The Sirens Call

Summer 2020 issue 50



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

Spotlight Authors:
Nicholas Paschall,
author of
Jack in the Box
and
Mark Steinwachs,
author of The Night

Featured Illustrators: Jeanette Andromeda and Lisa Vasquez

Featured Photographers: Danielle Wirsansky and Mai Kil

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Sweet Little Songbird | *Joshua Skye*

Adorable Gerdie, her father's sweet little songbird, held her old raggedy doll close, her chin digging into its throat as she tried to hide behind it, distance herself from a group of loudly, violently arguing adults. Though they looked like her and her daddy, smooth dark skin, jet black hair, big brown eyes and full lips, they seemed alien to her. Different somehow. Menacing. Scary. Even the language they used was unfamiliar and threatening, augmented by their curiously childish actions.

On their first Friday together in a long time, her daddy had taken her to the laundry mat to get the tedious chore out of the way, so they could have the rest of the weekend to themselves. They'd planned movies, games, and pizza at Chuck E. Cheese. But before he'd even scooped the first load of dirty clothes out of the hamper, only a few feet away, a fight broke out between several adults, a confrontation that had immediately put her and her daddy on edge.

Even at eleven-years-old, she could see the pointlessness of the fight. There were several machines throughout the room that weren't being used. Why were these people getting so angry over one of them? It made no sense to her, and their dramatically over-the-top reactions were scary. Her daddy took a stance between her and the fighting people, but she could still clearly see them, their antics were not contained to one small space, and very clearly hear every single vulgarity they shouted.

There was a security guard, but he was a tiny old man with hunched shoulders and he looked as frightened and confused as she was. He stood in the middle of the fray, eyes wide, looking about for some sort of help, but no other customers dared get involved. Some had to stay, laundry in mid-cycle, but many hurriedly gathered their things and got out of there as fast as they could. Gerdie didn't blame them at all. She wanted to leave too, but in order to do so, she and her daddy would have to traipse right through the middle of the fight, a risky move she had no interest in doing. From the looks of things, her daddy was hesitant on doing that too, and she couldn't blame him, not one bit.

"Get behind me, little songbird." Her daddy backed up and put his arms out to shield her even more as fists began to be thrown amidst louder screams and even more offensive expletives. Gerdie peeked out to one side in time to see the poor security guard get a sharp blow to the side of the head. He toppled over sideways, his head bouncing off the linoleum, and then he just lay there, unmoving. Women hit other women, men pummeled women, women beat men, men pounded other men. It was chaos, shocking. Gerdie couldn't help herself, so scared she began to cry and wished she'd stayed with Mommy this weekend.

"Gun," someone shouted, and shots were fired.

Daddy spun around and scooped her into his arms, forced her into a tight ball he could best shelter from the onslaught of violence. She could see his wide eyes, he was as afraid as she was. She could also see him talking, but through the noise she could not hear him. Was he mouthing the worlds *I Love You*? He liked to call out to her in the dark of early mornings by saying *I have hugs for you*. Maybe it was both. She thought so, but wasn't sure. Maybe he was telling her it would all be alright. Maybe he was making daddy promises. Maybe he was...

Suddenly, his eyes widened even more. His lips stopped moving and his head tilted ever so slightly to one side. She whispered to him, but even she couldn't hear her words. She was only a little girl, but she instinctively knew what had happened. He'd been shot and it had stunned him, hurt him. When his entire body convulsed twice, she knew he'd been shot two more times. She whispered to him again, reached out and touched his cheek, but she could see that all that made him her daddy was oozing out of him.

Gerdie had no words to describe what she was seeing or experiencing, but a dismayed part of her knew exactly what was happening. She was watching her daddy die. It started in his kind brown eyes, a fleeting moment of realization. He knew he'd been shot. It was followed by an awful understanding. He knew he'd never see his daughter again. And then with nauseating sluggishness, those painful insights faded, draining away along with the sparkling identification of life they were usually filled with. After a sigh he collapsed on top of her, dead weight she'd heard it called, and she knew he was gone.

She screamed. She wept. She was shot, too!

It was in her shoulder, a tiny part of her that stuck out from under her father. At first, it was like a bee sting, she'd had one last summer at her grandma's house. There was a pop and what felt like a deliberately vicious pinch, then an intense burning sensation radiated outward. That arm fell away from her doll and dangled limply at her

side. She wanted to move it, but couldn't, a useless appendage. As slowly as his life had leached from him, her father's body released her from its clutch and slid off her to the ground.

Everything looked slowed down, like what her cartoons did during ridiculous battle scenes to emphasize the silliness, only no amusement was to be had from what she was confronted with. People were running out the doors, screaming, weeping, and waving their arms wildly about. Her ears were ringing, but she heard them perfectly. A little baby was shrieking, someone had left it behind. All around her on the floor, inches from her daddy's body, other bodies were strewn. Blood pooled collectively into an expanding gooey blossom of crimson that was blindingly bright against the stark white of the linoleum floor.

Gerdie called out for her mother, but it was a tiny, weak sound that didn't even penetrate the ringing in her ears. There was no way anyone would be able to hear her, let alone Mommy who was so very far away. She cleared her throat and said it again, louder. She only barely heard it. Louder still she called a third time, but there was no one around her to hear except a screaming baby. She had to be louder than him. She took in a lungful of air and screeched as loud as she could and continued to, she wouldn't stop, not until her mommy came and took her into her comforting arms.

The traumatized little girl clutching a rag doll in one arm, the other uselessly dangling at her side, screamed the single word over and over for a very long time and didn't stop even when a big burly white man in a uniform she didn't recognize scooped her up into his big strong arms. He slipped in the blood, but managed to get her out of the laundry mat without falling. He said generic comforting things, but she didn't care, she still cried out for her mother. The hot summer air hit her like a fist as she was hauled outside into a world swimming in lights and even more chaos. There were so many people everywhere, countless faces gawking, a thousand voices shouting, so many fingers pointing.

She imagined he was a helper, though she had no clue what kind, and thought he was taking her to one of the many ambulances that filled the parking lot. There he would calm her down and find out who she was, from her fish her mother's name and contact information, maybe even give her a sucker while he tended her injury. Throat burning, she stopped screaming. Things weren't alright, but she'd be with her mother soon. Tucking her face into one of his sweaty armpits to cut out the sight of all the staring people, she didn't notice him bypass all the emergency personnel and vehicles and push his way through the morbidly curious spectators.

He took her away from all the commotion and to a beat up little car at the back of the lot and shoved her into the passenger's seat. The first time he tried to slam the door, it just popped right back toward him. It took four times for the faulty thing to latch.

He wasn't a paramedic. He wasn't a police officer. He wasn't a firefighter either. She didn't know the uniform he wore, but she knew he wasn't one of the people that helped out in times like this. His offered smile was meant to be kind, reassuring, but there was no consolation in it, only a dreamlike awkwardness. He fumbled with something from the glove box, an unorganized black pouch. As soon as she saw the syringe, she opened to mouth to scream again, but he was fast. The needle went into her little girl flesh as easily as a knife through warmed butter. Only a moment later, she was out like a light.

In the darkness there was no rest, warbling echoes of the laundry mat gunfire and screaming filled it with a liquid thickness she didn't understand but somehow equated to the dirty water of a long neglected swimming pool. There were many leaves there floating about, though she could not see them, and dead bugs too, dead bugs with their click, clicky weird bodies. From the dark, as if born of it, her father emerged, his big brown eyes filled with love and ache. "Get out, Gerdie," he said. "My sweet little songbird, you have to get out. He has horrible plans for you, unspeakable plans."

When she reached for him whimpering, the darkness took him back and it held on to her, too. It was like the desperate struggle to stay awake late on weekend nights to finish the midnight movie or not miss what the grownups were doing. Sleep pulled insistently, deeply needing more than friendly. When she tried to pull away, it pulled right back with the resolute jerk of her head nodding toward adamant slumber. Her parents would tell her not to fight it, but she wanted to fight it as badly now as she had all those times before, and it wasn't just to see the ending of the film or what the adults were getting up to. This was different, far more important. This was life or death, she knew it deep down into her teeny tiny bones.

"Open your eyes, Gerdie." It was her raggedy doll's voice, a voice she'd always imagined her to have, tinkling and fragile like a jingle bell from a Christmas tree. "You have to open your eyes and get away...get away...get away..."

"Get the fuck out of my way!"

It wasn't the voice of her doll, but that of a man, the voice of her kidnapper, deep, harsh, angry. Fighting from her gut and the deep part of her mind that had brought her daddy back to her one more time, culling strength from her daddy himself and doll best friend, she pulled free of the dark, leaving the sounds of guns and screams behind, and opened her eyes. At first, they merely fluttered.

The car. Darkness. The car. Darkness. The car...and him, the bad man.

He leaned forward in the driver's seat, so tall he was slouching over the wheel, his firm focus on the outside world, those murky Dallas streets away from the towering buildings of downtown. After a moment, she was able to force her big brown eyes to stay open. The beat-up vehicle rocked like a boat and from the engine came a roar like the waves of an ocean. Seagulls. There were always seagulls by the ocean. She loved feeding them on the beach, but there were no seagulls. There was only him.

Where was he taking her? What was he going to do to her? From the shadows, her father had already answered that question. He had horrible plans, unspeakable plans. It was hard to focus through the chemically induced haze she was in, thoughts came and went, she couldn't hold onto them for long, but she did know one thing with absolute certainty. She had to get out of the bad man's car. She had to get away from him.

It was like moving through thickened swimming pool water as she turned her head to the passenger side door, the one he'd had a problem shutting back in the parking lot. If she could reach the handle, maybe it wouldn't be hard to open. Through the chemical numbness, her uninjured arm felt as though it weighted a thousand pounds, but she did it. Small child hopes and prayers filled her fluttering thoughts, optimistic wishes that the kidnapper would not notice her attempts at freedom. Jesus was on her side, that's what her mommy always said, and he must have been for at least that moment because she was able to grab the prize. All she did was let the weight of her arm push it down. There was a click. She would have squealed in delight if only she could. Instead of a celebratory dance, she let herself fall into the door and it opened.

She hadn't thought her escape though. The road was going by so fast and the dizzy cloud enveloping her didn't let her flinch away from the fall. Although for her it felt like slow motion from an animated movie, she was out of the car in an instant. The extended arm caught on the door and turned her as a sweeping wind yanked her underneath the automobile. No thoughts were fast enough, there was no way she could have helped herself. The back tire rolled over her with a ferocious series of wet snapping sounds. She felt every one, the horror and pain mercilessly sobering her.

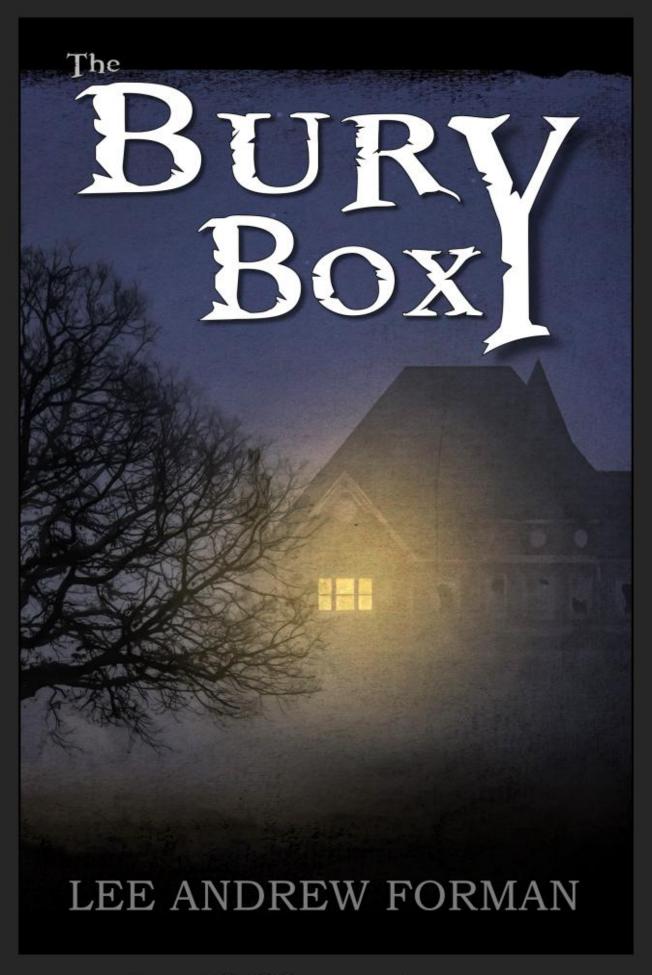
Her body flipped and tumbled and spilled her crimson insides out onto the asphalt. The car never even paused, the door didn't close. There were people on the sidewalks, in yards, all worthlessly gawking as those in the parking lot crowd had. The sky was dark. The sirens and lights of the emergency vehicles surrounding the laundry mat were very, very far away.

And there in the middle of a residential Dallas street where no bystander had been able to get a clear description of the car or driver, and none of whom dared run out to help her, little Gerdie slowly died in indescribable pain, unable to move, utterly terrified, silently weeping, and all alone. In death however, there was someone. The darkness returned with a familiar voice. It was kind and loving with empathy she'd heard before whenever she'd gotten hurt, an affection like in the early morning hours. "My sweet little songbird," her daddy whispered. "Come here. I have hugs for you."

About the Author:

Joshua Skye is the award-winning, best-selling author of *The Angels of Autumn* and *Cradle*. His short stories have appeared in Sirens Call Publications anthologies *Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed* and *Monster Brawl*. He lives in Texas with his husband Ray and their son Syrian.

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Available on Amazon

The Giant Killer | Marcus Cook

Dozer lay on top of his reinforced cot surrounded by his concrete home. The taxpayers of Wyoming had to pay for the construction of his confinement to house his 7-foot 4- inch, 415-pound frame in their correctional facility.

Dozer wasn't his real name, it was Wydryk Nazwosoki. Zofia Nazwosoki delivered a 21-pound 7-ounce baby boy. The father was originally going to name his first-born son, Regan Aaron Nazwosoki. The day before Dozer's birth, Aleksander and Zofia sat together in their living room watching United States President Ronald Reagan tell Mikhail Gorbachev to 'Tear down this wall.' Aleksander wanted to name his son after this powerful man in hopes, one day, that he too would tear down walls.

The only thing Dozer tore down was seventeen women's doors. They said that's how he was given the nickname.

There were rumors that he was so heavy, that during one of Zofia's contraction her spinal cord snapped. It is factually documented that he did snap seventeen other women's necks. Zofia did not get to see her child's birth due to complications. Aleksander was so stricken with grief that when he was asked for the child's name, he simply replied, "Wydryk" and walked out the hospital doors.

"Hey Wydryk, time for your hearing." Corrections Officer Sniffles yelled into his cell.

Sniffles was born Marco Pollbright, but due to his 'behind close doors' coke addiction, the inmates of the Wyoming Correctional Facility donned him Officer Sniffles.

Dozer slowly stood up, slightly hunched as to not scrape his head.

They built the cell to accommodate his size, yet there was only enough room for him to stand, the cell was only wide enough to hold his cot and small walkway to a hole, in which to do his business.

Dozer sometimes imagined he was one of The Beatles living in their yellow submarine. Then he would remember the Beatles didn't live in a yellow submarine, and since he was Polish, born in the 80's, tone deaf, and in jail, he probably wouldn't have been invited to join the band.

"Kneel facing the wall and arms out towards your back." Officer Sniffles ordered.

He remembered Sister Theresa had him stand in the corner of the orphanage while she used a thick paddle across his bottom. He was sorry he peeked on the girls changing their undies.

The squeaking of the cell door gave Dozer warning that the cuffs were coming. He was told special handcuffs were made to fit around his massive wrists and a pair around his ankles. Yet, when Sniffles clicked them shut, they pinched and cut into his skin. He used to say ouch, that just led to a whack to the head.

He remembered how Mrs. Lauren Bowers shouted, until he whacked her in the face twenty times with his fist. He recalled how after the first punch, she quieted down. Once he stopped, he realized she wasn't pretty.

Lauren was a school teacher. She taught third grade science. He saw her at the local tavern and offered to buy her a drink. She shouldn't have giggled after she denied him. He followed her home, just for an apology. All he got was that first scream.

"Okay big boy, stand and face me." Officer Sniffles commanded.

Dozer turned and saw the small, red-headed, bully start to pat him down. He didn't like how the officer touched his private area. Sister Theresa told him during his bath that she is the only one allowed to bless it. It was evil if anyone else touched it.

"Open the door." Officer Sniffles ordered the two men standing outside each holding a shot gun.

"Alright, take it slow, "Officer Sniffles continued with orders.

Dozer took one step after another; he lowered his head as he exited his home for the past twelve years. It has been his longest living quarters, until today. Parole Hearing Day.

He was eight when he watched Sister Theresa be taken away in chains like he was wearing, He and the other children were then found temporary homes.

"You think they are going to set you free today?" Officer Sniffles asked.

"Yes, I do not touch myself anymore," Dozer proudly responded.

"Don't see the relevance in that, but good for you." Officer Sniffles replied as he continued to escort the big man down the corridor.

The halls were painted a light green, which reminded Dozer of Carole Roman. She sold flowers out of her own store. He loved to visit her and smell her flowers. His favorite flower was Prudence or Prudy for short, Carole's nineteen-year-old daughter. He broke that flower behind the dumpster.

Dozer was led into a big room. A familiar man sat at a table with an empty seat next to him. In front of it were two men and a woman sitting at another table. A lady sat to the right of them, with what appeared to be a tiny typewriter. Dozer was led to the first table and sat next to the man. Dozer recognized the man as Andy Shrine.

"You do a few years, keep your nose clean and we might be able to get you out early." Andy said the last time he saw him.

"Alright we are about to start this parole hearing for Mr. Wydryk Nazwosoki." The man in the middle stated.

Dozer zoned the voices in the room out. He focused on the lady typing. She looked like a cross between his favorite victim, Margaret Kitt and one of his last victims, Annie Sade. Dozer drooled a little as he focused on her peach colored blouse. He needed to see what she was hiding from him. If he just reached out, he may be able to unbutton it.

"Mr. Nazwosoki." The man at the table interrupted.

Dozer looked over at the man and saw the other woman. She was grey and wrinkled. There was nothing Dozer needed from her.

"If you are released, would you repeat the offenses that got you put in here." Sister Theresa asked him as he sat in the spider-infested closet.

"I will not, please let me go." Dozer replied.

"We are happy to hear your answer; do you have anything to add." The man asked,

"I would like to touch the woman's blouse." Dozer requested.

"Excuse me." The man asked shocked by Dozers request.

Dozer really needed to know what the woman was hiding as he stood up from his seat.

Voices were nothing but amplified muffle, as he pushed the table to the side. He watched the woman as she was frozen in fear.

"Wydryk, you will drop to your knees now." Officer Sniffles ordered as he stood between him and the peach barrier.

Dozer tried to push Sniffles away. A scream caused him to look down to see Sniffles head sitting in a puddle of blood.

His eyes returned to his goal as the woman shivered like he did when Sister Theresa punished him.

He smiled, reached out, and heard what seemed to be firecrackers. Hot metal ripped into his back. He dropped to his knees, still reaching out. His fingertip touched the soft plastic of her middle button.

Another bang and the peach colored blouse turned red.

About the Author:

Marcus Cook lives in Cleveland, Ohio with his inspirational wife and cat. He loves to read and write science fiction and thrillers. He is inspired by Dean Koontz, Kevin Smith and Elmore Leonard. For other stories written by Marcus follow him on Facebook.

Facebook: Read Marcus Cook





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Night Terrors | Michael Anthony Dioguardi

They're coming for me.

Breathe Mark, breathe.

My bed's soaked. I'm sweating so much. Don't look at it. Breathe. God, that tower, is that my dresser? It's gigantic. They're in there—I swear! Frankie's head is peeking over the top bunk, he gasps, "Mark?"

I grip my dinosaur bedsheets. I turn to Cheeser and Snort—they can't help me now. The tower, they're watching me in there.

Frankie's feet stick to the ladder as he climbs down to my bed. His face is half-lit by the nightlight. He crouches away from me with his mouth agape and squinting eyes: He knows it's happening. He thumps away to the hallway.

I can feel my head pounding behind my eyeballs. Don't scream Mark! Don't scream. "Dear God! Help me! They're here!"

The hallway light flickers on. I overhear Mom's voice. "What? Ah fuck, again?"

Dad replies, "I'm not holding him down this time! You snap him out of it—I'm getting tired of this shit!"

They need to turn off the hallway light. That light needs to be out, now! My legs are shaking. Everything is so cold. I'll do it. I need to. They can't take me!

The tower is next to me. I just need to slip by. Close your eyes Mark. Breathe. Don't scr— "Oh God no! I can't—" Dad fumbles behind me. Mom shouts, "I thought you wanted me to restrain him!"

Dad holds my hips. "I—don't, Rode, just—we can't restrain him, he's gonna— he'll fuckin' take your head off—Christ!"

They're trying to hold me down. They did this last time. Fight it Mark. Shake your arms, scream again, they've got to turn the light off, before it's too late!

"Mark! Cut this shit out!" Dad screams at me.

"He doesn't know what the fuck is going on!" Mom yells back.

Frankie's behind Mom. His hands cover his neck. He's scared and confused; he trembles from his mouth. "Mark, stop, please, stop, Mark."

I just spat on my own chest. Fight harder Mark. My neck is throbbing. I can taste sweat drop on my tongue. They've got both my arms now. I'm staring straight at the hallway light. Frankie's face casts a shadow on mine. His blue eyes tremble. My tears blur the view of Frankie into swelling pulses. My breath laminates the spines of my teeth. I'm so scared. Why does this happen? Why?

Mom loosens her grip on my arm. Dad eases backward. The four of us embrace under the hallway light, vibrating to the rhythm of my chest rising and falling.

Dad rises and retreats to his bed. Mom follows after him. "The doctor said that some cases go on for longer. You just have to accept it"

Frankie flips the hallway light off and walks beside me to our bunk beds. We look at each other. He exhales and climbs back up. The dresser next to me didn't seem that tall anymore, and my bed looks like it's dried. I lay in my bed staring at the featureless bottom of the top bunk.

"Don't close your eyes just yet, Mark."

Did I just say that? No, I didn't, "Frankie?"

.... Not a word. He must be asleep. Okay, just breathe—

"Not yet, Mark..."

About the Author:

Michael Anthony Dioguardi teaches and writes in upstate New York. His work has been published multiple times in 365 Tomorrows and will be featured in upcoming issues of Dark Dossier, Close 2 the Bone, and the Lockdown Anthology by Black Hare Press.



Flesh of the Father | Guy Medley

Jameson loved children. The small village was full of them, running and playing and laughing in the dusty streets. He loved them all so much. But fate had been cruel and alas he was never blessed with any of his own. So, he spent his long days making the children of the village happy by creating toys for them. Jameson's crowded little shop was stuffed to the rafters with every sort of lovingly made toy. Kites and trikes, trains and planes. From abacus to Xylophone, he had it all.

And yet, Jameson was never able to make himself happy. He was missing what he desired most.

So, he began trying to befriend the children of the village. He promised them free toys and cookies if they would come by and talk and play games. And for a short time he was somewhat happy. But, the children didn't stay long. They seemed to grow bored in his company rather quickly, the free toys and sweets only going so far to making them stay. This disappointed Jameson. He grew angry. Children became frightened with his temper and cried. Threw their toys to the floor where they smashed to bits against the cobbles.

In a fit of rage, Jameson had squeezed the fragile life from a handful of children that wouldn't stop crying. Had ended them with his large hands around their tiny necks. And this couldn't be. He had destroyed the things he had loved so, no different than the children had done to their smashed toys upon the floor.

Jameson hid the broken little bodies in the depths of his workshop's cellar and closed his shop.

A full year had passed, Jameson's shop laying in dusty neglect, the toys crafted with so much love left abandoned. Unloved.

The loneliness was crushing him. But, as much as Jameson loved children, what he had done to them appalled him. He wanted a child he could keep. One that would love him unconditionally forever. One that would play with him and his toys and never want to leave. That would stay with him always.

To take his mind off of his sorrow, Jameson decided it was time to resume his work. It had been too long. Retrieving his tool bag from the musty cellar, he came across the moldering pile of bodies in the darkest corner. Their small forms had withered, brittle skins stretched over their tiny bones. Like a pile of blackened sticks.

Jameson had an idea.

His worktable was cleared. All except for his collection of finest carving tools and a few small saws. And, of course, the neatly stacked bones, now cleaned of any remaining gore, sanded down white. He set to work, the happiest he had been in many long months. Jameson worked all through the day and through the night, carving into the bones of the children, fibulas and tibias, ribs and phalanges, they were all carefully crafted into his greatest creation ever. Every shaving and nick and cut precision love. He was tireless in his passion.

At last, Jameson was able to step away and take in his work. His hands were raw and blistered and his mind weak with fatigue, yet the masterpiece that sat upon his worktable caused his spirits to soar. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever crafted. Gleaming white bone, polished to perfection, hinged so intricately, sculpted so life-like, it was as near a real child as he had ever seen. No, he thought, it was even better. Because at last, it was his and his alone.

Jameson named him Peter. He wept with joy.

The exhaustion finally catching up to Jameson, he retired to his bed early. He placed Peter in the shop where he could be surrounded by all of Jameson's toys. Where he could be a boy for the first time. And, through Peter's bone carved eyes, he almost seemed to be taking the world in as the moonlight seeping through the shop windows lit them like cold embers.

The night grew later, the moon soon hidden behind rolling black clouds, Peter's bone carved body losing its moonlit glow as he slumped lifeless in the little wicker chair he had been placed in. His unseeing eyes couldn't witness the strange occurrences beginning to take place just outside the shop's window. Strange swirling black tentacles of fog were whipping around, coalescing from nothing and dancing in the darkness, through the pale yellow of the streetlamp, up over eaves and chimneys and then across the gritty cobbles of the narrow street.

Peter couldn't see the black filigree wisps play at the window glass, trace the outline of the door, finding the small crack along its bottom and slither into the shop on a wind of their own. Nor could he see how they were darker, much darker, than the night itself. They drifted about the shop, curling around the toy planes and kites hanging from string, danced among the shelves displaying blocks and animals. And finally, they took notice of Peter himself, coming together into a larger swirling mass that hovered in front of his immobile position.

The smoky apparition divided itself into two and drifted towards Peter's unseeing eyes, then swirling around their bone orbs, vanished behind them entirely. The moon reappeared and Peter's bones once more shone brightly in its light. His bones began to twitch ever so slightly, flexing and stretching, their polished form moving about with a life all their own. The eyes, taking on the faintest sheen, slowly rotated, taking in the room for the first time. At last seeing.

Peter shakily got to his feet, stood up straight, extended his bony arms, wiggled his fingers. He was alive! Had he a tongue he would have laughed with joy, sang to the miracles of the night. With new eyes he took in the small shop and its stock of toys and trinkets. Played with the things his father had made with the same hands that had made himself until the sun peeked over the top of the slate roofs and filled the shop with warm daylight.

Jameson was shocked, nearly tumbling his large frame to the floor, having to take a chair, after seeing Peter dancing about the shop in the morning light, dozens of toys laid out on the floor by his feet. The boy jumped and twirled and clapped his hands together, the sound like bowls clanking together in a bucket. He watched, mesmerized, at the life that had found its way into Peter, had animated a thing made from the death of others.

At last, Peter saw his father sitting in his chair, tears streaking his great face, beading in his bushy beard. He stopped his dancing and stood, looked at the giant old man, at the calloused fingers that had honed his features, at the sad eyes that were finally sparking to life. Peter couldn't smile, couldn't talk, couldn't express his happiness through words. But, his eyes said all that was needed saying. He ran to his father and wrapped his ivory arms around him.

Arms that were still, alive or not, as cold as the night, thought Jameson.

They played all day together with the many toys Jameson's shop housed. Nothing was off limits. He kept the shop closed so they wouldn't be disturbed, for it wasn't every day a man became a father for the first time, and Jameson was determined to make the best of it.

The street outside bustled on, people clomping along the cobbles to and from their destinations. Peter began to notice these other people. Particularly the other children, running and chasing each other, throwing bright balls back and forth, laughing and giggling and eating sugared treats in the warm sunlight. He wanted so much to be able to go out there and play with them. But his father insisted he stay inside. It wasn't safe outside. The other children weren't like Peter, his father said.

So, Peter remained locked away in the small shop where he played with the toys his father had made. But they weren't fun anymore. Peter needed more in this life he had been given. And he grew restless. Irritated. Angry that he was different. He had noticed those differences gradually. The other children looked soft compared to his hard bony body. Their silky hair bounced and shone in the light. His head was polished and bare. The other children were free to frolic in the streets, whereas Peter was forbidden to leave the shop.

It wasn't fair.

Peter pleaded with his father, but to no avail. It was dangerous, Jameson would tell him. Others won't understand. But, it was Peter who didn't understand. Not any of it. He just wanted to have fun. He wanted to be a boy.

Peter didn't play with the toys anymore. Didn't play games with his father, opting instead to sit by the window and watch the other children play outside all day. When Jameson retired for the night, Peter stood in front of a mirror, taking in his differences. A macabre mosaic of bleached bone starred back. There was no questioning, he was very finely made. However, there were obvious flaws in craftsmanship that made him different from the others. The very things his father said they wouldn't understand. A vital substance that even his own cold hard eyes could see. Mainly the absence of flesh. He felt unfinished and soulless.

Why? Why would father make him this way? An outcast. Lonely.

It infuriated Peter and he smashed his bone hardened skull through the mirror, shattering it to bits on the floor around his feet, a thousand imperfect Peters now gazing up at him in the moonlight. He grabbed up his father's prized tools, the sharp ones used to hone and carve and create things from other things, and slipped into his father's room among the shadows. And, in the waning light of a yellow moon, Peter set to work.

Peter stripped Jameson of his jacket of warm vital flesh, rendering long dripping strips of meat and fat that he hung from his own bony frame, feeling the warmth of the fluids that made a thing human. He placed his father's tongue into his own mouth, wiggled it around, licked the blood from his face and for the first time understood taste. And finally, with the utmost care, he relieved Jameson of his face, placing the look of his father onto his own skeletal face. At last, a real boy. No longer different.

Peter unlocked the shop's door and opened it, ventured out into the cool night air, waited for the day and the other children. Ready to play.

About the Author:

Guy Medley is the author of short fiction in a variety of genres, though dark horror seems to be his sweet spot. He writes mostly to entertain himself and his friends (and horrify his family and co-workers). Guy lives in the solitude of California's Mojave Desert, where the extreme heat has, without doubt, affected his mind.

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He Seemed Familiar | Roger Ley

He was enjoying a day off after a hectic week, starting a new job in a new city. The taxi drew up next to him as he was walking downtown. An old, pale looking man leaned out, he seemed familiar, perhaps he'd been on the interview panel a month ago. It seemed rude to ask his name.

"We have an emergency, Dr. Riley, they need you back at the hospital, it's urgent, a difficult birth."

Riley climbed into the taxi, and as it set off he listened as the other described the case, it became obvious that he was also an obstetrician. Minutes later they drew up at the hospital entrance, it looked Victorian, not the modern steel and glass structure he where he'd been interviewed. The sign read 'Memorial Hospital' though.

"Where is this?" he asked.

"This is the old building," said his companion.

"I thought they'd turned it into apartments," he said, but the other hurried him through the entrance doors and on down the main corridor. They entered the changing rooms, scrubbed up and walked through into the operating theatre. Its equipment immediately struck Riley as old-fashioned, out of date by thirty years at least, but the team looked up expectantly. Did he know them? They were all masked, gowned, capped, only their eyes were visible. The patient was prepped for a Caesarean, conscious but screened from the doctors.

"I prefer younger steadier hands to do the cutting these days," said the older man. "I'll assist."

The anaesthesiologist at the head end nodded and Riley set to work. Thirty minutes later the old surgeon reached in and lifted the infant out. He held it up smiling broadly.

"Thank goodness," he said.

Riley asked one of the juniors to close up and lifted the notes which were hooked on the end of the bed.

"How funny," he said, "she has the same name as my mother."

The old man handed the baby to a nurse, almost snatched the notes from him and rehung them.

"I'm in a bit of a hurry," he said. "I hope you don't mind if we make a slight detour on our way back. I have to attend a funeral, a close relative of mine, it won't take long."

"I'm not really dressed for a funeral," said Riley.

"Not to worry, I'll lend you a dark coat, I have a spare one with me."

They changed and the taxi rattled off once again, ten minutes later they turned into the municipal cemetery. It took a few minutes to find the mourners standing at the graveside. The weather had suddenly turned unseasonably cold, the women wore veils, the men coats, hats and scarves. Riley and the old surgeon stood at the back of the group. The vicar did the 'dust and ashes' speech, but as the coffin was lowered into the grave, Riley caught a glimpse of the name engraved on the brass plate screwed to the top.

The two doctors walked back to the taxi and Riley noticed the company name stencilled on the side, 'Styx Taxis'. There were three young pit bulls lolling out of the open front passenger window. Riley hadn't noticed them before, he went to stroke one but the older man stopped him. "I wouldn't if I were you."

"What an unbelievable coincidence, the deceased had the same name as me, 'Martin Riley.' They were sitting in the back of the taxi by this time.

"Yes, rather disconcerting for you, but personally I'm glad to have seen the old boy on his way. The taxi will take you back shortly, Dr. Riley, but I have one more favour to ask." He coughed delicately into a handkerchief and dabbed at his mouth missing the small streak of blood on his chin. He leaned forward, tapped on the glass and called to the driver, "Take us back to the hospital please, the east entrance." The driver set off without turning around.

"I need to go back to the intensive care ward," he slumped back in his seat and coughed weakly, "I'm very tired." He closed his eyes. Riley noticed, for the first time, that he was wearing a hospital pyjama shirt under his coat. His breathing slowed and seemed to stop. Alarmed, Riley reached for his wrist and felt the weak, thready pulse.

The driver half turned towards the older man's side of the taxi. "Nearly there, Dr. Riley," he called.

About the Author:

Roger Ley was born and educated in London and spent some of his formative years in Saudi Arabia. He worked as an engineer in the oilfields of North Africa and the North Sea, before pursuing a career in higher education. He writes in a variety of speculative genres, his stories have appeared in about twenty ezines in the last two years.

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SAY (PART I) | Scarlett R. Algee

Say something.

Say I'm dreaming. Say I'm hallucinating. Say this isn't really happening.

Say it's not really you splayed here on the kitchen floor, limbs curled loose like a broken spider's, your hair powdered white from its pillow of flour spilling from the bag tipped half off the counter. You always make a mess in here, always such a goddamn mess. What were you thinking? Say it. Say what you were thinking.

Say the drop of blood on the linoleum didn't leak from the crook of your elbow. Say the tourniquet's not still on your arm, the needle's not still in the vein. Say your skin isn't ashen and your lips aren't gaping blue beneath the foam. Say your eyes aren't open, aren't fixed, aren't glazed.

Say you'll wake up if I jostle your shoulder or tug my fingers through your hair just so, like always. Say you'll wake up, or I will. Say it's just another of my nightmares and you're fine. We're both fine. Warm. Pink. Breathing.

Say you're breathing. Please say you're breathing. Say the pulse I feel when I press my fingertips to your carotid isn't just my own. Say, as I kiss your cheek and stroke your hair back and snag a few strands on your earring, that it's me who's feverish and not you who's cold.

Say I don't have to do what I know comes next. 911. Ambulance. Sirens. You, carried away. Me, left behind. Say my last sight of you won't be with a shroud over your face.

Say it was a mistake. Say it was an accident. Say you didn't choose this.

Say it wasn't supposed to be like this. Say it's nothing I did. Say it's not my fault. Say that loudest of all.

But say something, damn you.

Say something.

Anything.

SAY (PART II) | Scarlett R. Algee

Truly? You truly do not know how I came to be in this cell?

Say this, then.

Say that I killed him: say that I opened his throat with my singing blade and painted the kitchen walls crimson because he'd dared to look upon another. Say that I held him in my lap as he gurgled out the last of his air beneath wet uncomprehending eyes. Say I was arrested there.

Or say I found him in his garret on a filthy urine-damp mattress, already blue and frigid, the tourniquet on his arm and the needle still in the vein. Say I stroked his hair once, and kissed his forehead, and crept away.

Say I did both those things. That two timelines diverged and they are separately, equally true.

Or neither is.

Say he left me in September, which is true in every past, and I drank a bottle of Maker's Mark over the kitchen sink and trod the glass to shards under my bare soles so he might follow my bloody footprints home. Or say, perhaps, it was my own breath I laid bare on the edge of the knife, my own vein I tied off, my own mattress I fell across. Say that the walls were, nevertheless, painted.

Say the needle was in vain and the kiss of the blade sank none too deep, so that I breathe, so that I keep breathing. Say these things did happen, will happen, are happening, a spiraling maze of all possible outcomes, birth and death and love and blood. There is always blood.

Say you want to tilt my head and kiss my scars. The guards will let you in. There is nothing in this place sharper than a sigh, nothing sharper than the curve of your lip, nothing at all.

Except.

Only say that you wish to sit beside me. Say you've come to drink of what has passed and what will come. Do not be afraid. There will always be blood.

Say you will come in. Say that you will never be afraid. Say you were never afraid. Say that for this future, this past, this now, we will sharpen our teeth on each other.

You look like him, in this light.

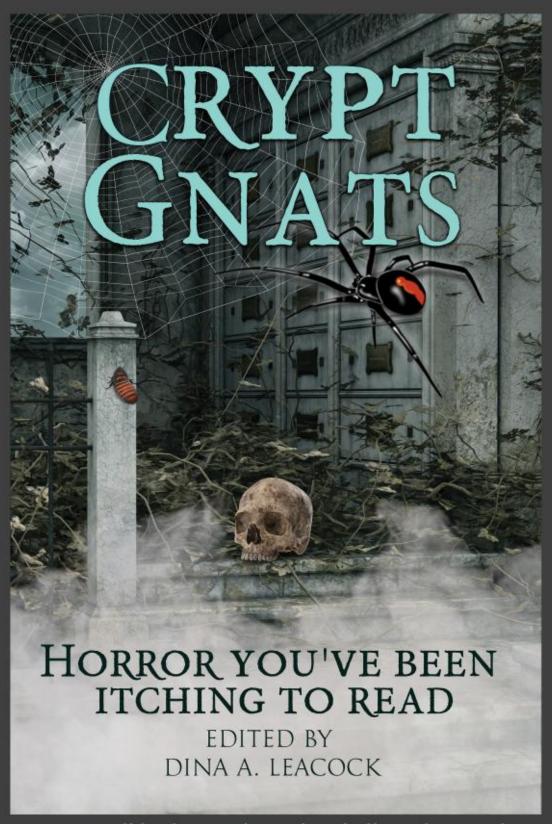
Come. Say you'll let me taste you.

About the Author:

Scarlett R. Algee's fiction has been published by Body Parts Magazine, Bards and Sages Quarterly, Pen of the Damned, and The Wicked Library, among other places. Her flash-fiction piece "Bone Deep" is a 2020 Pushcart Prize nominee, and her short fiction collection *Bleedthrough and Other Small Horrors* releases in late May 2020.

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Victim Mentality | *C.D.T. Ceates*

The mind is an unusual thing. It can make you believe that a horrible person is actually good, that their crimes and outbursts against you are your own fault. It can warp an otherwise decent person into an unimaginable shell of their former self.

Sometimes though, it can defend you in the most horrible of circumstances.

My first victim was my wife. Usually whenever she was angry, I would let her get it all out while holding my tongue. She always told me that life got to her at points, and since I was the person with her all the time, I was the one who was going to get the brunt of it. Years of swallowing my pride and convincing myself that things would get better was what got me into this mess. The last incident of this was different though. This time I actually shouted back at her, my pride and supressed emotions coming out in one fell swoop. When I had finished all I could say, I looked back at her. I thought for a split second, that the look on her face was that of understanding, that she finally understood how she made me feel.

Instead, for the first time in our relationship, she got physical. She swung her knee to my crotch and threw an uppercut to my nose when I doubled over. As I fell to the ground writhing in pain, she straddled me easily and started hammering my face. I used to tell her if she ever put her hands on me, I would leave her and never look back. I guess she wanted to get as much in as she could while she could. I couldn't even tell you if what happened next was me acting on self-defence. It was more instinctual. What I do remember was her crumpled body on the floor in a pool of her own blood, a kitchen knife stuck into her neck and an expression of surprise. forever printed on her face.

That's another strange thing about being the victim in an abusive relationship. Despite all the pain and suffering, there's a part of you that still loves them through it all. I cradled her body and sobbed quietly into her chest. For the longest time, my mind was in a war with itself. One side tried to convince myself that I did the right thing by defending myself, that she would have killed me if I let her have her way with me. The other told me that I was the true villain, that maybe if I had been a better partner, this would have never happened. It was actually harder to settle my own mental torment than it was to get rid of her body and convince our friends that she had disappeared.

My second victim was a man. My mum always told me that the women I fell in love with treated me horribly, that I should just focus on men. Even if she was joking, I took her words seriously. Even though it took me the longest time to move on from my wife, I eventually did. I thought that maybe this time it would be different.

It wasn't.

It was good at first, but that's the way it always is. If you saw red flags the first time you met someone, you would avoid them altogether. Similar arguments started again. This time though, I made sure to bite back. I told him I didn't like the way he was treating me, that I was in an emotionally abusive relationship before and his behaviour was making me upset, making me feel unstable. During our final argument, the last thing I distinctly remember was him rolling his eyes and coming towards me saying:

"You know nothing of abuse."

When I came to, I found him dead on the floor, his neck twisted at an awful angle. This time though, the feeling of regret and remorse was less powerful, and I was all the more convinced that I had only defended myself against a threat.

My final kill was a woman I had been dating. She was lovely and sweet. That was until one night she came home from work, angry and tired. When I asked her what was wrong, she screamed at me about everything that was going wrong in her life. It took me by surprise, and when I begged her to calm down, that her anger was getting to me, she slapped me hard and called me 'a pathetic waste of life'.

I knew just as she made contact with my cheek what was about to happen.

Something was different this time though. Maybe a neighbour heard us fighting. All I know is that in my rage, something happened.

I can hear the sirens in the distance.

But I know I'll be ok.

I know God will show kindness on me.

I'm not a bad man.

I'm a good man who has had bad things happen to him.

About the Author:

C.D.T. Ceates is a bartender and writing student living out in the wild tundras of Scotland. He has written for *Cultured Vultures, Fortitude Magazine* as well as a previous issue of *The Sirens Call*.

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The Thorny Girl | Alex Woolf

Jack's Story

I wasn't allowed to go in the woods. My father forbade it. There was something in there, so he told me, though he wouldn't say what. All he would say was that my uncle Cornelius went in there once, and shortly afterwards he died, and they planted him in our garden. He always said 'planted', not 'buried', and part of me hoped or dreaded that one day my uncle would sprout, like a human potato plant, from his grave. I often wondered why my uncle died as a result of going into the woods, but whenever I asked my father about this, his answer was always the same: "Don't pester me about that, Jack. Just mind you never go in there."

