumbled something and thrashed around in bed, but didn't wake.

Camila reached out and pinched her fingers on Luciana's nose, plugging the nostrils. For a moment, Luciana lay completely still; then, suddenly a hand shot out and smacked Camila right in the face.

"Hey!"

"What the hell are you doing?" Luciana growled, sitting up in the bed.

Camila's heart spiked in her chest at the volume of her sister's voice. She lunged forward, placing her hand squarely over her sister's mouth. Luciana grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed Camila away. She opened her mouth to speak, but Camila interrupted her before she could start shouting.

"Somebody's at the door!" she whispered furiously.

"Well it's probably just that old hag," Luciana said, making to lie back down. Camila reached for the covers and pulled them off her sister, throwing them onto the floor.

"It's *not* Señora Chavela," Camila said. "She already came by and mama went to take her back downstairs."

"Then Mom is at the door and you need to let her in," Luciana said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"It's not her," Camila said, staring intently at her sister.

"How do you know it's not her," Luciana moaned, rubbing the heel of her palms against her eyes.

"Because mama always does this special knock and whoever it is just knocked regular!"

Luciana glared daggers at her sister, but Camila wasn't backing down. She *knew* her mother's knock. She'd heard it dozens of times, and there was no way her mother would forget it.

With an exasperated sigh, Luciana swung her legs out of bed and staggered towards their bedroom door. She stepped out into the hallway and Camila followed her into the front room.

The apartment was silent; no sounds of knocking or scratching came through the door. Camila hoped that whoever it was had walked away. She'd even endure her sister's wrath just to know that the stranger was gone.

Luciana stepped up to the door and placed her eye to the peephole. As she looked through to the other side, Camila heard the soft knocks start again.

"Who is it?" she asked, her heart smacking against her chest.

Luciana didn't answer. She just stared through the door. She stretched onto her tiptoes and pressed her face even closer to the hole.

"Who is it!" Camila insisted.

"I can't tell," Luciana whispered. *That* upped Camila's unease. Luciana was a loud girl. She never whispered unless she absolutely had to. The low volume of her sister's voice unnerved Camila even further.

"What do you mean you can't tell," she asked, hating the way her voice trembled.

"I don't know," Luciana said. "She's got like scratches on her face and there's vomit everywhere."

Luciana stepped back and stared at the door for a moment. Then, without saying a word, she reached for the doorknob.

Camila didn't realize she had smacked her sister's hand away until her ears were full of the sound of skin on skin. Almost immediately after, the knocking escalated into a furious banging, the door vibrating on its hinges. Camila's heart filled with dread.

"The hell is wrong with you!" Luciana growled, shoving her shoulder.

"Don't open it!" Camila pleaded, eyes bulging at the shaking door.

"Why not?" Luciana said. Camila didn't know how her sister could ask such a stupid question. Then she remembered that it was her sister.

"Because she might hurt us, stupid!" she said.

"Ya basta, Camila, quit being such a baby. She's just an old drug addict who can't find her way home, just like Señora Chavela. What's she gonna do to us?"

"Señora Chavela is a drug addict?" Camila asked, incredulous. The interesting tidbit was almost fascinating enough to make her forget the banging on the door.

"Of *course* she is, you retard, why else do you think she goes around knocking on people's doors at three in the morning." Luciana put her eye back to the peephole, and made a noise low in her throat. "Damn, this bitch is crazy. She's trying to beat down this door."

"Why can't we just call the cops," Camila whined, on the verge of tears. She fought the urge to raise her hands to her ears and block out the thudding sounds coming from the door.

"We can't call the cops, we don't have any papers, do you want us to get kicked out of the country?"

Camila thought that might not be so bad if it would get them away from the strange woman terrorizing their door.

Then the banging stopped, just as soon as it had started. It was quiet for one glorious second, but then scratching nails started to fill the silence. Camila could feel the ends of her hair splitting at the sound.

"If we don't tell her to stop, she's gonna keep doing this all night," Luciana said, motioning to the door. "We'll never be able to sleep."

It was a grating sound, and Camila *really* wanted it to stop. But she wanted even more for that door to remain firmly shut.

Camila stood, petrified, as her sister reached for the handle. As soon as Luciana's hand touched the knob, the scratching sounds stopped, sending all of Camila's hairs standing on edge. Something didn't feel right.