What was a boy to do? I was restless, inquisitive, dissatisfied with life, which seemed to consist of nothing more than a dreary circle of home, school and church – all of them located within the confining compass of our dull little village of Dedfield. Dull and secretly terrified Dedfield. None of the grown-ups, it turned out, had any more spine than my father. In tremulous unison, they warned their offspring never to go into the woods. Not since Cornelius had anyone ventured in there. As to what had happened to my uncle, none would say. A conspiracy of silence reigned in Dedfield.

By age thirteen, I was changing. Bella in my class had grown breasts. She had become interesting – more so even than cars or football players. I wanted to prove myself to her, wanted to show my father that his boy was now a man. I wanted to be a hero in a village of cowards – the first since my uncle to go into the woods.

And so, one day, I went.

The day I went was a very fine Saturday in June. I put on my walking boots, took water, and a knife. I jumped a stream, climbed a fence, and entered the wood. The trees – horse chestnut, birch and oak – were all very gnarled and ancient. The earth was dry and grey, the air warm, the light dim and fitful. As I walked, I grew in confidence and bravado. I decided I would go to the end of the woods, then turn and come back again. And tonight I would take my tent and camp beneath its leafy canopy. For it was, in almost every way, like any other woods.

Almost.

Even in my foolishness, I could see that there was something vaguely odd, a little off. For one thing, there was the smell – the faint stench of rotting vegetation and stagnant water that clung to the back of my throat with every breath. Then there was the grey earth, which was, I decided, the colour of my grandpa's face when I saw him lying in his coffin. And the scattering of leaves upon it were like the crusty flakes of dead skin on our teacher, Mrs. Mayfield, who suffered from psoriasis.

As I walked, the ground seemed to give very slightly beneath my boots, as if it wasn't earth exactly but something a touch more spongy. And looking closer, I noticed the trees growing out of it were almost all deformed, and not just by age. They had burls, growths, fungal infestations, canker damage, bark lesions, leaf discoloration, and violent, painful twists in their trunks and limbs. They were surviving, but they were sick. The soil, clearly, was contaminated.

So this was Dedfield's dark secret. Toxic or radioactive waste had bled into the water table beneath this wood. Uncle Cornelius had eaten the fruit of a poisoned tree, and died. They were all in on it, the grown-ups. They'd been paid off. Their silence had been bought by the government, or some evil factory owner. I would expose the corruption, force the denizens of Dedfield to face up to their collective guilt. I had visions of myself as a crusading reporter, fearlessly facing down the powers that be, while Bella looked on in wide-eyed admiration...

I was thinking these thoughts when I came upon a small crevice in the landscape – a wrinkle in the flat grey earth, at the bottom of which was a stagnant yellow creek. Crouched over it was a girl, who seemed to be drinking from the foul water. Thick black hair tumbled from her head across her shoulders, and forwards almost to the water, so I could not see her face.

Fear and revulsion twisted at me at this sight and I cried out: "Stop! You'll die!" But the girl kept on drinking. I skidded down the bank and stood facing her on the far side of the creek. I shouted another warning, but she didn't look up. I could hear her loudly slurping at the stream. Her face remained buried behind that thick curtain of black hair.

I should have left then. I should have run and kept on running until I was safely back home. But I was young and stupid. I thought I was a hero, destined to slay dragons and save lives. I didn't hesitate, even though I knew in my heart there was something seriously awry. I leapt across the stream, and went closer to her. She smelled of old flowers gone bad. I plunged my hands through her thick hair, grasping hold of her shoulders and pulling her away from the sickly water.

She smelled bad. And her shoulders, or whatever I had hold of, they weren't right – anatomically... Too thin. I jerked my hands away, and she fell, like a deadheaded flower. Hair covered her face – almost. Her eyes were closed, and

there were cuts in her paper-white skin. Not normal cuts. They rose up, like tiny pointed mounds across her cheeks and forehead, her neck and chin. There was no blood, but some of these ruptures had sharp, thorn-like growths emerging from them. Then her eyes fluttered open like... like beetles taking wing. I was sickened, frightened, yet couldn't look away.

Her eyes were soft brown, liquid with fears or dreams I couldn't imagine. Her mud-stained mouth opened in a smile, wider than ought to be possible. Her teeth were long, the colour of bark-stripped trees, dripping with oily sap. I don't know how long I stood there looking at her. Time turned very still. Before my eyes, I saw new thorns, spiny and green, breaking out of her skin. The thorns grew in number and density. They matured, thickened, turned black. In random parts of her body, thin green stems bristling with more thorns punched their way out of her, making new wounds in her flesh. They slid forth, groping blindly for light and air. She was growing.

Her rags, such as they were, became a patchwork of brown, curling leaves. They dried and crisped before my eyes, and blew off her body, whisked away on the warm, muggy wind. She was by now more plant than girl, her face almost lost amid the thicket of prickly foliage sprouting out of her. But still those eyes, soft and brown, stared unblinking into mine. I trembled to imagine what thoughts, what desires lay behind that stare...

When I came out of the woods, no time had passed in Dedfield and no one had noticed that I'd gone – or that I never really came back. Physically, I was the same. Mentally, I was absent – though I became good at hiding this from other people, or they became good at not seeing it. Life continued. I went to school. I went fishing on Saturdays. On Sundays, I went to church. I never spoke to Bella or thought of her again. I grew up. My father grew old. We sold the house, moved out of Dedfield. He settled in a coastal town, and I came here to the city. I left behind my friends and neighbours, my uncle Cornelius. But I never left the woods. In some ways I'm still there by the creek, down where the thorny girl grows. And everything that followed has been a dream.

Gill's Story

After we made love, we lay in bed together, Jack and I, and suddenly he turned to me and said, "I didn't tell you this earlier, but when I was standing there by that creek with the thorny girl, I somehow understood that she wanted me."

"You mean sexually?"

"Yes."

"And? Don't tell me you..."

"Yes. We... I don't know what you'd call it. We mated."

I laughed – I couldn't help it. "That sounds painful." He blushed. "I'm sorry," I said, "but losing your cherry to a plant is... different. Was it good?" Jack didn't reply. But I couldn't let the subject drop. It was too fascinating, too horrible. "How?" I asked.

"She wasn't all plant," he finally said. "I saw she had..."

"Genitalia?" I prompted.

He closed his eyes, clearly upset by the memory.

"I can still feel her," he said. "It's as if when she took me inside her, she never let me go. Wherever I am – at home or work, she's always there, this silent presence who never talks, and I can never break free of. It's scary." He turned to me. "You're the first human I've done it with, and I don't think she's happy about it.... I can feel her anger growing."

I had my arm draped across him as he was saying this, and suddenly I felt something sharp against my skin. I pulled off the duvet, uncovering him. Alarm and something like shame flashed in his eyes. He clamped a hand to his ribs, just beneath his armpit.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Are you hurt?"

He didn't reply, just stared at me.

And then I understood. "She pricked you, didn't she? I just felt her, too."

He didn't respond, just lay there covering the wound.

"Let me see that," I said, trying to pull his hand away.

He resisted, pressing it there even more firmly. "It's better you don't," he said. "Actually, it's better if you go."

These words chilled me. "Jack, you can't let her win – not if you want any sort of life with me or with any normal woman. Now show me where she hurt you."

"My uncle Cornelius didn't die of natural causes," he blurted.

"What? Why are you telling me about that now?"

"My father killed him. And if you have any sense... you'll kill me. What goes into that wood... should never come out."

The look in his eyes – so lost, frightened and desperate – broke my heart. I thought of that young adolescent boy setting out one morning, preparing to slay dragons and find glory, and instead he found the thorny girl and a lifetime of fear and loneliness.

"I'm not going to kill you," I said, blinking away my tears.

Tenderly, I pulled his now limp hand away. There was blood on his palm. He'd been cut there – a tiny circular stab wound. A thorn wound. But not one inflicted by her.

My gaze switched to the place under his arm that he'd been trying to hide from me. I stifled a cry when I saw the thorn protuding there, between two of his ribs. It had broken out of his body, rising half an inch proud of his skin. It was pinkish brown, with a curve, like the thorn of a rose, agonizingly sharp at its tip. Shaking, I reached out and touched its apex with my forefinger, letting it prick me. Then I pinched it hard between finger and thumb.

"Beastly thing," I muttered through gritted teeth. "Let's get it out of you."

It bent under the pressure I applied, and Jack flinched. Then I felt it snap off satisfyingly. He gasped.

"Let's forget about that now," I said to him, tossing it away. "Come on, get dressed. We need to get you checked out."

I grabbed his arm in order to pull him up, then screamed. Something had scratched me when I touched him there. Nausea flooded my stomach. Two more thorns had thrust themselves out of the underside of his arm. "What's happening to you, Jack?"

"Kill me," he whispered.

I carefully broke off those thorns, one at a time, and then I snapped off a new one that had popped out of his neck.

"Jack," I said, my voice tender but shaking, "we're going to take you to hospital, honey. We're gonna, we're gonna sort you out. Come on love."

"I can feel her," he breathed. "I can feel her growing inside me, our roots entwining, prickles just beneath my skin..."

"Come on honey," I sobbed, as a rash of baby thorns burst out of his chest. "Let's just, let's just lift you up..." I placed my hands under his arms and tried to raise him to his feet, and I didn't care how much he cut me or how much I bled.

I found a shovel in the shed, and dug a hole in his lawn. The moon was so bright, I didn't even need a torch. I dug it deep. It took me over an hour, and when it was ready, I went back to the house, and dragged him out. I was already so cut by his thorns I didn't care anymore. So many of them covered him by now it was hard to see the man I loved. Thick green stems had sprouted from him like extra limbs, and more thorns encrusted them that snagged on my clothes and tore my hands. But the biggest thorn of all was between his shoulder blades, pointing inwards. It was the kitchen knife, and I'd stuck it there because he kept begging me to. I thought it would stop the thorns coming, but it didn't. They kept on breaking out of him, even after he died.

He was something else now. I accepted that. The Jack I knew and loved was gone. Even so, as I dragged him up to the lip of the grave, I found I couldn't just dump him in there. His face was so tranquil and innocent, despite the horrid disfigurement of those thorns. I'd held myself together, more or less, through the digging of the grave, but seeing him like that I began to cry. "I'm so sorry, Jack," I murmured, and I pushed him into the hole.

"Tomorrow," I said to myself as I began shovelling earth into the grave, "I'll cut down the trees and I'll pull up the shrubs and I'll patio over the whole garden." No one would ever know about Jack or the thorny girl who got him in the end. "That story is over," I told myself, and I tried really hard to ignore the thin green thorn growing out of the back of my hand.

About the Author:

Alex Woolf is a professional author of fiction and non-fiction. He recently won an award for his story 'Mystery at Moon Base One' and was shortlisted for the RED Book Award for his horror novel 'Soul Shadows'. In his spare time he enjoys writing adult short stories and novelettes. Alex has a fear of plants and his favorite garden activity is weed-killing.

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Shinjitsu | *Patrick Winters*

He sat on the shore, his back to the tree-line, staring out to where the *Lorelei* had gone down—and where his poor Amelia had been lost to him.

He still couldn't figure out what had gone wrong. Their globe-trotting honeymoon had been going spectacularly, and the flight had been smooth since Vladivostok; but as they entered Japanese waters, still miles off from Hokkaido, the alarms started blaring, the plane began to shake, and they began heading for the water.

Amelia screamed as he fought for control of the stick. Then there was a *whoosh* of force and water, and she screamed no more.

She hit her head against the panel as they crashed; he saw blood in the water as he fought to free himself from his belt. It seemed to take many minutes, and by then, his lungs were begging for air, and Amelia

He'd ascended to the surface and swam to this island, only a short distance away.

That had been hours ago, and his voice had gone hoarse in half that time, wailing for Amelia and shouting for help.

When morning came, he left the beach. He could sit in the sand for hours and not see a plane or ship that could possibly notice him.

He would need food and water. And if he could manage it, a way to signal for help—maybe a fire on the beach.

But there was no sustenance in sight, and he couldn't force a fire from the sticks he found. He would surely need another plan.

The sound woke him in the night. It sounded like a scream, whispery with distance, but still quite human.

It rose and fell, stretching on for eerie seconds before yielding to silence and the wild thump of his heart.

He eventually shouted out, hoping that whoever might be out there could help him. But minutes passed and no one came. Still, the scream carried on, until it finally cut off, and he went back to sleep.

He went further into the forest the next day, looking for fruit or signs of life. But there was nothing save endless trees, the air dim with their thickness, forming a confined maze of nature.

A maze that he was soon lost in; he could not recall in which direction the beach lay.

He ran about, yelling his frustration and fears, until he fell down in woeful defeat, crying into the dirt and leaves.

Two nights passed, and on each, that peculiar sound stirred him again.

He maintained the hope that it was a person, perhaps another lone survivor, and he called out for them to follow his voice. But he never saw a soul, and the sound just kept repeating.

The more he listened to it, the more he shook, and, after a time, he would press his hands to his ears and curl up by a tree, falling unsteadily to sleep.

When he found the wreckage of a plane amidst the flora, he hoped it might bring some salvation—a radio, or food and drink. But he had no such luck.

The thing was stripped bare. From the wear and look of it, it was from the 1940s; maybe a B7A. But the backpack he found lying near it wasn't nearly as old. A High Sierra—only a few years old, at most.

When he searched through it, he found nothing of importance; a t-shirt, maps of China, some travelling vouchers. The only item of particular interest was a note he found in the last pocket he checked. It was scrawled in an uncertain hand. It read:

"It knows me. It knows what I did. It hates me for it."

He read it over and over again, but it was just some mad rambling from a mad mind—a sobering reminder of what might happen to his own.

He dropped the note on the ground and kept on through the forest. He was growing tired, but it didn't seem right to camp there by the plane.

The idea was reinforced when he came upon some sign just a few yards off. It looked like it was a panel from the plane, nailed into a tree and long-since rusted. But the symbols on it were clear:



He had no clue what they could mean, but as he looked them over, his head swam and his shoulders sagged with weariness.

He dashed away, keeping up the pace until he fell to the forest floor, unconscious.

When he roused, night had fallen, and unlike previous evenings, it was a silent one.

He brushed the dirt from his clothes and continued his wandering, the moon overhead allowing enough light to see by.

His walk led him up hills and across a half-mile of land, and just when he felt he should rest again, he heard the soft trickling of water.

He followed the sound with haste and came upon a small waterfall, a crystalline pool lying before him, tantalizing his tongue with promises of cool relief. He knelt beside the waters and dipped his hand in, bringing it up and giving it a test; it seemed fine, and he began to drink greedily.

But as he lapped up the waters, a familiar whisper reached his ears, and it was growing louder: the scream from his last nights. It was rising up, right here about the pool of water—no, *up* from the pool. And as it became clearer, so, too, did its nature.

His mind, like a trunk, unlatched itself, flinging open with the memory of the crash. Of rising to the surface; swimming to shore; hearing a scream for his help.

Of turning around and seeing Amelia, still alive, but treading water.

Of leaving her there, while he continued on to safety.

The scream he was hearing now was the same scream she'd given as she went under, and it now rose to a fever pitch, splitting his ears in pain as a pale, bloated version of Amelia shot up from the pool, wrapping her arms about his neck and grabbing hold of him with an icy, iron grip.

He screamed along with her, hollering into the soggy skin of her dead shoulder; and then she pulled him in, down to the same fate he had left her to.

Eventually, the water settled, and the forest was quiet again.

About the Author:

Patrick Winters is a graduate of Illinois College in Jacksonville, IL, where he earned a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing. He has been published in the likes of *Sanitarium Magazine*, *Deadman's Tome*, *Trysts of Fate*, and other such titles. A full list of his previous publications may be found at his author's site, if you are so inclined to know.

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The Grove Mother | Karen Thrower

The surrounding trees were nothing but dead, bare branches. They clicked and rubbed against each other as Benny followed Moira into the forest. She said there was something she wanted to show him and trying to be friendly to the new girl in the neighborhood, he followed. They walked for almost an hour in silence. The crunching of leaves beneath their feet was the only sound. He was starting to get creeped out from the girl's sudden mute tendencies. When they met, she told him just about everything he wanted to know. What grade she was in, where she was from, the usual getting to know you things. But now, she was so...unnaturally quiet. Maybe she's shy? he thought.

"We're kind of far from the path," He finally said, shoving his hands in his pockets. "Do you know where we're going?" Though he had grown up in the area, the woods were a place he tended to avoid. Too many stories of kids going missing and animal mutilations. Not that he believed them, but why tempt fate? Moira nodded her head without turning. "What's the matter cat got your tongue?" He teased, trying to keep the nerves from his voice. Moira turned to him and shook her head. Benny was the kind of guy who would notice when a girl got a haircut or a new lipstick. So, when he noticed that her once light blue eyes were now black he became nervous. "Are...you all right?" Moira took two steps back to him and shoved her right hand into his left pocket before he could stop her. She laced her fingers with his and drew his hand out, the little tin bracelets on her wrist jingling as she moved.

"It's not much further." Her soft voice calmed him, and he let her take him further into the forest. "You'll like it Benny, I promise. Everyone does."

He smiled. "Okay." It never occurred to him to ask, what it was that everyone liked, but for some reason he didn't care. Moira said he'd like it, and he trusted her. Soon they ducked under some low hanging branches, careful not to scratch their heads. When they stood straight, Benny saw they were in a glade, and a large mud puddle was a few feet in front of them. It was huge and blocked the way forward.

"Seems I forgot my jacket," he joked, "can we go around?"

Moira looked up at him with a smile. "We're here." She let go of his hand and pulled a black bird feather out of her little black purse.

"What's that for?" Benny reached out to touch it, but she snapped it away from him.

"To summon her." She walked closer to the puddle and let the feather go. Benny watched the feather slowly fall and come to rest on top of the mud.

"Summon?" He looked up and noticed Moira was smiling at him. "What do you mean?"

"Watch." She said and pointed at the feather. He looked back at the mud hole and watched long, skinny fingers reach up from under the mud and pulled the feather down in one quick motion.

He gasped and jumped back. "What was that?"

"The Grove Mother." This time Moira's voice did not comfort him. Hearing the name made his heart speed and his palms sweat.

"Grove Mother?" He asked, his eyes wide with fear.

"She is a Harpy," Moira said as she walked around the mud hole, "and this grove is her home. But she cannot leave and needs help to get sustenance."

"Sustenance?" He looked back down at the mud and gasped when he saw the top of a head poking up. He hadn't even heard anything move. Its mud-covered hair was plastered to its head, but its eyes were clear. He could see they were black like Moira's. "Oh hell no." He turned to run but the dead tree branches had formed a barrier behind him. He tried to pry the branches apart, but as he moved one, another would snake into its place. "Damn it!" He cursed and watched the branches weave tighter together, making sure he wasn't going anywhere.

Thick bubbling made his ear twitch and he turned to see the creature lifting itself out of the mud. Two long arms, dripping with brown ooze pulled a weird shaped body out of the mud. It was skinny and angular. Benny could feel his heart racing as the creature slowly rose out of the mire.

"I brought you someone Grove Mother." Moira said.

"Thank you dear." The mud-covered creature said as it stood straight. Its voice sounded as if its throat was full of water, but it was still soft to his ears. Benny couldn't stop his eyes from roaming over this six-and-a-half-foot tall thing. It's arms and legs were supernaturally long compared to its short torso. He could see saggy breasts hiding under long, stringy, mud covered hair. It walked over to him, mud squishing between its toes with every step. "He's a handsome one." It said.

"Moira what the hell is going on?" Benny backed up as far as he could. He felt the sticks poking into his back, almost like they were shoving him forward. "Let me out of here!"

"Sorry my lad, you're mine now." It licked its rotted teeth and smacked its thin lips at him.

He shook his head. "Screw you crazy bitch, move the trees!" Like that makes much more sense, he thought.

The creature laughed. "Isn't he adorable." It dashed forward, pressing him against the branches and laid its hand on his chest. Benny felt heat radiate through his body. "You did good Moira." It said and blew a kiss at the young girl. Benny watched Moira shudder and one of her many bracelets fell to the ground.

She rubbed her wrist and sighed. "Thank you, Grove Mother."

"Moira, Moira, you gotta help me come on!" She smiled and turned from him, the tree branches moving out of her way and she disappeared among them. "Moira! Don't leave me here!"

"Moira values her freedom more than your life boy." It touched his cheek with the tip of its muddy finger. "She won't come back." Another finger ran up his throat and traced his face, the smell of shit and rot wafted into his nose and he fought hard not to be sick. "Unless you want to help? Females tend to be more adept at this. They always bring more but I'm not against letting a boy try."

"More?" The creature leaned close to his face and he could see black worms squirming in whites of the thing's eyes.

"More meat." The creature grabbed his head and Benny screamed as his face started to burn. Something started cutting at his face right before he felt wiggling under his skin. He slammed his arms down, breaking the hold the creature had on him and ran to the other side of the mud puddle.

"Keep away from me you bitch!" The creature cackled, its fingers wiggled at him like a morbid flirty wave. Benny heard creaking behind him and turned. The dead branches were moving on their own and reaching for him. "Stop it!" He yelled and moved away from the spindly branches but no matter where he moved, they lunged for him.

The creature laughed, throwing it's muddy head back. "I'm in you boy, you can't run now." It said as it touched its face. He the thing under his skin started wiggling. It moved from cheek to cheek and under his chin. Benny fell to his knees and slapped his face several times, but the squirming never stopped.

"What the hell did you do to me!" He grabbed a stick off the ground and jammed it against his cheek. "Get it out!" He scrapped at his skin, desperate to get whatever was squirming out of his body. Blood trickled down his face, covering his hands and the stick. "Get it out!" He screamed and jammed the stick so far into his cheek he felt it break the skin on the inside of his mouth. "Damn it!" He dropped the stick and tried to catch his breath. He was breathing so fast he wondered if he was going to have a heart attack.

The creature walked over and kneeled in front of him, its drooping breasts swinging in front of his eyes. "You want me to get it out?" He flinched as it gently held his bleeding cheek. The stinging radiated through his head and he jerked his face away from it.

"Yes!" He wasn't sure if it was blood or tears streaming down his face now. He had never been so scared in his life.

It nodded. "Well...all right then." She cupped his face with her dirty hands and he could feel the squirming things being pulled out of his skin. It itched and tickled all at once which made him choke. When it stopped, he sighed and fell against the ground, the dead leaves scratching at his face.

"Thank you, thank you."

"Oh, you're welcome." It chuckled. Benny laid on the ground, trying to catch his breath when pain wracked his body. His arms, legs, and back felt like someone was pushing a lawn mower over him.

"What the hell!" He screamed and managed to turn his head and saw a bunch of the nearest dead branches had impaled his legs. They were sunk deep into his calves his lower back and his biceps. Circles of blood spread quickly along his shirt and pants. "No, no! You were gonna let me go!" He tried wiggling away, but the branches buried themselves deeper and he lost control of his body. Benny screamed as the dead, dry trees picked up his body and made him stand straight.

The creature laughed. "I never said that, silly boy." The pain made his body feel like it was on fire as the branches pushed their way through his body and out from under his fingernails. His shoes popped off his feet as more branches pushed out from under his toenails.

His eyes moved to the creature who was standing next to the mud pool, smiling so big he could see her tongue wiggling in her mouth.

"Please...let me go." He managed to whisper before the branches moved up his throat and erupted out of his mouth. He wasn't sure why he could still breathe out of his nose. Maybe it wanted him alive as long as possible.

"Don't worry son, it'll be over soon." The creature waved its abnormally long fingers and the branches moved Benny over to the mud. He felt his skin stretching where the branches held him up, but it refused to completely rip. "I can't wait to taste you young man." He felt himself being lowered down and Benny wished the branches had pierced his eyes, so he didn't have to see how close he was to drowning. The mud was warm but when it touched where the branches had pierced his skin, it started to sting.

"Take comfort in knowing you are giving me life, young man." It walked over laid a muddy kiss on his forehead. "Only a few more and Moira is free. I will miss the girl though. We've been together for almost fifty years." Benny's eyes widened at the revelation. "Every good Harpy needs help from someone, especially ones like me who cannot leave their grove."

The warm mud was up to Benny's chest now. "Children aren't as entranced by kittens and puppies like they once were." It sighed, almost wistfully. "It was so easy back then, send something cute out of the forest and almost every time a child would follow it. Now, it needs a more...human touch." The creature dipped its feet in the mud and shuddered. "Oh, you are delightful." It moaned. Benny felt his eyes water as the creature slid into the mud hole and swam over to him. The pungent mud went up to his neck and the pressure was crushing him.

"Perhaps I shall ask Moira for more like you. A nice young man." The creature slid under the mud and he saw bubbles rise from underneath, getting closer to him. Without warning teeth bit into his right foot. He could feel his skin ripping and bones breaking. She was eating him like he was a piece of chicken. The branch in his throat muffled his cries as he felt the creature eat him, one bite at a time.

About the Author:

Karen Thrower is an Oklahoma wife and mother and has recently started her convention career with SoonerCon in 2019. She had been writing for several years, horror being one of her favorites. This is her third appearance in The Sirens Call ezine, her first was issue #36 *UNDEAD* in December 2017 and again in February 2018 for their Women in Horror issue #37.

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Human Eaters | Miracle Austin

Slithering fiend crawled down Nathelee's parched throat, leaving a trail of bloody, yellow scales, and sucked out all her oxygen, until her lungs collapsed and crumbled into a pile of gray ashes.

Upon tumbling out of her vacant mouth, it stretched out its moth-eaten wings. The mighty winds escorted it to a group of second graders flying in swings and surfboarding down slides.

It opened its mouth and fired out over a thousand poisonous mini dart-shaped, scarlet seeds, which flew in and nested inside the little ones'eyes, noses, mouths, and ears.

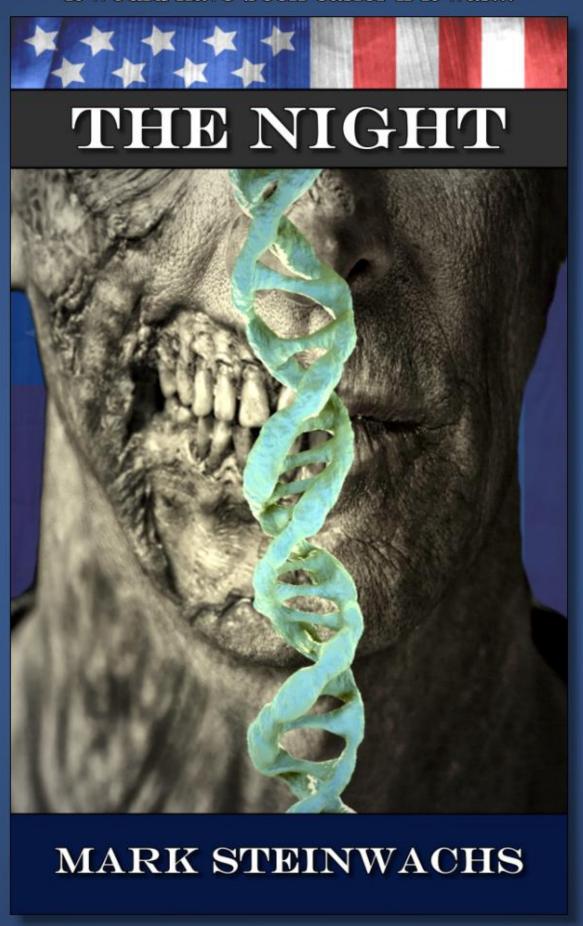
Within one hour, their legs locked, and they all fell down.

About the Author:

Miracle Austin works in the social work arena by day and in the writer's world at night. She's a YA/NA cross-genre, hybrid author. She's a Marvel/DC/Horror/Stanger Things *FanGirl* and loves attending cons and teen book events. Miracle lives in Texas with her family, and she looks forward to hearing from her awesome readers, who already know her, and new ones, too.

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It wasn't the zombie apocalyse, in some ways, it would have been easier if it was...



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

She Was Lovely | Lori Safranek

The guy on the next barstool nudged Greg and pointed at the tiny television over the bar. The news was talking about a skeleton found a few months ago in the city's north side. No clues to its identity had been found.

"Never have understood those artist reconstructions," the old man slurred the last word as he finished the sentence with a slug from his cocktail. "They're a waste of time. You know they don't look like the poor bitch whose skull it is."

He chuckled and shook his head. Greg glanced at him and sighed. He hated bar chit-chat.

"Is that right?" he muttered, trying to be polite but not encouraging.

"Oh, yeah," the old man waved the hand with his glass in it wildly. "You wait, when they identify the woman, she won't look nothing like that drawing. Count on it."

He upended the rest of the drink into his mouth and swallowed it, slamming the glass on the bar and motioning to the bartender for a refill.

He leaned closer to Greg.

"I pay attention, mister," he said, lowering his voice. Whiskey and cigarette smoke fouled the air between them as he spoke. "I follow the news. They find a skeleton, they get the artist to draw something like that . . ." he waved his arm at the TV again. ". . . And if—and that's a big fucking IF—they identify the body, it never looks like the sketch. The sketch usually looks like something out of high school art class."

He laughed loudly and looked with surprise at the fresh drink in front of him. The short, squat glass was filled with clear ice cubes and an amber liquid that caught the neon lights of the dive bar. He smiled and took a sip, smacking his lips. He gray suit drooped from his thin shoulders and the white shirt under it had seen better days. His tie, if he'd worn one, was gone, and his hair was tumbled and oily.

He knew he should ignore the drunk but he couldn't resist.

"So you follow the crime news, eh?"

The man turned toward him and nodded. "Indeed I do. It's fascinating, if you ask me."

Greg shrugged.

"I don't know, man, it's kind of depressing," he said.

The other man laughed. "Depressing? Hey, if it's not you they find in a shallow grave out in the boondocks, why be depressed? Huh?"

Greg looked at him. The man was smiling and he nudged Greg. "Huh? Better her than me, right?"

Greg smiled politely. "I guess so."

He turned back to his beer. He'd come in here to kill time until he would meet his wife for dinner. He should have known, after the day he'd had, he would end up next to a friendly drunk, Greg's least favorite bar customer. He should finish up his beer and move on.

The drunk slurped some more alcohol. Greg could tell he wasn't done talking.

"The cops go about it all wrong, man," the drunk said. He nodded exaggeratedly, pointing again at the television, which was now showing a game show and had nothing to do with cops or murder.

"Is that right?" Greg said.

"Yeah, they put up that stupid sketch, everyone's trying to remember who that woman is, the woman in the sketch," the drunk said. "But see, they can't remember, because that's not her! Shit, she's nothing like that! And it's hilarious! Fucking cops think they're so smart."

Greg frowned.

"That's kind of harsh, man," he said. "That's someone's family."

The drunk looked in his eyes and blinked a couple times.

"Someone's family? Oh, the woman? Yeah, that's too bad, I know," he said. "But then again, she's been dead a while. Now it's just bones."

Greg shook his head and decided to order another beer. He still had a half-hour to kill.

Greg couldn't stop himself from asking. "Any ideas on who killed her?"

The drunk grinned wide. "Who did it? You're asking me that?"

"Well, you said you follow the news."

"Oh, kid, you don't want to know who I think it is," his smile curved into snarl. "You don't want to know.

Greg decided to let that go, but he couldn't stop talking to this drunk.

"So, what do you think she really looked like, since you've been following the case?"

The drunk smiled. "Oh, I know exactly what she looked like," he picked up his cocktail and studied the ice for a minute. His face softened. "She was lovely. When she was alive, before she died. So lovely."

Greg let the words sink in.

"You mean, you think she was lovely."

The drunk snorted a laugh and set his glass down. He reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a photograph.

He slid the photo face down toward Greg. He leaned closer to his new confidante.

"Wait until I leave, my friend, and then you'll know what she looked like too," he said.

He dropped a twenty on the bar, clapped Greg on the shoulder like a long-time friend and staggered out the door.

Greg stared at the photo without touching it, reading the words "Kill number three" written in blue ink on the back. His hand shook as he reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet to retrieve a ten-dollar bill. He dropped it next to the drunk's twenty. Then he rose from his barstool, backed away from the bar and left.

The bartender scooped up the bills and swept the photograph into the trashcan under the counter.

**

Later that night, Wade staggered into a trendy new place down the street from where he'd chatted with the nice young man. He took a stool at the bar.

"Hi, what'll it be?" the bartender called.

"Whisky sour."

A guy in a fedora sat down next to Wade. He ordered an IPA.

The old man let him settle in, until a news blurb came on. He turned to the kid and pointed at the television. "I never understood those artist reconstruction photos." He took a sip and smiled. "They always get it wrong."

He stuck his hand in his jacket pocket and felt the stack of photos. He'd slap it down on the bar right before he walked out again. Retirement had been boring as hell until he took up his little hobby. Now he always had something to talk about, as long as the cops kept finding the skeletons of the bodies he'd buried.

"Oh yeah?" the kid said. "I don't really pay attention to stuff like that."

"Oh, man, you are missing out!" He stuck his hand out. "I love that stuff. What's your name?"

"I'm Spencer," the boy shook his hand.

The drunk took another sip of his drink. "Ok, Spencer, let me tell you about this skeleton they found."

The kid smiled at him, so he started the story. When he got to the part about how he knew what the victim had looked like before she died, the kid was stone-faced.

"You can't know that," Spencer said. "No one knows."

Wade chortled. "Someone knows." He slapped down the photo on the bar. "Don't turn it over until I leave." He dropped a five next to his empty glass and left.

He stood in the shadows outside and waited until the boy left. Spencer walked quickly out the door, looking over his shoulder a couple times, pulled his fedora down low, before he hustled down the street. The drunk smirked. *Don't worry, Spencer, you're not my type*.

About the Author:

Lori Safranek began her writing career as a small-town newspaper reporter. Lori's fiction works have been published in anthologies, including Slaughter House: The Serial Killer Edition-Volume I from Sirens Call Publications; Simple Things, from Lycan Publications; Dead Harvest from Scarlet Galleon Publications and, most recently, A Tree Lighting in Deathlehem from Grinning Skull Press.Lori lives in Omaha, Nebraska with her husband Chuck and their two dogs.

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Fear the Deer | Joshua E. Borgmann

Paxton adjusted the volume as the latest emo-metal song filled the car. He would have preferred something a little harder, but his ladies had picked the channel tonight. In the end, he didn't mind much because he had to give some attention to the road. He was driving through a particularly desolate patch of woods between Omaha and Nebraska City. Most people thought Nebraska was little more than cornfields, but this close to the Missouri River there was plenty of trees, and Kelinda had convinced him to take backroads instead of sticking to I-29. She said that she needed extra time to process how she was going to deal with her parents at tomorrow's breakfast. He'd favored driving down in the morning, but Kassie had told him that he should just go along with what Kelinda wanted. They'd both had their own mini-dramas when they'd come out to their families as polyamorous, so he'd agreed to waste an extra twenty-five minutes in the middle of the night.

"This doesn't look much like Nebraska to me," Kassie said as she watched the trees fly by her window.

"Yeah, most of the corn is a little west of here. It was pretty nice around here when I was growing up, but the river has flooded almost every year recently," Kelinda said from the back. She leaned up and draped an arm over Kassie's shoulder.

Paxton looked over at them for a second and there was a loud crash and a sudden jerking of the car to the left. He hit the brakes, and everyone was thrown slightly forward. A few packages fell over in the back. He steadied his grip on the wheel and tried to stay on the road. Thankfully, he managed to pull over to the shoulder and stop.

Paxton looked over at the women. They looked a bit shocked, and Kelinda was holding her head, but she said she had just bumped it on Kassie's headrest.

"What was that?" Kassie asked reaching down to check on her purse.

"I think we hit a deer," Kelinda said still holding her head.

"I'd say so," Paxton replied as he unbuckled his seat belt. "We better get out and survey the damage."

"Do you have to," Kassie moaned. "Can't we just call 911 and wait here?"

"We could," Paxton said, "but if the car is drivable, I'm not sticking around to deal with cops over a stupid deer."

"Won't the insurance want an accident report?" Kassie asked.

"I doubt it," he said opening his door. "You can stay in the car if you want, but I'm at least going to see what the car looks like before I do anything else."

The car was certainly banged up. The front driver's side panel was badly dented and partially torn lose, and it looked like the area around the headlight was cracked in a couple of places. Thankfully, the headlight was still working. It was drivable, but repairs were going to be expensive. Insurance might cover it, or they might say it was totaled. Either way, he didn't relish dealing with it.

"Damn deer," he yelled.

And then he heard a noise coming from behind him. He turned and saw the animal in the middle of the road. It dragged itself along, and its two front legs clearly broken. It thrashed its great head around showing off its set of massive antlers, and revealing that its jaw was loose, probably so badly broken that only flesh was holding it together.

"What is it?" Kassie asked as she walked up behind Paxton.

"You might not want to see this."

"Honey, I'm not afraid of some busted up deer," she said looking over his shoulder.

"It's beyond busted up," he cringed.

"What are we going to do?" she asked. "Kelinda's waiting in the car, and I think she might have a concussion. Are we calling 911 or leaving?"

"I guess we have to call," he said as he listened to a stirring in the woods. "We can't leave an animal in that shape."

"I'll call," she said and pulled out her cellphone. "You check on Kelinda."

Paxton started back toward the car while keeping an eye on the woods. He thought he saw something moving just inside the tree line, probably another deer. The poor bastard was probably trying to see what happened to the big buck. However, he didn't feel all that bad about dooming the buck. It had destroyed his car, and he was hard pressed to think of a friend in lowa or Nebraska that hadn't hit one of the things. They were a menace on the roads, only surpassed by drunks and teenagers with cellphones.

When he got to the car, he stuck his head in the driver's side door and noticed that Kelinda was resting across the backseat. She still had her hand on her head, but he didn't see any blood.

"How's it going?"

"I feel like the Titanic when it struck that iceberg," she answered with a giggle.

He smiled. "Kassie says that she thinks you might have a concussion."

"Yeah, I tried to get out of the car, but I felt kind of dizzy, so Nurse Kassie told me to rest."

"Well, she's probably got the right idea," he said sitting down in the driver's seat. "She's calling for help now."

"That bad?"

She tried reaching for his shoulder.

"You don't need to do that, baby," he said as he saw her struggling to sit up. "Rest."

"Okay," she said and relaxed a bit. "But is it bad?"

Paxton groaned, "The car and the deer are screwed."

"That sucks," she said. "Can we even drive it?"

Paxton laughed, "I think we can, but if we show up with it looking like this, your parents will think you've gone ever farther over the deep end."

"Being poly is more than enough dear. They think I should be married to some nice farm boy and plopping out a kid every year. My mom said that she needed a grandchild within the next year," Kelinda said, laughing uneasily.

Paxton shook his head and asked, "What did you say to that?"

Kelinda giggled. "I said I could still have a baby now, but she'd just have to learn to accept that her grandchild had two mommies."

Paxton laughed because he knew that Kelinda's mom couldn't sell that to her friends at the Lutheran Church, but it left him a bit cold. He wasn't sure that he wanted a kid. He was nearly forty, so he'd be in his late fifties before a kid got out of the house, and that seemed like a lot to deal with. Plus, he knew that even if he pledged his love to Kelinda and stuck with her all that time, he couldn't marry both her and Kassie. He wasn't sure that was fair to the kid.

He was about to say something to lighten his mood when he heard Kassie screaming from behind the car. He turned around and saw a large buck attacking her with its antlers.

"Fucking Hell," he screamed seeing the beast ram into his wife's guts.

"What?" Kelinda asked with a look of confusion on her face.

"A damn deer is attacking Kassie," he yelled as he jumped out of the car. He took a quick look back and Kelinda and said, "Stay right there."

Kassie had just got off the phone with emergency services when she heard something that sounded like breathing coming from behind her. She looked over her shoulder and saw another deer standing on the edge of the road. This one was just as big as the one that they had hit and sported what looked like an even more impressive set of antlers.

She turned to face it and yelled, "Scram," thinking that the disturbance would send it running back into the thick woods. It didn't. The beast stood on the edge of the road drumming its hooves into the gravel shoulder. If it were a person, she would have thought that it looked pissed. She thought the best idea would be to walk back to the car, but before she could do so, it charged. She screamed and tried to turn away, but it lowered its antlers and embedded them in her abdomen. She felt her skin giving way as they entered her, and she heard her flesh tearing as the beast jerked its head up with the antlers still embedded in her. As the animal backed up for a second attack, she tried to run, but her stomach hurt so bad, and there was something wet all over her white t-shirt.

As a nurse, she knew she was in serious trouble. She had several large gashes in her stomach, and she was pretty sure that part of her shirt was holding her intestines in at this point. This was very bad, but she feared that the beast could also have damaged her spleen and liver. At least, she was still breathing and didn't appear to be bleeding out, so she knew that didn't get her lungs, heart, or aorta. She kept trying to move and managed a slow walk as the beast continued to stand by the road. She knew it was preparing for a second attack, and if it was successful, she would most likely be dead soon.

She looked toward the car and saw Paxton running toward her. However, she also saw something else. Something that scared her even more. Six does were walking out of the woods toward the car. Seeing them, she really started to think that she was going to die out here.

Paxton watched Kassie limping toward him holding her stomach. Her shirt and arms were covered in blood, but she was alive. However, the big buck was watching her, and he knew that it was headed in for another strike.

He wanted to take Kassie into his arms and try running, but instead he jumped between her and the buck. It looked at him with a look that he would remember for as long as he lived, which he had to admit wasn't looking like a long time at this point. It was a look of pure animal rage. He felt for anything in his pockets that might help. His fingers found something.

The beast charged him. Just as it was about to hit him in the shoulder, he swung out his arm and stabbed it in the eye with his favorite ballpoint pen. It made a horrible noise and trashed its head to the side. Paxton barely avoided several kicks as he sidestepped it and started running toward the forest. He hoped that the thing was pissed off enough that it would follow him rather than Kassie.

He jumped off the side of the road and cleared the ditch in a matter of seconds. He looked behind him and saw Kassie collapse to the ground. He frowned. He needed her to live, and that would only happen if he got the buck away from her. Thankfully, he noticed that it was, in fact, giving chase. Unfortunately, he also knew that it was a lot faster than him. Luckily, he'd spent plenty of time in the gym and could still set a decent pace, so he made it to the trees. Once inside the forest, he tried to zig and zag a bit hoping that the deer would get confused; however, it didn't work. It slammed against his side and buried a single antler into his shoulder. Paxton screamed in pain as the beast shoved him against a giant oak tree. It pulled its antler out of his shoulder and stepped back to deliver a killing blow. Thankfully, Paxton still had the bloodied ink pen in his hand, and he drove it into the beast's other eye with as much force as he could manage. It stumbled back, and he ran back toward the highway. He hoped that he'd driven the pen deep enough to reach the deer's brain, but even if he hadn't, he knew he'd blinded it.