The words of warning died in her throat as Luciana turned the lock.

The door swung wide open, light from the hallway spilling into the apartment.

Camila didn't know what got her more: the long, thin gashes etched into the woman's face, slicing her eyes in half, or the stench of the viscous green liquid dribbling from her mouth. Limp and straggled hair clung to the woman's head, and an oversized coat hid most of her frame. She definitely *looked* like a drug addict. Camila almost believed her sister—maybe this woman really was nothing more than a harmless junkie—but there was still a deep sense of unease rattling her bones.

And then...

She'd never seen an arm stretch so long. It defied belief, the way it grew out of the woman's coat sleeve, knotted and mangled like the branches of a dead tree. Camila watched in horror as the twisted fingers spread wide and latched on to Luciana's waist.

Her sister's body was folded back in two with a *snap* as the woman wrenched her forward.

The door swung violently shut, Luciana's hand pulling the knob with her as the ghastly woman snatched her into the hallway.

Then, the absolute worst sound she'd ever heard filled her head: a loud, sickening crunch. Camila felt the hot rush of urine slide down her legs.

It was quiet out in the hallway. No scratching or knocking on the door. No footsteps on the floor. No sign of the old woman, or of Luciana.

Camila collapsed into a heap on the floor, hand stuffed in her mouth, eyes flooded with tears. She just managed to reach her hand up and twist the lock on the door. She slumped against it and wondered when—wondered *if*—her mother would come home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Aki Kaza is a life-long connoisseur off all things damnable and detestable. Darkness somehow always seems to find her, and she's learned that the only way out is through. Immerse yourself in her fictive worlds of darkness, and join her in purging the shadows from your everyday life.

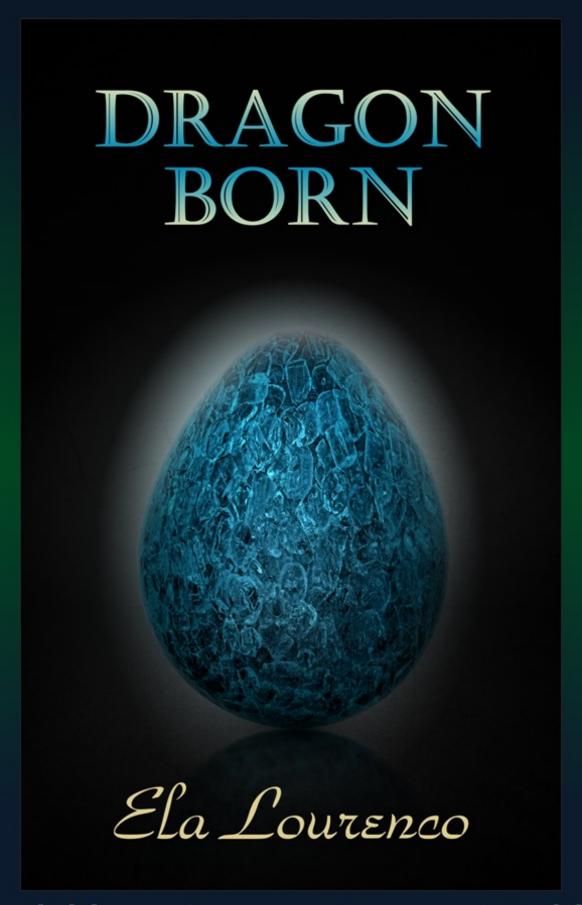
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The Undying Love *Greg McCabe*

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The Big Top | DJ Tyrer

"Come on, Terry," called Peri as she and Tanya ran ahead to the tent ahead of us.

I adopted a slower, cooler walk. I wasn't going to run around the circus like some kid; I'm seventeen and, I hope, mature. Jackie, too, kept to a walking pace; at twenty-two, she's the oldest member of the Wraiths. She's tall and lithe with long blonde hair to her waist. She had on a leather jacket and trousers and still wore her helmet, visor up. Peri was seventeen, like me, and also wore a leather jacket, with jeans. Tanya was only fifteen and wore a floral dress under her jacket.

It was the big top, but the show wasn't for another six hours. Currently, there was a tent up proclaiming *Ye Tent of Curiosities, Oddities & Freaks*, in awful, 'olde-worlde' lettering.