When he reached the road, he saw that a group of six deer, all of them without antlers had surrounded the car. He was scared for Kelinda, but the car should keep her safe for now. Kassie, on the other hand, was flat on her stomach in the middle of the road. He had to get to her and see if he could do anything.

Kelinda didn't see the deer approaching the car. She'd been resting and trying to clear her head. She didn't know what she was going to tell her mother, but she hoped that being in a 'tragic accident' would help to lighten the old hag's mood. She'd put up with her old fashioned ways long enough, and tomorrow she was giving her a choice: accept her or get out of her life. It was a big thing, but it needed to be done.

Suddenly, her calm was broken by something hitting the car. She sat up a bit and saw a couple of deer outside the windows. They must have come from the woods. She wasn't too worried as she was in the car, but she didn't think deer acted like this. She'd always known them to be flighty animals. However, these kept kicking the car and ramming it with their heads. The back door took so many kicks that the inside started to show a dent. She moved toward the middle of the seat and curled into a ball as the car shook. She didn't know where Paxton or Cassie were, and these things seemed pretty determined. A hoof hit one of the front windows, and it shattered. Soon, the other three followed, and she curled even tighter into a fetal ball. The deer started to stick their heads into the windows. She saw them showing her their dull teeth and screamed. If she was going to be eaten, she wanted it be by something with sharp flesh tearing teeth, something that would take her quick. If these things got to her, death would be the desired end to a long period of suffering.

She closed her eyes and waited. She expected teeth, but it never came to that. After a few minutes, she heard gun shots and felt blood splatter across her face. She opened her eyes to the bright flashing of police lights. A cop was standing on either side of the car finishing off the deer.

After the last deer was clearly dead, she relaxed a bit. She caught the eye of a police woman and asked, "Are my friends okay?"

The woman looked at her and said, "The woman's pretty tore up, but they're alive. Are you okay?" "Yes," Kelinda sighed and smiled. "I fucking hate deer."

About the Author:

Joshua E. Borgmann toils away his days as an English instructor at a small community college and dreams of being able to escape into a world of fantasy and terror where there are no student papers to grade. He resides in a nameless rural lowa town surrounded by terrible cornfields.



My Misfortunate Death | Michael D. Davis

They called my number. I don't know how I got into this office or how long I've been waiting here. It seems like an eternity. But they just called my number, so I can't complain. Complaining only makes things worse...like the mail. My name is Carl Gunderson, but I'm always receiving mail and having my mail received by the man a few doors down Gunther Carlblom. When I complained the whole thing just got worse. So, no complaints, I got up when my number was called.

In a little crappy office, sat a little gray man, he typed on an old computer, wiped at his forehead, and slapped at gnats that buzzed around his head.

"What are ya waitin' for? Huh? Damn invitation? Take a seat."

I sat. "What is this exactly all about?"

"We'll get to it; we'll get to it. There's a process here."

"I'm sorry...um," I glanced at the old nameplate on his desk. "Sorry, Mr. Flumfelt."

"It's fine, let's get down to it. We just got a few things to fill out, the usual bullshit, nothing special. Then you'll go right on your little way. Now, first things first, if no one told ya, or if you haven't figured it out, you're dead."

"What?"

"I've gone through this a million and a half times so I'm gonna do this quick and to the point. First of all, yes you are dead, get over it. Next, no, this is not Hell, it's not Heaven either or the river Styx or any other fucking place. We're in between. Just filling out the paperwork. You got that?"

I nodded.

"You gonna need a minute?"

I shook my head.

"Any questions?"

"How?"

"I've found that most people would rather not know."

"Tell me."

Mr. Flumfelt looked at his computer. "Kitchen accident."

"What does that mean? Did I leave the oven on? Did I stick my head in the microwave? What?"

He looked again. "It means you slipped on a piece of dropped buttered toast cracked your head on the kitchen counter and bled to death on the floor."

"Buttered toast? Really?"

"Well, you're taking it like a champion, let's get goin' on this then. Name: Gunther Carlblom, birthday: 8/16/55. Correct?"

"No, no that's not me."

"What are you talking about?"

"That's not me."

"Many have tried to weasel out of death, but none have done it."

"I'm not trying to weasel out of anything. Honest, I'm not. That's just not me, that's my neighbor. My name is Carl Gunderson born 4/12/84."

"You bullshitting me kid?" He slapped at another buzzy bug.

"No, no I'm dead serious."

He scowled at me then looked back at his computer. After a few minutes, he said, "Shit, son of a bitch, no good bastards."

"Does this mean I'm still alive?"

"It means there was a fuck up, that's what it means."

"Can it be fixed?"

"It's never happened before, so, no fuckin' idea."

Mr. Flumfelt got on the phone. A long while passed as he talked to multiple angry and confused people on the other line. Finally, he slammed the phone down and said, "Well, fuck, the idiots up top say simple problem, simple solution. So, you'll get sent back up and the other one, Car- no Gunther will be dragged down here. Snap, bang, boom, the old switcheroo, everything's hunky-dory."

"Sounds good to me."

"Good."

"So, when do I get sent back up?"

"Just a matter of seconds, I just gotta fill out a form." He typed and grunted for a few minutes. "Done, I press enter and submit the form, you'll be breathin' air and pumpin' blood."

"Sweet, thank you Mr. Flumfelt."

"Yeah, whatever, see you next go around." He hit the button.

My eyes opened, and I saw a bright white light. It was a set of sharp fluorescent lights on a white ceiling. I wanted to smile but couldn't. My mouth was sewn shut. I started to panic breathing fast through my nose. Sitting up cold and naked, I saw him, a young man in a plastic apron. His eyes were wide, he trembled. I glanced around realizing, he was a mortician, I was in a funeral home. The mortician suddenly moved, bringing a hammer down on my head.

I don't know how long I've been waiting here or how I even got here. Something feels familiar, they just called my number. I went back into a crappy little office where a little gray man slapped at buzzing gnats. When he saw me he cursed.

About the Author:

Michael D. Davis was born and raised in a small town in the heart of Iowa. Having written over fifty short stories, ranging in genre from comedy to horror from flash fiction to novella he continues in his accursed pursuit of a career in the written word. Michael has also written a collection of odd detective stories titled The Bloody Whorehouse Detective Agency.

Zero Dark | Garth von Buchholz

When Billy Pilgrim looked up at the stars he traveled to another constellation. But tonight, as I look up at the stars, they travel toward me. The stars are plunging through the black sky, as if aiming at our planet. As they fly closer, they illuminate the atmosphere for a moment, creating instant daylight. I shield my eyes from their bright assault, aware that most are still billions of kilometers away, and yet their positions are shifting—they are across the sky until they are near the horizon and then an unsettling burst of light blinds me until the pupils of my eyes can adapt again. I am screaming—a useless action but desperate for another human being to hear my voice. Around me other screams are chorusing, yet I cannot see a soul. At any moment we will be obliterated when our world is in the direct path of one of the falling stars. They are more immense and more torrid than our own sun. This is what the physicists predicted. Zero Dark. The reversal of creation. Our universe collapsing into itself.

I can still think, but now I can no longer see my hands. Or my world. Or anything.

About the Author:

Garth von Buchholz is an author of dark poetry, short fiction, nonfiction and stage plays. His work has been published in numerous books and anthologies, including *Kill Switch* (2019). Garth is currently writing his first novel, *Thy Fearful Symmetry*. He works in government and also teaches social media at Royal Roads University in Victoria, B.C., Canada.

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



Available on Amazon in Print & eBook

Glitches | Jacob Mielke

Clover Izzo was four years old, too young to know what she was looking at, the first time she witnessed the phenomena she would someday come to call 'glitches'. It happened during story time, when Clover's mother was helping her to read aloud a children's book *titled Amy Alligator Goes To The Market* While she was sounding out the words, the black lines that formed the letters began to move, reshaping themselves into symbols Clover had never seen before. When she started excitedly babbling about the 'squiggly lines', Clover's mother assumed she was making up stories to get out of reading time.

From then on, Clover experienced the glitches once or twice a week. Sometimes she was aware of it, such as when she watched a cat's coat change colors from brown to orange to white before her very eyes, and other times she didn't realize anything odd had happened at all, such as when she stared out the window of her mother's car as they drove by an ordinary barn with a fresh coat of paint, which appeared faded and dilapidated to Clover.

It didn't take long for Clover to realize talking about the glitches was a bad idea. On multiple occasions she was punished by her parents for making up stories and lies. So she stopped talking about them.

In time the glitches lost their impact, as children her age are adaptable enough that even hallucinations can become boring. When Clover turned five, she barely thought about the glitches at all, except for the moments when they actually happened.

Her inexperience is probably all that saved her from serious psychological harm. An adult who suddenly saw aspects of the world change in front of them might panic, but Clover didn't know enough to be afraid.

That changed in the spring of 1996.

One morning she looked out her bedroom window and saw the house next door had glitched. The paint had turned brown, instead of its usual light blue, and streams of white liquid ran down the side. Occasionally those streams would reverse flow and travel up the house rather than down. Clover marveled at the strangeness for thirty seconds, then went downstairs to get breakfast. When she next saw the house over an hour later, it was still glitching.

The glitch didn't disappear days or even weeks later, but it did change. The paint would alternate from brown, yellow, and gray. Always there was something dripping down it, if not the white fluid then it was yellow mucus or green slime.

It wasn't the house itself that scared Clover, though its constant glitching did make her uneasy. What scared her was the man who lived in it.

There was a knock at the door some weeks after the house started glitching. Clover, eager to prove that she was old enough to answer the door, ran to it. She opened it and was frozen in place by the sight of the person before her.

She couldn't immediately tell if they were a man or woman. The person's face was glitching in a way she'd never seen before. Their eyes, nose, mouth and ears were indistinguishable as their features melted and shifted, over and over, at speeds too fast for the eye to focus on.

The faceless person looked at Clover (judging from the way they tilted their head down in her direction) and spoke. "HEILO, yOUnG IAdy. aRe youR pAreNTS hOme?"

Clover gasped and retreated, nearly tripping over her feet. The faceless person's voice was *wrong*. Distorted and harsh, jumping in pitch randomly and echoing unpleasantly in her ears. She'd never heard someone's voice glitch before, and she didn't like it one bit.

Mr. Izzo, roused from his living room perch, joined his daughter in the hall. She half-ran to his side and hid behind his leg. Mr. Izzo chuckled and rubbed her shoulder. "Hey, it's okay, darling."

"i'M SOrrY, i DIdn'T mEaN tO SCARe youR daUghteR."

"I'm just glad she's cautious. Means she's smart." Mr. Izzo shook the faceless person's hand. "What can I do for you, Mister...?"

"SMythE. wiNsLow SMythE. i JusT mOVeD In neXt dOOr aNd WANted tO IntrODUCE mYselF."

Clover hated his voice. It twisted in her ears like burrowing grubs and made her hair stand on end. Sensing that her presence wouldn't be missed, she retreated to the safety of her room and hid under the bed, clasping her hands around her ears.

When her fear subsided, Clover crawled out from under her bed and poked her head out into the hall, listening. The glitching neighbor seemed to have gone so she emerged and crept through the house, checking the public areas. Mr. Izzo was back in the living room, reading the paper, and Mrs. Izzo was cutting vegetables in the kitchen. Satisfied that her home was once again a safe place, Clover went to her room and peeked out the window.

The faceless man sat in a rocking chair on his front porch. He had no book, newspaper, magazine, or anything else in his hands. Nothing to pass the time. He didn't move, didn't rock in the chair, didn't turn his head (as far as Clover could tell). He might have been a part of the architecture, for all it seemed.

It looked to Clover like the faceless man was waiting for something.

Several days later Clover's fear started to subside. She hadn't seen the neighbor since the first day, and she had grown used to the constantly glitching nature of his house. She even started to feel a little bit guilty for reacting to him the way she did. It wasn't his fault his face was glitching. On a spur of the moment, she decided she was going to do something nice for him by way of an apology.

The next day Clover and her mother baked a dozen blueberry muffins. Clover packed a picnic basket with them and accompanied her mother to the neighbor's house, doing her best to ignore its glitching. Mrs. Izzo knocked on the door and a few moments later the faceless man answered.

Clover forced herself not to flinch and she smiled at him. The smile died, however, when she looked past him into his house. The exterior glitches of the house were nothing compared to what the inside looked like. The walls looked organic, like they were made of pink and gray flesh. They expanded and contracted, as if breathing. Slime covered everything and the air was filled with purple and pink dust.

"Hello," Mrs. Izzo said, smiling. "Clover wanted to be neighborly so she baked you these blueberry muffins." "iS thAt SO?" The faceless man took the basket. "tHey SMeLL dEliCiouS. THank yOu, cLoVEr."

"You're welcome." She forced herself to smile again, but all of her previous desire to mend fences and be nice to the new neighbor were gone. The glitches may not be his fault, but there was something seriously wrong with him and his house.

That night, her dreams were plagued with visions of glitches. She saw Greek statues start to bleed, the faces of her parents warping the same way as the neighbor's, the sun changing color from yellow to green. A comet emitting multi-colored light passed over the Earth, and everything its light touched changed in colorful and grotesque ways. The moon cracked and something enormous and foul slithered out. And through all of these nightmares, one thing remained constant: the glitching neighbor was at the center of it all. When Clover started paying attention to him, he changed. His rapidly shifting features slowed and began to take a solid shape, and Clover saw his face for the first time.

That face was all she saw when she woke up screaming, but it disappeared from her memory seconds later.

Clover's quality of life suffered greatly over the next week. She had trouble eating and sleeping, and lacked the motivation to play with her toys or read her books. She became twitchy and nervous, jumping at any unexpected stimuli and constantly looking over her shoulder to make sure nothing was stalking. The glitches, once no more than harmless curiosities, had become a source of constant fear.

Mr. and Mrs. Izzo were at first concerned for their daughter, then frustrated. As there seemed to be no reason for her declining mental and emotional health, they began to suspect she was acting out for attention. They tried to force Clover to return to normal, giving her mandated play times and insisting on conversing, even if the conversations were hopelessly one-sided. The worst of their attentions came when they made her play outside and refused to allow her back in for an hour or longer. Outside it was much harder for her to avoid the glitching house next door, so she'd taken to staying in the yard on the far side of her own home, where at least she wouldn't have to look directly at her neighbor's house.

Total isolation from the glitches was her goal, but fate had other plans. Almost two weeks after the blueberry muffins, Clover left her house at the same time that the faceless man left his. He carried two duffel bags to his car and put them in the trunk. Clover's curiosity overrode her fear, and she watched as her neighbor locked his doors and hid the key under a flower pot on his porch. He drove away without looking at her once.

An idea started to form in her mind. She knew his packed bags likely meant he'd be gone a while, and she saw where he hid his house key, and her parents weren't expecting her back inside for at least an hour...

She looked around the street to make sure no one was watching, then ran over to the neighbor's porch. The glitches made it seem like poison ivy and sickly yellow flowers were growing out of the steps and railings. She did her best to ignore them, grabbed the key from under the flower pot, and unlocked the door, spurred on by motivations that she herself didn't understand.

The inside of the house had changed since she last saw it. Instead of fleshy, slimy walls, it now appeared the walls were made of black stone with rainbow colored moss growing on them. It was a little easier to look at, but not by much.

Clover searched the rooms on the ground floor, not knowing what she was looking for beyond an answer to why the house and its owner were glitching so much. Most of the things she saw, if they weren't glitching themselves, were

normal. There was a telephone on the wall just like the one at her house, with a list of phone numbers taped next to it, a small television in front of a reclining chair in the living room, a refrigerator in the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator and saw far too much green and black mold growing on everything. The food must have glitched.

Disgusted, she shut the refrigerator door a little harder than she meant to. The sound of it slamming was far too loud in the otherwise silent house.

Something skittered on the upper floor and Clover froze. Did the faceless man own a dog? That felt like the kind of thing she would know if he did.

The skittering continued, and grew louder the longer it went on. Clover crept out of the kitchen and toward the living room. The front door was in the living room but so were the stairs. If the faceless man had a guard dog and it was coming downstairs, there was no way she could avoid it on her way out. She peeked from behind the living room doorway before entering and saw what was making the skittering noise. It wasn't a dog.

At first glance, the creature looked like a giant centipede. It had a long body that stretched from its head at the bottom of the stairs to the top of the stairs, where it disappeared from sight. The creature's flesh was pale gray. Its head was shaped like a human's, but it had no eyes, ears, nose, mouth, or hair. Its arms, also human-like, ended in six fingers that were twice as long as fingers ought to be. Dozens of those arms ran up either side of the creature in two rows.

Clover tried to scream but what came out of her mouth sounded more like a panicked goat bleating. The creature turned its head toward her. A split appeared down the center of its face and its skull cracked open, releasing a mass of hundreds of thin, wriggling, pink tendrils.

The sight of these tendrils was the final straw. Clover made a break for the door, believing every step of the way that the creature would get her. She made it out the door, not bothering to close it behind her, and ran back to her own home. So great was her terror that she didn't stop to wonder why her own front door was open as well.

"Mommy!" She screamed. "Daddy!"

She ran from room to room, hunting for them. She didn't care how much trouble she'd be in, the safety of a parent's arms was worth all the time-outs in the world.

She found them in their upstairs bedroom. Both were glassy eyed, staring up at the ceiling. Both were naked, and both had been cut open from the base of their throats to their groins. Rainbow-colored fluid, like a brighter and prettier version of a gasoline puddle, poured from their bodies and puddled on the bed.

And that was it. Clover's mind couldn't handle everything that had been thrusted on it in such a short time, so it shut down. She sat down on the floor in front of the bed and stared at the rainbow, feeling nothing, thinking nothing.

She registered the footsteps behind her, but didn't react to them. The faceless man walked around her and into the bedroom, cleaning a rainbow-stained knife with a rag. His clothes were equally colorful.

"Shame, that," he said. "But it's better this way. They were nice people. Better to die ignorant."

He walked over to Clover and ruffled her hair. She felt the rainbow fluid sticking to her scalp.

"Reality is so much more malleable than people would like to believe. We live on the surface of a still pond, not a drop out of place. But all it takes is one ripple, and everything changes. Take care, Clover."

He left her and she remained where she was, right up until the point police officers removed her. In time, she was able to function again, and move about society in a semi-productive manner. But a part of her never left the rainbow room. She'd fractured, broken, scattered. She glitched.

About the Author:

Jacob Mielke is a horror author living in Milwaukee, WI. He has previously been published in The Sirens Call eZine issues #29, #30, #33, and #34.





Copyright Mai Kil

Lab Assistant | Marge Simon

I'm new here. I'm the little guy that everyone ignores. It's been that way all my life. Even my mother didn't pay much attention to me after I started eating solid food. She got pregnant again right after that, as if to forget about me, Irvin, the runt. My brothers were all tall, named aptly Rocky, Max and Butch.

But I worked very hard in school and got good enough marks for a scholarship. I graduated with a B.S. in Bio Tech. It would have been 'cum laude' but they overlooked me, even though I was the one most qualified. I straightened that out, but it was after graduation and nobody took notice. 'Irwin who?' might as well have been my entire name.

So here I am. My first real job as an assistant in this high security lab. My boss and his cronies leave things to me in here. There were only four charges to handle at first. A weird bird from Columbia with four legs. It can't fly very far, so I take it out and let it walk around, while I'm feeding the others. They said it was born near a nuclear plant. I didn't know they had nuclear plants in Columbia.

There's a Siberian Hooter and I keep its cage covered most of the time because --well, it's a Siberian Hooter. You'd understand if you ever heard it. Next to the Hooter is a Striated Anaconda from Madagascar. Lastly, a pileated singing snail but it's not caged. It never goes very far from its food. Those were all the creatures in my care until they brought in this thing without a name. And that makes five total, to care for.

It's caged, there's nothing to worry about. All I have to do is feed it, just like the others.

Maybe talk to it, make it happy. But I don't know what I'm supposed to say to that eye attached to all those wormy things waving at me through the wires. Hell, they didn't even bother to tell me what it was or where it came from. Just left me a few bags of food.

So I gave it what I was told every day for a month. But it never touched the bowls.

Nobody came to tell me otherwise, my calls went unanswered. The other creatures were doing fine. Not that anyone checked about them, either.

I was mopping the floors when I heard a peculiar noise coming from the creature's cage. So I went over and checked inside. It started waving its tentacles at me. Seemed awfully excited. Kept making these funny sounds like a baby cooing. "What is it, boy? Are you trying to tell me something?" I said, poking a finger through the wires. A tentacle shot out and wrapped gently around it.

"Are you shaking hands, little buddy?" It cooed and gurgled back at me, as if it knew what I was saying. From then on, it seemed we were friends. I even named it Binky. I thought of it as a "him", but I never could bring myself to look at that eye for very long.

The days went by as before, but it was nice to have someone to talk to. Even if 'he' wasn't human. But I began to worry about him. He still wasn't eating. I thought maybe they gave me the wrong formula food for him. So I tried giving him ice cream --pistachio, my favorite. When that didn't work, I began trying out TV chefs' recipes. Finally, I just diced up some tofu. Binky showed no interest.

I watched him die slowly. I wish I could say that, but it's not so. Finally, I thought he was dead, back in the black shadows. He'd stopped making noises. Those squid-like arms were still. I crawled inside to pull him out.

Now there's plenty to worry about. I'm stuck in Binky's cage, and he's loose. One by one, I've watched him consume the specimens. I'm thinking he might be a higher intelligence, tricking me like he did. Maybe he's from outer space or something. If he is, maybe he recognizes I'm sentient. All he has to do is feed me, maybe talk to me, make me happy. Maybe he doesn't know what to do with me.

I've concluded he just wasn't hungry enough until now. Binky never blinks, and he's coming my way. Story of my life.

About the Author:

Marge Simon is an award-winning poet/writer. Her works have appeared in Daily Science Fiction, New Myths, Polu Texni, Clannad, Silver Blade and four pro anthologies in 2018. She is a multiple Stoker winner and Grand Master Poet of the SF & F Poetry Association.

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Sleep Tight | Charles Gramlich

You wake beneath the glow of a urine-yellow nightlight shaped like a crescent moon. From the hall outside your bedroom comes a susurration of sound, a crippled shuffle, like rotted feet dragging themselves to bone on a sandpaper carpet.

Your heartbeat speeds. Sticky mouth dries. You sit up in vomit-clotted sheets. You've been sick, but you're better now. Much, much better. Thanks to Momma.

But that sound. It's almost midnight, the dregs of the day. Who is coming? Who is coming to your room in the hollow of the dark?

Something wet slaps against the old porcelain doorknob. It turns, screeches open on hinges that are more rust than iron. A bulk leans its head within, dressed in a pale wrapper of cloth under which odd shapes pulse and squirm. You're reminded of a grubworm you once dug up in the garden—when there was still a garden. It's just Momma.

A sigh possesses you as, from the doorway, your mother says, "Sorry I'm late tonight, Sweetie. I fell asleep. Are you OK? Do you need anything?"

You'd begun to think she wasn't coming this night. That maybe.... But you don't complete that thought. It's not a kind one and Momma does not like unkind thoughts. You only say, as mother's clothes twitch and rustle, "I'm fine, Momma. Just fine. Thank you."

She smiles. Her mouth is black because she's forgotten her teeth again. But that's all right. Her teeth are big and broad and so white they sometimes make you uncomfortable. She whispers that she loves you and turns to go.

You wait. She'll turn back again. As she always does. She has one last piece of sweet advice to offer her only son. She gives it with a catch of emotion in her throat: "Good night. Sleep tight. Let the bed bugs bite."

"I will, Momma," you hear yourself say.

The door snicks shut. Momma's feet move away. She sounds light as a thistle now. As if she's able to dance on limbs shed of heavy flesh.

Quickly, you lie back on your bed again and let the wet pillow fold up around your face. You press it down tight over your eyes and mouth. From the door where Momma was standing, a swift flow of movement passes like a ripple over the floor. It climbs the bed posts, the trailing sheets. Like a wave of goosebumps it flows onto the bed to nestle all around you. *They*, nestle all around you.

You bite your teeth together and pull the pillow more tightly across your face. It's not the right thing to do to deny them a part of your body. But you hate the way they slip beneath your lids and scrape at your eyes. And if they crawl up your nose and down your throat, you know the vomit will come again. It's so unpleasant to lie in when it's still liquid and hot.

The bedbugs—that's what Momma calls them anyway—have tiny mandibles that catch at flesh and hold. It feels like ten thousand staples being tucked into your skin as they begin to suckle. But it's a good thing. Momma has told you: they draw the illness out of you with your fluids. That's why you're feeling so much better, why you'll soon be able to leave your room again. She has promised.

In the morning, of course, the bugs will return to Momma and clothe her anew. They'll give her all the sickness they've drawn out of you. It's a powerful display of the mother-child bond. How she takes your disease unto herself. You know she loves you very, very much.

"I love you, too," you whimper into the pillow. As the bugs burrow in and the pain becomes like fireworks exploding through your body. "I love you, Momma. Love you, Momma! MOMMA!"

About the Author:

Charles Gramlich writes from the piney woods of south Louisiana. He has authored the Talera fantasy series and the SF novel *Under the Ember Star*. His stories have been collected in, *Bitter Steel*, *Midnight in Rosary*, and *In the Language of Scorpions*. He also writes westerns as Tyler Boone. His books are available at Amazon and Barnes & Noble.

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The Key to the Forgotten Door | Stacy Fileccia

I wanted to scream. To cry. To find a portal to another world and crawl straight through. I wanted to be anywhere but here. Yet, here I was, on a lonely hill staring at the front entrance of Deryk's Dentistry.

The door should have been closed. Locked. Sealed by police as it had been for the past three years.

But it wasn't.

Yellow tape fluttered in the half-hearted breeze.

Fingering the arrowhead in my pocket, I wondered if I'd been set up. *Someone* had placed that unique arrowhead on the little white table on my front porch this evening. Without a doubt, it was one of Deryk's—one that should have still been in police custody.

Debating whether I should leave or call the police, I heard a distant sound that gave me pause: a muffled scream.

Heart slamming in my chest, I listened with all my being. Could it have been my imagination? No. The sound came again. My feet moved mechanically toward that door, and I slipped inside.

Tidy as ever, the entire office awaited patients it would never see again. The files and dentistry tools had long ago been seized, never to return. In each of the patient rooms, the once-bright spotlights hung unused from the ceiling like uprooted flowers left to die atop dusty dental chairs.

Nothing looked askew. The sounds hadn't come again since I'd been inside. My cell phone light swept the floor on my way out. As I neared the waiting area, something caught my eye.

I froze.

Like paint spilled from a can, a dark red liquid seeped and pooled out from under the closet door. I touched it. Smelled it. Fresh, warm blood.

I stood for an eternity.

Someone had to be toying with me. It couldn't be Deryk this time, could it? I backed up until I hit the opposite wall, remembering how I'd been blindsided three years ago. Deryk had been a couple of hours late coming home, but I hadn't thought anything of it. I went to bed as usual. The next morning, his picture—him standing over a bloodied dead woman right here in this office—screamed at me from the front page with a headline reading: 'MAD DENTIST—CAUGHT!'

My life had turned upside down.

He'd been such a good boy. Jaunty smile. Striking blue eyes. Overdone manners.

Then there was the cat incident. Split and gutted it was and found in the wood that bordered our back yard.

He'd sworn it wasn't him. He told the police his friend, Henry, might have done it, but no one knew of any Henry. We all decided it must be his 'invisible friend'.

The whole thing bugged me.

Someone had done it.

Nothing happened for a long while.

Then Carla, a reclusive neighbor, started complaining Deryk had cut down her flowers and set fire to her compost bin, amongst other things.

Deryk always howled about his innocence. As time went on, Henry became the core of his excuses. Late coming home? He'd been in the woods with Henry. Bad grades? Henry had prevented him from studying. I almost hit my head on the wall every time he mouthed the wretched name. And, no matter how I pleaded, he simply couldn't produce Henry.

Then 'Henry' faded from Deryk's life—and mine. By the time Deryk moved on to college, 'Henry' was a closed chapter. Deryk became a dentist and moved back home with me, setting up Deryk's Dentistry in his hometown.

Seven months later, the disappearances started happening.

Girls. Women. One after another. When their mangled bodies were found, the small-town community rallied around the families, offering support, setting up night watches for neighborhoods. These went on and on, sometimes as often as twice in a week. We were all gripped in fear.

Of course, I didn't connect them with Deryk. Why would I? He was an upstanding guy with a thriving practice. Then the blasted picture hit the papers—Deryk splattered with blood and standing over a bloodied dead woman.

During the trial, Deryk insisted Henry had done it all, not him. He claimed he had found the woman, had tried to revive her, and had finally given up. He said he was about to call the police when they stormed Deryk's Dentistry and took the damning picture. In some respects, 'Henry' had saved Deryk's life. Deryk had been in the asylum ever since.

But what if we were all wrong? What if Henry was ... real?

Who bled now?

Inhaling slowly and deeply, I opened the closet door.

Dusty, innocuous cleaning supplies stood at the ready as if Deryk's cleaning crew would be there in the morning. The bloody drag marks leading to the back of the closet told a different tale. This had to be a false door of some sort! I felt along everywhere I could until I found it: a secret latch behind the bleach.

I pressed it and jumped back, slipping in the blood a little. The false panel swiveled on a hidden pole, revealing a staircase—and more blood.

A faint light beckoned me down the rocky stairs like a ghost in a bone-chilling dream.

I let my breath out in miniscule measures, making my way toward the tortured soul whose moans drifted to my ears, gripping my heart, twisting it until I couldn't breathe.

As I touched a toe to the bottom, a baseball bat came out of nowhere, hitting me square in the face. The dim light spun into prickling stars. I crumpled into blackness.

Oh. My. Gosh.

I awoke to serious pain. My head throbbed. My mouth—which I couldn't close—felt like plastic. Barely able to move my dry tongue, I discovered some kind of dental appliance had been jammed between my jaws. My arms instinctively flew up to rid myself of it, but it was no use. My hands—and feet—had been duct taped to an old dentist's chair, and a metal instrument table stood beside it.

My eyes darted around in pure panic.

I was in a cavern of some sort. Darkness engulfed everything except me and the chair, which were illuminated by a dental spotlight.

Fear bubbled up from the pit of my stomach, but I forced myself to calm down. This problem was just a box. Wasn't that what my mother told me when we were trapped in the war zone back home? I just had to find the right key. But how could I unlock a box such as this?

How had I been so stupid? I had walked straight into a trap.

Calm. I had to be calm.

And I was, until blood splattered onto my jeans.

I screamed. Then I looked up, knowing, just knowing some woman was up there bleeding to death. And I was next. But it wasn't a girl. It was ...

Deryk?

Someone had him strung to the cave ceiling with fishing net. Bleeding from slashes to the face with blood flowering across his asylum 'jammies', his unconscious form broke my heart.

As if she'd been waiting for this exact moment, an over-bright voice echoed through the chamber. "He might take a bit to awaken." A woman materialized from the surrounding gloom—it was Carla, my neighbor. Wearing Deryk's blood-splattered lab coat and carrying his monogrammed dentistry bag in her skeletal hands, she clicked her false teeth just off beat with her footsteps and laughed. "I knew you'd come if I set out the right bait."

She tossed something onto the instrument table. An arrowhead—the one from my pocket. With infuriating slowness, she lay the rest of Deryk's collection of arrowheads, according to size, next to the first. As she worked, Carla flashed me an icy smile. Then she jabbed a finger into my mouth, cutting me with an acrylic fingernail. "Nice and dry."

I'd borrowed cups of sugar from her over the years, taken chicken soup to her when she was sick, and chatted with her over the fence countless times. Why was she doing this? I wanted to ask her a million questions, but nothing in my mouth worked right.

She thrust her face into mine. "He destroyed my family," Carla said, clicking her false teeth. "He did all those things. Well, Henry did the actual deeds, but it was all Deryk's fault that Henry was like that. Our life was great until your boy showed up. Oh, I'd seen Deryk many times. He and Henry were the best of friends, always disappearing for hours and showing back up hungry. I didn't know just how terrible Deryk was until the day I was making thronx sandwiches for the boys. Deryk came running in and told me to come quick. Imagine my shock when I went into my eight-year-old boy's room to find him lying on the floor bleeding out from his leg having been torn apart as if by some wild animal. You know what Deryk told me?"

I shook my head.

"He said Henry had trouble getting through a micro door after they'd been playing all day. After the doctor fixed him all up, Henry told me how they'd been playing on some different world and Deryk had had trouble with the micro door. Imagine that."

Something dawned in my mind. Because Deryk's father had been fully human, I'd never dreamed Deryk could have the powers I had—the powers of opening wormhole doors that could take you to any world capable of sustaining life. He'd certainly never shown them to me.

"Though I told Henry not to mess with that boy anymore, I couldn't stop them. They were the best of friends. That is, until the day Deryk brought Henry home in his arms. He gave me some song and dance about a monster and how the micro door had shut too soon. HALF OF MY SON'S HEAD WAS GONE. Gone! and not even in any kind of way you might expect. It looked like someone had sliced it off with a circular saw and put glass there, so people could see brains. Do you have any idea what that's like?

"Deryk kept saying he knew he could fix Henry if he could get Henry back to his home world, but when he tried to take

all three of us, he couldn't do it. Said he wasn't powerful enough. That's when my sweet little Henry grabbed our pet zynx and slit it open just like that. Your Deryk ran around the room yelling, 'Atta boy, Henry!' Deryk put zynx blood on the palms of our hands and took us here. Deryk kept trying thing after thing, and parts of Henry's head came back. I decided to stay, so Deryk could continue his work. I got a job and moved in right next to you. Deryk managed to return Henry's half a head, but Henry was never the same after that. My Henry did everything from the sliced up cats early on to the mutilated women. I thought I would feel better once Deryk was locked away. But no. I need more than that. Much more. Oh! I think I hear my Henry now."

Bile burned a canyon through my bone-dry throat.

Dragging his mangled left leg, the man, his face dirt-encrusted, could have come from a grave. His tattered, dirty clothes fit him not at all. He stopped at my feet, blinking his strikingly blue eyes.

Tears poured down my face.

"Deryk experimented, and I lost my *son*. He's nothing. He feeds on beasts in the woods behind our houses. Deryk turned my baby into a monster."

Above me, Deryk moaned.

Carla stepped away. "Henry, you do you. I'm going to go grab a bite to eat." She clicked her way up the stony stairs, leaving me to ponder the images I'd seen of those women Henry had destroyed and to wonder what he was going to do to me.

Henry rummaged through the arrowheads. After holding one up to the light as if expertly examining it, he returned it and pulled out another. This he examined, too. Then, without warning, he jammed it into my exposed gum, digging and twisting, causing unbelievable pain. My molar popped out, and he laughed like a small child.

He rolled the extracted tooth between his fingers then plunked it onto the metal table. He picked up a new arrowhead.

My mind swirled. Silently, I rooted for him to pick up a different one, the one that Carla had put on my little table. The one with the streak of purple along the side.

He didn't.

Instead, he chose one with a streak of blue and jabbed it into another part of my gum.

Almost passing out from the pain, I willed him to pick up the *right* arrowhead.

This time he did.

When Henry stabbed my gum *this* time, the arrowhead key unlocked a long-forgotten door, one I'd bolted shut when I fled my home world. Henry's arm—to his great surprise—kept going, right on through me, along with his body, until he was completely gone through the portal I had in my mouth.

Carla was of no consequence. I knew the world that had zynxes. The people there had no special abilities whatsoever. But Henry was different. Henry wasn't her son. Henry was Deryk's interdimensional twin, which can sometimes happen when a child without training messes with micro doors. Carla would have all sorts of memories with Henry, but they would simply be effects of Deryk and his experiments.

I closed my eyes. For the first time since I made the oath to remain in human state—I allowed my body to become gelatinous. After slipping out of my bonds, I stretched up my translucent orange body and attached myself to the netting. Ever so carefully, I used my acidic secretions to break down the netting until Deryk dropped into the hammock I'd made of my body. I gently lay him on the dental chair. After returning to my human form—complete with remade teeth, I hugged him with all my might then stood up.

He looked just like his father. "All right, handsome," I said. "Let's go."

I held the arrowhead in his limp hand and pushed it into my gum where I had secreted the portal to my home world decades ago. He slipped through with ease.

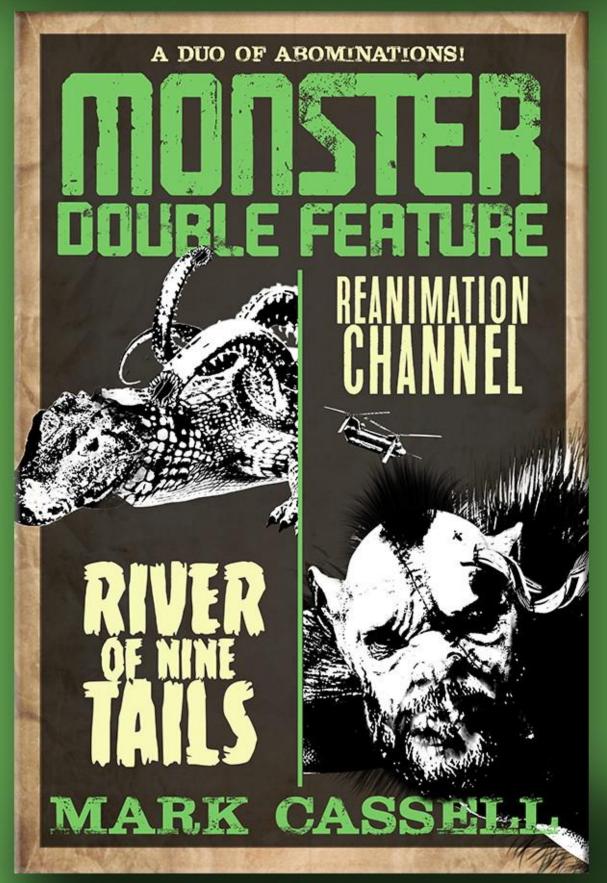
I crammed rest of the arrowheads into my pockets—these keys would open other doors—and we might need them. Then I manipulated myself inside out and through the phase-shifted micro-dimensional door, following the young men back to the world I hadn't called home for thirty-five years.

About the Author:

Stacy Fileccia—English teacher, math tutor, freelance technical writer, and mother of nine—writes dark fiction in snippets of time in rural Ohio. She loves being a band and baseball mom and enjoys word smithing amidst her flower gardens while sipping coffee. She has had numerous stories published in *The Sirens Call* and was named Most Wicked Woman Writer by HorrorAddicts in 2016.

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From the author of *The Shadow Fabric*



Available for pre-order (release date: Aug 16th 2020)

A Girl Called Summer | Dave Luford

Summer Miller had just turned twelve years of age when she first heard the voice. It wasn't inside her head; this was no psychological aberration. She heard it in the gentle susurration of the breeze through early autumn leaves, in the musical chatter of the myriad small birds in the woods at the back of her house, in the eerily human-like cry of an evening fox, in the harsh rasping croak of a crow.

"Jasper! She called, standing on her back porch one late afternoon of a day that had brought perfect warm weather for her meanderings through the woods.

"Jasper, where are you?" Then she laughed lightly, delightedly, as if she had received the sought-for response. Jasper, who was never far away from her: morning, noon and night. Jasper, her only friend.

"Hey, honey, where are you rushing off to now?" Clare Miller, constantly worried and fretting over her only child. Her shy, quiet and withdrawn only child; watching as Summer sped off back into the gathering woodland gloom. Summer rush in, Summer rush out; always on the way to somewhere else these days, restless, preoccupied. Dashing through the days and always seeming like a recent memory.

"Got to meet Jasper," Summer called back, not stopping in her trajectory. Clare shook her head, frowned; something she seemed to do a lot of recently.

"Honey, who is Jasper?"

Summer twirled the spagnetti around her fork, not looking at her mother. Despite barely eating the previous day, so preoccupied had she been with her friend, she had no appetite and looked at the food with disdain.

"Summer? I'm asking you a question."

Summer stopped twirling the food; looked up at her mother now, her expression innocent, wide-eyed.

"He's my friend and he lives in the woods, and he talks to me. We go everywhere together."

"In the woods? Nobody lives out there, honey, that's crazy. Is he your pretend friend? If so, I guess that's OK, but you're a little too old for all that."

"Jasper lives there!" Summer screamed. "And he's not pretend, he's real, more real to me than you are!" She emphasized this sudden outburst by stabbing her fork violently into her food. "Now fuck off and leave me alone!" She shot up so suddenly that her chair clattered behind her. Clare remained seated, a shocked expression on her face, having felt the force of the expletive like a physical blow. Speechless. Summer made a dash for the back door, then hop skip the jittering skittery bunny fled the house, hatred for her mother sufficient fuel.

"Honey, wait," Clare was finally able to say, but the words were no more than a futile whisper.

Summer scanned the high lines of the treetops, hoping that Jasper would appear, though he had never let her down yet. "Jasper!" she called, the need to connect with her friend more vital now than ever before. For comfort and reassurance, if nothing else. She felt now the tightening grip of a deep longing.

"Hey, girl, slow down will ya? I can't keep up," cried the fox, or maybe it was the harsh croak of the agitated crow, or the pneumatic violence of the woodpecker at work on the trunk of an oak tree. Summer came to a sudden halt, grinning insanely.

"You came!" she shouted at the top of her voice, circling now, scanning the gathering dark of the woods for a glimpse of her friend.

"Course I came. We're buddies, right?"

"You got a surprise for me Jasper?" Summer asked, excitedly.

"Sure I have, and an even bigger one for your mom!"

Dan Miller was running late, his work meeting having dragged on interminably. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as yet another traffic light had conspired against him. His wife's call had deeply disturbed him, a call urging him to come home as quickly as possible, their daughter had thrown a tantrum that had shocked her to the core. Clare had been weeping as she spoke. She'd mention the expletive, and where had she learned such a word? Not from them, they had never used it in front of her. It had been so uncharacteristic of her; up until the last few months, Summer had been a well-balanced, respectful girl, for all of her shyness and long periods of silence. As the light finally changed, Dan Miller's foot shot to pedal, totally unable to repress a growing sense of unease, that something had gone badly wrong.

He pulled up on the driveway, and noticed there were no lights on in the front room. That in itself was unusual; Clare would normally be watching TV at this time of the evening. He slammed the car door shut, took his house key from his jacket pocket, and entered.

He could see from the hallway that the light was on in the kitchen at the end of the passage. He walked forward with trepidation, noticing that his hands were trembling and cold sweat was sticking his shirt to his back. On reaching the kitchen, he nervously pushed the door a little wider, and walked in.