Peri and Tanya had already entered and, after we'd paid a dollar each, Jackie and I followed them.

The interior was dark, half-a-dozen halogen lights high up in the tent's rigging raised visibility to about that of a badly-lit street on a dark, misty night. Peri and Tanya had already been swallowed up by the gloom, leaving us to explore the exhibition on our own; I wasn't complaining.

We were in a roped path, obviously designed to guide visitors who, otherwise, were liable to get lost or miss exhibits in the darkness. We moved slowly along the path to the first exhibit: a display case lit from within contained ten stuffed guinea pigs, each standing erect and holding a finely-crafted miniature brass instrument.

"Freaky." Jackie gave a chuckle.

The next case contained a mummified cat from, the plaque claimed, an Egyptian temple of Bast, while the third showed a fossilized skull of a T. Rex allegedly displaying a prehistoric gunshot.

"A fake," I said, nodding sagely.

Next, we came upon a crude Voodoo idol, which appeared to have dark stains about its base... Probably just red paint...

We continued upon our twisting journey through the darkness, apparently designed to cause us to lose all sense of direction, before arriving at a case containing the stuffed remains and grotesquely-fused skull of a two-headed lamb. We spent a minute or two looking for a join, but it appeared genuine.

We didn't linger at the next two exhibits. The first was the mummified body of a bearded lady, obviously a former employee of the circus freak-show. The second was the warped skeleton of what was crudely dubbed 'The Elephant Boy'.

The next case contained a crucified Toad, purportedly used by Crowley in one of his rituals, but it seemed too fresh to be true.

For a moment, as we stood staring at that toad, I had the sensation of something rubbing against my leg like a cat, but unfurred and rough like sandpaper. For a moment, I had visions of the mummified feline roaming the dark tent, but I quickly dismissed them as sheer foolishness.

"Come on," I said, urging Jackie to end her study of the toad and its magickal pentagram, to move on to the next exhibit.

This proved to be a waxwork model of a 'witch' being flogged to death by an inquisitor. I felt sick at the sight of it: the torn skin and tormented face were vividly reconstructed, and I couldn't quite manage to pull my eyes away from it... And then, it seemed to turn its head, just a little, to gaze at me and smile an evil smile.

I swore and, without thinking, grabbed hold of Jackie and pulled her away from it, deeper into the darkness.

"Hey, you're getting real spooked," said Jackie once we'd slowed a little. She gave a fragile laugh. "Do you want to go back?"

I wished I could, but the mere thought of passing the waxwork spurred me on, fear of the unknown proving the lesser of two just then.

"Er, no. I'm... I'm fine. Let's go on."

"Okay, if you're sure?"

"Yes." I didn't want to sound childish and tried to reassure myself by striding boldly on into the darkness.

We passed quickly by the stuffed conjoined corpse of 'Siamese twins' and the singed, stuffed cadaver of an axe murderer, strapped into the electric chair that had taken his life back in the twenties. Real? Allegedly. It certainly *looked* real...

I felt sick and sincerely wished we'd never entered the tent. I was sure the figure was watching us, its head with anguished features seeming to turn slowly as we passed.

It was all a trick of shadow, I knew. And, yet... And, yet...

The next exhibit almost made me scream. It was a representation of the Grim Reaper, scythe raised as if to strike as it loomed out of the darkness at me. It was barely visible, but the skeleton within the robes seemed real enough to my eye. We briskly moved on and came upon a small, poorly-lit case.

"What does it say?" Jackie asked.

I didn't want to lean closer, but did. "Um, the sign says that it contains... the mummified hand of an ancient Egyptian princess."

There was something in the case shaped like a hand, but shriveled and gray; as I watched, writhed and twisted. Jackie seemed to notice nothing strange, so I left her examining it and moved on, hoping the exit was close.

Suddenly, I stopped in my tracks and screamed.

I heard running footsteps as Jackie heeded my cry, and then I heard her scream in terror too.

The last exhibit was mounted on a board.

Peri and Tanya were pinned upon the it. A tent peg had been thrust through each of their elbows and knees and through their stomachs. There was blood smeared across the board and congealing in a pool at its base. Peri seemed dead, but Tanya was still twitching, a trickle of blood dribbling from her mouth and down her chin.

I felt sick.

For a moment, there was silence as we stared in shock at the scene of brutality.

Then, I became aware of the sounds of people approaching...

Jackie cried out and I turned to see her being grasped by two indistinct, shadowy figures: one was bearded, but wore a dress, the other was hunched and misshapen, barely human at all.

I felt a hand upon my shoulder, but when I lashed out, my blow connected with no body...

And then I realized, I'd gone mad as I heard the sounds of bleating, of purring, and of an off-key brass band, as figures grabbed me roughly by my arms and dragged me towards the board where Jackie had already been led.

As a robed figure produced ten shiny new tent pegs, I realized that now, we were the freaks to be exhibited...

I screamed again: "The scythe!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — DJ Tyrer is the person behind Atlantean Publishing and has been published in anthologies and magazines around the world, such as Chilling Horror Short Stories (Flame Tree), Snowpocalypse (Black Mirror Press), Steampunk Cthulhu (Chaosium), Night in New Orleans (FunDead Publications), Miskatonic Dreams (Alban Lake), and Sorcery & Sanctity: A Homage to Arthur Machen (Hieroglyphics Press), and has a novella available, The Yellow House (Dunhams Manor).

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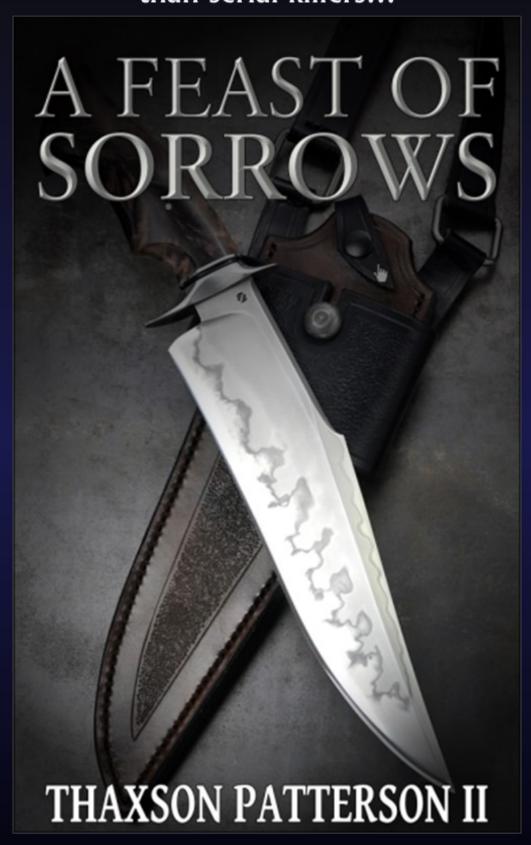
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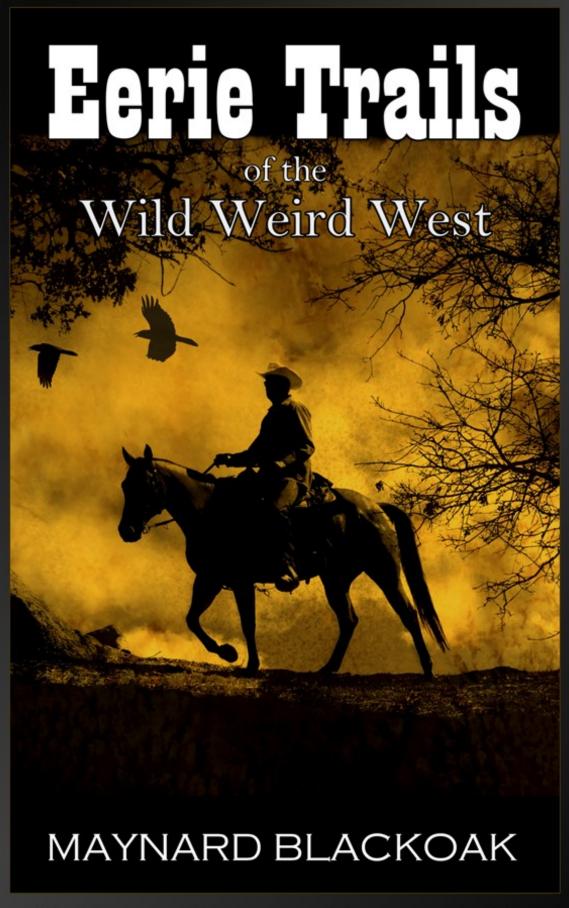
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Interview with Sam Mortimer, Author of Screams The Machine

Sirens Call Publications recently released Sam Mortimer's dystopian-esque, sci-fi novella titled *Screams The Machine* and we wanted to take a moment to sit down with him and ask him a few questions.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Sam! Why don't you take a moment and introduce yourself?