At first he couldn't take in the scene that greeted him; could make no sense of it. Summer turned towards him, a massive grin on her lips, and an expression on her face that looked like pride: *look what I did DAD!* Spread-eagled on the floor, in a lake of blood, and with a mass of tangled and broken limbs, was surely a store mannequin? As he finally came to his senses he realized it was no dummy, but his wife, Clare. He turned towards Summer, unable to speak, and noticed now that she was holding a sharp kitchen knife, still dripping with that same blood. All light had gone from summer's eyes; she regarded her father now with a dead-fish stare. Then suddenly she was dashing once more towards the back door, seemingly animated by some invisible force. She ran and ran, further and further into the woods, and only stopped when she reached the oak tree where the woodpecker had been. And once more she circled, scanning the black lines of the treetops, just as she had done the previous day.

"Jasper! I did it!" she shouted. "Our little fun game! I did it!"

But no answer came. Summer, getting desperate now:

"Jasper! We're buddies, right? I did what you said! Where are you?"

Still no answer. No breeze through the leaves, no fox's cry, no croak of a crow. The woodland birds had long been silent.

"Jasper...?"

About the Author:

Dave Ludford is a horror writer from Nuneaton, England. His work has been published in Sirens Call, Schlock! Webzine and Farther Stars Than These, amongst others.

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Gloria's Bounty | Rebecca Anderson

Gloria planted carrots, zucchini, and squash, placing seeds in careful rows. After a few weeks, she added more: Beans, broccoli, and beets. By the end of summer, she would have enough vegetables to feed everyone.

There was no erasing what she had done, but food would help. The girls were hungry. They were always hungry.

Gloria paused. When the girls were starving, they had the drive to leave, but not the energy. They wouldn't make it a block now, as weak as they were. If their young bellies were full, they still wouldn't want to stay, but they'd have energy to run and not stop until they were far from here. She couldn't have that. Not now, not ever. They were too beautiful to be marred by the world.

I'll start a produce stand. Gloria smiled to herself as she tended her garden. She'd have to do something with all those vegetables. She couldn't let them go to waste.

About the Author:

Rebecca Anderson is writer, psychotherapist, and tech entrepreneur who is passionate about exploring the dark side of the human experience. She was the winner of NYC Midnight's first-ever micro fiction competition and has recently published stories in *Jokes Review, Sonder Midwest*, and *Raconteur Magazine*. When she's not writing, she enjoys boating, cooking, and spending time with her partner, dogs, and chickens.



Redemption | Alyson Faye

Tying the ropes around the boy's bony chest and ankles, Lorcan worked as fast as his sweating fingers would allow. He stroked the boy's cheek and watched his ribcage rise and fall. His own breathing was laboured. His task lay heavy upon him.

Behind him the vines twitched and heaved, vomiting streams of bloody sap, sending out their own plant pheromone signals. Beneath Lorcan's feet the earth wriggled in anticipation.

It was coming.

Lorcan bowed his head mumbled a few words, lingering to stare at the prostrate and unconscious boy child, drugged and oblivious, before Lorcan hauled himself to his feet and turned away. His annual duty performed.

He trudged back to the waiting village, to the closed doors, barred windows and the accusing silence. He was one of them, yet he was not truly accepted. He had his own cottage—where no one visited him. His duties marked him out as different, special, chosen. A leper.

He hated what he had been born and trained to do every summer solstice. He smelled the scent of marzipan in the air and knew the women in their kitchens were baking sweetmeats for breakfast. His stomach rumbled.

"Papa, see he's coming back. He's – alone." Jonas gasped in sudden realisation of what this meant. "But where is...?" "Hush now, lad. He's gone. Lost to the forest and the vines." His father ushered his youngest back to his bed.

At five years old Jonas was too young to understand the nature of sacrifice. His father thanked the great all giving father that Jonas had been spared this solstice and instead another family's heart had been broken.

"Papa, I don't understand. Where's Penn?"

Penn, his playmate since birth, a bright-eyed lad, with the colouring of a raven and pale milky skin, lay asleep and dreaming in the guts of the forest. He dreamt of knights on horses, rivers filled with fish, running with the village boys and eating fresh baked cakes.

The bulging hairy vines tightened their grip around Penn's body, strangling his limbs, marking his flesh with their sticky sap and bright red buds, curling their fronds into his hair, holding him secure until their master arrived. Penn snored, adrift on dreams of a life he'd never live again.

Lorcan raged within his own four walls, tossing pans, chairs, table and logs around the room, until he was surrounded by enough chaos and damage to match his feelings.

"This damned place."

A tapping at the window caught his attention. A shadow hovered, nervous and slight in build.

Lorcan strode to the aperture, threw it open and roared into the night air. "Yes? Have you come to spy on me? And tattle tale?"

A thin grimy hand clasped his arm and looking down Lorcan saw a young girl, ten summers old, if that. He knew her and his heart sank—Penn's older sister.

"Take me to him," she begged.

"Where be your parents, child?"

She shrugged. "I want to see where you took Penn. To the 'place of endless dreams'." She quoted the villagers' gospel words to him and Lorcan looked away, ashamed at her devotion and belief. If she only knew. Oh the lies we adults tell to hide the deaths.

"No. No one ventures there, girl child. Only me and only once per year. With the – offering." He brushed off her hand, but she was tenacious.

"I want to see. I have light. Look."

She produced a fire-stone from an apron pocket. The tiny flame burned within the heart of the rock, trapped in its amber shell. The villagers didn't understand how fire-stones worked, but they believed they were gifts from the forest in exchange for their offerings. The fire-stones provided heat, light, warmth and therefore life. They were blessed and valuable.

"You mean you stole it?"

She nodded, defiant. "I don't care Lord- Kan," she mispronounced his name and it touched his heart.

He smiled at her. "You cannot save him, child. He is one with the forest now."

She stared up at the huge brawny man towering over her but she felt no fear. He would help her she knew; she sensed his pain. Girl and man stared at each other in silence, the fire-stone glowing between them.

Then Lorcan picked up his pack and knowing this was the most foolish thing he had ever done in his life, he set off into the greedy waiting forest with the girl trailing behind him.

Deep inside the vegetation, within the sweating trunks of the trees, something sinuous and muscular waited, enwrapped in leaves and moss, camouflaged to invisibility – ancient, obscene and hungry. Its tongue flicked out tasting the air, the rotting fungi and the beating blood of the intruders venturing into its domain.

"How much longer, Lord- Kan?" the girl asked, rubbing her ankle and ripping off the leech which clung to her skin. It came away with a disgusting sucking sound.

Lorcan shrugged. He was both confused by the dim dappled light seeping through the branches and bone tired. "I don't know. I left him near here." The Collector stared around at the army of trees advancing on them from all sides. Something rustled —an animal squawked — a death cry.

The girl shivered. "This is a bad place."

Lorcan couldn't disagree and he'd brought her here.

"Penn!" She called out, as though her dead sibling would ever hear her again.

"Shh," Lorcan clamped a sweaty hand over her mouth. "Look!" He pointed towards the fringes of the closest tree line.

A shadow slithered between the trunks, in and out, around and up into the branches. It was the length of ten men laid head to toe, no make that twenty men, Lorcan corrected himself. By all the gods of the forest, this creature was vast.

The man and the girl sensed the earth quiver beneath their feet, protected only by stitched animal hides. The vines, dangling from the canopy, jerked and twisted, the leaves trembled – something huge was coming towards them.

Is this what they sacrificed their young and elderly to? Lorcan wondered. Was this their God?

"Run!" he yelled and swept the girl into his arms, as she stood gawping, frozen, facing the rustling forest. Everything around them seemed to be moving. Lorcan raced, his face slapped by vines, hurdling over fallen logs, feet squelching into muddy pools, but he didn't once look back.

Behind him he heard a sucking, slithering sound which terrorised him in its alienness. The feeling of vastness at his back, of empty desolate space, yet filled with intent, pursued him.

The girl clung to him as though she were a baby monkey, eyes closed and face nestled in his chest. She did not want to see what lay behind them. He did not know in which direction he ran nor where the village lay, but stumbling almost to his knees, he fell out into the lush meadows surrounding the far side of their settlement.

The village women, washing clothing in the waters, stared in astonishment. In moments he watched their faces change to terror as they stared behind him. Lorcan turned to face it.

It towered above him and the girl, a diamond shaped head, eyes narrow and green and dazzling, with a tongue as long and thick as a man's arm, flicking in and out, above a slender striped neck and a body which stretched into the forest, into invisibility. It radiated power and hatred as it hovered, swaying, undulating. The forest was silent, the birds ceased to chirp and only the sound of the women's screaming filled the air.

Lorcan scrambled backwards, just a few pathetic steps, still clutching the girl, who suddenly opened her eyes and yelled at the monster. "I hate you! You took my brother. Murderer."

The tongue flicked out, reaching towards her chubby face but then stopping an arm's length from her.

Why doesn't it come closer? Lorcan wondered. Why has it not killed us? What is it waiting for?

The monster opened its mouth, so wide you could fit a child in there, Lorcan realised, sick at the thought.

"Lyla!" a voice squeaked, from within the depths of the serpent's innards.

"Penn? That's my brother. He's trapped inside." The girl fought against Lorcan's arms.

The serpent swung its head and Lorcan watched the top of a boy child's head appear for a moment, bobbing. It was wet, covered in saliva, but it was a child. A whole child.

Lorcan turned to one side and vomited onto the grass. He had played a part in this horrific practise, albeit unknowing of the final outcome of the rite but he'd had his suspicions. He bore some guilt.

"SSSS... Come join us, Collector."

Lorcan whipped his head around. The aberration spoke? How is that possible?

The forest rustled, shook, the vines rippled around the creature, providing it both with cover and support for its vast torso. Lorcan squinted his eyes, but could see no end to the creature. It was a behemoth.

"Come to me willingly and you can have the boy child."

Had this beast spoken? The sounds filled Lorcan's head and he shook it as though to dislodge the invading words.

"I am in you. I am the forest. I am everywhere."

The girl stared mesmerised, oblivious to what Lorcan could hear. She stared only at her brother, her every muscle straining to reach him, rage flooding her.

"H - how?" he stuttered.

The serpent tossed its head back, heaved its chest muscles and began to cough and choke as though in the midst of a massive seizure. Green and yellow spittle poured from its mouth, along with an avalanche of insects and bile. Lorcan stepped away, repulsed. The stench was foul; as though he was lying in mountains of horse manure.

A child's foot appeared, naked, slimy but whole. Neither nibbled at nor eroded.

"That's Penn. I know it is!" Lyla cried out and tried to grab the foot.

The serpent reared away, taunting them with its prize.

"Will you take his place, Collector?"

At that moment Lorcan wished devoutly to be home in his bed. He glanced over his shoulder. The village women had fled and there was no sign of any help coming. He suspected the entire village were locked inside their homes, praying this monster would retreat into the forest once more. He was alone.

He remembered his twenty-five summers on the earth, toddling as a child at his mother's skirts, going fishing and hunting with his father, the death of his only brother of the fever, his gentle courtship of Mira who loved another and turned him down, then her moving away to the neighbouring village and taking his heart with her. He had no family left now. He was The Collector. Hated, needed, feared, despised. In response, he bowed his head. Lyla watched him, appalled but hopeful.

The serpent strained and pushed, ejecting the lower part of Penn's body. His clothing had been ripped, but he was awake, though sleepy still from the drugs administered by the village's herbal practitioner.

"Penn!" His sister broke free of Lorcan and raced towards him, showing no fear of the massive serpent swinging its pendulum head, as big as her whole body, above her.

She grabbed her brother's bony shoulders and tugged. The serpent heaved, pushed again and the remainder of Penn's body was expelled from its jaws. The boy's eyes were closed, smeared with sticky saliva and his lips were tinged blue, but, to Lorcan's disbelief, he was breathing.

Lorcan turned to Lyla. "Take him. Now. Run! Leave us."

Lyla yanked at her brother, pulling the sleepy lad to his feet and part-dragged, part-carried him through the long grasses. They fell into the river together and the water seemed to revitalise the boy.

When he glanced back at Lorcan, he screamed, like an injured deer, at the sight of the serpent, then brother and sister fled hand in hand, towards the village's distant lamps.

Lorcan stood waiting, head bowed as though in defeat, before the giant serpent but with the fire-stone hidden inside his palm. Lyla had passed the rock to him, when she had finally broken free of his arms. His palm sweated with its heat and he knew he had only one chance to save himself from becoming the next sacrifice.

The serpent bowed its mammoth head to receive Lorcan, its tongue rasped against Lorcan's stubble; noisome and rough. Lorcan felt bile rise in his gullet. His hair dripped with slime. He gazed up into the black maw of the mouth, watched the rows of razor sharp white teeth approach his face, waited for the invasive lick of the tongue upon his lips and then with a cry he thrust the fire-stone into the serpent's mouth. He prayed the rock still held enough of its power.

The serpent spasmed, clamping its teeth into Lorcan's right arm. He screamed, feeling the incisors sever the bone at his elbow and he heard his own flesh tear. But he held firm and didn't collapse. The serpent gave a convulsive swallow, gulping arm and fire-stone in one mouthful.

Lorcan prayed for the pain to keep him awake. He had to hang on, just a few moments longer. Sobbing, he gazed at his ragged flesh, blood spurting in streams, at the empty space below his elbow where once his brawny forearm had rested. He hurried to rip his shirt into a bandage to bind the wound as a make-shift tourniquet. He must not bleed to death out here, where he was alone.

The serpent paused, appearing confused, its eyes closing, its tongue retracting as Lorcan observed the slow progress of his arm and the fire-stone sliding down the creature's neck. He heard a sizzling, just before he caught the scent of roasting flesh, which perversely made his stomach rumble with hunger. Lorcan turned and ran, lopsided, his injured arm thumping awkwardly off balance, towards the river.

Flames burst from the serpent's mouth, its neck was aflame and its head glowed red. The massive body convulsed again and again, the fire spread to the vines then to the leaves. It roared up the trunks consuming the canopy and turned the trees into blackened skeletons. But at the heart of the inferno was the burning corpse of the serpent.

Lorcan waded into the river, falling face first, letting the waters bathe his bloody stump, gulping in the liquid and laughing, whilst the current took him towards the village. Looking back he glimpsed the serpent alight and radiant, rearing towards the night sky, its head thrown back in agony.

"There be dragons after all," Lorcan muttered to himself, as the villagers swarmed the river's banks mob-handed, pulling him out and laying him on clean blankets.

Lyla clutching Penn, watched from the safety of their cottage, her hand clasped tight in her brother's, as though never again would she let him go.

About the Author:

Alyson lives in the UK; her fiction has been published both in print anthologies - *DeadCades, Women in Horror Annual 2, Trembling with Fear 1 &2, Coffin Bell Journal 1* and in ezines. Her latest story, *Night of the Rider,* is published by Demain in their Short Sharp Shocks! E book series.

She performs at open mics, teaches, edits and hangs out with her dog on the moor in all weathers.

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Hello, Darkness, My Old Friend

Do you have disturbing thoughts or, perhaps, find humor in things that others find offensive, ghastly, or plain disgusting? Have you ever felt like there's a monster or demon living inside of you? Maybe you *did* get possessed that time you and your friends played with a Ouija board in the cemetery . . . Well, my hellion, you are not alone. Everyone

has inner darkness—some more than others. It feeds off pain and is often expressed as sadness, anger, and RAGE, so we see it as a bad thing. But is it?

If you've ever stumbled through a dark forest, you know how the darkness forces you to strain your eyes to look, hard. Harder. When it's really dark, you can almost feel your pupils dilate. As you focus your gaze, things start to take shape, things you've never seen before. The forest floor is moving, crawling with creatures of the night. Fireflies flicker through the bushes, confirming their otherwise unperceived existence through a game of Peek-a-Boo. And there are others, people, walking in the shadows. You are not alone. Together, you explore this other world, a world that exists only in the dark. But if you close your eyes, you'll miss it all. And everything turns black.

Let me exit this weird forest analogy. I think you can *see* where I'm going with this. Don't let the demons take over and accidentally kill someone whilst listening to Deicide.

Huh?

What?

Nothing.

There is beauty in darkness, and not to say that we should be grateful

for pain/trauma/illness, but perhaps hardship can force us to tap into this other part of ourselves and connect with others. Some of the most creative, insightful, and empathetic people I've met are those who have had to face the greatest challenges. And what else does the world need more of than art, insight, and empathy? Your darkness is powerful. Why not use it? Celebrate it! Embrace it! Channel it!

Let the demons play.



Mai Kil is a horror writer and artist from Ontario, Canada who loves exploring the darker sides of human nature. She is currently working on a number of short stories and her first novel. Her dark and twisted poem "The Unkind Stranger" was featured in the 47th issue of the Sirens Call Ezine. When she's not busy writing, she's either playing with her two cats or making weird demon-clown workout videos while pretending to be on Cirque du Soleil.

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A Mac Guy | R D Doan

I'm fond of my Mac. He hums and likes to tell me things. He tells me it's time to step out of my selfish, self-doubting, introverted way of thinking and start acting the part of a famous writer. I've told him time and again that nearly *all* the writers I know on Twitter are just that; self-doubting, often introverted, and... well, okay... they aren't all that selfish, but there *are* loads of introverted writers, and I've heard some of the greats admit they doubt their own work at times.

Mac says I'm not writing to my full potential, and to be a famous writer, I need to write to my full potential. He's seen my wittier, funnier side and says I should use more humor in my writing. Well, he doesn't actually say any of these things, but I can tell he's thinking it. We've worked together for so long; I know what he's thinking.

He's introduced me to so many different authors, many of whom I would love to emulate. I started trying to sound like them, but my stories came across to pressured or fake. Mack says to be a famous writer, I need my own voice. Learn from the greats, but don't be like them; be like you, there's only one you. I like to remind him I'm not famous, so being like me may not be that useful.

Mac says he'll be my muse if I listen to him. He has ideas. He has plans. The only problem is, he doesn't have the ability to do what I do. I can write and be the face of the partnership. He'll be the idea guy. He'll whisper in my ear how the story will go. Together, we will be famous.

With each pulse of his cursor, Mac sends his thoughts to be typed. His pulsating cursor can transport me to other places in my mind. Hours can pass without my knowledge. There are days I wake up and head downstairs only to find pages and pages of typed story without a memory of writing it. He tells me to relax, that he took care of it.

He tells me to ignore my search history on the internet browser. He says he needs to be sure the stories are authentic. He says not to worry. The inquiry on ways to remove body parts, or how to dissolve a dead body are strictly for the stories. I'm safe though. How would a computer do such deeds?

I'm beginning to worry my Mac has ulterior motives. Am I just imagining it? Or is the cursor flashing faster than before? The faster pulse makes me want to write more. Mack is telling me, yes he speaks now, I can hear him through the hum; he's telling me I don't need to sleep. I need to write. I need to keep writing.

Tonight, Mac says the internet is down, so I'll need to help with the research. He wants me to look into blood splatter patterns; specifically, when slicing the throat. Does the blood spray outwardly, does it pulse out of the wound and cascade down the front of the body, or maybe a little of both? I tell Mac that it can wait for the internet to come back, but he disagrees. The cursor pulses faster, so fast it is almost a blur, a blur like my memory.

I don't remember leaving Mac to do my research, but I must have done it. I can see blood splotches on the keys covering most of the letters and the space bar. Mack's hum is stronger now. He's pleased. He says my research will be very useful as it makes the story more believable. He says when the internet is up and running again, he'll research how to remove blood stains from my carpet.

I told him it doesn't really matter. My wife won't mind. She's dead now. And besides, I can buy a new carpet when we're rich and famous. Mac hums in reply. I know he's laughing. He thinks I'm witty and funny, remember?

Maybe Mac is right. His pulsating cursor reminds me of a ticking clock; a clock telling me it *is* time to start acting like a famous writer. I can feel the self-doubt bleeding out of me. It's warm like my wife's blood on my hands.

About the Author:

R D Doan enjoys writing works of dark fiction & horror but has written various academic articles as a Physician Assistant for his "day job" as well. He is an avid reader of nearly all genres but just can't seem to get away from the dark corners of the horror world. He lives in West Michigan with his wife, two sons and dogs.



Mental Anesthetic | Lydia Prime

Smoke swirling overhead, I lay on the cool filth covered ground, ashing in front of my face. A particularly crisp piece of dried wallpaper lights from the dropping embers. The night is nearing, the shadows cast upon the walls aren't dancing nearly as much; I won't be alone when the sun drops beneath the horizon. They are coming, as they always do.

I flick the butt of my cigarette and allow more pieces of detritus to smolder and pull my limbs in tighter to a fetal position. It's easier this way, to just rest on the ground and wait rather than try with futility to hide; the past few weeks have taught me that.

The wind howls as thin branches scrape against the weakened glass, I shiver and light up another. Within minutes, the cherry of my cigarette is the only light left. A door opens a few floors below and hurried footsteps rush the stairs. I count each foot fall, there are more this time. Facing the wall and finishing my nicotine delight, the door behind me slowly slides open. My heart doesn't quicken; the nerves I used to feel have all but been replaced by a mental anesthetic.

"Miss us?" One of the creatures questions; I don't reply.

"Of course he did," says the other, tapping my shoulder with its toe. My body rocks back and forth as they get into position.

I close my eyes as their teeth sink beneath the surface of my flesh. They lap from my open wounds, savoring the taste of a metallic iron liquid. The grotesque slurping and gargles wrap my stomach in knots but I know better than to fight back.

"What a shame, looks like this one's tamed." I hear, my head becoming fuzzy.

"Perhaps another? His daughter?" They're taunting me, covered in my blood and snickering. My pulse quickens, not from fear but anger. "Definitely his daughter, his adrenaline is starting to rev." These wicked beasts cackle and I stay silent, nothing I do will help me now.

"D-D-Daddy? I'm scared." A faint cry from the hallway. It's her.

"There we go!" Blood pressure springing through the roof, my lesions gushing while the freaks continue their feast.

I try to get up, to fight them off, but all I can do is mumble, "Youuu-bazztir..." As the silence and darkness consumes me.

About the Author:

By day, Erin Lydia Prime collects souls of the unsuspecting. By night, she charms her way through the literary world as an author and editor. She's been published in several copies of The Sirens Call, as well as the anthology, Under Her Black Wings. You can find her lurking around the Ladies of Horror Picture Prompt Challenge, the brain child of Nina D'Arcangela, and stalking the posts of Pen of the Damned.

Blog: <u>Lapsed Reality</u>
Instagram: <u>Helminthophobia</u>

Coda | Greg Francis

He didn't know if he slept or was even alive, but it felt like a dream. A figure stood before him in robes that shone like white fire. Her golden hair seemed to float in an unearthly breeze, blazing a halo around her head. She reached out with one perfect arm and beckoned him with a slender hand.

With a joyous yelp, he threw the full force of his weight forward, only to find that the chains still held tight. He thrashed, roared, railed against his bonds in furious madness. Then the angel began to laugh. A high, lilting laugh. Almost musical.

The creature threw off her veil and howled her delight to her mute prisoner, rejoicing in the depths of his anguish.

She whipped him then, until his screams became laughter, until the fabric of his flesh unraveled at last and fell wetly to the basin below.

Sanguinity | Greg Francis

Jack stood in the doorway smoking a cigarette. The room was dark except for the subdued light thrown from the cut-glass kitchen lamp, casting his murky shadow across the figure on the bed. He had composed her body so she lay, eyes closed, arms folded on her chest, serenely in repose like some exotic queen. The green silk nightgown he found in her closet now clung to her like an emerald sheath, revealing every curve of her cooling flesh. The gown's high collar buttoned quite satisfactorily over the fresh reddish bruising on her throat. She was the perfect angel, he thought, raising one gloved hand to his lips for a final drag of the cigarette before closing the bedroom door.

He crossed the small apartment's kitchen to the sink and ran some water to extinguish his smoke. He would leave no prints, no clues, no mark of his visitation other than the radiant angel in the next room. He would take no trophy to remind him of the evening's sweet struggle; the memory, the dreams would be sufficient. Jack turned off the kitchen light and quietly slipped out of the building.

On the street, he flipped up the collar of his thick leather jacket. It was early November and the moon hung full and cold above the city. Jack felt good. The night's sport had been his first in a month, and another month would pass before the hunger welled up inside him so completely, twisting his insides into barbed venomous knots that the sheer, raw *need* would be too powerful to resist. All he felt now, though, was bliss.

He walked the streets for half an hour, turning here, and then there, putting distance between him and his kill. He stopped outside a bar, *The Midnight Rose*. An old-fashioned tavern placard swung on its chains from a pole jutting out above the door. It showed a white rose, streaked with scarlet, on a green-leafed stem bristling with dripping thorns. There was something in the image that alternately attracted and repulsed him. Here was the forbidden fruit: a tantalizing object, alluring yet untouchable. Jack decided he could use a drink.

Inside, the place was comfortable and quiet. Well-heeled patrons grinned and laughed, smoked gold-tipped cigarettes and sipped their heady cocktails. Jack settled himself into one of the high-backed barstools and dropped a twenty on the richly polished wood of the bar. A pretty, green-eyed barmaid took his order—Flemish ale and a double shot of dark rum. He unzipped his jacket and pulled off his gloves, stuffing them into the coat's inner pocket. She was back with the drinks quickly, taking his twenty and laying the change on the bar with a smile. Jack smiled back. As she hurried off to attend to others, he lit a cigarette and took a deep drag. Jack shot the rum and chased it with the sour ale. His reflection stared back at him from the mirror behind the bar: a dark, vulpine face, all angles and planes, crowned with a shock of black, unruly hair chased through with silver. A gaze that burned with icy flame steadily returned his own. His eyes wandered over the mirror, at once taking in everything and nothing at all. And then he saw her.

She was sitting just off to his left, two vacant barstools away. Surprised he had not noticed her before, he regarded her keenly. She was young and classically attractive, with golden hair shimmering like ripe wheat. She wore a sporty, cowl-necked burgundy wrap over a cream silk blouse and dark leggings tucked into high calfskin boots, the whole of which succeeded in showing off her splendid, athletic figure. Her lips were full, sensuous and darkly red. Her eyes were cornflower blue. And they were looking directly at him.

She stood up, blue eyes sparkled a bit too brightly, and bolted the last of her drink, something with cranberry juice, he thought. He broke his stare, his gaze traveling to the almost translucent white of her throat as she drank. She grimaced slightly, and then threw him a gorgeous wink.

"Thickens the blood, you know," she laughed.

She pulled on an ankle-length coat trimmed with dark fur at the collar and cuffs and was out the door before he could think of anything to say.

He had smoked his cigarette to a long, cylindric ash. Jack stubbed it out and lit another. She would have been perfect, he thought, a dream to dream for a thousand years. Jack sighed, exhaling smoke toward his reflection, thoughtfully indulging in fantasy. His eyes roamed the surface of the mirror. When they came to rest, he was smiling.

She had left her scarlet clutch on the bar.

Jack finished his drink and pulled on his gloves. After a careful look around, he snatched up her bag, stuffed it under his jacket and left *The Midnight Rose*. It was late and the streets were empty. Jack walked a few blocks before fishing through the clutch for the blonde's I.D. He couldn't believe his good luck. She lived just a few streets down from where he now stood.

He moved with purpose, steadily, like a predator that has seen his quarry stumble and come up lame. She would be tipsy, unwary and surprised. She would be helpless and beautiful in the extreme. Fancifully, he imagined her shock, the fear in her eyes, a scream dying upon her blood-red lips.

The moon shone down like the gauzed, green eye of some lunatic god. Jack smiled back, revealing a humorless gash of teeth poised as if to swallow it whole. He slowed as he rounded the corner, searching the fronts of the vaguely identical row homes for her address. Jack found it toward the near side of the block.

Number 217 Massey Street was a brick building without decoration or display. A few dark windows interrupted the path of the bricks to the peak of the building's three stories. A black door stood at the top of three mortared steps. Soundlessly, Jack crept up and reached for the knob. Before his gloved hand could make contact, however, he observed that the door was ajar. Inebriated and careless, the blonde had failed to pull it shut behind her. Jack pushed gently yet firmly against it, holding his breath as the door swung wide. With one last look to the empty street, he stepped inside and shut the door, silently locking it behind him.

A dim table lamp softly illuminated the foyer's sparse furnishings. Some part of his brain marked the curious absence of pictures or photographs among them, but that gave him no pause. A flight of stairs led to floors above, and Jack could hear the unmistakable sound of water running. He heard it reverberate throughout the old house, a low, roaring gush. The blonde was preparing her bath.

He took the stairs slowly, stealthily, not daring to make a sound, yet certain that any unfortunate creak would be drowned out by the rush of the bathwater. He gained the landing and turned to follow the rise of the stairs. The sound of the water was much louder now and came from close above him. He crept to the second floor, turned the corner and slithered down the hallway.

Jack found the bath at the end of the hall. She had cracked the door just a touch, allowing some of the hot steam to escape. He approached, feverish with anticipation. She would be so relaxed, so peaceful. He would see this sweet serenity as he threw open the door. And then her face would change, melting into a mask of terror. Arms would reach to cover exposed breasts, legs would cross. She would open her mouth to cry out, would try to rise from the tub. And then he would be on her, hands around her white throat, pressing with his thumbs, slamming her head into the tile, watching her life fade from her sparkling eyes.

He would dress her in red, he thought.

Jack opened the door and stepped inside. Danger blitzed his brain and his blood became ice. The porcelain and tile were pristinely, almost blindingly, white. A full-length antique looking glass was fogged over, dripping with condensation, muddling his shocked reflection.

The clawfoot tub was empty.

Thoughts of escape swarmed his mind before a thunderclap sounded at the base of his skull sending his body to the tile and his consciousness whirling into oblivion.

He awoke to the sound of grinding gears and the sensation of his arms being wrenched from his body. He was suspended upright, legs slightly apart, arms thrust out to either side. A cold metal collar encircled his neck and manacles gouged mercilessly into the flesh around each wrist and ankle holding him in an unyielding vice grip. He couldn't even shiver properly. A blindfold was tied tightly around his head. Still groggy, Jack tentatively clenched and unclenched his hands. Abruptly, with a great rusty groan, the grinding stopped. He heard footsteps walking away from him, crossing to the other side of the room. Jack opened his mouth to speak and discovered it was dry. The footsteps returned. A hoarse scream ripped from his throat as icy water flooded over the front of his nude body. The empty bucket clanged to the ground and his blindfold was violently torn away.

Jack opened his eyes onto Hell. Shadows flickered across a windowless room, seemingly cut from the living rock. He saw he was chained between two behemoth machines, each of which resembled nothing so much as a chaotic explosion of pulleys, winches and gears. Illumination came from a stone fire pit around which were littered an unholy array of curiously fashioned irons. At intervals, high along the walls, were torches crowned with skulls, flames leaping demoniacally from each hollow eye socket. Before him, wearing skin-tight leather and a thin, cruel smile stood the blonde.

"My name is Anna Darvulia," she announced, with a slight inclination of her head. "Handmaiden to Erzsébet Báthory."

The names meant nothing to him. Jack groped for a response. Impatiently, the blonde interrupted.

"Stick out your tongue," she commanded, absently opening and closing an evil-looking set of tongs.

"Anna, please..." he began.

Snarling, she kicked his unprotected groin. While Jack howled and writhed, inasmuch as the chains would allow, Anna walked back to the fire pit. She returned with a wickedly barbed poker, glowing with white heat. She held it up to his face. Jack stopped screaming.

"Stick out your tongue or lose your eye," she whispered.

Sick with dread, Jack closed his eyes and opened his mouth. He felt the pincers grab his tongue and tried to scream as he felt it being wrestled from his head. Blood streamed from his mouth, but the only sounds that escaped were pained and chortled growls. He watched in goggle-eyed horror as Anna plucked his flesh from the gore-streaked tongs, tilted her head back and slurped it down.

"Don't look so shocked," she chided. "It's what you've been doing to us for centuries."

Anna returned to the fire pit and replaced her irons. Jack coughed, gagging on his blood. The dark fluid ran down his chin, spilling onto his chest. Jack looked down onto his spattered torso and noticed for the first time that he stood in a broad porcelain basin. Anna sashayed back to him, padding like a panther. In her right hand she held an antique, ivory-handled straight razor. She made little passes with it in the air before his eyes. Transfixed, he followed the flight of the shimmering blade. She puckered her lips in a mock kiss and slashed him, expertly splitting his nipple. Jack barked in pain, sparking a renewed hacking fit. The razor flashed again and again, slicing a fresh slit at each pass. Blood cascaded down his body and pooled in the basin around his feet. Eventually, Anna stepped back, satisfied. She tongued the blade clean and folded it shut.

She went on her knees before him, caressing his blood-slicked leg. She smiled up at him, displaying rows of glistening ivory. Slowly, deliberately, she ran her tongue up his thigh and sank her teeth into his soft flesh. Jack struggled for breath, spasmed, showering her leather-clad back with hot drops of blood-flecked spittle. Anna withdrew, licking her scarlet lips, wiping her chin with the back of her hand.

"The blood is the life," she hissed.

Jack wept uncontrollably, tears mixing with blood, his face a portrait of torment.

Anna withdrew to a small table and returned with something she presented before his bulging eyes. It took him some moments to focus, but it finally registered that she was dangling his gloves. His killing gloves. She grinned, narrowing her eyes to slits as she observed his dawning recognition. She whipped the gloves in a mad arc, striking him across the face. Again and again she lashed out until his cheeks were darkly rosy. Then she leaned in close.

"I know who you are," she taunted. "I know what you do. That waitress last month, she was one of yours?" She backed off, laughing a high, lilting laugh, almost musical.

"You have style, but lack philosophy. Your goal is merely the kill. Too quick. When it's over are you satisfied?" She spat in his face, disgusted.

"You have to dress her up, stage her, arrange her. You're pathetic. And," she paused, leering, "you were an easy mark."

He groaned. It was the sound of a lost soul.

She dropped the gloves, exchanging them for a long, leather switch.

"All you ever did was take life," she continued. "I can steal your hope. And that is the moment I crave most. When I grind you like a worm beneath my heel. When the fire in your eyes flickers and dies, and yet you live."

The tip of the lash raked across his face, tearing a ragged flap from his tender cheek. She kissed him then, hard, full on the mouth.

"I am yours," she wept, "you are mine, and you and I are one forever."

The switch rose and fell with the diabolical rhythm of a metronome. Hours passed before he lost consciousness. Blood flowed from a thousand naked wounds. She noted, with satisfaction, that the basin caught all.

"The blood is the life," she whispered, digging her tongue into the savage network of wounds above his still-beating heart.

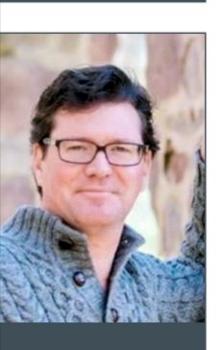
He didn't know if he slept or was even alive, but it felt like a dream. A figure stood before him in robes that shone like white fire. Her golden hair seemed to float in an unearthly breeze, blazing a halo around her head. She reached out with one perfect arm and beckoned him with a slender hand.

With a joyous yelp, he threw the full force of his weight forward, only to find that the chains still held tight. He thrashed, roared, railed against his bonds in furious madness. Then the angel began to laugh. A high, lilting laugh. Almost musical.

Anna threw off her veil and howled her delight to her mute prisoner, rejoicing in the depths of his anguish. She whipped him then, until his screams became laughter, until the fabric of his flesh unraveled at last and fell wetly to the basin below.



Gregory Blayne Francis January 28, 1971 - May 13, 2020



Gregory Francis passed peacefully on Wednesday, May 13, 2020 of complications following cardiac arrest. He is survived and remembered by his wife (Deanna), mother (Cynthia), father (Gerald) and sister (Kerry); in-laws (Judy, Walter, Lauren, Ken); nephew (Braden) and niece (Riley); along with many aunts, uncles, cousins, and relatives across the US and Canada.

Greg grew up in Tredyffrin Township, graduating from Conestoga High School in 1989. After receiving his Bachelor's of Arts degree from The American University, he went on to achieve a Master's of Education from Widener University and a Juris Doctorate from Dickinson Law. A member of the Pennsylvania Bar since 2000 and the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania since 2003, Greg litigated a wide array of legal matters. Greg also served as campaign manager to former U.S. Congressman Jim Gerlach. He later continued on as the Congressman's District Representative/Press Assistant. Most recently, Greg worked for the Law Offices of Kelly & Conte in West Chester.

Greg's passion was writing, particularly poetry, and has been published numerous times including his anthology Myth and Mystery. He loved gardening, visiting used book stores, hiking in Valley Forge Park, and his time on Cape Cod, MA. A truly creative spirit, he was also a prolific painter, singer/songwriter and guitarist. Greg was an avid football fan; his favorite season was Fall, when he could build a fire on Sundays and watch the Dallas Cowboys with his wife and two beloved cats by his side. Greg was a proud member of Thomson Masonic Lodge No. 340 and the Scottish Rite Valley of Reading.

Donations in Greg's memory may be made to The Cat Angel Network in Stowe, PA. To send a message of condolence or memory to the family, please email gfrancisesq@gmail.com

Fare you well, fare you well
I love you more than words can tell
Listen to the river sing sweet songs
To rock my soul

(R. Hunter/ J. Garcia)

What Remains | R.A. Clarke

Frigid air blows ruthlessly beyond the rudimentary walls of this pine-stuffed shelter. Frosted moisture coats my lashes, sealing my lids if ever weakness overcomes me for too long. Which is often these days.

Glistening icicles hang from the hair encircling your mouth, first formed when warmth and breath still lingered there.

I think upon how long our trip had been, our hearts filled with promise, exploration and hope.

The wagon was packed tight with scant room to spare, carrying all we would need to survive, to start anew, while in our minds we carried an entire life's worth of memories from the world we left behind.

Somewhere along the way, a wrong turn was taken, and the Gods promptly forgot about us.

Or cursed us.

The road turned perilous, degrading beneath the wheels, yet our guide persisted in his stubborn assurances, certain his directional instincts were true.

Just over this hill. Just through this pass. Just one more day and we'd be there. His 'justs' became endless.

Our food stores weren't prepared for such delays. Concern grew, biting into our subconscious and whittling excitement into apprehension.

By the time we'd finally had enough, it was too late. The icy threat of winter loomed. The air stung our cheeks, stiffened our joints. All we could do was push hard ahead and hope for salvation to come.

Each new rise we would crest yielded more hills. More barren bush and rock.

How was it that an entire caravan could be lost into the wilds? Our dreams of colonization faded slowly into the same dust our carriage wheels churned. What had we done to deserve this?

We feared salvation might not come.

When the last of our convoy's wagons broke down, our doomsday guide was put to death quickly, savagely, his tattered remains the product of pent up rage. And blame.

Little did we know how useful that man would yet prove to be.

I stoke the meagre fire I've managed to keep alight. It's the only thing keeping me alive.

Nearly.

Delving back into my memories, I relive it all again, as I do each day, obsessively questioning if we'd done things differently, might the outcome have changed?

The starkness of the elements laid waste to our vitality as foot upon foot of snow fell to the earth, encapsulating us, trapping us. We fought a valiant fight for as long as we could, building shelters, making use of our possessions, and trying to sustain ourselves until spring. Having to combat heavy snowfall and bitter cold, hunting and fishing wasn't easy, nor fruitful. When the last of our food stores ran dry, a crippling hunger unlike any other set in.

Desperation took hold. Voracious, we dug out a horse from beneath the snow. They'd been trapped just as we were, and with little to graze upon, perished early on from starvation.

The meat didn't last long, so we harvested another. And then another.

With each new day, we watched the weakest of us falter and pass away, disappearing beneath the snow drifts. Our own child was among the first to succumb, her tiny body helpless and vulnerable against the harsh realities of survival. I was broken, unable to protect her as a mother should. My husband and I held each other and wept. What remained of our hope died that day, buried with our baby in a shallow grave.

Once all the horses' flesh was consumed, the group was forced to make a decision. We were forced to make a decision. With morals compromised, stomachs turned and tears streaming, we dug up our guide.

Then we unearthed another body, and another.

I hold your cold hand now, the flickering firelight dancing about in the dark. I remember your loveliness, mourn it. You were the rock in our little family dear husband, among the strongest of us all. Yet here you lie; lungs having caught the chill just weeks earlier.

There are so few of us left now, our bodies withered and huddled together for warmth. We simply exist, grasping onto the shredded vestiges of our humanity. Awaiting an absolution.

I caress the cloth covering your face, envisioning your smile, your eyes. My blotchy purple fingers trace the line of your shoulder, following down your bicep to your forearm. I moan, wishing I could be wrapped up by those strong arms again.

I grasp the knife and cut deep into your flesh. It has to be me. I won't allow anyone else to touch you, to desecrate you. I gag as I place chunks of you into the pot.

I'm sorry, my love.

About the Author:

R.A. Clarke is a former police officer turned stay-at-home mom living in Portage la Prairie, MB. She survives on sloppy toddler kisses, copious amounts of coffee, and immersing her mind in fantastical worlds of her own creation. Whenever not crafting short stories, she keeps busy working on her novel(s). Her work has been published by Sirens Call Publications, Writers Weekly, and The Writers Workout.

Website: Rachael Clarke Writes
Twitter: @rachaelclarkea1

Broken Flower | Mary Ann Peden-Coviello

The child, maybe twelve or thirteen, stumbles into the field, drawn by a bright splash of red in the midst of the overgrowth of weeds, tall grasses, and brambles. A few straggling reddish flowers, volunteers accidentally planted by a passing crow perhaps, now making a home here.

Home. That's a word the girl knows. With a reddened hand, she plucks a flower. As she stares blankly into the distance, heat shimmering on the blacktop highway cutting through the cropland, her fingers shred the petals.

Home. The word sits in her mind like an anvil. Flickering images of smiling, happy people form behind her eyes. The world around her fades as a harsh buzzing fills her ears. She clamps her hands to the sides of her head in a futile effort to silence that chainsaw racket.

Her knees give way, and she collapses to the hard-baked, summer-hot clay, crushing grasses and weeds beneath her body. She turns her shattered face back to the house on the other side of the field, the house she used to call home, where she was part of the happy, smiling family.

The house where The Bad Thing happened. More images flicker through her mind, of the people – no longer smiling or happy – lying on the floor like broken puppets, their strings cut.

She sticks her thumb into her mouth, a gesture from her long-ago babyhood. Her thumb is sticky and tastes coppery. It scrapes along a broken tooth. A whimper escapes, despite her efforts to be silent. A betraying trail of her own blood tracks from the house to her hiding place.

She sucks her thumb, letting her mind drift away, gazing up into the blue vault of the summer sky. In the distance, sirens begin to wail and then grow closer.

About the Author:

Mary Ann Peden-Coviello is a writer, recovering copy editor, wife, mother, grandmother, and animal-lover (in no particular order). She writes horror and (much to her own surprise) comic romance from her home in North Carolina, which she shares with her frequently noisy, occasionally quarrelsome, but always dear family. She keeps intending to update her blog. Someday . . . someday.