Sam Mortimer: I have worked the graveyard shift in law enforcement, attended film school, and have been writing strange stories since age eleven. I love reading, music, and strive to meet the demands of my cats. I'm also in an electronic-rock band called Anifail.

SCP: What made you decide to become a writer?

Sam: I'm interested in knowledge and the human experience. Existence is weird. Plus, an area of my life feels dysfunctional and empty if I don't write. Round up the books, movies, games, and music that've been around since humans started making them, and I'm sure every writer has something in common. Also, I experience my inner world, which is enjoyable even if it's a bit messed up— and honestly (most importantly), when the muse calls, I answer her. Thus, I gladly write.

SCP: What is Screams The Machine about?

Sam: Screams The Machine is a whirlpool. It's partly about how technology is a neutral means to an end, but what's the intent of the user/creator? I doubt the answers are neutral there. It's about decisions, ones we can control and others we cannot. Also, addiction comes in different forms – mainly they're hideous. I'd say that's some fruit from the tree in the story.

SCP: What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about *Screams The Machine* before they read it?

Sam: I wish you could hear the soundtrack that was going through my head as I was writing the book. It's an important aspect that couldn't be put to the page.

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

Sam: It makes me smile to say pantser. I'll go with that. Plus, the pantser style is a solid, ancient technique proven time again, developed by the wisest of the pantser sages. How cool would that be? In the end though, I almost feel more like a reporter than a fiction writer. It feels like I'm experiencing the story as it happens, so I guess a good pants-ing could work for that in numerous ways. My first drafts are usually done in complete silence. The world I'm writing about does what it does, filling my head with sound, colors, etc. It feels spiritual actually, and it feels honest. I think honesty of intent is most important in any process. If the writer means what they say, it'll probably show in the pants-ing.

SCP: If you could cast *Screams the Machine*, who would you choose to play your main characters?

Sam: I'd like to see new talent play the characters. Also, I'd want you to be able to hear any of the sounds that were in my head that accompanied the story. That would be fun.

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

Sam: Me. I've been the hardest challenge.

SCP: In your opinion, what sets *Screams The Machine* apart from other books of the same genre?

Sam: Hopefully it adds to the genre(s), like an extension or compliment. I want it to pay respects; however, I also want *Screams The Machine* to blend different genres in a way that makes sense. Horror, sci-fi, and fantasy have been important parts of my life.

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

Sam: Yes. I'm reading any Scientific American sent to me (subscription). Also, 'The Essential Guide to Werewolf Literature', by Brian J. Frost has been useful. The 'Dictionary of Superstitions', by David Pickering has been super fun. For current research, I'm reading texts such as 'The Didache', and a few others that would be considered sacred. Then, of course, I'm reading 'The Singularity is Near', by Ray Kurzweil.

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

Sam: Hideyuki Kikuchi. Joseph Campbell. Richard Matheson. Ray Kurzweil. I like Steve Niles' stuff, 'Savage Membrane' was pretty killer. Will Storr. William Gibson (Neuromancer). Richard K. Morgan (Woken Furies). Simon R. Green, 'Hex and the City' was a blast. My favorite novels are the ones where I have a genuine good time reading, or they massage my brain in some way. There are many. I highly suggest 'The Power of Myth', with Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers. I read it over ten years ago. That book helped changed my perspective on life in general.

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

Sam: It seems there're three types of success with writing: personal, critical, and monetary. Personal success is an awful beast to tame, but you have to remember that if you've completed your story, you're already putting the nix on that part. Then there's the hell of wondering if what you did is any good. Who knows, right? Deep down, you do.