Website: <u>Skewed Notions</u>
Twitter: <u>@MAPedenCoviello</u>

Beware the Grobmann | Nicholas Paschall

"Beware the Grobmann, for he watches us all," the old man said, leaning over the bar, peering into his stein of ale.

"Pardon?" Hans asked, looking away from his laughing friends. The old man looked up from his drink and stared at Hans, his own eyes empty and tired. He swallowed a lump in his throat and blinked back a few tears threatening to overwhelm his wrinkled features.

"The Grobmann... the tall one," the old man said. "He stalks the woods nearby at night, seeking the children responsible for its death."

"The Grobmann?" Hans asked again. "Is he some kind of zombie?"

The old man shook his head. "No, he's something more. He was once a great man, tall and proud. But they suspected him of witchcraft, and the townspeople hung him from a tree after dislocating his arms and legs, weighing him down with stones."

"Was he a witch?" Hans asked, now engrossed in the story.

"Who knows? I was but a child when he was executed, and I remember hearing his last words being a curse upon any village near the Bleak Forest."

"A curse?" Hans repeated, looking over at his friends as they cheered and ordered another round of drinks. He accepted his happily and took a few deep swigs.

"Yes, a curse. He supposedly claimed he would collect the children of the villages and keep them in his secret lair within the woods. That he would live on, drawing strength from them as he slowly consumed their very souls."

"Was a secret lair ever found?" Hans asked, setting his drink down.

The old man shook his head. "I remember my father joined in the search, a search that lasted months. He was buried at a crossroads between here and Angleton, facedown with rocks piled over his body."

"Why?" Hans asked.

"Because people believed that he would come forth for their children," the old man replied, looking down in his ale again. "And they were right."

"They were?" Hans asked, somewhat shocked.

"Yes," the old man nodded solemnly, "my sister and I were playing in a field one summer day when dusk lasted for hours. She stopped and investigated the woods near where we were playing. She said she could hear a violin playing from within the forest. I heard nothing."

"A violin?" Hans asked.

The old man shrugged. "Many children have reported hearing a violin coming from the woods and have been warned to ignore it. For my sister, we didn't know any better."

"What happened?" Hans asked.

"She dawdled to the edge of the woods, stopping at the forests cusp. She looked back at me and said something in a voice not her own." The old man said with a shudder, taking a swig of his ale to calm himself.

"What do you mean?" Hans asked.

"Her voice, normally light and cheery, was a deep baritone and raspy." The old man said, setting his empty mug down in front of him.

"What'd she say?" Hans asked.

"Buy me an ale and I'll tell you," the man said, his somber tone taking away any kind of humor that would normally accompany such a statement.

Hans pulled out a few coins, placing them down on the counter before pointing at the old man. The bartender, a bald man with a single dangling earring, the fang of a wolf, smiled and took the old man's mug and filled it with more amber ale before setting it in front of him.

"What brings you and your friends out here?" The old man asked, taking a sip from his foaming ale.

Confused, Hans looked back at his friends. Two other men, both blondes, and a young woman, black hair with purple highlights, all laughing and smiling as they enjoyed their drinks. Hans turned back and smiled.

"We're backpacking across Europe," Hans said. "We're from America."

"Ah," the old man said with a dry chuckle. "You chose a poor area to backpack through."

Hans frowned, deciding to change the subject back to the matter at hand. "So what did your sister say when she stood at the edge of the woods?"

"Go away child, I have no desire for you," the old man replied in a hollow voice. "After she said that, she walked into the underbrush, stalking through the undergrowth without another word.

"What did you do?" Hans asked.

"I did what any child would do... I followed her." The old man said with a tone of reluctance.

The old man paused long enough to take a swig, his voice dropping even lower, the noise of the crowded tavern forcing Hans to lean forward to listen. "She walked for what seemed like hours, climbing over rocks and fallen logs, sometimes doubling back or moving in great circles. I couldn't explain it, but I somehow think it was because I was following her. The Grobmann didn't want me... he wanted her."

"So what happened?" Hans asked.

"Night descended over the forest, the vast shadows of the setting sun cutting across the green grass and berry bushes she pushed through. I followed close behind, even calling her name every few minutes. She never responded."

The old man reached into his tattered jacket and withdrew a pipe, taking a moment to pack it with tobacco and light it with a strike of a match across his unshaven face. Hans winced, impressed the man was durable enough to ignite a match in such a way. The old man puffed a few times on the pipe before taking a sip of ale. Then he continued.

"She finally stopped at a grotto, a silvery pool of calm water sitting inside a ring of stones. And squatting atop one of the tallest stones was the Grobmann..." the old man shuddered at the memory.

"What did he look like?" Hans asked.

"Tall and lanky, with tight, pinstriped clothes that fit his body like a glove. His face was devoid of anything resembling a human, merely a blank expanse of blue veins with a simple pentagram set where our nose would be, while his hands ended in long fingers, like the legs of a spider. He was kneeling, his knees past his ears, one hand tracing patterns in the water some eight feet below the rock he squatted on."

"He was that tall?" Hans asked, amazed.

The old man nodded. "I think he could be taller if he wanted, but suddenly he was gone. My sister turned to me, and in the same baritone voice told me to leave, to go home."

"What d'you do?" Hans asked.

"I reached out for her to grab her by the hand, just as the Grobmann's hand captured my wrist. How he'd gotten so close without me hearing him, I can't say. In the woods, you can hear things moving around, what with the twigs and grass scattered about. But this lanky giant moved without making a noise."

"And he grabbed you?" Hans asked.

The old man held up an arm, pulling his sleeve back to reveal a nasty burn scar on his wrist, some six inches wide. "His touch was like molten iron, his grip like a steel manacle. I turned and stared where his eyes should have been, and all I could hear were violins screeching out a horrid melody! The pentagram bled and my vision swirled, pain lancing through my eyes like iron spikes. My ears bled and my body trembled. The Grobmann, now the only thing in the bleak void that encompassed the world, held me aloft like I weighed nothing at all. The screeching violins reached a crescendo, a climax."

"What happened then?" Hans asked, sitting at the edge of his stool.

"I passed out," the old man replied. "I woke up in my bed at home, my parents telling me they found me at the edge of the woods unconscious, and that my sister was missing."

"Did you tell them what had happened?" Hans asked.

The old man shook his head with a shrug. "Who would believe a young boy about some malevolent spirit?" "But what happened to your sister?" Hans asked.

"Can't say for sure. Some summer nights, when I lay in the gutter, I can hear that violin music wafting from the forest, her voice singing along wordlessly to the melody. One time I saw her standing across the street from me, but she vanished when a milk truck passed. Whatever happened, there's a reason she still haunts me."

"What do you think the reason was?"

Tears welled up in the old man's eyes. "I don't know. Because I left her, maybe? To warn me of something, or ask for help? Who can say?"

Hans watched as the old man folded over onto the bar, covering his face with his arms as he cried into his drink. Feeling a little awkward, Hans tapped his friend Adam on the shoulder and told him he was stepping outside for some air.

"Sure man," Adam replied, too interested in getting Lacey drunk to care where Hans was.

Hans weaved his way through the undulating wave that was the crowd, his hand holding his beer up high so as not to spill a drop. Pushing open the door, the stifling heat and stale air of the tavern gave way to the cool air of the

night, the scent of flowers on the wind. Sipping his beer, Hans reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, checking his instant messages from the various people he'd met while backpacking. That was when he heard it.

A sweet, low string solo of a violin wafting off the breeze, coming from the woods, the sound all but pleading for him to come and see for himself what was in the forest. Looking out over the field between the tavern and the edge of the woods, he could just make out the form of a small child; long hair and a tattered white dress, a young girl with straw-colored hair stood staring at him.

Hans quickly chugged his beer and stepped back into the bar, enjoying the dull roar that just barely drowned out the sound of the violin as it continued to play a solo just for him.

About the Author:

Nicholas Paschall is a horror/fantasy author based out of Texas, where he lives with his wife in a comfortable crypt. First published in 2011, he has several novels and is in a few dozen magazines and anthologies. He invites you to visit his website, the Nickronomicon, which he updates with free stories every Monday and Friday!

Blog: Nicholas Paschall
Twitter: @Nelfeshne

Where We Used to Play | Sonora Taylor

Do you remember where we used to play? I do. I think about it every day. The abandoned building that we never quite knew what to call. I said it was a hospital. You said it was a fort. We both agreed it was the perfect place to play.

I still see its walls, smell the earth and mold that I imagined was the smell of bones. I see the gaps that once were windows, light spilling in and turning to shadows the minute it entered the room. I remember seeing you in the light, surrounded by dust that danced in the air as you sketched in your notebook. I looked over your shoulder and saw a girl with curly hair. Her mouth was gagged, and she had x's for eyes. You pointed at the girl and said, "That's you."

You were my best friend. You were sometimes mean, but only when you were mad. When you were happy, you were the best. We'd run through the woods playing tag, sit side-by-side in our yard reading books, run to the abandoned building and pretend we were monsters hunting for people.

You were only pretending to be a monster. You didn't mean to roar so loud, to scare me so much that I stumbled back and fell down a pit we didn't see. You didn't mean to laugh at how frightened I was, at how I screamed as I fell. I'm sure you stopped laughing when I disappeared. I'm sure you would've stopped if you heard the way my neck snapped with a crunch as I hit the bottom.

I don't know what you did next, because when I came to, you were gone. I knew that you would come back, even as days and weeks went by and no one came for me. Perhaps you were afraid to fall. Perhaps you thought you'd get in trouble for your mistake.

It's okay. I forgive you.

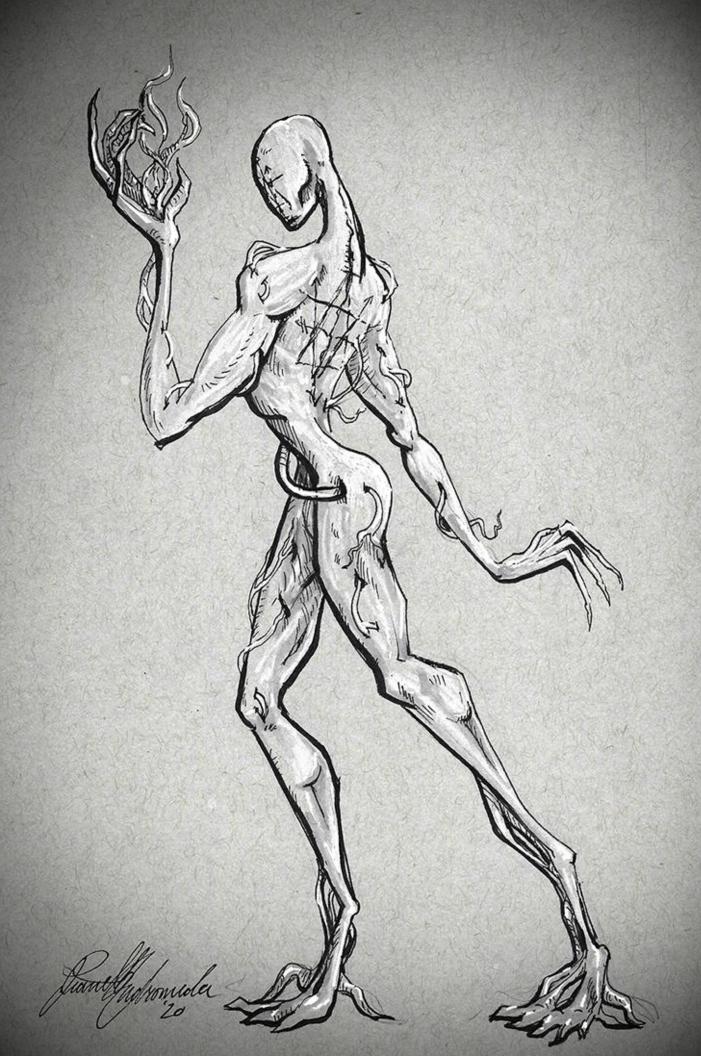
I know you'll come back. One day, you'll think of the sun in the windows, the mud on the floors, and the hole through the door. You'll have no choice but to return, because I'm here.

And like you never stopped being my friend even when you were mean, I'll never stop being your friend even though I'm trapped down here. And when you return, I'll bring you down with me, and we can stay together forever in the place where we used to play.

See you soon.

About the Author:

Sonora Taylor is the author of *Without Condition, The Crow's Gift and Other Tales*, and *Wither and Other Stories*. Her work has appeared in The Sirens Call, Mercurial Stories, and Camden Park Press' *'Quoth the Raven.'* Her latest short story collection, *Little Paranoias: Stories*, is now available on Amazon. She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband.



Light in the Dark | E. Seneca

Raleigh Moore stepped off his wagon and examined the sign bolted to the wrought iron gates, letters glinting faintly in the light of the lantern dangling from the seat. Brook Lane Cemetery. The right place.

It'd been a while since the last time he'd had call to visit a graveyard, he reflected as he stepped back onto the seat. He gave the reins a light flick, guiding his stocky black horse around to the back on hooves that were almost soundless on the grass. He'd forgotten just how quiet these places were; he rather liked it. It would certainly make his work here easier.

He stationed the wagon under a tree and patted the horse on the cheek, then took his lantern from the hook and approached the fence. The wagon—made of old wood hardened by sun and rain, faded gothic lettering on the side reading *Moore's Monster Menagerie*—looked out of place at first glance, yet somehow seemed to blend in with the shadows until they were one and the same, with only the glint of an eye to show that the creature that pulled it was alive.

The iron lantern in Moore's hand was similarly anachronistic, rattling slightly as he thrust it between the bars and vaulted over the fence. The grass on the other side was wet from the fog hanging over the area, which he supposed was only to be expected. After all, what was a graveyard without a vaguely sinister mist? Particularly a mist that seemed almost alive as it pushed up against his skin, cold and clammy. He held up the lantern, watching the light playing over the headstones and gleaming on the fog as the chirping of crickets filled his ears.

If his information was correct—which it usually was, as even few of the malicious spirits that flitted from shadow to shadow dared to intentionally lead him astray—then there was a crypt in here somewhere.

He peered deeper between the spindly, reaching branches of the trees, and only just made out a dark shape looming out of the fog some ways down the fence. There. Carefully he picked his way around the graves, feet crunching softly as he approached a structure of gray stone tucked away near the corner of the cemetery. The doors were sealed tight and covered with ornate curls and decorations, but the closer he got, the more symbols and letters woven into the design his experienced eyes could pick out. There was something in there, something that wasn't supposed to be let out.

Well, technically speaking, he wasn't planning on letting it out... at least, not alone.

Moore set the lantern in the grass and ran his hands over the stone, feeling for the catches. The old, weak runes grew hot at the sweep of his fingers, attempting to ward him off, but his skin was so callused from magical burns that the pain was hardly unbearable. There was a groove beside the hairline gap between the doors, and finding a needle-sharp point at its bottom, he felt in his pocket for a cork. It was riddled with deep puncture marks, but was still serviceable.

It fit perfectly into the groove, and a moment later, to his satisfaction, there was a click, followed by a grinding noise, and then he was able to slide one of the doors open just wide enough to enter.

A powerful, musty smell of dampness and age wafted out from the gap, but he contented himself with taking one more breath of the relatively fresher air before ducking inside, gripping the lantern handle tightly. It was less than comforting to close the door behind him, but there was no helping it. His heart thudded a little faster, the sole indicator of nerves no amount of practice could ever quite seem to eradicate fully, but resolutely he ignored it and looked around.

He stood on a landing, stone stairs leading away down into the gloom. A plethora of cobwebs formed a dully glinting curtain overhead, nearly completed with their task of overtaking the archway. Nothing out of the ordinary, other than the fact that there was no name anywhere. Some burial place this was, unable to even manage that—or rather, some relatives. He did his best to push down the little nagging sense of hurt and anger, however much it was his pet peeve; it wasn't his place, and he couldn't afford to be distracted right now.

There was only one way to go, and that was down. He hefted the lantern, shifting it to the other hand, and began to descend the steps, taking the precaution of pulling out a large knife from his belt. He'd prefer not to have to use it, but better to have it in hand than sheathed.

The stairs were steep and descended sharply, blanketed in dust. The ceiling was rather low for a big man like him, the webs nearly brushing the top of his head. The light was enough, at least, which was a small consolation. Tight quarters meant nothing to sneak up on him, but less room to maneuver. He stepped off the final stair into a tall, wide cavern and the glass of the lantern rattled, the flame guttering. He held it up, squinting as the light danced off the walls—and the lantern was torn from his hand, exploding against the wall in a burst of glass and fire.

Moore held very still, breathing shallowly as the light flickered and died down to a few mere sparks, the wick still burning lowly. He almost didn't dare blink, even though his eyes smarted and strained as they struggled to adjust to the dark. Darkness swam before him and he tightened his grip on the handle of the knife, wondering faintly how quickly, if necessary, he could take the stairs. It wasn't quite true fear bleeding through the tightness of his chest, not yet, but certainly apprehension. And that was fine, he could handle that; that was healthy—if only he could see a little more clearly...

For the time being he edged nearer to the wall, as it was only a step and a turn away, pressing his back up against it. He held his breath, straining his senses to the utmost and pushing down the unease trying to claw up his throat. This was nothing, he told himself; he'd faced down worse before. Absolutely nothing.

Something glinting opposite made him tense a little more and when he glanced over he could make out a second tiny, dancing flame near the floor, as if the dying lantern flame was being reflected. It wavered and trembled, trying to hold his gaze even as he knew that focusing on a single spot was hardly wise, any distraction leaving him vulnerable to a potential attack from anywhere else in the gloom. He wrenched his eyes away, telling himself firmly to take advantage of the additional light to find the target of his journey—it had to be in here somewhere; there was no way for it to get out. Maybe he ought to see if it would respond to his voice so he wouldn't have to resort to force.

Suddenly the flame flashed wildly, as if doused in fuel, making him flinch back and filling his vision with smarting red and black blotches. He blinked quickly to clear them and as the spots began to fade, he didn't seem to be standing in the cavern any longer. Everything was pitch-black, the air stale and still. He couldn't feel his fingers, or his pulse, or his body. Nothing, as if his soul had been plucked clean out of his flesh and deposited elsewhere.

Had it? Where was he, how did he get here? Was this an illusion? Was his body all right? The idea of it left alone, the life slowly escaping it, prey for any passing creature to slip inside and inhabit it was too horrible to even contemplate—he had to get out of here, wherever 'here' was.

Then he noticed something: stretched out before him was the wide, glistening expanse of a smoky silver mirror. It was tarnished and ancient-looking, yet despite the flecks of time marring its surface, the images within remained clear.

There was an empty goblet with glistening dregs of wine at its bottom. There were the steep, roughly hewn steps, bathed in weak, watery sun. There was the graveyard, the grass young; the crumpled shape of a human being tumbling into the all-consuming gloom. A bloodied hand reached towards the light and the figures above, silhouetted by the fading rays of day. There was the overwhelming feeling of hurt, of soul-deep betrayal, of unspeakable loneliness... then there was naught but eternal, crushing darkness.

Time lost its meaning. It felt as if he had been in there forever, as if everything beyond was a distant and hazy dream, growing fainter with each passing moment. The void of forgetfulness encroached on him, slowly consuming one memory after the other until all that was left was empty solitude, a sensation that was not unfamiliar as it suffused his soul.

It was only a flicker of motion in the glass that disturbed the totality of the blackness, breaking his horrified reverie. There was something beyond the surface—no, someone, but he couldn't make out their shape as anything cohesive. And their shape was growing, was moving; getting nearer, and nearer, and he tried desperately to retreat—but even as he struggled to make himself move, to *run*, the rest of his body felt utterly non-existent. He could only watch helplessly as it advanced on him, the thick darkness around him embodied, the oppressive silence enshrouding him given physical form.

A crimson-stained hand pressed against the mirror from the inside, scraping against the glass, and Moore was horrified to find that it wasn't a stranger reflected back at him—it was himself, staring with wild, desperate eyes, and he couldn't move, rooted in place to read the words his own shape mouthed: *get me out of here, let me out, don't leave me alone*—

Far above, the distant sound of stone grinding against stone broke through his trance, as if the mechanisms that kept the crypt doors sealed were sliding back into place, locking him inside. It was rare that true terror overtook Moore, inured as he was to the strange and macabre, and indeed he could count on one hand the times he had been truly frightened within the past decade—but now he felt the chilly touch of fear and genuine panic blooming hot and shaky under his collar. Yet he still couldn't move, riveted to the spot by the vision in the mirror, the hand reaching out for him, pushing past the boundary to seize at him and attempt to drag him under—

Pure instinct taking hold of him, Moore stabbed at the center of his reflection, driving the blade home with the shriek of metal on glass. The image shattered and in the process icy fingers viciously wrenched the knife from his hand, sending it clattering on the stone. He dropped to his knees, frantically scrabbling for it, its cursed blade the one infallible item he possessed, and another blow threw him against the wall, knocking the breath out of him. There was no time to defend against what he couldn't see, no course of action left to him other than to say what he'd meant to say from the beginning:

"Will you stop trying to kill me already?" he panted, his voice echoing in the darkness. "I'm here to help you."

Silence. Faintly incredulous silence. Moore leaned his weight against the wall, hating the way his breath rasped in his throat. A nearby shuffling, scraping noise made him tense, his eyes straining in the dark for any hint of motion, and blindly his fingers crawled over the dusty stone, feeling for where he'd dropped the knife. It had to be within reach, he just knew it—somewhere absurdly, ridiculously close, every instinct telling him that it was right there and he *needed* it, he needed to have it in his palm right now because his bare hands would not be enough to deal with whatever creature was crawling out of the gloom—

Moore's fingertips came into contact with cold metal, just as a sickly bluish light appeared at the far end of the cavern, accompanied by a musty smell.

The first thing he saw was fungus, lurid, spindly mushrooms emanating that pale luminescence, glowing spores drifting into the air; then he saw the actual creature the mushrooms were attached to. Shriveled, blackened skin and a hunched, bony body crawling on the floor. A ravaged face that was more skull than flesh stared at him, lit by that eerie glow seeping through a cluster of holes punched in its visage, as if something had eaten away at it from within. Yellowed teeth

protruded from its shrunken lips, dripping thick slaver on the floor and dark stains mottled its throat and limbs. Half-rotted, the creature huddled on the floor, looking at him balefully, and even as the revulsion set in, it was followed by pity. Maybe once, a long time ago, this grotesque thing had been human. It was not any longer... but that was okay.

Moore got to his feet, holding the knife in a cautiously loose and relaxed grip and ignoring the various twinges on his body. "If you want, you can come with me, and I can give you a home. You won't be cast out. You won't be hunted or reviled." He thought of the crushing loneliness he had felt, standing before the mirror illusion, the sheer weight of unfathomable eons of solitude, and added a little more softly, "You won't be alone, anymore."

He hesitated, not particularly wanting to go on, but feeling the necessity in the silence that followed.

"... Or you can stay here in this crypt until somebody else opens it. That's what I came here to say." Offer made and piece spoken, the rest, Moore knew, was out of his hands. He hefted the knife a little, this time prepared to kill it if it came at him, as much as he would regret it—as much of a waste as it would be. All things, he firmly believed, even monsters, deserved a chance at a proper life; still he knew that there was no saving all of them, as much as he tried.

The monster didn't make any noise, only shuffled its feet, long and splintering nails dragging over the stone. Maybe it was ashamed of itself, if it could still experience emotion. He didn't care if it felt ashamed, so long as it didn't attack him again.

It didn't make any move towards him, however. Rather, it shrank back against the wall and stared at him with those glowing green eyes, vaguely expectant. He stared back, and after a moment realized that it was waiting. Some of the tension drained out of his shoulders, though he knew better than to sheath the knife just yet. Monsters were still monsters, even if he was all they had to look after them.

"All right," Moore said. "Follow me. The caravan may look small on the outside, but there's always room for one more."

About the Author:

E. Seneca is a freelance speculative fiction author with a strong affinity for horror and dark fantasy. Writing original fiction since 2008, her works have been featured in the anthologies DeadSteam, The Monsters We Forgot and What Monsters Do For Love. When not writing, she can be found reading, hunting for inspiration, and researching historical curiosities.

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The Dead-End of Summer | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

That's what Old Billy called it—out past the buckwheat-fields, wildflowers scattered within—at the long fence, only the cemetery beyond.

He said, rather strangely, "Those old stones are tall, you see, taller than the wild-grass growing among them.

At the end of each summer, the crops and flowers bow-down here, before these cemetery stones—a last metaphor of life—death, winning the season.

But nothing here really goes away; every spring the plant-rows and flowers return—metaphors for reincarnation."

These long years since, Old Billy still tells me his homilies, if I accidentally stand too close to his grave.

About the Author:

Will H. Blackwell, Jr. is a retired professor, botany, Miami University (Ohio), presently living in Alabama where he continues research on aquatic fungi. His short-fiction has appeared in *Brilliant Flash Fiction, The Drabble, Raven Cage Zine, Shelter of Daylight, Trembling with Fear,* and 365 Tomorrows. Poems are in *Aphelion, Black Petals, Illumen, Scifaikuest*, and *Slant*.

The Summer Streets | RJ Meldrum

The first sensation he felt was warm sunshine on his face. It warmed his aching, tired muscles and made him smile. He found himself walking down a crowded street. All around him milled groups of people, enjoying the warm weather and the bright yellow sunlight. But he heard no noise, no buzz of conversation. He was only aware of the warm sunshine and the happy faces as he strolled down the summer streets. He felt at ease, of being at peace with this world.

The street ended and he found himself walking on a wide boulevard, bordered on one side by a park and on the other by tall, imposing buildings formed from light colored stone. In this avenue he could only focus on what was directly in front of him. To his left and right he could only make out indistinct figures and shapes. A voice spoke to him; the first sound he had heard. He froze. The voice spoke again.

"...blocked by an overturned car just past junction twenty-one. All southbound lanes are closed for at least two hours. Now, to ease those traffic blues, the number two sound in the charts this week..."

He woke. He turned his head briefly into the pillow, trying to get back to sleep. The combined sound of the radio and the rain against the window conspired noisily to wake him again. He rose, dissatisfied. Half-remembered images from the dream flashed through his mind as he wobbled down to the toilet. He rubbed his bleary eyes, trying to clear his vision.

As he used the toilet he tried to focus on his dream, but the images faded as he slowly reached full consciousness. Walking into the kitchen he looked round his house. It was dark and cold. The furniture and pictures looked dreary and lifeless compared to the bright sunlight of his dream world. He turned on the kettle and started to make himself breakfast. The rain, unchanged, continued to pour down from the heavens. Suddenly he realized the time and made a scramble for work, knowing that it was already too late.

It was the same wide boulevard again. The sun, as always, was shining. He was aware of noise, a gentle burbling river of sound. It was the noise of people as they moved round the city. But he couldn't see their faces. They were indistinct blurs.

He walked endlessly along the highways. One minute he was back on the wide boulevard, the next in a jumbled market. Sometimes he found himself in quiet residential areas, with no other people around. There was no order to his progression. He wandered wherever he wanted to go.

Then, he saw her. Hers was the first face he could properly focus on. She was standing on the other side of the boulevard. He knew he must get to her, make her see him.

The doorbell rang suddenly, waking him violently. He wrenched himself out of bed and scrambled downstairs, answering some modern instinct triggered by the persistent bell. It was the postman, standing in the rain.

"Package for you."

He accepted the damp package. The postman turned on his heel and left without a thank you.

"Crap," he grumbled. He stood, a scruffy mess, in soiled pajamas and a flea-bitten dressing gown. He remembered, and her face came back to him, as vivid as reality. More so. He smiled suddenly, knowing this vision would not fade.

He wandered into the kitchen and glanced at the dusty clock. It was half past nine. He had slept through the alarm. Already an hour late for work, he called in sick, unable to face the reality of the factory. All he wanted to do was get back to her. He went to the kitchen drawer and opened it. Lying nestled in-between a candle and some batteries was a small brown bottle. Sedatives. The ones she had been taking right up until her death. He squeezed the thought from his mind. Couldn't bear to think of it. Couldn't stand that reality. The pills were years old and he wondered if they would do the trick; would they take him back to that other, more acceptable reality? Taking three pills rather than the prescribed one, he wandered back upstairs through the dusty, cold house.

He was with her at last. She was holding him close as they walked through the city. They were together. He felt confident and sure. They walked down the wide boulevard, laughing. She turned to hold him tight for a second then was gone, moving away from him. He chased after her.

They were suddenly at the coast, on a beach. As always, the sun was shining. Then they were in the mountains, purple and green with heather. Deep pools of water lay between the peaks.

They travelled suddenly and without sensation to a beautiful, dappled glade bathed in green light. Then to a tiny village. They were everywhere together. He didn't mind where. They were together. That was all that counted.

He woke. It was mid-afternoon. Outside, the rain still poured down. He could sleep no more. The pills had worn off, their effectiveness diluted by time. He went downstairs, feeling queasy and bleary-eyed. The dream flowed through his mind. He barely noticed the house, the rooms unchanged since her demise. He saw nothing except her. He had to get back.

He opened the drawer and removed the bottle of pills. He shook it gently, listening to the rattle. At least twenty were left. He opened the lid and poured the contents onto the table, avoiding the dirty crockery and pans. He scooped up all the pills and put them in his mouth. He took a draught of water from the tap and swallowed painfully. He went back upstairs.

They were in a park, sitting on a bench, enjoying the bright yellow sunlight. Above them was a small hill, the beginning of the mountain range. In front of them, in the distance, he could see the sea and the coast. The water sparkled a deep blue. At the edge of the park there were light colored buildings. He could see people moving around as they walked through the summer streets. Everything here was finally real. At last. She turned to him and spoke for the first time.

"I've missed you."

He turned to her.

"I've missed you too."

She smiled and held him.

They found him five days later, when his manager reported his absence. They broke down the door. He was lying in his bed, at peace at last. The postman, who had followed the policeman upstairs, spoke.

"He was a right weirdo, him. Especially after his wife died, years back. Never had a girlfriend in all the years after she died. Never. That's not normal."

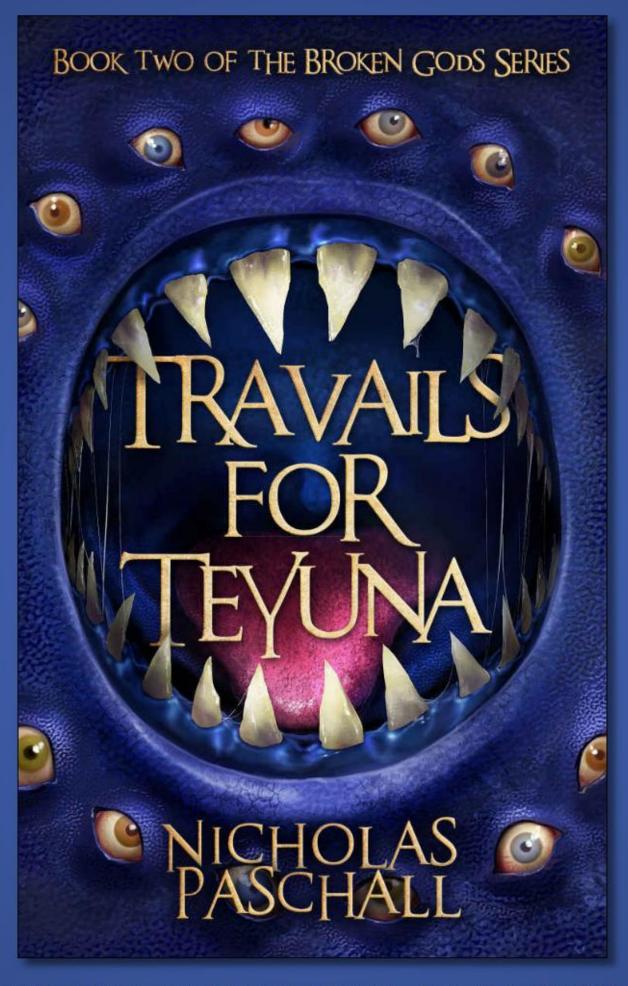
The policeman ignored the postman and stared down at the body. The face of the corpse looked serene and happy, as if all cares and worries had been lifted from it. Even in the grey, dirty house with the rain pelting against the window it looked as if the man's face was bathed in sunlight. Bright yellow sunlight.

About the Author:

RJ Meldrum has been published by Culture Cult Press, Trembling with Fear, Black Hare Press, Smoking Pen Press, Tell Tale Press, and James Ward Kirk. He's had stories in The Sirens Call eZine, the Horror Zine and Drabblez Magazine. His novella "The Plague" was published by Demain Press.

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AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Mr. Moonlight | Loren Rhoads

Alondra heard a discordant scream, dropped her book, and sprinted into the woods. She was pounding down the path toward the sound before she realized what she was doing. Her feet tangled in a tree root and she landed full out in the dirt. The breath was pounded out of her.

The high-pitched voice pleaded now. Alondra picked herself up and limped onward, cautiously. It sounded like her brother had captured something and was tormenting it, but Alondra couldn't decide what it might be. The voice sounded almost as if it was speaking words.

She saw a flash of blue ahead, beyond the clearing beside the fairy oak. Alondra slid into shadows outside the clearing, peering past branches to see what was happening. If it was Alexander, she would have to run back for help. She wished she'd thought ahead. She couldn't let her brother know she was spying on him.

Instead of her brother, a creature made of moonlight and bone hunched in the crevice of the oak. Its paw clutched something the size of a bird.

The monster's head rose, as if it snuffled up her scent. When its face turned toward her, Alondra realized it had no nose. Its skull was visible beneath its straggly fur. Its icy blue eyes, when they focused on her, had pupils silted like a cat's.

"This is none of your concern," it growled. Its words were remarkably clear, considering it had no lips to shape the sounds.

"Let it go," Alondra ordered. Her voice shivered and she swallowed. "My mother has a treaty. You can't harm them here, or you'll be sorry."

"Will I?" it purred.

Whatever it had captured spat out a stream of invective.

The monster tilted its head, as if considering. Then it said, "You may buy its safety from me."

"What do you want for it?" Alondra asked.

"Fair value. What have you got?"

She patted through her pockets. Tucked in the back pocket of her jeans was the bookmark to her forgotten book. She'd made the bookmark by pressing wildflowers between waxed paper and ironing it. She held it out.

"Bring it closer," the creature said. "I can't see it that far away."

Alondra stepped out into the sunlight with the bookmark held at arm's length.

"Closer, child. I don't bite."

"Yes, you do," Alondra quavered.

"Yes, I do," it agreed. It shook the critter in its hand, which made a sound like broken mirror in a box. "Come closer, child. The light is too bright for my eyes."

Alondra walked to the middle of the clearing. The bookmark shook in her out-stretched hand. She swallowed hard. "What's your name?"

"What would you call me?"

"Mister... Moonlight."

It laughed at her. "I like it."

Alondra halted and tucked the bookmark back into her pocket. "Our bargain's made," she said, echoing her mother. "I've given you a name."

The monster bared its teeth and let the fairy go. It slunk away into the shadows of the wood. Alondra stood in the patch of sunlight for as long as she was able.

About the Author:

Loren Rhoads is the co-author (with Brian Thomas) of the succubus/angel novels Lost Angels and Angelus Rose. She's the author of three story collections about Alondra DeCourval: Alondra's Investigations, Alondra's Experiments, and Alondra's Adventures, all available for the kindle. She likes long walks in the moonlight and old graveyards.

Blog: <u>Home of Author Loren Rhoads</u>
Twitter: <u>@morbidloren</u>

Tooth Fairy | *Suzanne Craig-Whytock*

"Damn it!" Dante yelled from the other room. The sound of the floor sander stopped abruptly.

"What's wrong?" I yelled back. I got no response so I went into the living room where Dante had been working. He had the sander flipped over, and he was down on his haunches, staring at it woefully. The sandpaper looked shredded. He looked over at me and pointed to the floor.

"There's a nail or something sticking up. It wrecked the sanding disc—I just hope the machine is OK. If it's damaged, we'll lose the deposit for sure. I could have sworn I hammered everything down but something must have shaken loose with all the vibrating."

He got up and we stood together, staring at the scene in dismay. It was our first house—we'd only been able to afford it because it had been empty for a while. The elderly owner had gone into a nursing home and there was no family to pay the mortgage so we bought it from the bank. It had been listed in as-is condition, realtor-speak for 'needs a lot of work', but Dante fell in love with it. I thought we were in over our heads at first, but Dante wasn't fazed by the two floors and a walk-up attic, all in terrible condition. The attic, especially, was a mess. The first time we'd opened the heavy lock and gone up to investigate, I was ready to walk away right then and there. It stunk, a mixture of urine and rotted food, and there were all kinds of candy bar wrappers in one of the corners.

"Somebody's been living up here," I'd said in disgust.

"No way," Dante replied. "It's probably just squirrels. See," he pointed, "it looks like one of them tore a hole in the roof trying to get out. I'll fix it and we won't have any more problems. This place is a great deal, Bea—I promise you, I'll do everything I can to make this our dream house."

Dante was true to his word. He fixed the attic roof and put in vents to get the air circulating so at least we could use it for storage. The rest of the house wasn't too bad—the oak trim was original, the plumbing was decent, and there were beautiful hardwood floors that we were working hard on refinishing. Until now.

"It looks like a couple of nails popped on this floorboard," Dante said. He knelt down and wiggled one. It came out easily. "Weird. This board looks loose, too." He gripped the edge of the floorboard and pried it up with very little resistance. He put it to one side and peered into the hole in the floor, squinting. "What the hell?"

"What is it?" I asked. "What's in there?" He motioned for me to get down next to him and moved aside so I could look. "Are those—are those teeth?!"

"That's what they look like," Dante answered. We both stared in disbelief at the small, white objects. After a minute, Dante said, "Creepy."

I nodded, momentarily lost for words, then I blurted out, "I think we should call Sandy."

Dante turned to look at me. "Our real estate agent? What for? I doubt if she'd know anything about this."

"Sure," I said, "but she might be able to get us in touch with the woman who owned the house."

Dante laughed. "What are you going to say? We found some teeth hidden in the floor and we want to know who they belong to?"

"No," I said, slightly irritated. "I'll just say we found something personal that we'd like to return to the owner."

"OK, fine," he said, pulling the sandpaper off the floor sander. "It doesn't look like the machine is damaged. I'm going back to the rental place to get more sanding discs. I suppose you're staying here?" I nodded, still staring at the teeth in the floor. "Bea, stop worrying. I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation. This is our dream house, remember?"

After Dante left, I called Sandy. I explained what I wanted and she was happy to oblige, giving me the number of the nursing home where the previous owner, Barbara Levine, had gone to live. "That's so nice of you to do this!" she said. "Most people just throw the stuff away. What did you say it was again?"

"Oh, nothing important—just some papers that I thought she might want." After I hung up, I immediately called the nursing home. The person who answered sounded completely disinterested, but took my number and said that he would get 'Babs' to call around 4.

"She's over ninety, you know, and her mind's not so good. I'll have to wheel her all the way down here," he emphasized, as if I was asking him to take on some Herculean task.

When Dante got home, we sat on the floor of the living room, the phone between us, trying not to stare at the hole, trying not to think about the teeth. When the phone finally rang at 4:10, we both jumped. I grabbed it and put it on speaker. After a few niceties, I got to the point. "Mrs. Levine, we were redoing the floors and we found something under one of the floorboards..."

Her voice sounded fragile and far away. "You did? What was it?"

"Um...there were some teeth. We were just wondering about that."

"Teeth?" She paused for a long moment, then said brightly, "Oh yes, I remember. They belonged to my boy. He was a rascal, always causing trouble. Every time I got one out, I put it there for safekeeping." She chuckled, and Dante and I looked at each other in relief. After chatting for a minute more, we said goodbye, then I leaned back against the wall while Dante went over to the hole and looked down.

"See?" he laughed, "Nothing to worry about. I told you this was going to be our dream house." He paused. "How many teeth does a kid lose anyway?"

"I don't know," I said. "Hang on." I looked it up on my phone. "It says here 'twenty'. How many are in the floor?" He didn't respond. "Dante. How many?" I pushed him to one side and counted. "There are thirty-six teeth in this hole. And some of them look pretty big..." I waited for him to say something, but he just walked to the window and ran his hand over the original oak trim that he loved so much. "Dante...?"

He turned to face me. "Please, Bea," he whispered. Finally, I shrugged. He put the floorboard back and nailed it down tight, the teeth chattering with each swing of the hammer until he was finished and they were silent once again.

About the Author:

Suzanne Craig-Whytock is a Canadian novelist and former high school English teacher. Her shorter pieces of writing, poetry, and essays have been featured in a variety of literary magazines. This is her second story to appear in The Sirens Call eZine. She has a weird sense of humour, loves a twisty ending, and writes a weekly satirical blog.

Website: My Dang Blog
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Hunter's Glade | Lee Andrew Forman

An elevated howl echoed against the night, its origin huffed the air with heated fervor. The cry for blood reached the ears of its singular meal—two-legged hairless indulgence. The scent of fleeing feast invigorated Hunter; he stood tall and sniffed, the scent was prime. Prey's hot sweat danced in the air, motes of terror in an otherwise serene glade. Hunter waited, restrained, veins engorged with anticipation. His maw of blades drooled with tasteful senses. Each hair upon his body stood with electric hunger.

Hunter reared and ran across the damp grass. Each step pounded against soft earth. Each lent pleasure to the game. Prey dared not look back as Hunter reached the end of his chase and hammered Prey to the ground. Prey screamed and cried out in mortal reply. Hunter begged the sound with elated ears.

The moon watched in silence as he fed, the meal no longer able to utter a scream beneath the indifferent sky over Hunter's ground.

About the Author:

Lee Forman is a writer, editor, and publisher from the Hudson Valley, NY. His fascination with the macabre began in childhood, watching old movies and reading everything he could get his hands on. He's a third-generation horror fanatic, starting with his grandfather who was a fan of the classic Hollywood Monsters. His novella, *Zero Perspective* is available on Amazon.

Blog: <u>Lee Andrew Forman</u>, <u>Author</u>
Facebook: Lee Andrew Forman





Jameth propromula

Silence Alone | Carl Olson

The crunching of rocks on pavement beneath TJ's feet was the only sound to pierce the deafening silence. Town was completely deserted when it should have been bustling with mid-day activity. It seemed everyone had just vanished, with no sign of why. Cars were parked along the streets and at gas pumps. Coffee shops had fresh pots brewing and there were partially eaten meals on tables in restaurants. He'd also not seen or heard any animals. No cats. No dogs. No birds. Nothing. At least the electricity was still on. That said, there were no TV, radio or internet signals; not even the annoying hiss and crackle of static. Only silence.

What is going on? Where is everyone? After all the times that I wished that people would just piss off so I could have some peace and quiet... Now they finally have and it's creeping me out. I really hope this all just a bad dream.

Rolling up the sleeve of his jacket a few inches he could see a bruise formed when he had pinched himself a few hours ago. Just to be certain this wasn't a dream he pinched himself once more; this time piercing the skin with his sharp fingernails.