Personally, I love submitting my work to people I don't know. It's a pretty big thrill and testament. Then again, I don't care to share everything with everyone. The definition of success is up to the individual when it comes to creativity. In the end, I'd say happiness is a major success, and if you can pay a bill with writing, then that's also success.

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?

Sam: Test your mettle. Keep going. Validate yourself. Love what you do. Stay safe.

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

Sam: Being that times are changing, humans require more stimulation and social-media glitter bedazzles us, I'm writing novellas for a reason. I want to help keep folks interested in books, for one, and make stories accessible. Novellas are short but interesting. I feel they're a good middle ground with the modern person's time. I honestly don't know how anyone should feel after reading my book. I leave that entirely up to the reader.

Thank you Sam for taking the time to answer our questions.

And now for an excerpt from Screams The Machine...

Chapter One: An Odd Dream, Birthday

Flesh severs from bone and a green-eyed girl cries a black flood, a flood of such devastating capacity it could cover the world...

In her pink smiling monkey pajamas, she stands on a great body of blackness, the water rippling beneath her feet. She swipes her arm across her cheek, surprised to find her hand covered in red. She inspects the blood carefully, but she has no idea how she was cut. But that isn't the worst of her problems. She begins to sink, first to her knees, then to her waist. The water has no temperature, like the touch of nothingness.

Soon she falls into the liquid darkness; descending for what seems like forever, being pulled down by a gripping, otherworldly current. The water becomes shockingly cold. She twists and tumbles, feeling pressure build on her lungs, beginning to crush them. Deeper, farther and farther down, as she drowns—as if this can get any worse, the thought crosses her mind—from the blackness an onslaught of charred hands reach and grope, tearing her body to pulpy ribbons.

There is a moment of stillness, the absence of all sound, until blood ascends in violent whorls, spreading, mixing with the tears to create: floods, oceans, lakes. Her dismemberments form continents, her veins rivers, and her mind creates the Nature of All Things. Big fish consumes small fish. Big corporation consumes small business. Government consumes big corporation. Obese man eats donut and watches television. Television consumes obese man. In one last sweeping exhalation, her breath becomes the atmosphere.

Her name is Elizabeth. She is the doorway to The Ultimate Reality.

"Damn," Elizabeth shot up in bed, keeping her eyes shut because she was afraid of what she might see. Her thoughts jumbled helter-skelter, sweat clung to her brow, and her auburn hair was a sticky mess. She had no idea why she would have such a dream, except for an underlying feeling that the world—her world was messed up. She thought, maybe it was a sort of silly allegorized psyche soup parading its nonsensical ingredients, as can happen at times. As Dr. Reverence always said, Elizabeth recalled, 'One is prone to cling to a reflection of madness, if only so they can wallow in their own likeness.'

Attempting to gather her wits and her breath, Elizabeth inhaled for the first time in what felt like a full minute. She opened her eyes and a spot of sunshine coming through the slits in the blinds jabbed at her pupils.

Her room was furnished with a twin bed, two bureaus—one that had an old vanity mirror owned by her late grandmother before the world cracked. This was the same room she had lived in since the age of six, where she once played with a hand-me-down *Rainbow Bright*, and experienced her first kiss at age eleven, which proved horrifying. Randal Markins' bottom lip had got caught in her braces. In a panic, he jerked his head back and a chunk of flesh ripped out. He had moved away years ago, but she wasn't sure where. He was her first experience with love.

The walls in her room were painted pink then, but now they were purple. Most of her time within these walls was spent listening to music and keeping her mind occupied. She was twenty-four now, the house was hers, and she was near alone with the exception of her mother, who was not often up for company.

Elizabeth groaned. Letting the memory of her dream slip away, she stretched like a cat and a pleasant rush slid through her head. Suddenly she grew sleepier than before, and her eyelids drooped as the prospect pulled her back under the down comforter. She could have dreamed again of a much better, calmer place, even though she knew she had chores to start this morning, plus she had to check on her mother.

At 8:00 AM Elizabeth woke again, and the air seemed stained with rainbows until she rubbed her eyes and they adjusted properly. She reached over to her nightstand, picking up her smart phone and looked for any missed calls. Of course, there were no missed calls. She scrolled to an app and turned on *Pandora*. The music played quietly.