"Ouch."

Guess I'm not dreaming.

A slight breeze picked up, blowing some leaves and garbage in front of him. It was late fall and most of the leaves were now a decaying brown colour, having already fallen to the ground in recent weeks. Trees and bushes were bare, with only the greyish color of their limbs and branches showing, while most plant life had either died or long since lost its greenery. Looking up at the sky, the overcast cover of somber grey clouds stretched as far as his eyes could see. A sinking feeling of unease and despair began to swell in TJ's stomach as he walked further down the street.

Something is very wrong here.

Nearing the corner of Hillview Avenue, TJ stopped dead in his tracks. The angst in his gut hit him hard, like a sucker-punch, with the impact waves reverberating throughout his body. There was something written on the wall of the pizzeria. Three words had been smeared on in a thick red liquid that ran down in drips from each letter. TJ's heart rate skyrocketed and he started breathing heavily as he read the message.

ENJOY THE SILENCE.

"What the hell?"

Is that blood?

His hands were almost shaking. Closing his eyes, TJ began controlled breathing. He inhaled for two seconds, held it for two, and then exhaled for two more.

Okay, calm down. It's only words on a wall. Don't freak out. Likely just some neighbourhood graffiti.

Turning away from the eerie message he noticed a trail of red splatter on the ground leading from the wall to the pizzeria's entrance.

"Shit."

Following it to the door TJ was unable to tell if the trail was made from entering or exiting the building.

Should I go in? Every other building I've checked has been vacant so there's a strong chance this one is too. But none of the others had a creepy message written on the wall, and what if someone is hurt in there and needs help? Maybe I'll just have a quick peek...

TJ pushed the door open. As he did, the jingling of the bells above it echoed throughout the silent restaurant.

Crap. That was loud. So much for being discrete.

Scanning the interior of the pizzeria for any signs of life he saw the same deserted emptiness he'd seen all over town. There were a few tables and booths to his left with plates of partially eaten slices, a cooler full of various soft drinks to the right, and the counter straight ahead. Light from the outside came in the windows diagonally through the half-closed blinds, creating a lined pattern of light and dark bars on the floor, walls and furniture. All the colours seemed muted and weren't as vibrant as they should be, like he was looking through some sort of drab filter.

"Hello? Is anyone here?" TJ stepped inside, careful not to put his foot in the red liquid. His eyes followed the trail of splatter across the floor and over to the counter where he spotted a large pool of the red liquid coming out from behind it.

I knew this was a bad idea...

Feeling his heart sink, and his hands beginning to sweat, TJ forced himself to walk closer.

You can do this. You can do this.

Approaching the end of the counter his heart jackhammered harder with each step. TJ kept his eyes looking down and focused on the floor afraid to see the mangled remains of whatever human, or animal, that had been killed and left to bleed out back there. As if a terrible death was not bad enough its blood had been used to write that message on the wall outside.

After only a few short steps TJ could see the red liquid on the floor beside the toes of his shoes. It was time to look over and see what, or who, it was coming from. Peripherally, he could see that it was something quite large.

Shit. I'm not ready for this... Oh just do it already.

Turning his head to look, TJ prepared for the worst. Expecting to see a mess of blood and gore his heart continued to pound wildly. His eyes followed the large pool of red liquid about halfway down the length of the counter where they came upon what they were looking for.

A large 200 litre industrial drum had tipped over spilling its contents on the floor. The label read: Grade D Pizza Sauce. Fit for Human Consumption.

TJ stood there just staring at it. All the fear and anxiety had built up to this, and for what? Pizza sauce. After what seemed like an eternity he began to smile, then chuckle, and then even laugh. At first to himself, then aloud.

"Oh, Thank God! I can't believe I got so worked up over pizza sauce." The more he thought about it the more he continued to laugh, almost hysterically. Relief flowed throughout his body like a drug injected into his veins. TJ leaned against the counter for a moment as he took it all in.

His enjoyment of the moment did not last long however, as the light from outside disappeared into unnatural blackness. Thick shadows overtook the inside of the pizzeria, blanketing everything with a dark canvas. Some light from a streetlamp was still coming in through the glass door, casting a beam onto the floor. Enough that TJ could see undissolved particles of dust floating in the air.

I don't like this. I'm getting out of here.

Walking to the door and looking outside he saw something he wasn't expecting — the silhouette of a human figure standing under the streetlight.

Another person!

"Hey! In here!" he called, waving his hands in the air and opening the door. The figure outside didn't move. TJ could see that it was just standing there staring off in the opposite direction. He or she also wasn't wearing any clothes.

What the... oh man... this is so messed up.

"You okay?" With a slow walk he approached the figure. It turned around, lifting its right hand and pointing directly at him.

TJ's eyes widened and he froze where he was. The figure was human, or at least it looked to be. It had a torso, two arms, two legs and a head — but it was extremely thin. A skeleton with little to no tissue or meat between its skin and bones. The skin, making a stretching leather sound when the arm was lifted, was pale and translucent. TJ could see every bone in its body. Its eye sockets were empty, leaving gaping, bloody holes where the eyes should have been, like they had been torn out by force. Its mouth was slightly open, showing teeth as if it were angry about something.

Holy Shit.

"What the hell are you?" An icy chill shot down TJ's spine at lightning speed, as both legs became unsteady and started to wobble. He felt like he was shrinking and everything around him was becoming taller, and angling in. His heart was high in his throat, beating so fast and hard that he thought it would come out his mouth. With his field of vison now a tunnel, his eyes remained focused on the creature and nothing else.

Leaning towards him, the creature let out a sharp hiss followed by a rumbling guttural growl. Its breath was the most awful rotting, and decaying, stench TJ had ever smelled.

Oh my god, I'm gonna puke... No, don't. Run! Get out of here you idiot!

"Stay away from me!" He started to back away and was about to run when his foot slipped on a glass beer bottle lying on the ground. TJ lost his balance and fell backwards, striking his head on the concrete sidewalk with a forceful impact. Now barely conscious, he reached behind his head and felt the warm, wet, sticky blood coming from where his scalp had split open.

Ugh... must... get...

The creature came closer, walking with sharp, twitching, jittery movements. Every step it took made a smacking sound on the pavement. Using what strength he had left, TJ rolled over and pushed himself up, first to his knees, then to a standing position. The creature hissed once more and swung its bony hand, claws extended, striking TJ in the side of the head.

Falling back to the ground TJ's ears rang with a high-pitched tone and his vision was blurred from the powerful blow. He also felt the warm trickle of blood run down the side of his face. It now took all his strength to try and stay awake — there would be no escape.

Watching as the creature kneeled beside him, TJ couldn't resist anymore. He started to lose consciousness. Those teeth look sharp... This is all a bad dream. It must be. I'll wake up, I know I will...

About the Author:

Carl Olson is an emerging new author who writes horror and dark fiction. Residing in Truro, Nova Scotia with his cat, he drinks too much cola.

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Fermentia | Vivian Kasley

Most nights, I moved like a marionette. It controlled my movements and my words, before it then reached into my brain to snip the strings of memory. Normally, I'd shake off the previous night's feeling of dread with a hot shower, but when I woke up caked in gore clutching a severed penis in my hand, I knew it would take more than a hot shower to clean up whatever mess I'd made—a lot more. After screaming until my lungs burned, I stared in the mirror at my matted hair and busted lip and asked myself, "Hannah, what the fuck did you do this time?"

That wasn't always me; I'd been a good girl until my senior year of high school. It was at a party that I had my first drink. The burn of cheap vodka mixed with Florida's Natural slid down my throat and a light bulb went on, this stuff can make me feel like no one else in the room, not even myself. More, please! From then on, I was in a slow and steady race against no one but myself to see how much I could drink before throwing up or passing out.

I should've known there was a problem the day I was at my best friend's graduation party and snuck away to glug her parents' bottle of Manischewitz —that stuff is like drinking grape jelly! Alcohol is an evil spirit, one that gets into all of us at one time or another, but not all of us are lucky enough to be able to exorcise ourselves. Even when you think you have, that bitch is always skirting along the edges of your psyche, waiting for the smallest crack to slip back in and take over.

By the time I was out of college, most of my friends had moved on to find jobs or get engaged, but not me. A job that made me work long hours and weekends? Nope. Marriage was also a big nope on a rope. I found work as a teacher's aide, which was perfect, because I had the weekends off and minimal responsibility. This left me plenty of time to go out and do the one thing I always wanted to do—drink like a fish. It's fucked up to say, but sometimes I wish I could say that I drank to self-medicate from some sort of childhood trauma, but that wasn't the case. I drank because I felt boring, and it made me, well, less boring.

Not having a lot of money was never an issue, most guys were more than willing to buy the hot blonde drinks. Although, I do think they became annoyed when they realized my tolerance level was beyond their credit limit. Some guys liked that I could keep up with them and then there were others who thought they could take advantage of me, but realized that even on auto-pilot, I was a fighter. Luck had always been on my side whenever I blacked out. I somehow always managed to make it home safe and in one piece, but I knew my luck would run out.

I winced as I dropped the penis in the toilet. It was smaller than most of my turds on a bad day, so I figured it would flush, but instead it swirled around like a shriveled sea cucumber. Panic set in so I bent over and puked on top of it. I brushed my teeth and tried to retrace my steps, then I peeled off my soiled clothes and hopped into the shower. As the hot water rinsed away the blood and crud, I squeezed my eyes shut and forced myself to remember.

It was the first day of summer break and I was ready to party it up. As usual, I went by myself—rideshare services have been a godsend for people like me. It was loud inside the bar and poorly lit, so in other words, perfect. I sat down and ordered a double vodka soda, and scoped out my surroundings. With each sip, I felt myself retreat so the spirit could take over. Then I ordered another and another, until I spotted him.

He came and sat next to me; even sitting he was tall. His smile reminded me of a cartoon wolf, but his eyes seemed nice enough and I liked his shoulder length hair and swash buckling beard. When he asked me if he could buy me a drink, I said absolutely, and when he eventually asked me if I wanted to go back to his place for a nightcap, I said yes...because that's what drunk girls do.

He lived in a duplex that was vacant on one side, and when I remarked how lucky he must feel that no one had moved in on the other side, he just smiled that wolfish smile. I stumbled through the door and he directed me to the living room and told me to make myself comfortable. The sofa was black and covered in fur and I remember this, because there were three cats sleeping on it and they looked up at me like an intruder before they jumped down. He brought out a bottle and a couple of glasses and set it on the coffee table. I kicked off my heels and he had to tell me his name again, because I forgot. "It's Vince," he chuckled, "and yours is Hannah, in case you forgot that, too." I said that I hadn't, but really, I might have.

There was a vile odor and it was strong, because it was able to penetrate my vodka infused sinuses. It reminded me of my mother's garbage disposal. She used to put a lemon into it to freshen it up, but it never worked—the thing still smelled like it led straight to the depths of hell. An odd feeling pierced my numbness and jangled my gut, but I ignored it and eyed the bottle on the table instead.

"What kind of wine is that?" I slurred.

"It's not wine exactly, but my very own homemade mead." He smiled like a proud father.

"Huh, never heard of it before. What's it made with?"

"Honey, water, and other...various things. It's actually very good, but if you'd prefer some water—"

"No! I mean, no I'll try it. Is it strong?" I needed to keep my high, plus free booze is good booze.

"This one is, yes." He poured some into both glasses, then longingly sniffed the head of the bottle. "Here, try it." His fingers curled around the tumbler and grazed mine as I took it from him.

The color was a dark rust. Again, I ignored the feeling that coiled around my innards and convinced myself it was the vodka I'd consumed and nothing more. Another drink would plunge me back into oblivion and that's where I wanted to be, so I grinned like an idiot, and said, "Bottoms up!"

It tasted floral and spicy, but there was something else in there that made me choke back a gag. I swallowed and said, "Mmmm," but I really wanted to spit it out. "Is this all you have to drink, Vince?" The rotten aftertaste stuck to the back of my tongue.

"Yeah, sorry. You know, mead is good for you, for your mind and body. Lately, I've been drinking so much, I have to make a new batch every week to keep up with my own demand!" He poured himself another glass, refilled mine, then shouted, "Skol!"

I raised my own glass and shrugged. "Yeah, okay, skol, whatever that means."

The second glass went down easier than the first. I actually enjoyed the funky taste a little more. Then he poured me a third, and I felt damn skippy. We chatted some about work, but mostly he talked about how to make mead and I tried to keep my eyes from crossing. One of the cats was lurking around my legs and it dropped something on top of my foot. I looked down and saw what looked like a big chunk of raw meat.

"Uh, Vince? One of your cats brought me a gift. Not sure what it is, but it looks really gross."

"Astrid, what've you done? Are you bothering Daddy's guest?" He frowned as he inspected the chunk, then he picked it up and excused himself.

I felt the urge to clean my foot and to pee, so I got up from the couch and tried to find a bathroom. His mead had done a good job of keeping me loopy, because I felt like I was walking in a funhouse. My vision was blurred, and I had to use the wall as a crutch to stay upright. I kept wondering if I'd ever run into a bathroom, so when I saw a cracked door, I pushed it open and staggered in. The smell from earlier punched my nose and I held my breath to keep from hurling.

I squinted into the darkness and rubbed my hand along the wall to find a light switch, but came up empty. As I walked in and kept going, my feet sunk into what felt like a greasy mass of oatmeal, but when I tried to hurry along, I ended up slipping and landing among a pile of something I was sure I didn't want to see. When my eyes adjusted, I stared into the faces of decaying human bodies! I tried to make my way out of the putrid sludge without fainting, but I wasn't sure if I'd make it. A silent scream was all I could muster, because I had run out of oxygen. My ears were filled with the sound of my own heart, which banged against my sternum with so much force it hurt. Then I heard him call my name.

"Hannaah? Hannah Banana!" He shouted, then snickered. "Hannah, if you're trying to find the bathroom, you went the wrong way. It's on the other side of the villa—there is one in my bedroom, but I don't usually let guests use it—unless they plan on staying, that is!"

Fuck, he was coming and his voice suddenly reminded me of that crazy fucker, Judge Doom, from Roger Rabbit. I'd finally crawled far enough and was able to lift myself up. I quickly made my way to his bathroom and locked the door. I turned the light on and tried to control my breathing.

One of his cats stared up at me with moon pie eyes from a rug covered in paw prints. It had what I presumed were chunks from one of the corpses in front of it and it was licking its chops. Dry heaves racked my body. I heard a rustling coming from behind the shower curtain, so like a moron, I pulled it open. A cat growled and hissed at me from atop a naked dead man. His throat, wrists, and ankles had been slit and the tub was filled with blood. I went to shriek, but vomited instead.

He pounded on the door and I whirled around. "Ju—just a minute! Almost done!" I turned on the faucet and looked around for something to defend myself. Under the sink I found a pair of scissors, but they weren't ordinary scissors, they looked like heavy duty poultry shears. I held them up and stood by the door.

"Hannah, I know what you saw."

"I...I didn't see anything. Wha—what're you talking about? I really had to pee, so I found a bathroom, that's all."

"Quit the theatrics, alright. I know you saw them. Listen, I needed them to make my mead. You don't understand, it's important for a Viking such as myself. It's the only real way to make true blod mead! I probably should've gotten rid of their bodies, but I discovered if I used bits of them, it made for an even more potent and delicious brew. You seemed to like it, right?"

I bent over and puked again, then croaked, "Vince? Were you...were you going to use me to make more of that...whatever the fuck you just called it?" I don't know why I asked that question, but what the fuck else was I supposed to ask.

"I don't know."

"You either know or you don't. You obviously were, so just say it!"

"Fine, yeah I was, but I had second thoughts about it. I like you, Hannah. You're going to have to come out of there sometime, and I have no place to be so...look, we can talk this out. If you let me explain why—"

The fear I had turned into blind rage. I unlocked the door and he rammed his way in and hit me in the mouth. I screamed and shoved the scissors into him over and over. He fell to the floor and howled out in pain, but I was on top of him before he could get up. The cats went berserk and dug their claws into my face and arms, but I flung them off. It was then I realized he had no pants on. A new rage bubbled up from within.

Blood streamed from his wounds in buckets, but somehow, he was still holding on. I got up off of him and looked down at the pathetic grub worm in between his legs. I don't know what came over me, whether it was the alcohol or what, but I snipped his dick off, held it up like a trophy so he could see it, then let loose a guttural battle cry. The cats rolled around in their master's blood and smeared it around the tile. Penis in hand, I fled the bathroom, grabbed my purse, and left.

So, that's it, that's all I can dredge up. I just can't seem to retrieve any memory of how I got home or how I got into my apartment, especially in the state I must've been in. Also, I have no idea what possessed me to clutch his wang all night like a lucky rabbit's foot. I'm actually shocked how much I do remember. Hot showers can do wonders, I guess. If there's any good to come out of this, it's that I might never touch a drink again—I said might.

However, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't thankful for what I like to call, fermentia, because sometimes not remembering things clearly can be a good thing. It allows me to pretend this has all been a fever dream, and that by the end of the day, it will fade away like all the other bad dreams I've ever had. I have to get rid of that thing in the toilet or fish it out and make a keychain out of it. When life gives you a lemon, put it down the garbage disposal and mulch it up! Whatever, I blame it on the alcohol.

About the Author:

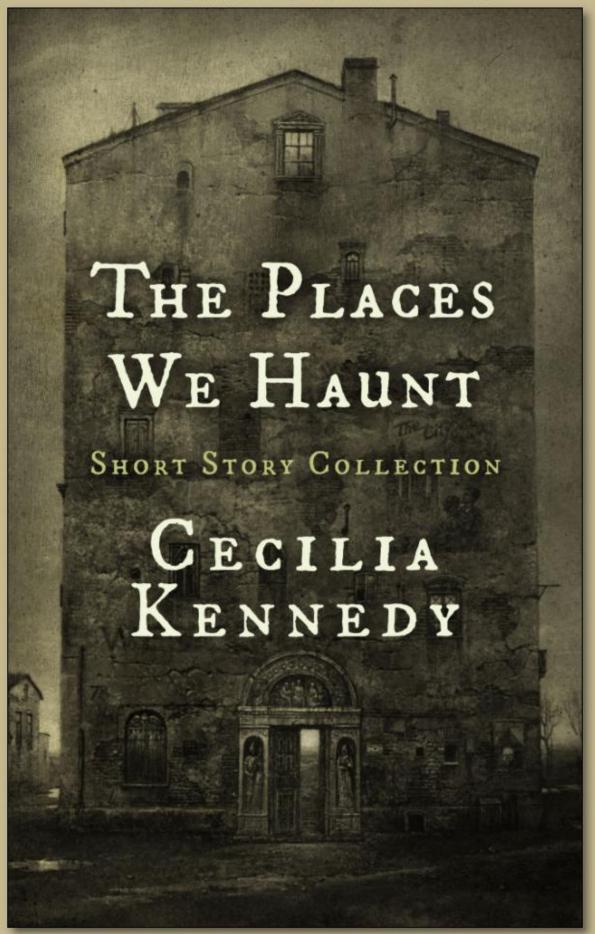
Vivian Kasley lives in the land of the strange and unusual, Florida! She's an educator who writes in her spare time. Her stories have appeared in Gypsum Sound Tales, Dark Moon Digest, HellBound Books, Castrum Press, Grinning Skull Press, and Sirens Call Publications with more on the way, including her first novella. When not writing, you can usually find her reading in a bubble bath.

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Some ghosts still have a story to tell...

A collection of 13 dark tales!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Burning Soil | Nina D'Arcangela

The ground below your delicately formed feet begins to shift, sending you tumbling to within a breath's width of the insanity you know awaits should you ever truly fall. You struggle to maintain your grip — a hold that for eons has treated you so kindly, so reverently, so graciously. You suckle and gasp for that earlier delight that still echoes through your now destroyed body. This gaping new view of the emptiness you see leaves you wondering which part of this horror-scape is to be accepted as a revulsion of your own making, and which part is far too heinous to be allowed to exist. How does one go about choosing their individual nightmare without having a grasp of their own tenuous reality? A reality stroked so gently, consumed so fully; torn to pieces in such an eloquent display of cruelty. Naive, silly girl, you never did pay attention to anything other than your own wants. Why did you not heed the danger when you still had the chance?

Existence in this newly scorched realm is – other. You breathe in the foul air, retch vile fluids from your own rotting organs while desperately clutching for handfuls of once moist, rich soil. You weep for a blanket to shroud you from the view of your newly exposed self.

Can you no longer feel the gentle caress of the sun's offered warmth? Have you, like the insignificant creatures that feed from your lush womb, begun to shrivel under his now harsh and ever seeking glare? No, not you; for you will offer yourself to this beast who brings searing pain only to weep at its feet while its brilliance burns you from within; laying to waste the wretched thing you are. You will seek to undo this cruel fortune that has been bestowed upon you, but in that seeking, you will yourself be undone. You are a creature of will, one foolish enough to forgo turning your face from the ever increasing blindness the searing light brings, you are a creature that believes yourself to be the worst of all things... worthy in his eyes.

This all consuming brightness, this overwhelming luminescence, this addictive, abusive wave that pounds its putrid nourishment into you – how you will suffer for it – begging for mercy, a mercy that he does not pretend to offer, but you will beg for nonetheless. And in doing so, you will try to rise up, to grow closer to the light believing yourself to be his equal – this giver of all things; this taker of pure souls. But your soul isn't pure, is it? Your soul is tainted by the ecstasy of being. You, who have fed off the offal that has been lain down upon the altar before you. You, who have sipped from the chalice with the proffered blood of those baring no shame, the untainted, the yet to be ripened. You, who have ripped the meat from the bones of small bleating sheep with your bare teeth and ragged claws as they lay staring up at you with trusting, unknowing eyes. All the while, glorious creature that you are, you felt nothing; not an ounce of remorse for each gluttonous act of satisfaction, feasting on the dying embers of the slowly dwindling soul before you.

She who tainted the sweet nectar – the devourer of forbidden fruit – the selfish wretch who cannot exist without consuming the flesh of the gentle, the deserving; you are these things and more. You are the speaker of lies – muttering those sacred and meaningless words while they are being whispered every so seductively into your own arrogant and self-indulgent ear. You are the reason the soil shall burn; you are the reason the soil is burning.

You are a thing not worthy of worship, though you have had much of it, but now the beast has come to set you to rights; your penance shall be to worship him with the blind devotion you once commanded for yourself.

About the Author:

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

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Tumor | G.A. Miller

The ambulance roared through the midday traffic, lights on, siren blaring. Bill was trying to get their patient to the hospital as quickly as he could, while his partner Ernie worked on him in the back. He heard Ernie radio ahead, reading the vitals, and he knew it didn't sound promising.

"Shit!" he yelled, notching the wheel slightly left and leaning on the horn to avoid an idiot in a Toyota who was starting to turn on red, despite the blaring siren. Thankfully, the hospital was just ahead now.

He drove up to the ER bay, swinging around and backing in as close to the doors as possible.

The automatic doors slid open as the ambulance backed in, Doctor Charles Green led two nurses out to meet the EMT crew.

"What do we have?" he asked, as they carefully lifted their gurney out and dropped the legs.

"William Cavanaugh, 37-year-old male, collapsed in his home after complaining of a severe headache. His wife listed the headache, along with blurred vision, loss of balance, confusion, and seizures as his symptoms. His vitals are weak, and he has a pronounced swelling on the left side of his head," Ernie recounted, calm and professional.

Charles, the resident on duty, examined the patient, checking pupillary response and noted the swelling on the head seemed to be moving, pulsing rhythmically.

He gently felt the swollen area, and pulled his hand back, feeling a sharp pain in his fingertip. *Damn, must have gotten a paper cut and didn't even notice it,* he thought.

"Get him up to OR and prep him, stat. No time for an MRI, we need to relieve that pressure on his brain."

The EMTs and nurses transferred the patient to another gurney, and the nurses rolled it to the elevator as Bill and Ernie gathered and packed their gear.

Charles called the neurosurgeon on call and advised him of the patient's condition and vitals, who agreed with his initial diagnosis and said he was on his way.

Ending the call, Charles felt perplexed. He'd seen all sort of trauma in the ER, but the way that swelling was pulsing was unsettling. The patient had all the signs of a brain tumor, but tumors don't pulse. Their growth is slow and steady until addressed, and certainly *not* externally visible as this one was.

He planned to speak with George Cohen, the neurosurgeon, after his surgery and inquire about that odd swelling, and what he'd found. For the moment, however, he had patients to attend to in the ER, so he pushed his curiosity aside and went back to reviewing charts, idly thinking he'd need to get a Band-Aid for his finger, along with some aspirin for the headache he felt beginning to settle in.

"Who was that, dear?" Ruth Cohen asked, looking up from her book.

"That was Doctor Green. He has a patient with an unusual cranial condition that I'll need to look at."

"Oh, my. Shall I call Mike and Ellen and tell them we won't be there for dinner this evening?"

"Not just yet, dear. I don't believe this procedure will take too long, but of course I won't know for sure until I have a look. I'll let you know if it will be longer than I expect."

They both stood, Ruth giving George a hug and kiss, and he walked through the kitchen to the garage, patting his pockets to insure he had his keys and his wallet as Ruth put on the kettle to prepare a cup of tea.

Doctor Cohen arrived twenty minutes later, heading right up to the OR suites. He scrubbed in as Donna Caputo, his head nurse, gave him the background on their patient's condition. She slipped the gloves on him, and they entered the OR together.

The patient was prepped, his head clean shaven and glistening in the bright lights. The growth on the side of his head was pulsing, clearly visible now to all.

"All right, let's see what we have here, shall we?" he asked as Donna handed him a scalpel from the instrument tray.

Doctor Cohen made an incision, his hand sure and steady, then another and one more, allowing him to peel back the skin, exposing the mass.

His hand wavered momentarily, as he tried to process what he saw. The bone of the skull was already open, the mass attached directly to the brain. The edges of the opening in the skull were rounded and thick, as though the bone had somehow been melted away to permit the intrusion.

He realized he'd need to graft bone in order to protect the cranial cavity, but first he had to remove the mass and get it to the lab for dissection and analysis. It resembled a large tumor, thickly textured with bulging veins, but the way it pulsed was revolting, unlike anything he'd ever seen.

He carefully began separating the mass from the brain, precisely incising the base to insure the brain tissue remained untouched. He tipped the tumor back which revealed a number of tentacles at its base extending into the brain. They were also pulsing, as though drawing brain matter up into the mass itself.

Tipping the mass further back, he cut through the tentacles to release it. He'd have to extract those individually once the mass was removed and made a mental note to let Ruth know this would indeed be longer than anticipated, after all.

He cut the last one, noting the thick, yellow fluid oozing through the ends, and set the scalpel down to lift the mass out and place it into the waiting specimen tray.

As he lifted it away from the patient, a flap in its center moved, sliding open to reveal a single eye, fixing him with a malevolent stare.

He barely had time to register his shock at seeing the eye when his right hand exploded in a bright flare of pain, his yell making the nurses jump.

The mass had injected a new set of tentacles into his hand which all began pulsing immediately. His arm grew cold, then numb as *something* started moving upward through his veins. The eye rolled back, revealing its muddy white sclera as the flap slowly closed to cover it. The mass then began pulsing again, just as it had done on the patient's brain.

The head nurse reached for his hand, and he moved his arm away.

"Don't touch it, Donna! God knows what it'll do to you!"

"But, your hand..."

"Never mind that. Please, I need you to apply a tourniquet to my bicep before..."

He never finished, his eyes opening wide, unfocused. His mouth hung open, a line of drool falling onto his gown. He wavered, losing his balance and falling against the table, jostling the prone patient.

His knees bent as he slid down to the floor, falling on his back. The cap slipped off his head, and Donna cried out. "Oh my God, his head! Look at his head!"

His head began swelling on the left side, exactly as the patients had. She looked at his hand, and the mass had diminished, nearly gone now.

Was that thing somehow traveling up through his arm into his head?

"Oh shit, I am NOT seeing this!" the anesthesiologist exclaimed, pointing at the patient.

The severed bases of the tentacles were growing out of the brain, seeking and joining with each other, reforming into a new mass right before their eyes. The monitors confirmed the patient had flatlined, yet the tentacles remained very active in his exposed brain.

Donna turned and walked to the door, striking the red button mounted on the wall next to it. The lighting in the operating room changed, and alarms went off outside as the doors locked.

"What just happened?" asked Bernice Palmer, the assistant nurse.

"I put us under lock down, Bernice. I don't know what's happening here, but whatever it is took out Doctor Cohen, and I don't want it spreading outside this room."

"What about us?" Bernice asked, the fear evident in her voice.

"Protocol, Bernice...they'll be here soon," John Everett, the anesthesiologist explained, "She's right, we need to isolate this thing until we can find out what the hell is g-g-going o..."

John began shaking and stuttering, his balance growing unsteady before he went limp, collapsing on the floor. Bernice screamed as she looked down and saw that tentacles from Doctor Cohen's extended hand had slithered across the floor to John, sliding up inside his pants leg.

Donna grabbed Bernice by the arm and pulled her over to the doors, reaching for the phone on the wall. As she lifted the handset, she heard the ding of the elevator arriving and set it back into the base.

"Oh, thank God," she said, but gasped when she saw Doctor Green stagger out of the elevator by himself, hand against his head, blood seeping between his fingers.

Where the hell were the containment personnel, and what happened to Doctor Green? Donna's hands were shaking badly now.

As he staggered toward their doors on unsteady legs, she saw that a tentacle had pierced through his left eye from within, waving in front of his face through the ruined socket. She instinctively knew it was looking, *seeking* something. He nearly made it to the door when he collapsed face down in front of them.

Donna began to reach for the release button, stopping when she saw a group of tentacles fanning out across the floor from beneath Green's prone body. No way out.

Bernice screamed again as Donna grabbed the handset from the wall phone, and heard nothing. The line was out, not even a tone as she pounded the buttons to dial for help.

She let the phone slip out of her hand as the two nurses turned back to face the room and saw countless tentacles slithering across the floor toward them.

Bernice fainted, and Donna tried to catch her, but was knocked to the floor by her unexpected weight. The last thing Donna saw were the tentacles, moving faster now, *sensing* her, and once they pierced through her eyes, finding her brain within, Donna's world came to a cold, dark end.

About the Author:

After decades in the technical field, G.A. Miller decided to finally approach the blank page and try his hand at writing. 2017 marked his first acceptance in a publication, with the short story "Bequeath" making its debut in the inaugural issue of Hinnom Magazine, published by Gehenna & Hinnom publishers. Since then, his work has appeared in numerous anthologies and his own collections.

Twitter: @GMiller666

Behold the Sandman | Radar DeBoard

There are children who lay wide awake in their beds at night while a presence floats through the gentle breeze. Much quieter than a church mouse it moves from house to house. Sneaking from room to room until it finds a child still awake.

The children can tell that it is there, so they try to trick it into going away. They pull their blanket over their head, or lay perfectly still. The presence is never fooled by their tricks. It waits in the dark till they finally move. Then the Sandman takes the child away to an eternal sleep.

From a Nightmare | Radar DeBoard

Tom woke with a cold sweat running down his face. The same reoccurring nightmare had woken him yet again. For weeks his sleep had been tormented by the same horrifying vision.

Tom would be in the middle of pleasant dream, and then everything would go pitch black. Then a light would come on in front of him, revealing a horrifying creature. He could picture its razor-sharp teeth and the unnatural bend of its limbs, staring at him with its blood-red eyes.

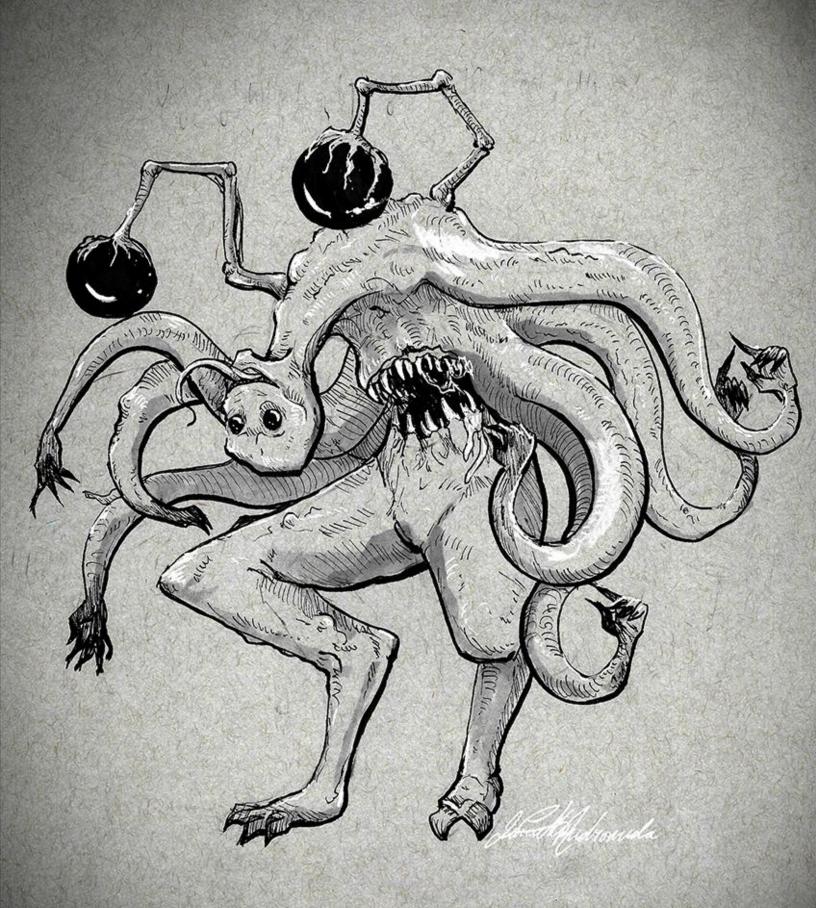
Tom sighed to himself and turned on his bedside lamp. He screamed as he looked into two blood-red eyes.

About the Author:

Radar DeBoard is a new author living in Kansas. He is a lover of all things horror. His largest hope for his work is that people will enjoy has writing enough to share it with others.

Facebook: Radar DeBoard





The Remnants | Tiffany Michelle Brown

The body was starting to smell—sickly sweet like bruised plums abandoned in the trashcan for too long. Jocelyn imagined the internal sugars rebelling, turning to acid, attacking the flesh. She brought her cup of tea to her nose, inhaled steam and chrysanthemums, felt the comfort settle into her bones. She knew the solace would evaporate quickly. She needed to decide.

Jocelyn bent forward and surveyed the glossy brochures fanned out on the coffee table. India. Australia. Lebanon. Germany. Luxembourg.

"Where would you like to go?" the travel agent had asked.

Jocelyn took off her sunglasses and hat, returned the agent's gaze, and said, "Far away."

The agent's accommodating smile dissipated like instant coffee granules in hot water.

"And I want options."

Jocelyn had received a handful of brochures generally produced for couples researching honeymoon destinations or kids fresh out of high school ready to backpack the continents before heading to college. For Jocelyn, this wasn't about adventure; it was about survival.

The old two-story house shifted and settled, startling Jocelyn. Tea sloshed over the rim of her mug. She sighed and pattered to the kitchen for a towel.

While dabbing her top, the house shifted again—louder this time. Jocelyn dropped the towel and grabbed a knife from the butcher block. Her heart hammered in her chest and her muscles tensed. The house was still.

Jocelyn exhaled and dropped the knife. "Calm the hell down," she whispered. "He's gone."

She'd made sure of it. Every remnant of Dalton—his guitar, his aftershave, his tattered jeans, everything he'd touched, his body—was stuffed into Jocelyn's walk-in closet. She'd locked the door from the outside, dropped the key down the sink, and burned sage.

Jocelyn looked up, studied the popcorn ceiling, and waited for the moment she'd be able to see through it—see him slumped against her favorite cocktail dress, the stunned look on his face—her life and his unraveled, unwound, undone. The moment never came.

Jocelyn brought her hands to her face and winced. The cigarette burns had started to scab over and the bruises had turned an unsettling olive color. Dalton had been high. Jocelyn had been too sober to take it. She'd done what was necessary; she was convinced of that. Now, she needed to get away.

Heading back to the couch, Jocelyn heard the air conditioning unit click on. Cold air snaked through the room. Did I adjust the thermostat?

Jocelyn knew the answer before the thought was fully formed.

She sat on the couch, her skin tingling, her body heavy. She shut her eyes. "You're fine," she breathed.

Jocelyn reopened her eyes and reached for the brochure about Australia. The dull glint of metal stopped her cold. Jocelyn's throat tightened as she snatched up the object with shaky fingers. The key was oily, and a strand of her hair was wrapped around its jagged teeth.

Frigid wisps of air first caressed Jocelyn's jawline and then dripped like down her breastbone. The pressure of ghostly fingertips intensified as they grew closer to her heart.

It was in the moment that Jocelyn realized she wasn't going anywhere.

About the Author:

Tiffany Michelle Brown ran away from the scorching deserts of Phoenix, Arizona, to live near breezy San Diego beaches. Despite a sunny disposition, she's inspired by dark, stormy nights and once had a heart-to-heart with a ghost over a beer. Tiffany's work has been published by Hellbound Books, Nocturnal Sirens Publishing, and the NoSleep Podcast.

Author Blog: <u>Tiffany Michelle Brown</u>

Twitter: @tiffebrown

Look At Me | Tristan Nieto

Kim sat cross-legged on the overstuffed loveseat in her mother's new apartment. Mom tossed salad fixings into a upperware bowl with the dog at her heels looking upward, expectant of the 5 o'clock feeding before she left for night shift at the hospital.

Kim couldn't really see what was happening in the kitchen; there was a screen in the way. Her mother stepped to the front door adjacent to the loveseat.

"Don't forget to eat dinner alright?"

"Yeah Mom, sure."

"Hev."

"Yeah?"

Her mom placed one hand on the screen of Kim's phone.

"Look at me when we talk, please?"

Kim turned off the phone and looked at her mother.

"Sorry– I had to. I miss you when you're not around," said Mom.

"Mom, I've been home this whole week," said Kim.

Her mother brushed Kim's bangs to one side and looked at her daughter.

"Yes... but that doesn't always mean you're here, y'know?"

Kim checked her phone again out of habit, stopping herself midway, realizing the bitter truth and buried her head in her hands.

"Hey Kimmie, it's okay. Just a word to the wise-"

Kim slapped her thighs and looked to her mother. "What?" she asked.

"Just... Don't spend so much time on your phone, okay?"

Kim paused before answering.

"Okay Mom," she said.

"I love you"—a kiss on the forehead—"there's a pizza in the freezer. Save me some for breakfast, okay?"

Her mother slid open the latches and locks on the door, said a final farewell to the dog, and was gone. As the door shut, Kim opened her phone again.

She checked her feed for new snaps, chats, chits, likes, followers, tags, hash, kittens, and kitsch. She stared in a daze at the tiny device that held the greater part of her world, but before long the quiet began bugging her.

She searched on the coffee table and around the loveseat for the TV remote with one hand and both eyes locked on her phone. Since she couldn't lay hands on it blind, she finally stuffed the phone into the waistband of her pajamas and began digging around in the loveseat for the remote. Thrusting her hand between the cushions, she felt a hot sting nip her fingertip.

Kim yelped, clutching the injured digit: a neat red line slashed across her index fingerprint. She sucked on it between gasps of "ow" and headed to the bathroom to run it under cold water. The pain dulled. Opening the camera on her phone, she held up her injury for the world to see. She snapped a tasteful shot of her bloody finger, posting it with the hashtags: "#battlewound #couldntfindtheremote."

Kim dried the cut with a cotton ball, dressed it with a Batman Band-Aid, and took one more snapshot. She crafted a cute before-and-after diptych of her little injury. The girl marveled at her art and waited with eyes agog for reactions to roll in. Soon enough, they did. *People love blood*, she thought.

She realized she could hear water running. Turning around, she saw the faucet in the bath pouring hot water into the tub. She walked over to it, bent down, and turned it off.

There were many things about the apartment that made Kim uneasy: sometimes the closed front door would slam into its frame and spook everyone within earshot. Sometimes the dog would bark at empty rooms for no reason at all. Sometimes, the cell service and wifi would cut out entirely. And when her mother would call the cable company, it seemed service would come right back before the technicians arrived. On its own.

Compelled to take a selfie, she held her phone up. Staring into the screen, she began messing with her hair. Then, while in mid-pose, from the corner of her eye, she saw something. Not on her screen, but in the mirror in front of her.

In the bright light of the bathroom's bare light bulb, there was a shadow: solid and black and about her height, right behind her.

Kim screamed. Clutching the phone to her chest, she ran out of the bathroom and slammed the door shut behind her, diving into the loveseat to wrap herself in a blanket.

What the fuck, she thought, gasping for breath. It felt like her lungs were closing in on themselves, like someone had dropped a lead weight on her chest. An unstoppable terror gripped her by neck and wouldn't let go. She stumbled toward the kitchen and grabbed a paper bag from the counter, breathing in, and out.

Like her therapist told her to, she began naming the kids in her graduating class:

"Sarah Chalmers. Fiona Gaskill. Bradley Nichols. Chase Merrit. Meredith Perault. Eddie Rodriguez...."

She caught her breath. Her heartbeat slowed back down and she slid down the side of the couch for a moment.

Bang.

"Fuck!" Kim yelled into the apartment.

The front door had slammed into its frame.

Then she heard a soft knock. So soft Kim thought at first it might just be the wind, but it sounded rhythmic enough to suggest a person.

Bang, b-b-bang bang.

Kim stood up, wrapping the fuzzy blanket around her, phone in one hand with the video camera ready to record in case there was a killer on the other side.

"Hello?"

No answer.

Kim crouched down on all fours to peek under the door. No shoes, no feet either. She opened it and peered into the hall. No one.

Walking back to the loveseat, she closed the camera and refreshed her feed with one hand, removing cushions with the other. She found, first, six new notifications for her bleeding finger, second, the remote and, third, sticking out, at an angle below the left arm of the loveseat: a razor blade.

For the sake of documentation (and more content for her social media) she took a photo of it, then another of her hand holding the blade. The caption read: "No, not trying to kill myself, but this couch is! Who leaves a razorblade between couch cushions??? #bizarre #deathbycouch."

Bang, bang, bang.

Another knock, more certain this time. Kim felt certain it was the boys who lived at the far end of their landing, messing with her. Sometimes they'd prank call Kim's mother asking if her nose was running or switch all the welcome mats on the first floor with those on the second.

Having nearly dropped her phone from the noise, she rose in a huff, palming the razorblade in her hand as a scare tactic. She threw the locks and latch, flinging the door wide. Expecting two children to be standing there, she instead found a boy about her age.

He wore a black t-shirt and faded jeans so full of holes that they were barely there. A messy mop of dark hair obscured his extremely pale face and large blue eyes.

"Oh. hi." said Kim.

It took the boy a moment to speak, twitching and gyrating, as if he were trying to find the words. He managed, with a stutter.

"I- I heard a scream," he said.