After Elizabeth showered she stood naked on the old black and white tile, smelling of violets. She cleared the layer of condensation off the mirror then covered the circles under her eyes with honey-beige concealer. She got dressed in jeans, black knee-high leather boots, and a teal three-quarter length T-shirt with a black cardigan over it. Added to her wardrobe was a heavy, black coat. Before leaving the house, she vaguely wondered where her mind might go if it weren't for the little pleasantries life still allotted.

Elizabeth walked outside into a bright February day, the cold and fresh breeze fumbling over her cheeks. While the sun may have spread a cheerful hue, most of the houses in the neighborhood stood abandoned or foreclosed. Many of the yards were overgrown, the grass dried and dead from winter. She saw children's toys and wind-beaten battery powered trucks on the lawns and dead potted plants on porches. Many families fled during The State of Chaos. Others were killed, some simply vanished without explanation as disease ran rampant, jobs dwindled, and violence spread. The old government attempted to suppress the disorder, but their efforts failed. Then the Solution arose from the depths of global networks, utilizing their strange war machines and snuffing the mayhem. These strange, bipedal marvels were called the RMS (Robotic Military Sentries). Elizabeth had never seen any RMS in person, but she had watched a plethora of live footage along with reports on television. No one had ever witnessed the odd technology before, nor did they know it existed; the RMS were armed with nightmares, it seemed.

Elizabeth kept trekking, observing the near derelict neighborhood. She sighed, recalling a time when the *Blue Bear* ice cream truck would play its drippy and tuneless music. Elizabeth had found it eerie, yet the music possessed the ability to make her happy all the same, to reach in and grab her veins as though she were a stringed musical instrument. Kids flocked in groups around the neighborhood then. Things were normal, but it seemed that the last few years her life stumbled toward a monstrous mouth that would swallow her whole. She wanted college, to work once again at *Cool Keith's Coffee*, but alas, that wasn't going to happen.

A sudden heavy gust of cold wind forced Elizabeth to turn her head down. Her eyes watered. When she looked back up the street, she saw a slim figure in the distance silhouetted by the morning sun. As the figure got closer it became less obscure, formed into one of the last remaining neighborhood men—she didn't know his name before, and she refused to know him now. His face was blotted by shadow but she could tell he was in a hurry as he jogged to a yard where an old and withered dogwood tree stood. He opened the door and went inside the home. Someone was dying, she was certain. Soon the teeth of disease would crush and swallow, again.

Elizabeth reserved a numb awareness of death, because she had witnessed enough already. The Dysfunction Grief no longer belonged to her. Her street led to the main road. A few stores remained open for business, but many had shut down or were rundown. The businesses that survived appeared rather immaculate and clean—the shelves were stocked with supplies. Walking another five minutes, she eventually entered a small convenience store called *The Orange Market* located between two empty and dark-looking buildings that used to be banks. Per requirement of the Solution, a sign posted over the pristine glass entrance door read,

ABSOLUTELY NO CASH, in bold red letters. Cash Disease, which had been transmitted by handling cash, wiped out millions—it was the beginning of The State of Chaos, also known as The Disintegration.

She got a box of hot chocolate, a loaf of bread, peanut butter, one banana, pink *Snowballs*, a gallon of milk, a tomato, then swiped her wrist, which had a tracer chip implanted just under the skin. A beep sounded to indicate she had purchased the items. Mr. Smith, the short portly old clerk stood behind the counter. His hair was white, and his eyes were pale blue.

He smiled, saying, "Little chilly outside, but it'll do. I'm glad winter's coming to a close soon. Another month or two."

"I suppose. But I like winter," Elizabeth said.

"You like winter? Funny a woman says that. Y'all used to love summer, hopping round in your bikinis like bunnies. Sun tannin', ya know. I can understand the change, though." Then Mr. Smith cocked his head to the side for a moment, as he peered solemnly at her. "In one respect I feel fortunate it—The Disintegration, you know—didn't happen during winter. In another way, I kinda' wish it did."

Mr. Smith raised an eyebrow and Elizabeth understood. They both had smelled the baking rot and war in the summer heat. The stench was like spoiled milk and bad meat as it blew in with the wind from miles away. She didn't really care for anything further to be said about it. Not many people did. But sometimes (most times), they talked about it regardless.

Elizabeth said, "The Disintegration isn't over for all of us."