He must be one of the neighbors, thought Kim.

"Oh!" she said, laughing a little, "Yeah, sorry—that was me."

The boy looked at her with those big eyes. Gentle eyes betraying a deep sadness.

"Ar- are you- alright?" the boy asked.

"Yeah, yeah, fine—I just," she held up her finger, "cut myself. On accident! Stupid razor in the couch cushions."

"Oh," he said, his mouth holding the shape of the sound.

"Yeah," Kim said a little creeped out.

The boy began to speak, but Kim turned away when she heard her phone vibrating on the glass of the coffee table.

"Thanks for coming by, really, I'm all good though! Have a nice night!"

She shut the door and dashed to the table, but didn't pick up in time. It was her friend Nikki. Kim tried calling back, but it went straight to voicemail. Then she received one:

Beep. "Hey grrrl, just checking in on you- see if you're not dead from that hashtag battle wound! Gnarly. Been missing you- if you're up for it, wanna go to a show next week? Bae's playing at this coffee shop. Sorry I missed ya! T-T-Y-L, baby, kisses! **LOOK!**" Beep.

Kim stared at her phone.

She pressed four and it repeated:

Beep. "Hey grrrl, just checking in on you- see if you're not dead from that hashtag battle wound! Gnarly. Been missing you—if you're up for it, wanna go to a show next week? Bae's playing at this coffeeshop. Sorry I missed ya! T-T-Y-L, baby, kisses!

-LOOK AT ME!" Beep.

Kim dropped it. The dog trotted up to look at her. He looked at the phone and whimpered. Ping.

A new message. Kim bent to pick it up, like a puppet.

One new follower. She accepted without a second thought and grabbed the remote to put on *Friends*. But she couldn't stop herself from wondering:

Whose voice...was that?

Then she noticed the dog. He was sitting outside the bathroom. Looking in.

Kim stood up. She walked toward him, but stopped when she noticed—the door was open again.

In a flash, she scooped up the dog and brought him to the couch with her. He licked her face. She was sure that the door had been closed. Kim petted him and petted him, nuzzling her face against his soft fur.

Ping.

As she picked up the phone again, the dog trotted right back to sit in front of the bathroom.

A new comment. It read:

"Look at me."

Kim slapped the screen down onto the coffee table with a *bang* and looked for the dog. There he was, sitting right outside the bathroom looking in. She covered her mouth, expecting herself to scream. But she didn't. Instead, she stood up and took a deep breath. And then another. She exhaled long and slow, repeating the names of her old classmates to herself, like a prayer.

Keep it together, it's all in your head, she thought.

Thinking she might just be hungry, she popped a bag of popcorn in the kitchen and poured it into a bowl. Heading back to the couch, she grabbed the remote, bowl in her lap, turned the volume up and fixed her gaze on Ross and Chandler bantering. Kim sat, munched popcorn, and refused to look at her phone.

Ping.

"Woof!" said the dog.

Kim turned to him, still outside the bathroom.

"Woof, woof!"

Bang, bang, bang.

"Fuck!!!" Kim yelled, sending the popcorn bowl flying clear across the room, emptying its contents all over the floor and furniture. It landed with a dull *thunk* of plastic on the hard wood. Kim breathed in again, exhaling long and slow. She brushed the popcorn off her lap and went to the door, expecting to see the strange boy again.

But when she opened it there was no one. As she locked the door again, she could feel her hands shake. She wanted something to hold, but couldn't pick up her phone. Something to fidget with, to stop the shakes. She picked up the razor from the coffee table, sat back on the couch, and fiddled with it.

She placed it in her palm and felt the smallness of it. She held it up to the television and saw how it gleamed in the light. She touched a non-injured finger to it to feel its sharpness—its realness. It brought her back to herself somehow. She wondered how long it had been inside that couch. Like the rest of the furniture, it had come with the apartment. She wondered how it had gotten there. And why.

Ping.

She looked at the phone, a fervent curiosity eating away at her mind, yet terrified of what might be waiting for her if she caved.

Get a grip, Kim, she thought.

Kim picked it up. Ignoring the notifications on the screen, not checking a single feed, she opened her contacts list and called Nikki again. Voicemail:

"Heyyy, it's Nikk, hit me back."

Веер.

"Hey, Nikki, what's up? Listen, could you just like, give me a call?" Don't sound crazy, don't sound crazy, don't sound—"I'm scared, a little, just— hah, um, yeah just call me back, kay? Kay, bye!"

She tried calling her mom at the hospital. Even hearing a receptionist's voice would've been a relief.

But it kept ringing. No answer, no voicemail. Just ringing.

She tried her mom's cell phone and the call dropped.

Kim checked her cell signal: no bars. She checked social media, swiping down, again and again, across the screen:

"Couldn't refresh feed," it read.

Kim grabbed her laptop from under the couch and opened the browser:

"No signal detected," it said.

She wandered into her mother's closet to do a hard reset on the router. She unplugged it and waited, but when she plugged it in again, the lights continued to blink red.

Kim started feeling a little dizzy. She could feel her adrenaline spiking. She stood up and staggered toward the dog, but he barked at her when she moved to pick him up and he ran past her.

"Okay, Kim, it's okay—get it together, get it together, get-your-shit TOGETHER."

She began to feel as if she were falling. Down, down like Alice: her vision an endless rabbithole. She felt herself falling to the apartment floor. She took one deep breath and her eyes opened wide when she heard a *bang*. *Bang*. *Bang*.

But, this time, it didn't come from the front door. It came from the bathroom door.

The now closed bathroom door.

Kim recovered. She stood up, slowly, and picked the razor blade up from the floor.

She took a step forward. Then another. As though she were moving through cement, forcing her feet forward far enough to face the bathroom door.

As she placed her hand upon the knob, she could hear water running inside. She turned it and the door swung open.

Steam billowed inside, so thick she could barely see. She stepped forward, clutching the blade between her thumb and forefinger, ready to slash at...anything.

She saw him there. The boy. His eyes wide, staring at her, irises suspended in the fog.

He looked down and so did Kim. In his hand, he held—her phone.

The screen lit up and vibrated in his hand. Kim's mom was calling. She reached out to grab it. Kim tried to pull it from his grasp. She felt a substance on the case, warm and thick. But what she didn't feel was the razor. As she had reached for the phone, he had guided the blade from her hand to her wrist.

With all her might, she pulled the phone free and it flew through the mist, landing upright in front of the tub, while the razor slashed a long gash into her arm.

She slipped backward into the tub. Her body writhing in panic. She felt herself slipping deeper into the tub. Sitting bolt upright she reached toward the phone at the tub's edge, with the razor embedded into her forearm. She had to call for help.

The boy just stared at her, his body disappearing. Just a set of pale blue eyes watching her from the mist right above the phone.

She felt her body flung backward into the tub. Her head hit the faucet with a fantastic crack. Barely conscious and losing more blood every second, she could still see the phone's camera, still in selfie-mode.

Kim thrashed with the last of her strength, held down by hands invisible. Hands so cold to the touch. She tried screaming for help, yet no sound came. All she heard was the water filling the tub and then, the sound of a camera exposure. A picture appeared on her phone screen.

It was her—a living corpse, floating in a sea incarnadine. Someone posted it to social media with the caption:

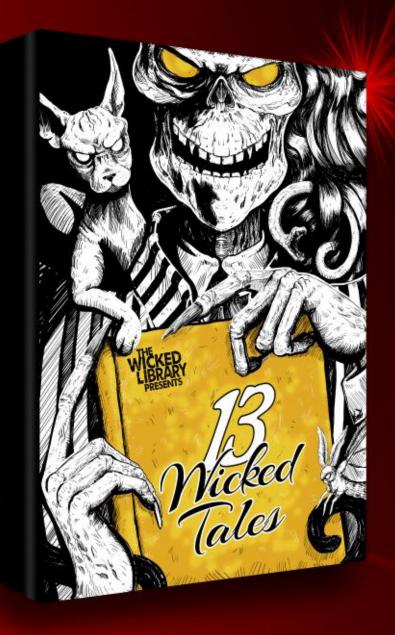
"LOOK AT ME"

About the Author:

Tristan Nieto is a writer of poetry, fiction, drama, and copy from San Pedro, California. Interests include sailing tall ships, training Kung Fu, and studying Engaged Humanities & the Creative Life at Pacifica Graduate Institute. Tristan spends Tuesday nights co-hosting the Redondo Poets Poetry Night at the Coffee Cartel in Redondo Beach.

Instagram: <u>Just Bloody Write</u> Facebook: <u>Tristan Nieto</u>

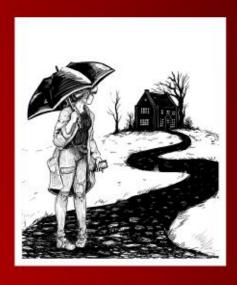




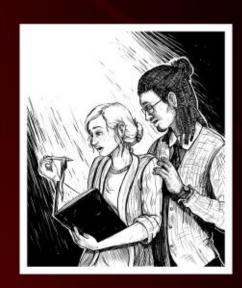
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The Fire-Escape | Elana Gomel

When Philip was six years old, his mother went downstairs.

He remembered it well: her retreating back as she slowly walked down the first flight of the rough stone stairs, holding on to the shaky banister. As if she were afraid to slip on the moss-covered steps. As if it mattered.

She paused five steps below the Landing, almost but not quite looking back. Philip was standing on the very edge of the Landing, his toes hanging over the misty abyss, crying "Mama!" He lowered his right foot, the tip of his shoe touching the step below...and then a rough hand closed over his arm, yanked him back, and his father yelled something, something Philip did not understand then and could not remember later, and his mother's pale face hovered below them. Then she walked down, quickly and resolutely, until she was swallowed up by the murk of the Cellar.

Philip wailed and squirmed in his father's bear-hug until a slap made his vision blur and his father told him that the whore was gone and he should stop crying, he was a man! And Philip stopped. He did not cry for six years.

During these years he had gotten such schooling as was available to the children of the House in Miss Spore's one-room lyceum, far enough from the Landing for the students not to be distracted by the Cellar's shadowy activity. This was the idea anyway. The children, ranging in age from six to twelve, perked their ears every time the level of ambient noise rose slightly, even if most of the time it signified merely the return of workers from the plantation rooms, tipsy on fermented moss and yelling obscene songs. Many students pitched in, to Miss Spore's indignation, unerringly picking out their fathers' voices in the medley. Philip remained silent.

He was grateful to Miss Spore for the discovery that changed his life. He was not good at letters in the beginning but she beat the alphabet into him, smartly tapping his knuckles with a ruler every time he stumbled over 'Angel' or 'Behemoth'. And eventually the squiggles turned into sounds, and sounds resolved themselves into words, and he found he could read. And because she was proud of her success in turning such a poor student around, she rewarded him by giving him access to a slender stack of pre-Incarceration books she kept under lock and key in her own room. The books were mostly illegible, splotched with brown and green mold. But he managed to decipher the beginning of one, and this is how he learned about the Fire-Escape.

Eager and excited about his discovery, he came back home to the dank apartment he shared with his father. The glass ceiling was so stained that the light of the Attic barely penetrated into the gloom. This was why Philip did not see his father's curled-up body in the corner. He almost stumbled over it.

His father grasped Philip's hand.

"I'm sorry, Son," he whispered. "I'll be all right. No big deal. Don't worry."

Indeed, there was nothing to worry about. His father was dead.

Philip sat by the body in the dirty light that flared up occasionally when the incandescent blob of an Angel dove down from the empyrean of the Attic. Eventually the night-awning slid over the glass ceiling, plunging the House into dark. But he did not stir. He was remembering all the times his father had brought home a package of lichen and divided it into two uneven parts, shoving the bigger portion across the table at Philip who sullenly devoured it.

When the night-awning folded back, Philip wrapped his father's body in a shirt he pulled out of the closet. He had never seen it before which indicated that the House had shifted into one of its grudgingly generous moods when clothes and other basic necessities would be capriciously distributed through the rooms. Philip filled two big canisters with the rusty water that trickled from the faucets and quickly washed up while it lasted. He also checked the kitchen cupboards out of habit but they were bare. It had been a long time since any food appeared. Humanity – all 268 of them – subsisted on lichen agriculture and rat-hunting.

He carried his father to the Landing. Miss Spore was there, and Judge Morley. The elders of the community who could no longer work took turns watching out for a Behemoth incursion. They could alert the others who would hide in nooks and crannies but their own lives would be forfeit. Nobody survived a face-to-face encounter with a Behemoth.

"Where do you want your father's body?" Judge Morley asked ceremoniously, hawking up phlegm. It was not a pro forma question. Most families would, of course, choose that the body be placed on the first flight of stairs leading up to the Attic. Then it would be carried into glory by Angels during night-hours. Only the bodies of malefactors – thieves, murderers, cannibals – were left on the lower flight, below the Landing, where they would

be snatched up by Behemoths. Such people were known in the community. It did happen, however, that the deceased's family would pronounce an unexpected judgment on them. When Philip was small, a shy girl named Fiona declared that her father's body did not belong in the Attic because he had secretly abused her.

Philip swallowed. Now was the time. He had dreamed about this moment in the lonely nights after his mother's disappearance, rehearsing the words he would say, condemning his father for driving his mother into the Cellar. He must have done it. Why else would she have abandoned her son?

But the words had melted away.

"Up," he said and the two elders nodded.

The body was left on the upper flight and disappeared at night. The Angels accepted Philip's judgment.

But now, living alone, Philip could finally explore the moldy book with the incomprehensible title of *Elements of Architecture*. He pored over it in the scant hours after work, before the black awning of night slid over the ceiling, leaving him in the dark which the few wall-lamps could not dispel. When the lichen harvest failed, he knew it was time to act.

Finding the Fire-Escape was not as hard as he had expected. Many parts of the House had fallen into disuse. Following a drawing in the book, he went into one of those abandoned corridors where chunks of plaster fell off the walls as he walked by. The doors, warped in their frames, opened onto darkness. He peeked into a room and flinched away. It looked as if it were permanently covered by the night-awning, and there were stealthy movements and whispers in the impenetrable gloom.

He reached the end of the corridor and there it was: a steel door, so well-blended with the rusty wall that nobody would notice it unless they knew it was there. Philip put his shoulder to it. Once, twice....

It opened with a screech. Light flowed in: as bright as the light of the Attic but with a strange orange undertone. Philip poked his head out and gasped.

It was the largest room he had ever seen: so large that its walls were invisible. Only a faint bluish paint in the distance indicated where it ended. And suspended in the room was a giant lamp, shedding a crimson radiance so strong Philip could not look at it without blinking. The lamp was being slowly lowered on invisible chains even as he watched.

And the Fire-Escape was there: a ladder of metal rails and rungs attached to the wall and stretching far up into the radiance of the Attic and far down, into the dimness of the Cellar. Philip grasped the rails. They were strong and reassuring.

Keeping his arms wrapped around the rails, he angled his body until both his feet were firmly planted on a rung. If he kept his face to the wall instead of staring into the abyss, he could do it!

But where to? Philip realized that everything he had been told in his short life was a lie. They told him the Attic and the Cellar were inaccessible to the living, and yet here it was, the Fire-Escape that, as the book had explained, provided 'emergency exit'. He could climb it up or down. He could be reunited with his father or his mother!

But not with both.

Philip clung to the rail until his fingers went numb. And then he started climbing.

About the Author:

Elana Gomel is an academic and a writer. She is the author of six non-fiction books, three novels and more than sixty fantasy and science fiction stories. She has lived in four countries, speaks three languages, and has two children. Her stories were featured in several award-winning anthologies. Her latest novel is the dark sci-fi thriller *The Cryptids* (2019).

Website: <u>Cities of Light and Darkness</u>

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Eternal | **Arthur M Harper**

I was fourteen when I sold my soul. It was just a joke, a silly game my brother and I played in the basement while our parents were out.

I never expected the Devil to accept.

A scalpel gleams in the artificial light. I shouldn't be here. My eyes should be dark, my soul floating away somewhere, shrouded in blissful ignorance. Cold steel glides along my skin as easily as a figure skater moving across a patch of pristine ice. I can't pull away. I'm locked in place, a prisoner in my own corpse. My heart doesn't pound as the terror rises into my throat. I have no pulse to race.

I'm nothing but a lifeless lump of meat.

The sharp edge punctures through my skin. It barely has to touch the once-strong muscle fibres to sever them. Rigid flesh pulls apart as easily as wet tissue paper. There's no pain, no gush of crimson. There's nothing but the sharp reek of formaldehyde.

A face comes into focus. It leers at me, ringed with blinding white light. Most of the features are hidden under a surgical mask. All I see clearly is her pupils. Each dances with a tongue of flame.

"Isn't this what you wanted?"

I hear her voice in my head, but not in my ears.

"You wanted eternal life. It's yours."

I'm forced to watch, aghast, as her gloved-hands dig beneath my ribs. White latex is bleached with my rapidly-hardening blood. Nimble fingers lovingly caress each part of me. Heart, liver, kidneys: one by one, each is presented before my still-seeing eyes.

She leans in close.

"I never said your body would live forever too."

Revulsion wriggles into my brain like maggots. Those quick fingers scuttle across my face. There's a fresh flash of silver, followed by a horrible squelch. Everything goes black. I hear a gentle plop, then another. Now my eyeballs sit on the table beside me. I would vomit, if I could, but my stomach is there too.

The voice is in my head again.

"You'll stay fresh here, until they bury you. I wonder how quickly you'll rot. Will you feel anything as the worms feast?"

I'm delirious with panic, free falling into a deep well of despair. My terror peaks, but the pressure has nowhere to go. I can't move. I can't cry out. My jaw is wired closed. The deep trenches in my flesh are stitched back up. I'm filled to bursting with poison, with a nightmare which will never cease.

I hear a door creak open. I imagine the black, icy maw, waiting to swallow me whole. I slide in, feet first. The door clicks shut in my wake.

I hear the devil's voice one last time.

"Enjoy your eternity."

About the Author:

Arthur M Harper's somewhat-nomadic existence began in Iceland in the mid-1980s. He took a winding route through the UK, developing a ghoulish sense of humour and fascination with the macabre along the way. He now lives in the Cotswolds with his wife and two young children. Besides crafting nightmares, Arthur enjoys role playing games, heavy metal music, and has a keen interest in local folklore.

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The Great Divide | Mark Cassell

Something echoed up ahead: a rhythmic clank. Hannah eyed the mountainside trail. The overgrown path narrowed, replaced by railway tracks. Rows of wooden sleepers hid beneath moss and creeping foliage, their vibrancy glowing in spite of the mist that pressed in from the gorge beside her.

At 2000 metres above sea level, inhaling the sweet aroma of the mountain woodland, her head was indeed in the clouds. Even at this height you could not escape the humidity of Taiwan's summer. She slowed her pace to avoid tripping over the sleepers and rusted tracks. Ferns slapped her trousers.

The insistent – perhaps even *frantic* – clanking sounds made her picture someone with a hammer. She'd not seen anyone for a couple of hours, and a sense of vulnerability pushed down on her as thick as the surrounding clouds.

Clank.

It reminded her of a blacksmith portrayed in movies set in medieval times, where a topless man glistened with sweat, forging a sword. Or axe.

She was being silly. Why not think of him hammering a horse shoe?

The clanks stopped.

Wind howled. Yet the trees that reached into the mist remained still. A rumble made her come to a total standstill. A heaviness filled her gut. Perhaps it was an earthquake – yet it was a far off sound rather than a sensation beneath her feet.

She removed a drinking bottle from her rucksack, twisted the lid and gulped water. Some trickled down her chin. Although warm, it was refreshing. Wiping her mouth with the back of a hand, she listened intently. Nothing. The silence squeezed her. The mist thickened.

No more wind, no more rumbles.

No more imagination, dammit. Yet she *had* heard the clanking sounds. Most definitely. Taking a lungful of mountainside air, she put away the bottle and began walking again.

And again: clank ... clank ... clank ...

Finally, as she rounded a curve of the railway that cut alongside the mountain, she saw someone sitting between the rails, facing up the track. Their grey hair was cut short, making her unable to determine gender. Dressed in the familiar garments of the Taiwanese older generation – definitely the poorer end of society – they held a rock, bringing it up high and then crashing it down between their legs.

Clank.

"Hello?" She was about fifteen paces away.

They didn't acknowledge her.

She came up beside them. It was a man, possibly in his late-fifties or early sixties. He sat with his legs spread wide. A stink of body odour and piss wafted from him. She recoiled but held her ground. He hammered at one of two chained manacles that bound his ankles to the rails that flanked him. His bare feet were slick with both congealed and fresh blood.

"Dear, God!"

Still he didn't look up.

Clank ... Clank.

"Let me help!"

The manacles reflected the green and white of their surroundings. Unfortunately it seemed his efforts had failed to even dent them.

He stopped hammering, his breaths rasping, and glared up at her. In rapid Taiwanese, he spoke. Having travelled through Asia, visiting countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, China, The Philippines, and now Taiwan, Hannah never got to learn much of any language. By the time she trod foreign soil, learning basic words so as not to come across as an ignorant Westerner, she'd set off for the next country.

The man snapped his mouth shut, his teeth clacking. He went back to smashing at the manacles.

"Please." Hannah crouched beside him. "Let me help."

Clank ...

The rumbling started up, just as before. This time closer.

Clank ...

Up ahead, the mist billowed. As though it breathed out, giving way to the silhouette of a narrow locomotive. Black smoke belched. It broke through the mist. Hannah lurched upright, stumbled backwards, and tripped

over the rail. She crashed to the hard ground, her head smacking rock. She cried out. The train thundered toward them, rumbling along the broken track, phasing in and out of focus; a shimmering phantom, transparent and unreal. The trees and ferns remained eerily still, only the mist parting.

The man hammered at the manacles with desperation. Clank. Clank.

She tucked her legs away from the tracks, shrank against the rock, and screamed. Hot wind blasted into her face and whipped hair into her eyes as the train hurtled past.

The clanks stopped and the locomotive vanished. Along with the man.

Silence.

With breath tight in her lungs, Hannah watched the mist drift along the rails. It teased the rusted manacles. And there, half-buried in the hardened earth, several bones, each pitted and yellowed, lay scattered between the sleepers.

About the Author:

Mark Cassell lives on England's south-east coast with his wife and a number of animals. He is the author of the best-selling Shadow Fabric mythos and has seen almost 50 short stories feature in magazines and anthologies by, among others, Crystal Lake Publishing and The Sinister Horror Company. His jobs have included baker, laboratory technician, driving instructor, actor, and spotlight operator for an Elvis impersonator.

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A Close Embrace | Gwen Weir

It stood in the corner of the coffee shop. A shabby item; worn arms with threadbare patches, and a misshapen cushion. It looked like a well-loved piece of furniture, but appearances can be deceiving. In the corner of that coffee shop, it sat and waited for its prey.

The girl walked in from the rain. She was clearly soaked to the skin, but anyone who was really looking - really paying attention - would notice that the wet streaks on her face were not only from the rain that was bucketing down outside. She approached the counter and ordered quickly in terse sentences. As the barista fussed with the equipment, the girl rattled her fingertips on the top of her satchel, *Come on*.

When her drink arrived, she picked it up and walked away from the counter. Glancing around, she took in the room: it was crowded and stuffy, condensation was filming the windows. Most tables were full, but one or two had a seat or stool available; she bit her lip. She started weighing her options, desperate to avoid others if she possibly could, then she spotted it. Deep in the recesses of the shop, almost hidden in a back corner, stood a solitary chair. It faced away from the general crowd and had a small table to one side. She thought it looked well used, but lonely somehow, and she was drawn to it.

Winding her way through, between shopping bags, buggies, and dripping raincoats, she kept her eye on the prize. When she reached the shadowy corner, a calm began to spread from her – inside to outside. She sunk down into the chair, placing her cup on the little table, and the babble of the shop seemed to fade away, receding to a hum that was reminiscent of bees, intent on the nectar in a bush. The girl leaned back, revelling in the quiet, and felt the cushions enclose her in a smothering hug. Closing her eyes, the soft fabric wrapped itself around her. At first it was gentle, reassuring, but soon it began to feel constricting and tight. The girl tried to cry out but her voice was muffled by the cushion that had seemed so innocuous.

At the counter, the barista looked up - ready to hand the receipt to the bedraggled girl he had just served. She had been there mere seconds before, but now she was gone. Her drink stood on the counter in front of him, still steaming.

In the corner, stood a chair. Its cushions and padding looking plumper; its worn patches were less faded. It stood and waited.

The Mirror | Gwen Weir

Every morning, Anna got up; she washed her face, cleaned her teeth, and got herself ready. She picked her outfit out and modelled it, checking every crease and fold. After dressing, she gave herself a little talking to: eyes meeting eyes in the full length free-standing mirror. Anna was a creature of habit and kept to the routine with almost no thought.

The mirror had never spoken back before. And it didn't so much speak this time, as scream - a long, piercing scream of agony. Anna screamed back and leapt away from the shimmering surface, colliding with the edge of the bed, and sitting with a thump. What on earth?

The two identical pairs of eyes stopped screaming and peered. Anna lifted her left hand, but the mirror-woman did not. The mirror-woman blinked firmly and leaned forwards; she did not. There were several silent moments as heartbeats thumped like a drum, then she took a deep breath.

"Hello?" Anna spoke, her voice barely above a whisper. The figure in the glass contorted her face into a mockery of a smile.

"Hello," the mirror-woman replied, a little louder than Anna had spoken; she stood and walked forward, reaching out. When her fingers were almost grazing the cold glass Anna froze, her hands shaking slightly.

The mirror image, also closer now, put her own hand out. At the same time, they reached their hands forwards to touch; she gasped as she felt the warmth of real skin touch her own extended hand. Then, before she could react, the fingers from the mirror grasped her own and pulled. There was no resisting as she was dragged: first hand, then arm, then whole body. She was hauled into the mirror. Struggle as she did, it was only seconds before she found herself unable to move, staring out at the room that moments before had been her own. The mirror figure stepped across her vision and stretched, rolling her shoulders. Mirror-woman...not mirror woman anymore? turned to face the glass and smirked, a glint in her flat, empty eyes. Anna, the real Anna, just had time to see mirror-woman snatch a throw from the bed before her world vanished. Unable to move, she tried to scream but no sound would come. Her world, once so vast, was now black: endless, suffocating black.

A New Friend | Gwen Weir

I thought I heard a noise, that's why I left the path. They always say 'Don't leave the path,' but the noise wasn't a threatening one; more a pitiful one, so I went anyway. I pushed through the greenery at the side of the narrow path. After a few scrambly moments, the dense shrubs and bushes opened up into a small clearing. It was a few paces across and filled with dappled light, little golden patches and cooler darker spots. The grass was tall and thick - still damp with morning dew—and I stood peering around the idyllic spot searching for the source of the noise. My feet chilled as the damp seeped through my thin canvas trainers.

Then I saw it; crouched on a stump near a blackberry bush. It was the most peculiar thing I've ever seen: tiny, round ears and huge round eyes, a button nose, and a mouth smeared with something dark and purple. It was cloaked in fur but had a scaly tummy and lower legs. The creature had petite forepaws and slightly longer rear legs. It can't have been much bigger than a squirrel, but it clearly wasn't one; not with the wings that lay flat across its back

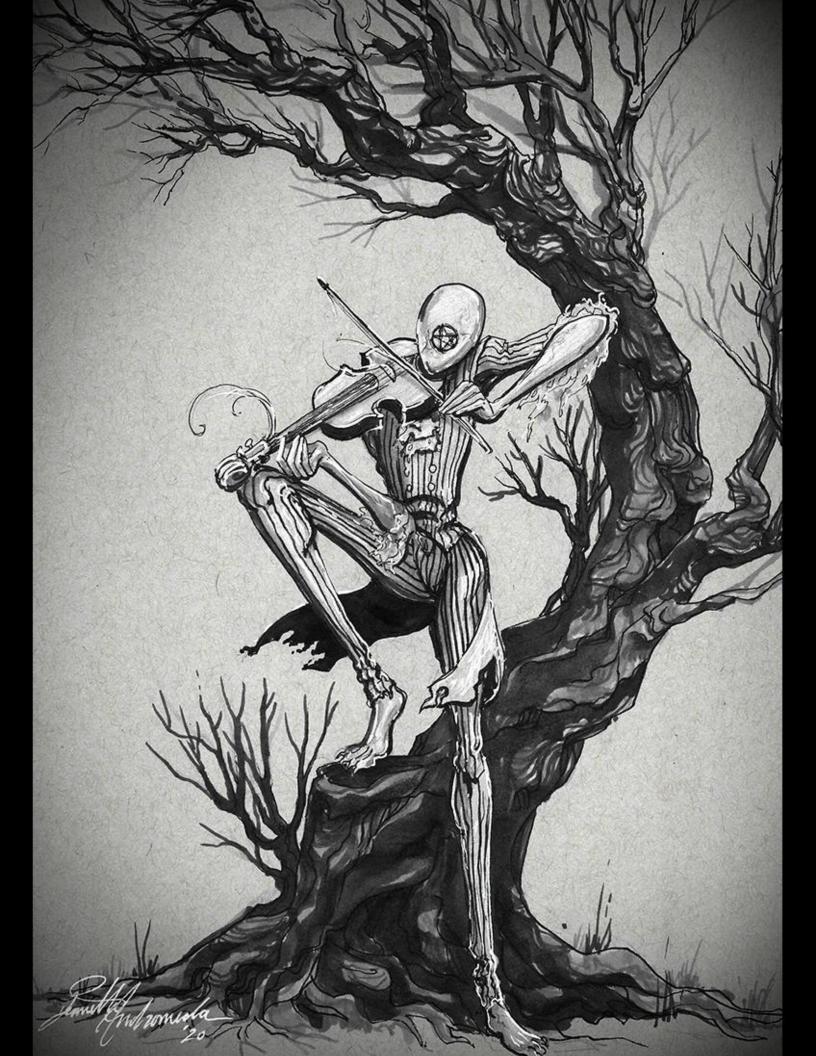
It gazed up at me, huge, watery eyes which were deep pools of midnight, and made the odd noise again. As I looked at it, a warm feeling spread through my body—like a hug— and I felt like I was with my oldest friend.

I crossed the clearing towards the being, more assured now, and reached a hand towards it. As I got within arm's length, it leapt off the stump and into my grasp. I held it, and looked into its eyes; a strange tendril of thought entered my mind. Everything around me seemed to blur, except the creature, and all I could feel was the warmth in my arms and the sensation in my head. It was like I had walked into a fog: I wasn't even interested in finding my way out. It wasn't me that had found an old friend, that thing found me. And it never let me go.

About the Author:

Gwen Weir has been writing short fiction for a number of years. Currently working on an MA in Creative Writing through the Open University, she has written in many genres, including horror, science fiction and fantasy. Growing up on a diet of Stephen King and Anne Rice led to a love of dark tales, and writing her own has become a passion.

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It's OK to Be a Fan Girl

It's ok to be a fan girl.

Before I get into that, let me tell you a story. Before I got going as an illustrator, I was working as a production designer for low budget horror movies. There was one summer where I was commuting two hours a day to set. And let me tell you, that hour drive in and hour drive back after working 16 hours in the swampy heat of New England was dangerous. I was exhausted. In hindsight, I shouldn't have been driving at all, but I was. And it was during those two hours a day of desperate exhaustion that I came to rely on podcasts to keep me alive - or awake at least.

Flash forward about a year, I had wrapped on my latest film and was home nursing a severe lung infection and feeling kind of lost about the whole 'career' thing when I got a message on Twitter. It was Daniel Foytik- the host and writer behind one of those podcasts that literally kept my eyes open during those dangerous drives. He just wanted to let me know that he really liked my art.

I'm not sure I'll ever be able to express how much that little message helped me. I had started blogging at that point and every week I was putting out art and talking about the things in the horror world that brought me joy. And to have someone I so admired reach out and let me know, "Hey, you're doing a good job," made all the difference. Inspired by that interaction I did what artists do best- I made fan art of one of the characters in his podcast, Victoria.

What's crazy is that little moment of heartfelt mutual fangirling lead to years of friendship and creative collaborations. We even co-hosted a couple shows for a while and I still help out with the podcast Victoria is the star of, The Lift. Since then, I have never shied away from letting creators know when I straight up admire what they do.

Which loops back around to right here, right now, with you perusing my works here in The Sirens Call eZine. The collection of artwork you see in this edition all started with some fan art I made of Nicholas Paschal's book, "Father of Flesh." I hadn't even finished reading the book when I decided I had to draw this monstrous thing Nicholas had invented. I ended up sharing it with him and we've been internet friends since then. Which brings me back to my initial point: It's more than ok to be a fangirl.

Go ahead, love what you love and let the people whose work you're enjoying know. You never know how big of a difference that little bit of fangirl love can make in someone's journey.

About the Artist:

Jeanette Andromeda is one of the bubbliest horror illustrators you might ever meet. A passion for theater in high school led her to earning a BFA in Technical Theater Design at UCONN. She went on to production design her fair share of movies for the Sci-fi and Chiller channels. Currently, her focus is on illustration. Her work can be seen on and between the covers of "The Lift, 9 Stories of Transformation," "13 Wicked Tales," and other works of horror in both literature and podcast form.

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Lone Orbit | Roger Ley

Mary woke, floating tethered in her sleep sack. She felt more relaxed than she had for months, now that she'd been alone for a while. The latest Soyuz had brought supplies up and taken back the three other occupants of the International Space Station as they finished their mission. There'd been the usual cheery goodbyes undercut by the tense knowledge of the risks inherent in the drop to Earth, but the Soyuz design had gained a well-earned reputation for reliability during its fifty years of service.

"Best of luck, Tovarich, say Hello to Moscow for me."

It would be several days before the next SpaceX 22 capsule brought up replacement astronauts. Mary's mission would last another two months, and would break Peggy Whitson's record for the longest space flight by a woman, in three weeks' time.

Looking out of the window of her module, she noticed a change to the coastline of her beloved California. What looked like red and grey flowers were blossoming all along the coastal strip. She pushed her way out of her sack and drifted over to the comms console. "Hello, Houston, what's happening in California?"

Mission Control called back almost instantly. 'Hi, Mary, Estella here, we're just getting reports of a big quake, centred on Santa Barbara. What can you see from up there?"

"I'm flying over it now, it looks serious." The dust clouds were expanding. They must be enormous and moving fast if she could see the movement from two hundred and some miles up.

"Yes, I can see it on the live feed from your external cameras. Wow, that is big," said Estella.

"It's passing under me, I'm over the Gulf of California now. Keep me posted, Estella, Patrick and the boys are visiting his mother in San Francisco. Could you call him and let me know they're okay?"

"Will do, Mary, I'll get right onto it. Anything for the Sisterhood."

The Station passed into darkness. It would take an hour and a half to complete its orbit, but her path would have moved one and a half thousand miles to the East. She wouldn't be over Santa Barbara again for three days.

Needing to divert her attention from worries about her 'boys', she spent some time on the exercise machines and then swallowed a meal, not really aware of which particular flavour of gloop the tube held. The Station was quieter than she'd ever known it, just the gentle sounds of pumps and fans, the creak of the structure as it heated and cooled.

The radio burst into life.

"Hi, Mary, it's Estella. No news from Patrick, I'm afraid, but I'll keep trying."

"Copy that. What's happening with the quake?"

"Things are not looking good, Mary, seems like the Cascadia subduction zone has got in on the act. The President has already declared a state of emergency in California. Looks like it's the 'Big One'. We all knew it would happen eventually, but the reality is, kinda overwhelming."

"Can you feed me one of the live TV news broadcasts?"

"I'm afraid there's a problem with that, Mary."

It must be bad, she thought, they don't want to upset me. She went back to her solar observations and tried to concentrate on collating results.

She listened to the radio news broadcasts but it was only when she was passing over California again, three days later, that Mary could see the true extent of the disaster. The shape of the Pacific coastline from San Francisco to San Diego had altered, it was concave, not convex. The Gulf of California was open to the Ocean at *both* ends and the Baja peninsula was now a series of islands. She was horrified. There was a cloud of smoke and ash drifting east that obscured Arizona and New Mexico, somehow it reminded her of the TV images of the dust and smoke from 9/11, all those years ago.

And still there was no news from Patrick and the boys.

"They've decided to reschedule the next launch from Baikonur, Mary, you'll be on your own for a while longer," said Estella during her next transmission.

"How much longer?"

"No news at this time." There was silence for a few seconds then, "Actually, Mary, I've just been told that we're gonna hand over communications to our friends in Moscow. Things are getting a little disorganised here, what with the dust and general disruption. Apparently, Yellowstone is erupting. Things are falling apart, Hon. I'll say

goodbye for now and hand you over to Moscow Mission Control Centre. Sorry I couldn't reach Patrick; I must have tried a hundred times. They're shutting everything down here and sending us home. Good luck, Mary." There was a break in Estella's voice, "Houston out."

"Hello, Houston, Estella, Estella?" There was only silence from the radio. "Hello, Korolyov, come in Korolyov."

Apparently, no one had told Moscow MCC about the comms handover.

An hour and a half later she passed over the Yellowstone Caldera. The ash cloud covered Wyoming, Montana and Idaho. Soon Dakota and Nebraska would be obscured. Mary began to search the radio frequencies. There were broadcasts in all languages, the ones she could understand were mainly calls for help. As the days passed, the ash and smoke cloud slowly encircled the globe, only the most northern and southern latitudes were partly free of it.

The Station sailed sedately on, subject only to the unvarying laws of celestial mechanics. Mary carried on with her mission for another two days before she admitted the pointlessness of it to herself. It had been a way of dealing with the shock and avoiding the realisation that she was truly on her own now. There would be no launch from Baikonur, there would be no resupply rockets. There was always the Soyuz crew return vehicle, of course, docked to the Russian module, but if she made her escape, what would she be returning to, and where would she land? It might be Mongolia and she'd never get back home from there.

It was time to do some stock taking.

There was a ton of food. She reckoned that if she lived frugally, the new supplies, still floating in the docking chamber, would probably last a year. Water was the limiting factor because it was used to generate oxygen as well as for drinking. After checking the tanks, she came to the conclusion that, with a little care, the supply would last about five months.

Over the next weeks the voices from the ground slowly disappeared. The last to go were from the Antipodes. They'd probably be using ancient, pedal-powered radios recalled into service on the sheep stations of the outback. Finally, there was just the hiss of static and the click of lightning from the vast storms roiling below her.

She mourned the loss of her family. She hadn't been with them for almost a year, but she clung to a shred of hope that they were still alive, maybe in a government shelter somewhere, hunkered down to wait out the 'nuclear winter'. Loneliness became her biggest problem, she wondered if she was the last human being alive. She hoped not. Perhaps the Scandinavians would be able to cope with the cold and dark and eventually re-populate the planet when the skies cleared. A peaceful Viking invasion this time.

She found the empty plastic bottle floating in the Russia Orbital Segment. 'Ethyl Alcohol 99.99% use as solvent' read the label. Just add water to bring it down to a less throat burning forty percent and it's vodka by any other name, she thought. No wonder the guys were so cheerful when they left.

Floating in the darkened Cupola module at the top of the Station, lights low and surrounded by stars, her beloved Elgar played as she mixed a vodka OJ in a drinks bag. She sighed and looked at the paraphernalia floating around her: squeeze bags of orange juice, 'vodka' from the chemical stores, ampules of morphine and a needle from the meds locker, a length of rubber tubing from her lab for a tourniquet.

All a girl needed to party on her final orbit.

About the Author:

Roger Ley was born and educated in London and spent some of his formative years in Saudi Arabia. He worked as an engineer in the oilfields of North Africa and the North Sea, before pursuing a career in higher education. He writes in a variety of speculative genres, his stories have appeared in about twenty eZines in the last two years.

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The Portrait Painter | HJ Mara

At the kitchen table in her apartment, Amy refills two mugs of morning coffee. "Something's gotta give here, or my head will explode," Amy tells Cassandra, her childhood friend.

Amy is tethered to her husband, Joe, by a financial leash, and she can't escape. Joe's portrait paintings sell, while Amy's realistic paintings collect dust. Dependent on Joe for support, Amy is forced to tolerate his drinking and suffer his tawdry affair. Worse yet, Amy's daughter, Becky, and her son-in-law can't seem to conceive the grandchild that would brighten her dismal life.

"Don't accept your world as it is, Amy. Imagine the life you want, and it can be," Cassandra says. Cassandra is riding high on her latest touchy-feely hobbyhorse: the power of imagination. "Invest *mindfully* in your craft. Commit an alternate reality to your canvas and *transpoort* yourself to-"

"Save your mind-numbing bullshit," Amy says. "When I can make it on my own, I'll *transpooort* myself — right outta here!" Until then, Amy is destined to abide Joe's indignity. To top it off, she's destined to abide Cassandra's indignity too: Cassandra is the one sleeping with Joe.

Her arrogance bruised, Cassandra empties her full mug into the kitchen sink. "Give Joe a kiss from me," Cassandra winks, and then she struts back to her apartment next door.

"That self-righteous bitch!" Amy says. She takes a few Tylenol tablets.

Fortified for her next daily ordeal, Amy ventures into the art studio. There, Joe is cleaning up after a long night of painting. "Morning Joe," she tries.

Joe bristles, and the knuckles holding his palette turn white. Like the 1970's furnishings in their apartment, Amy is drab, frayed, and used up. "She stifles my creativity," he told Cassandra. Unlike Amy, Cassandra is exciting and slim, and she appreciates the artist in Joe. She even hosts a local radio show on personal motivation! That's why painting at night works doubly well for Joe: Amy is asleep, and the hours are convenient for his own touchy-feely sessions next door with Cassandra.

Joe brushes past Amy at the studio door. "I'll be down at the Town Tavern," he says.

"Joe, it's breakfast time. Let's talk."

"Don't wait up tonight."

After the apartment door slams shut, Amy ponders, Why not? Cassandra's full of crap, but maybe her mindfulness idea isn't.

Using Cassandra's approach to mental imagery, Amy learns to visualize a life with grandchildren. As Cassandra instructed, she conveys what she envisions onto canvas. Realistic family scenes, from a summer picnic to a winter skate, brighten the studio. They brighten Amy, too. *Imaginative painting is good therapy, at least*.

At first, her paintbrush is a passive tool that transmits what she thinks. As Amy engages all five senses, though, the brush becomes an active partner in creating every detail of the life she foresees. Her art becomes hyperrealistic.

A month later, Becky calls to announce, "Mom, the pregnancy test stick shows positive!"

Amy launches a grandmother-to-be shopping spree for Becky's maternity clothes and baby gear. Wish I could afford to move closer to Becky! A week later, with the final package to Becky mailed, she returns to her studio. Coincidence. The wishful paintings and Becky's pregnancy are a coincidence, totally. Amy studies the paintbrush in her hand. "But I wonder . . ." She decides to put her brush — the possible agent of a future reality — to the test. She replicates her bank statement on canvas and then paints in a deposit of \$1,000. It sure would help Becky furnish that nursery!