"Hmm, but we know who to thank, don't we, that it's not worse? Because it's over for most."

Elizabeth said, "Yeah, I suppose."

"You're lucky. The other deserted neighborhoods are getting demolished right and left. Solution officials plan to move people closer to the city, which means your neighborhood will be preserved and occupied. We're close. Don't you feel it, though? The pull to the city? Like some sort of calling."

Elizabeth nodded her head yes, because she couldn't deny that she did. She had an urge to go. There wouldn't be much left here after her mother passed regardless if people would be arriving soon or not. And even if she felt the urge to go, she doubted she ever would.

"Something's happened to, well, reality, all right," Mr. Smith said.

Elizabeth agreed and noted to herself that it's gone insane, that reality itself seems to be diseased or cracked.

Mr. Smith continued, "And I can feel something else happening as we speak. I feel it down to my marrow, singing like a choir. There's a feeling just below the surface, ya know, something of a power permeating us. Do you ever get that?"

"No."

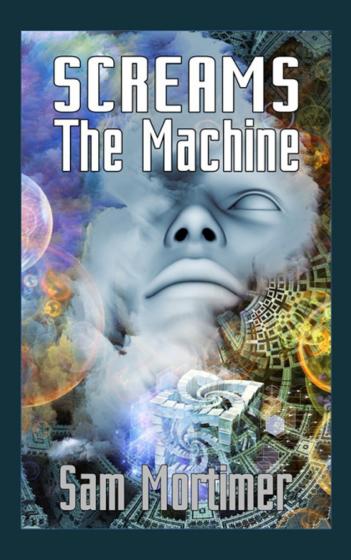
"Oh, it's strong. It's real strong." Mr. Smith's eyes narrowed. He reached a hand into his shirt pocket but discovered what he was looking for wasn't there. "No damned cigarettes. Still can't accept it, but Dr. Reverence frowns on them, so I guess I should. But I need one so bad, I dream of smoking when I sleep. Gotta have something to keep me from going loony as a mongoose on crack. Dr. Reverence is a good woman."

Elizabeth deemed Mr. Smith's dysfunction Unfortunately Positive.

Mr. Smith dropped his hands to his sides and squeezed the fabric of his slacks, then reached to the counter, snatching and unraveling a piece of candy. He popped it in his mouth.

"Anyway, not much new construction will happen, huh? How's your mother?" The old man asked. "She's one of the last with, you know, Cash Disease. She's gotta be pretty damned close. I'm sorry."

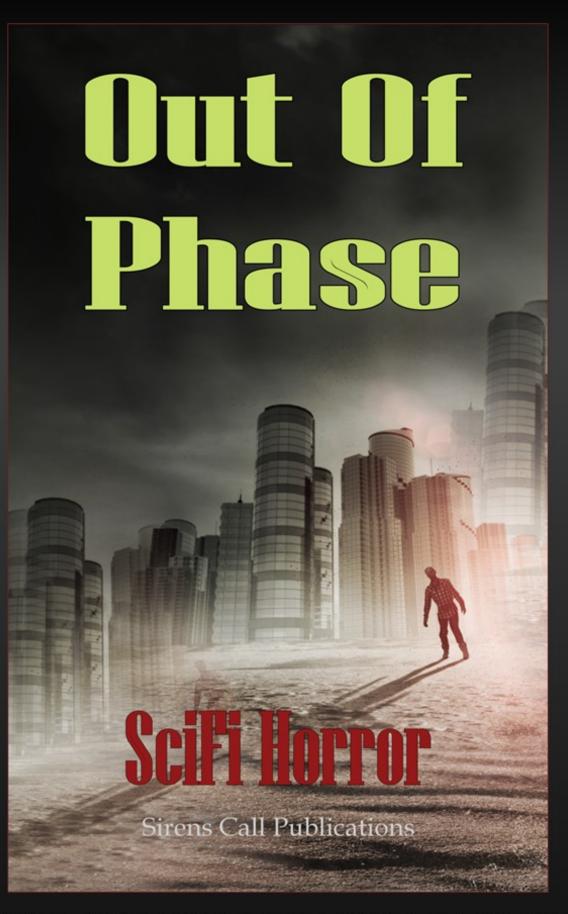
"I'd imagine you are," Elizabeth said.



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