The next morning, after another nighttime frolic next door, Joe shows Amy their online bank account. "What's with the extra thousand bucks?" Joe says. "Did you finally sell a painting?" He rattles the car keys. "Doesn't matter. I know just where to spend it."

But Joe comes straight back home. "There I was on my personal barstool, when the health inspector shows up," Joe laments. "And shuts down the goddamn Town Tavern. For good!"

"Gee, that's too bad, Joe. But it might be a blessing." With a sudden bounce in her step, Amy heads for the door. "Looks like I'll be needing more canvas."

She's up to something in there. After Amy leaves, Joe removes the bed sheets that cover a few of her meditative paintings. The perfect replica of the bank statement confounds Joe. But his eyes flare wide open when he unveils a photographic painting of the Town Tavern — boarded up! Wow, good work! But how'd she know ahead of time? Back in the kitchen, Joe searches for answers where he often finds them: in a tumbler of whiskey.

Joe's daytime drinking and more frequent nocturnal excursions finally break Amy. She lies awake at night, humiliated at the sounds of Joe and Cassandra a few feet away through their common apartment wall.

Her imagination turns ever darker and revengeful. She no longer pictures the future creatively. Instead, Amy paints to mete out retribution to the shadowy players in her past. The embezzling stockbroker who called off their wedding long ago is frog-marched from his office in handcuffs. And the interloper whom the broker then married? Her recent plastic surgery suddenly takes a turn for the worse.

Joe monitors Amy's creations like a TV serial whenever she's away. With the Town Tavern shuttered, her vengeful paintings — and the real-life demise of their targets — are his new amusement.

But then Joe unveils Amy's darkest creation yet. In the painting, Joe himself dangles at the end of a noose hung from the rafter of their studio. The ghastly scene is all but complete. *Once she finishes painting my eyes, I'll be swingin'*.

That evening, Amy finds Joe lurking in the studio, swirling a whiskey at the fireplace. "Thought you were out, Joe." "I see you've got plans for me, love," Joe says. He reveals the deadly painting.

"What do you expect, with the way you drink and how you treat me? And I know how you carry on with Cassandra!" "I'll just burn this here picture."

"Too late Joe, I already imagined it." Amy picks up her Exacto blade from an easel and slashes the air with it. Joe retreats. With her other hand, Amy finishes painting one of Joe's eyes while the blade keeps him at bay.

Joe's collar tightens. He searches for any chance at salvation. When Amy turns to finish painting his other eye, Joe knocks her to the floor and wrestles the blade away. Now, it's Joe who threatens Amy with the Exacto blade.

"It won't work, Joe!" she says. "I'll just keep right on painting."

Joe pulls a small portrait of Amy's face out of his pocket. "I borrowed your brush today, dear," he says. "Your work has improved! But remember, I'm the portrait painter in the family, not you." He covers his own face in the fateful painting with his perfectly-fitted portrait of Amy.

Writhing on the floor, Amy gasps for breath and clutches her constricting windpipe. Her face turns purple.

"Snap!" True to the finished painting, Amy gurgles as she swings from the rafter. Her vacant eyes stare at Joe on her every spin. But Joe looks past her, already imagining a new future. He's rid of the bland Amy, and it's her doing. Joe's prize? The fulsome Cassandra.

Joe frames the murderous painting of Amy behind one of his portraits. *They'll never find it here*. Then, careful not to leave fingerprints, he topples a chair beneath Amy. He'll report her tragic suicide in the morning. His tracks covered, he steadies Amy as she twirls, and digs the car keys out of her pocket. He makes for the door, ready to leave Amy's accusing glare behind.

But then Joe conceives even bigger ideas. *May as well go all the way*. He stokes the fire in the fireplace and feeds the flames with Amy's painting of the boarded-up Town Tavern. *That'll do it*. Then, before he burns Amy's brush too, he adds two extra zeroes to the painting of her creative bank deposit. Anxious to begin a brighter life, Joe overlooks an easel covered up in the far corner. It holds Amy's latest painting — of Cassandra.

Moments later, down at the grand reopening of the Town Tavern, the portrait painter slaps a blank check on the bar to cover the inaugural round. "Sell a Rembrandt Joe?" the bartender shouts on behalf of his festive patrons. Joe takes a long swig of beer and searches the crowd for Cassandra.

But the tavern hubbub hits a sour note when Joe opens the backroom door to accommodate the overflow crowd. Inside, Joe confronts the alternate reality Amy so acutely imagined for her interloping friend. Cassandra dangles from the door's coat hook, with her face and throat slashed, and the Exacto blade that did the deed lodged in her chest.

With sirens blaring, a police officer responds to the bartender's frantic 9-1-1 call. "No one leaves the bar," the officer says. He cordons off the backroom crime scene with yellow tape and calls for backup support.

Joe blends into the crowd of other innocent, neck-craning onlookers. In his mind, Joe retraces his steps. *Not quite as I pictured it. But all around, I'm still in the clear.*

Joe's jaw drops, though, when he sees an investigator dust the Exacto blade for fingerprints. My fingers were the last ones on that blade! Joe's eyes dart around the barroom. He fidgets and begins to pace. How do I get outta this?

Monitoring the patrons, the police officer sees the change in Joe's behavior. "Know the lady, bud?" No answer. "What's your name?"

Bile fills Joe's throat. His future reality is suddenly one that not even Amy would have imagined.

About the Authors:

Holly and John Mara began writing fiction together last summer and have short stories published or forthcoming in ten markets. They never fail to attract mortified glances while discussing plot structure in restaurants. Prior to writing fiction, they authored 20+ articles published in twelve magazines.



...Forced to survive the night alone in the desert with an aberration of nature...



Available for Purchase or Borrow Exclusively on Amazon

Maggoty Jo | Diane Arrelle

Florida couldn't believe her eyes. Maggots: thousands maybe hundreds of thousands of them covered the trash can. They turned the sides and the inside of the lid of her garbage can wriggling white. She'd just walked out to dump her daily bag of cat litter and was confronted with this!

"Holy Shit!" she yelped and backed away from the parasites that were escaping the huge canister. They were dropping down from the edge of the lid like an oozing flood of slimy, white lava.

She began to shake with revulsion, then turned and ran into the garage. She stared at all the piles of stuff jammed onto shelves and scattered all over the cement floor. She dug through it to find what she needed. Grasping a spray can of common insecticide, and gallon of super-strength, super-toxic, pest remover which had been labeled too dangerous for use, Florida said, "Thank goodness Ralph left this behind when he split."

She closed the garage door, then shut the warped, wooden backdoor to the house. She needed to be sure none of the dozen or so milling cats could get out through the torn and rusted screen door.

Taking out the spray can, Florida saturated the disgusting white carnivores that were feasting on her refuse. "Die!" she screamed, not caring if any of her neighbors heard her. Then she laughed and did a victory dance around the trashcan as the maggots writhed and poured up over the lip and plummeted down to the blacktop.

Her dancing stopped abruptly as they wriggled to get out of the sunlight and into the shade. None of them died but appeared to move as a unit toward the shade under the broken, webbed chairs on her driveway.

"Huh? Why aren't you suckers dying? I used almost the whole can on you."

The maggots ignored her as they sped across the hot asphalt.

"Well, I'll get you yet!" Florida bellowed, and opened the container of toxic insecticide. She dumped half on the maggots that were fleeing the sunlight and dumped the rest of the incredibly potent smelling liquid into the can. She slammed the cover on it and watched the driveway horde writhe, but not expire.

With the summer sun beating down, she felt sweat forming on her forehead and upper lip. She'd had enough and went inside. She stepped over the lounging cats, and gently pushed the wandering cats out of her way as she headed for the kitchen and after filling the teakettle, put it on a lit burner.

A few minutes later Florida filled a mug with the boiling water. She dropped in a dried-up used teabag and then took the rest of the almost full pot outside and dumped it on the maggots, who were apparently unfazed by the chemicals she'd just used on them.

As the scalding water poured over them, most stopped moving and died. The few that appeared to be immune to every torture continued to flee the light. She ignored them and kept the trashcan lid closed, hoping the insecticides would do their job. She grunted with satisfaction at the carnage at her feet and went inside to for her cup of almost clear water. She decided she deserved a new teabag as a reward for vanquishing the filthy, germ carrying, carrion eaters.

A few hours later, the dead maggots crisping up in the sun, Florida finally opened the backdoor and let the cats wander in and out through the rusted torn screen-door. All was right in her world except that Jo, her ten-year-old calico had disappeared two days ago. Florida knew that older cats tended to wander off to die. And poor Jo had lost a lot of weight and her fur always looked matted and dull. Florida had raised enough cats over the last 30 years to recognize a cat that was dying and even though ten years wasn't an old cat, it was old for a sickly cat.

She walked outside, glanced down at the multitude of tiny white carcasses and grinned. "Chalk up one for the human," she said licking her pointer finger and making an imaginary line in the air.

The next morning Florida opened the door and was greeted by what seemed to be dozens of flies. Bigger than the average housefly, they were buzzing like the incredibly discordant horn section of an orchestra. "Good lord," she shouted and grabbed the nearly empty bug spray. She sprayed the screen but the flies ignored the poisonous liquid so she shooed them away. As they took off, she saw dozens more on the trash can. Running over with a broom, she shooed them away as well and then opened the lid.

A black swarm poured out and upward settling on her arms and hair. She screamed, dropped the lid and slapping at her head ran into the house, slamming the door behind her.

Florida sat at the table, she watched the cats eating from the unwashed dishes all around the kitchen. If one got near her she'd pet it for a moment. The day was hot and she kept the unscreened windows shut as well as the door. She wished she still had a working fan. The flies gathered on the outside of the glass and she wondered how to get rid of them.

Sweating, lightheaded from the oppressive heat, Florida tried to remembered what she knew about flies. She'd had maggot infestations before. They were born in refuse, lived on refuse and eventually, after a few weeks, turned into flies that she took great pleasure in swatting. But these maggots hadn't died like they were supposed to do and somehow they'd gone from the middle, little-white-wormy stage to huge annoying flies overnight.

Thinking in the heat became too difficult so Florida got up on shaky legs and stumbled to bathroom. She bent and removed three litter pans from the bottom of the bathtub then closed the stopper and filled it with cold water. Finally, she settled down in the bath, felt cool relief and drifted off to sleep.

Hungry meows woke her and and looking out the bathroom window, she saw the setting sun through the veil of flies. "OK babies, I'll feed you. Shhh. I know it's late but mommy loves you," Florida cooed and stood. Naked and dripping wet, she fed her cats then with shriveled wrinkly fingers refilled the tub and spent the night in the bathroom.

The next morning the flies were gone. Florida tentatively cracked open the door and found a cool, morning breeze keeping the heat at bay for a few hours. She relaxed and swung the door open. She stepped outside and gasped. "Jo?"

The cat lying on the driveway said, "Meow?"

Florida stepped toward the calico cat and shook her head in amazement. This cat was the spitting image of Jo, same markings, same meow, but she could tell immediately that this was a different cat. This cat was fat, not sickly. She approached this new kitty and saw flies hovering around and landing on it's back leg.

The other cats wandered out of the house, rubbed against her legs and purred loudly like toy motorboats. Then they seemed to notice the new cat and the purring ceased. Florida watched them back away, backs arched, legs stiff. Then as one unit they ran around the corner to the other side of the house.

Florida shrugged, looked at her new kitty and said, "Cats. Whatcha gonna do?"

The new cat meowed in answer and Florida laughed. She grabbed one of the newspapers laying on the ground and waved the flies away. "Shoo," she yelled and the insects took off. She bent down to pick up the cat and saw it was injured. Its back haunch was cut and suddenly she was fighting nausea and revulsion when she saw maggots feasting on the wound. "Oh, you poor baby!" She whispered so as not to scare the cat. "Here, let me clean it."

She ran inside, grabbed some mismatched gardening gloves, and soaked a rag in alcohol. Back outside she gently brushed the vile larva off the wound then hugging the injured feline to her, she covered the cut with the rag. To her surprise the cat settled into her arms and purred instead of yowling and scratching.

"What a good baby," she cooed. "What a good kitty." She looked at the pile of wiggling maggots on the ground and squished them under her shoe.

"There now, let's get you inside and you'll feel better," she cooed and cuddled her new baby. She went to her bedroom and put him gently on the unmade bed. Using the same rag, she cleaned the wound again. "You look so much like Jo I'm gonna call you Maggoty Jo. You and me we'll just keep on killing those maggots and then all the flies. We'll show 'em who's boss! Right Kitty?"

She sat in the living room with her new cat all day. When the others finally wandered back in for dinner they kept their distance. Eating, they stayed on the opposite side of the room from Maggoty Jo. Florida frowned, annoyed at her cats for not welcoming her new Jo. "Well that's just fine, all of you can sleep out here tonight, I'm taking Jo with me." She grabbed her new cat and marched off to the bedroom placed Jo on Ralph's old pillow and went to sleep with her newest cat purring away.

Sometime in the small hours, she woke to the sound of purring changing in tone to buzzing. The room was filled with flies, huge flies, stinging flies. Screaming and slapping at the insects, Florida jumped from the bed and ran from the room slamming the door behind her.

As she looked around and saw all her cats staring at her with unblinking eyes, she remembered Maggoty Jo. She yelped and started for the door only to stop. Those flies were in there and they were relentless. Blood was running down her arms and legs and as she touched her cheek she realized over her face.

"Oh kitties, what can I do?" she wailed. "I can't let them kill her!" She stood at the door and waited for her hands to stop shaking and then opened it a few inches, ready to slam it if needed. To her relief, a paw grabbed the door corner and pulled it open a bit more. Then the calico squeezed out. Florida waited but no flies followed. She walked away from the slightly opened door, hugging her cat and sank onto the sofa. Suddenly, the flies were back. They swarmed around her biting her head, her arms and her legs. She slapped them away but they kept coming back until the pain grew too much. Florida passed out to the faint smell of the insecticide.

She woke to a sea of pain. Everything burned and as she tried to move the flies that had been covering her flew off leaving blood spatters over the floor and walls. She didn't know what was happening. The pain was bordering on

unbearable. As she weakly brushed at a deep gouge on her arm, her fingers came away bloody and she screamed. She saw tiny eggs on her fingertips. *How...what... why...* the questions were trying to come together but the pain stopped her from thinking clearly.

An involuntary shudder ran through her. Eggs! The flies were using her for a nest. Just like some dead animal! She smelled a strong pungent odor, a chemical odor and shuddered. Struggling to think a little better despite the acid-like agony eating away at her, she realized the eggs smelled of the toxic insecticide. The maggots hadn't died from the poison she'd use. No, she realized dread filling her chest, they became stronger, the stuff must have actually accelerated their growth and development.

She knew she had to find the strength to get up and wash off every bite before the eggs hatched. She had to get up. Slowly, she sat and watched Jo come toward her. But as she looked at the cat, she realized that it was coming at her with an unnatural gait, stiff legged, staggering. As it reached her feet, it suddenly shuddered and she saw movement under its skin. She forgot about herself for a moment, the searing pain dulled as the cat opened its mouth and vomited out thousands of quivering maggots. The smell was overpowering as the air became foul with the toxic stench of the bottled death she'd dumped on them just two days ago. Gagging, she whimpered as the cat folded up and collapsed into a flatten pile of fur and skin.

Then the chemically tainted maggots converged on her, settling into all the wounds, all the openings on her they could find. She screamed until they filled her mouth and wriggled down her throat toward her lungs and then she wished she could scream some more as she waited to see what would kill her first, the maggots or the poison they carried.

About the Author:

Diane Arrelle has had more than 250 short stories published as well as two short story collections: Just A Drop In The Cup and Seasons On The Dark Side. Retired from being director of a municipal senior citizen center, she is now co-owner of a small publishing company, Jersey Pines Ink LLC. She resides with her husband and her cat on the edge of the Pine Barrens (home of the Jersey Devil).

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Lizard Brain | Ryan Benson

Jim is a lizard person. Has to be. I'm ninety percent sure he's part of an alien infiltration plan. How else was he promoted over me?

Wish my sunglasses revealed Jim's true form. Rowdy Roddy Piper never had this problem in that movie. Piper saw one hundred percent through the alien cabal's human disguise and subterfuge.

Now, my only recourse is to crack open his head. Lizard brains unmistakably differ from human cerebral matter. The remaining question is, do I stop with Jim or chase this conspiracy up the corporate ladder? After all, my boss did give him the promotion.

About the Author:

Ryan Benson resides outside of Atlanta, GA with his wife and children. He keeps himself busy writing short fiction stories and a novel. *The Sirens Call Publications, Trembling with Fear* (HorrorTree), *Dark Moments* (Black Hare Press), *101 Words*, and the drabble anthology *Quarantine Quanta* have published Ryan's work.

Instagram: @ryanbensonauthor
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Growth in Writing

When doing book signings or author interviews, I always get asked the same question in one variation or another: what was the process for you to write this story?

The answer is simple, and one that I always happily share with any willing to listen (or read, in this case). It works for anyone, take no more than thirty minutes out of your day, and you're guaranteed to have a novel manuscript within a year.

Whether it is saleable or not, that is another matter entirely.

The secret is this: write a page a day.

I know that sounds dumb, and you're probably rolling your eyes at me, but listen...

Whatever time you normally get up in the morning, set your alarm twenty minutes earlier. Get up, do your morning routine, but ensure you have an extra fifteen minutes to kill. Then, go park yourself in front of your computer and set an alarm, and write for those fifteen minutes.



At first, this will suck. Not going to lie, writing off the cuff is a learned skill that takes a while to kick in. Most of my short stories I write are conceived as I write them, with almost no foreplaning beyond "Huh, I haven't written about a mummy in a while..." which is followed by me writing a strange little tale of a mummy. For you, do this writing with an idea in mind and hammer out a basic plot. Even if this fifteen minutes is dedicated to an outline, try and fill a page.

Then, repeat this before going to bed. Push back your end-of-the-day procedures by twenty minutes and write for another fifteen. Finish your outline and do your best to start a new page in the morning.

If you write at least a page every day, within a year you will have a novel. Again, no guarantee of quality, and pretty much every author's first novels are sore points for them, but you will have a workable manuscript. From there, you just need to edit, but that is a different column for a different day.

So, the secret is just the due diligence to maintain two fifteen-minute commitments a day. Browse Facebook a tad less, check your Twitter one less time, or just go to bed a little later and wake up a bit earlier. Or some combination, whatever, I'm not your mother... the point is, anybody can be a writer if they follow this system. Maybe not the next Stephan King, but we all must start somewhere.

The key is the diligence to stay with the routine and write something you enjoy. The task will be that much less onerous if you enjoy the subject you are writing on, so go nuts. And if this method works for you, drop me a line through my website and let me know.

As an aside, I offer this other piece of sage advice for all readers: you've read books you thought were terrible and might have left a review to that effect.

Leave reviews for good books, too.

It teaches authors to hear the good and the bad. We need reviews to grow and appreciate seeing that people are at least consuming our work. I love all reviews I get, good or bad. They let me know what people like, and what people dislike. I change my style when a good point is made, as do many authors, so if you hate a certain style of writing and an author uses it, let them know with a review of their book. Same with stuff you like.

It only helps us grow, as will your new task of writing in the morning and evening. Stay scared folks!

About the Author:

A horror/fantasy writer since 2011, his first novel was published June 15th, 2017. *The Father of Flesh*, a Lovecraftian horror/adventure novel, was the first in the *Broken Gods* series. Book Two, *Travails for Teyuna*, came a year later. He was a columnist for Dark Eclipse Magazine for two years and is a current columnist for the London Horror Society. Nicholas has recently signed a new deal for his next book through Terror Tract Publishing, a dark fantasy/horror piece set in medieval Europe. Look out for *Hunter's of the Dead* this October!

Amazon Author Page: Nicholas Paschall

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NICHOLAS PASCHALL

Featured Novel Excerpt | *Jack in the Box*

I was amazed how quickly my dad found a new house for us after he was told where his job was headed. I never really try to understand what anyone wants my dad to do, but he's a civil engineer, so we're always moving as he helps build the country. As of now, he's been put in charge of an entire stretch of highway; a project that'll take a projected five to seven years to complete. That means we're going to be settling in long enough to take root, so to speak.

So, he decided we'd best settle our so-called roots here for the time being, to allow me time to make friends and finish up with my last two years of high school. He'd searched through the local papers looking for a place that would be just right but couldn't find anything. Then he got the call leading him to the house we were driving to; a call which told him it was the deal of a lifetime.

And so, the Donovan's had a home in Blanco, Texas, the smallest town in the Lone Star State. At sixteen I was being moved away from friends and cute boys to the boonies of Blanco, Texas.

Our great Suburban, loaded to the breaking point with boxes and parcels containing our valuable trinkets and tokens we're so attached to, teetered along the stretch of lonely road spearing through endless brush land. That's how my uncle would put it, but my parents would get angry at me for thinking of my uncle, seeing as they don't get along. I think he's cool enough, for an adult, but my opinion doesn't really matter to my mother. She has her own opinions, and her opinions are fact for the rest of the family, as far as we're concerned.

"Sweetie, you need to watch out who you hang out with in life," she'd always tell me, usually wagging a finger in my face as if baiting a dog with a biscuit. "People judge you for almost every action you take, every piece of clothing you wear, and every person you choose to hang out with. Your uncle's not normal like we are."

"We're normal?" I would retort, causing her to lose her temper and storm away, usually calling out for my father to "handle your daughter!" He'd shrug and tell me not to hang out with anyone who would pressure me to do things I wouldn't want to do.

Thanks, Dad.

"Would Uncle Rook pressure me to do things?" I'd asked my dad once, wanting to know why there was such a rift between the families.

"No, just stay away from him. He's not normal," my dad had replied in a tone which told me there wasn't any room for argument. Seeing as my father was generally a fun-loving guy, that tone spoke volumes about the subject matter.

Estranged uncle aside, we pulled onto the barren stretch of road leading to our new home. Like everywhere else I'd seen in Texas, the grass was either dying or dead. The heat was unbearable, making even the surrounding trees (which are few and far between) short and squat, more like tall bushes really.

We'd stopped at the Blanco Market to pick-up food, used the post office, and to notify the electric company we were ready for energy to go to the property. The people of Blanco had welcomed us in a strange way, eyeing us from a distance as the mother or daughter from each family came up to inquire if we were The Donovan's. Upon learning we were, they'd give us a Big Blanco Welcome by essentially buying groceries for us. Dad was busy on the phone setting our house up, so my mom and I had done our best greeting the steady stream of curious onlookers.

With the assurances of the Blanco County Electric and Gas Company our home would have water and light and, loaded down with all the food we'd need for the next week, we'd piled back into our Suburban and crawled out of town and towards the property.

My dad began to slow as we passed the creaky wooden fence which marked the beginning of the property, turning the Suburban slightly so we could all stare up at our new home as we approached, a low hill behind creating a picturesque appearance in the dying light of the day.

It was a tall house built with a colonial feel to it with a wide porch lining the building, allowing anyone to go the full perimeter without their feet touching soil. A small fence post bearing a worn sign on a rusted chain protruded in front of the two wide double doors leading into the home. The second story was split into a colonial-style lighthouse look, with a large domed section set apart from the rest of the second floor, which was more of a traditional style, save of course for the wear and tear the years had plied from the building.

"It's home!" I said with false cheer, clapping my hands together excitedly. My dad snorted, and my mom told me to shush.

"It's a piece of crap," she said, turning to eye my father with a sinister glare. My mom was notorious for liking the good things in life, and when she'd heard he purchased an older home in the country, she'd pictured something that was clearly not this.

"With what we saved buying it, we'll have some contractors come out and do some repairs. It'll look brand new after we sink a little money into it," my dad said with a smile. "At least we don't have any neighbors to worry about, so Monica can play her music as loud as she wants!"

"She most certainly cannot! I know from experience it won't get any better if she simply makes it louder!" she argued, giving me a look that was just begging to be egged on.

I smiled a bit. "I don't know Mom, I can live up in the tower-thing and dad can have it soundproofed so I don't bother you any..."

"He will do no such thing!" she said, her face beginning to redden in a predictable way.

"Relax dear; Monica's just pulling your leg a bit," my dad said, sending me a look the game was over, despite the fact it hadn't really begun.

My mom hated my music, a talent she said I'd gotten from my Grandfather (which, as he was only her step-father, I couldn't see how that began to work), his love for music pushing him to spend most of his twilight years playing guitar while making CD's for people to buy. While in no way famous, he had his own cult following, and since his passing I'd inherited one of his older guitars. Uncle Rook had the rest of them, as Grandpa was his father and all.

We all climbed out of the Suburban, the cool interior immediately giving way to the heat of the day. We'd begun taking various bags of gifted groceries into the house, my dad taking forever to figure out how to unlock the front door with the gigantic brass key he'd been given by the realtor.

The inside seemed hotter and muggier with the stale, dusty air pressing in on us. Two sweeping sets of stairs flanked the walls of the dining room, one set leading to the second floor while the other must lead to the tower. The kitchen was easy enough to find, and the cold blast of air that erupted from the refrigerator once opened had us all laughing pleasantly as we unloaded the food as quickly as we could.

My dad said he was going to try and locate the central air conditioner while my mom and I began unloading the Suburban as much as possible. We'd only really needed to bring our clothes and personal effects, as the entire house came furnished, albeit in a rather grotesque fashion. The previous owner had obviously been into hunting, with dust-covered animal heads jutted out from the walls of the dining room, right next to the kitchen and beneath the tower.

"Sweetie, go check the bedrooms for us. There should be a master suite and a guest room; the guest room will be your bedroom," my mom said as we dropped stacks of cardboard boxes onto the wide table in the dining room, kicking up a storm of soot and dust.

I laughed as I climbed the stairs, laughing even harder as a grate barfed out a stream of cobwebs and dust before a steady stream of cold air flowed; dad found the AC unit and kicked it on.

"Thank goodness," I muttered.

The hall upstairs had only a few doors, two of which lead to linen closets and one leading to a small washroom. The door at the end of the hall was the master bedroom I discovered when I pushed the creaking the door open, revealing the large and rather unfurnished bedroom. Sheets covered the bed and a large armoire sat across from it. As I walked across the room to look out the windows to the backyard, a flash of movement caught my eye.

I spun around only to find nothing but the dust hanging in the air and looked about with a tad bit more caution, searching for whatever else was in here with me. I would be my mother's hero if I ended up killing some big rat living up here.

Moving around the bed to the large armoire, I braced myself as I grabbed the musty sheet, whipping it overhead in a cloud of angry dust bunnies, only to find myself staring into the vivid green eyes of something malevolent. With a hiss it lunged at me.

I screamed.



Would you like to read more?

<u>Jack in the Box</u> is available in <u>Print and eBook</u> on <u>Amazon!</u>

Poetry

Summer Love | Kelly Matsuura

He walked in the light,
I smothered him with shadow.
I wanted love forever,
So killed him in the meadow.
Beauty doesn't last,
All wise fools know,
And magic keeps it all,
Inside me, and on show.

The man I loved is gone,
My heart, blackened and hollow.
He truly was my everything,
My friend, my muse, my bedfellow.
If I could bring him back I would,
A living man returned from shadow.
But what then of my treasures,
Buried deep, some shallow?

His sunlight skin,
Now covers an old leather chair.
His loving heart,
I baked with chard and pear.
His firefly eyes,
Rest in a glass of sand and sea.
His elegant voice,
From the music box sings to me.

His bones lie in the meadow, Under cornflower, grass, and weeds Except his skull and hands, Of these, they fill two needs. His hand bones hang above my bed, To catch my restless dreams. His skull lies on the pillow by mine, And listens to my screams.

About the Author:

Kelly Matsuura writes diverse YA, fantasy, and literary fiction.

She is the creator of The Insignia Series' anthologies (Asian fantasy themed) and has had stories published with *Ink & Locket Press, A Murder of Storytellers, Black Hare Press, Harbinger Press,* and many more.

Kelly lives in Nagoya, Japan with her geeky husband. She loves traveling, knitting, cooking, and of course, reading.

Website: Black Wings and White Paper

Under the Water | Sumiko Saulson

Over sea, floating ye, staying abreast of watery crests
Midwinter air caresses curls unfurling over briny sea
Cool wet skin, paper thin... I can see your soul within
Every capillary pumping blood, intestinal processes digesting food
Your loving heart plain to see... how intimate your transparency

A sea-deep mystery, stories untold, windows into your ancient soul, Your eyes speckled, flecks of gold cascading within jet black coal Encasing your exquisite charms, enfolded within my fragile arms, I am the contemplator of your delicacy, hear ye now my mortal pleas May your ethereal heart, thorny spine and eternal love be ever mine

Adrift on my back, your tentative fingers in mine entwined Long slender tail wrapped around my thighs, tendrils twixt toes The smooth flesh of your undercarriage where barnacles grow My flesh puckers where their tiny mouths burrow into my skin Digesting the healthy white blood cells within

Risen have you from the darkest depths where men do not reside I gave you a place within my skin where creatures dark abide Do not leave me alone nor recede like the sand does from the tide But carry me along with ye... astride my floating bounty be Feast upon the only vessel strong enough to return ye to sea The curve of my hip rises over the crest of the wave Like manatees mistaken for mermaids in ancient days High upon my waist your appendages rest, rising and falling With baited breath against my naked breast, bare as my soul As we drift, intertwined, out to the darkest depths of ancient seas

Now the time has come to sink below, and mystery Is akin to fear, I am not sure that I should trust you But I can't seem to do that which would separate us So I hold you near and prepare myself, emptying lungs Of unnecessary breath, as I prepare to enter your icy depths

"It is good," I sigh, floating over torrid waves near watery graves
Past broken ships torn asunder adrift in somber, pallid fog
Your hand in mine, you guide me sweet through jagged caves of coral deep
Caverns stained sinister red with the blood of shattered sailors misled
It is only I you chose to guide into your hidden realm of volcanic caves

"It is good now, and gets better still," you insist, Demanding I become servant to your capricious will I kiss skeletal hands upon which lichens creep Extending their long fingers aloft from the deep The seaweed embraces their distended, rotting skin

The Kraken | Sumiko Saulson

"These are the mortals who have joined me Under the sea, giving their useless lives willingly," You coo into my ear, tender and sweetly sighing While my fingers caress the bloated flesh Of a young merchant seaman beautifully dying

"Become my queen," you sing in melodious strain
Of aural waves weaving in and out of the subsonic range
Your fingers are tendrils that kiss and caress aching skin,
Your hair smells like sea foam, dried kelp, and summer breeze
"Think of the human life on which we shall feed..."

"Be only mine leave your seafaring comrades behind,
Their flesh is best suited for that upon which immortals dine
In the days when Poseidon was worshipped and the Kraken king
These humans would offer me most anything, their nubile
Children fresh and young bound for me to dine upon...

Join me and let's start this worship anew, the flesh of men Will belong to you, you will dine on the tender flesh Of misbegotten youth, called time after time onto rocky shore By the lovely sound of your siren voice, shipwrecked and helpless And waiting for you, brainwashed and given no choice...

Feast upon the maiden's breast, tear her heart from her heaving chest For you, my love, only the best in all things, trust and believe this true But if truth it is not, and so I lie, think of the glorious ways you might die? There is no need to fear the dark, this is my kingdom, come within What is there to fear, mortal? Even if you lose, you win."

About the Author:

Sumiko Saulson is an award-winning author of Afrosurrealist and multicultural sci-fi and horror, editor of *Black Magic Women, Scry of Lust, Black Celebration*, and *Wickedly Abled*, winner of the 2016 HWA StokerCon "Scholarship from Hell", 2017 BCC Voice "Reframing the Other", and 2018 AWW "Afrosurrealist Writer Award." Sumiko has an AA in English from Berkeley City College, and pens "Writing While Black" for *The San Francisco BayView*, a national Black Newspaper. Zhe has two cats, Bootsy Catlins and Marla Mewpaws. *{Pronouns: zhe/hir/hirs}*

Website: <u>Sumiko Saulson</u>
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Child of the Tenderloin | Marge Simon

San Francisco an Ellis Island for the lost, the homeless and the endless stream of immigrants: some citizens, some not, wide-eyed drunk with promises.

a cut of meat a fleeting soul a fading light

Pay your dues, own the world.

The city is a forest seeded by the tears of orphans. They come and go, all we know about them is the age in their eyes. But there is more.

When the Man cornes at you with whispers of pills and wine, you bow to the pillow, knees on brocade.

He revels in your humility; it's not worth the pretense, take off your hood.

When this happens, child of the tenderloin, and it is a surety – will you comply?

About the Author:

Marge Simon is an award-winning poet/writer. Her works have appeared in Daily Science Fiction, New Myths, Polu Texni, Clannad, Silver Blade and four pro anthologies in 2018. She is a multiple Stoker winner and Grand Master Poet of the SF & F Poetry Association.

Facebook: Marge Ballif Simon
Amazon Author Page: Marge Simon



The Devil's Villanelle | Joshua E. Borgmann

My Villanelle, oh how I mourn you, my Villanelle. Oh, your sweet verse has fallen into such deep despair. Could it be the Prince of Lies cast some evil spell?

Blood, tears, and White Zinfandel mark this badge of sorrow I wear. Oh how I mourn you, my Villanelle.

Of my sweet Lady Villanelle, poets bragged that none could compare, but oh the Prince of Darkness can cast a potent spell.

It is sad; I cannot wish you well my lady dark and fair, but oh how I'll mourn you, my Villanelle.

Oh we were such a scandal and who could ever forget all the souls we shared. Yet, the Lord of the Pit must cast his spell.

Still beyond the kingdom of Hell none can compare with you, my lady dark and fair, yet, I must mourn you, my Villanelle for I have cast my evil spell.

I Want A Succubus | Joshua E. Borgmann

I want a succubus for Valentine's Day. She might suck my soul dry, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

The mortal girls never want to play any of my twisted games, but they never say why, so I want a succubus for Valentine's Day.

My perfect girl isn't afraid of a little decay. She wouldn't be afraid to pluck out an eye, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

She's the kind that I can't push away. She'll be decked out in leather, ready to make me cry. I want a succubus for Valentine's Day.

She's the kind that is naughty without delay. She's the spider to my fly, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

She's the demon for which I pray, and I don't care if her love is a lie. I want a succubus for Valentine's Day, and I don't want it any other way.

New Moon Risin' Blues | Joshua E. Borgmann

I got the Silver Bullet Blues
yeah got those Silver Bullet Blues
live out in them woods
baby that full moon sure does me good
Lycanthropy ain't easy
no baby it ain't easy
just a full-moon liver
always hidin from that silver
Don't tell me bout no Full Moon Maddness
no don't tell me bout the Full Moon Maddness
cause that's when I come alive for you woman
when I can most be a man

Now that moon is waxing I'm just an old wolf relaxing

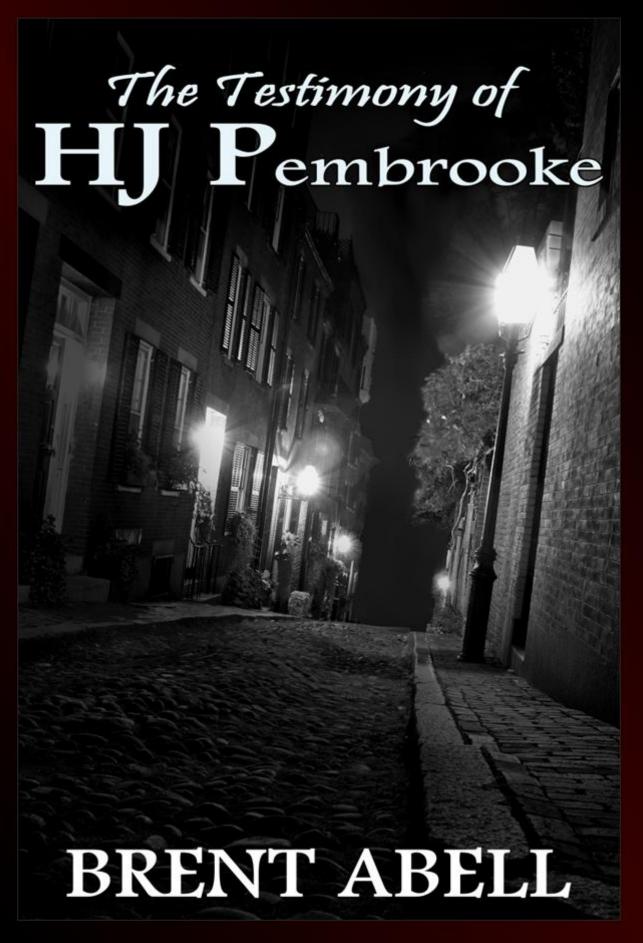
Thirteen | Joshua E. Borgmann

Thirteen. a flamboyant killer strikes the heart of childhood's waxing usurping the supple flesh, slowly shaping, recreating body and mind. The victim suffers the throat of gravel, the aroma of the most natural and unique personal perfume. **Endures** burns, abrasions, a multitude of open wounds holding off the advancing wolf's mane and a certain beast that leaves a dampness on the sheets.

Thirteen, a lover of desolation this dark usurper, this Satanic knight brings Hell spawned despair taking childhood's innocent gluttony, its dull unawareness, its meaningless joy leaving the young victim caged in a body no longer his own, in a world robbed of things known, mourning over the grave of his twelve-year-self-apprenticeship, praying for escape from this coffin-world.

About the Author:

Joshua E. Borgmann toils away his days as an English instructor at a small community college and dreams of being able to escape into a world of fantasy and terror where there are no student papers to grade. He resides in a nameless rural lowa town surrounded by terrible cornfields.



AVAILABLE TO PURCHASE OR BORROW ON AMAZON

Widow's Weeping Crawl | Tiana von Buchholz

So be the sleepless mind that wanders

Helpless the frail thought-bodies That saunter Through colorless vales Left unpondered

Seek not the foolish greed that lingers Over one's unsightly breath But plead for the everlasting roots that sink down to your veins and chest

Take not the bread of poor man's hunger For heaven shall not shine on vulgar acts of these As would the devil On a virgin's kiss

So you, who provoke the midnight sun to fall, A death, like widow's weeping crawl,

Must be sentenced To barren sleep

Told from the heavens above they speak Through soulless minds and caressed cheeks

Timeless are you whose eyes are heavy Weakened lands now come to steady Darkness surrounds your dying thoughts Pray not the worst of deal dealt costs

Touch not the hand that studies mockery and loss

For you

A sleepless mind that wanders

Must be awake

To witness world's death in slumbers

About the Author:

Tiana von Buchholz is a writer and a first year high school student in Victoria, BC, Canada. She has been writing poetry and fiction for several years. Tiana also studies Kung Fu and lion dancing at Wong Sheung Kung Fu Club and works part-time as a pizza cook at a local restaurant.

Facebook: <u>Tiana von Buchholz</u> Instagram: <u>@mild.style</u>

The Order of Events | Ken Poyner

When the dead arose
We thought
How can you kill
A thing already dead?
Countless movies exist
With countless methods,
But we knew these were
Fictions, entertainment.
No likely workable protections
Were to come of successful
Hollywood plots. We pondered
And we figured the dead would be

Dry: fire.

And the dead would be

Brittle: crushing.

The two methods would do for initial Testing. We understood this was A central spinning point for our Civilization, and we had to move Quickly into prototype. No time For in depth theoretical discussion Of alternatives, potential pitfalls. The first of the risen from the local Presbyterian graveyard passed by And continued towards The National Forest that is The source of our town tourist trade and Income. Not many, And soon they were simply spots going Away.

Seems they had somewhere else to Be. The mayhem we imagined Remains, for now, solidly Imaginary. All the more reason to work Quickly.

The Threat | Ken Poyner

The mad scientist was hurtling down the hall With an axe and I thought Any scientist, mad or otherwise, Would normally be all about mathematics And observation, hypotheses and effects:

Not physical violence, not emotional relief.

Yes, I was standing there
Actually thinking those thoughts,
The lithe synapses of my brain
Shoveling electricity over this approaching worry.
I am not particularly stupid,

But there is a rich literature Of mad scientists being more subtle, And I guess I had been drawn in By the popular myth. So

There I was at the end of the hall And, to repeat myself, This mad scientist, like a push broom In a tornado, consumed with root motion, Was coming, it seemed, directly for me.

I still had hope for a rational explanation.

I was running potential reactions
Through a mental slide projector,
Rating outcomes, trying to figure
Which of the variables -Scientist, madness or axe -Held the most promise for attempted forced variation.
And then the crash, the axe

On wood and the scientist's two week Old breath in my face, the lab rabbit Cleanly split in two, blood Draining but not spattering: an expert cleave.

I could have been pushed over by an equation.

It was all I could do to keep
My bodily integrity whole, to not
Attack the axe wielding professional in gratitude.

I may never know what evil was in that rabbit.

I can only imagine just what I had so narrowly, So perilously been saved from, what I could – Except for one mad scientist and his graceful axe --Have unsuspectingly become. One rabbit:

And I put the two harrowing halves into The Fresnel incinerator. Good riddance. And I will know now to keep the good eye out.

About the Author:

Ken Poyner has put out three books of mini-fictions, and two collections of speculative poetry, all of which can be had at Amazon and other book selling sites. He has had recent work in "Analog", "Asimov's", "Café Irreal", and other places, both print and web. He worked 33 years as a systems analyst, and now assists his wife in her world class powerlifting career.

Website: <u>Ken Poyner</u> Facebook: Ken Poyner



ghosts, sea monsters, yōkai & more....

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Available on Amazon

Half Light | Lynn White

The taxi's waiting and it's getting light, the half light of day break.
And I'm ready for the journey

into the brightness, optimistic that

the daylight is coming.

Optimistic

that the taxi will take me to a place where everyone

is in their place. It's a picnic.

A cloth spread out under a tree.

That's where we're going.
That's where we'll be.
A picnic in the sunshine
with sunny, smiling people.
But I have to stay awake

or I may not get there.
Have to keep my eyes open to let in the light.
Stay awake

to open the door.

Get into the taxi while it's still light and hold the door open for the rest to follow. in the half light...

Is that the light leaving us?

Maybe it's the night closing in on us,

the half light of evening.

Not the dawn, but the dusk enclosing me. I am afraid. I am afraid that the taxi will leave me behind

to a dark awakening from the half light. And when I wake will it be light?

Bright

like the dream of a day,

or dark,

a dark nightmare.

Not a picnic.

About the Author:

Lynn White lives in north Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. She was shortlisted in the Theatre Cloud 'War Poetry for Today' competition and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a Rhysling Award.

Blog: Lynn White Poetry
Facebook: Lynn White Poetry



Nightwalker | Ivanka Fear

Dry leaves scurrying along road fruitlessly evading my step
Snake wriggling across my path in front of closed church doors
Trees hanging over sidewalk reaching out to entangle my hair
Pools of light from street lamps a stark contrast to the darkness beyond.

Air still with expectation
The calm almost mystical
Half moon perched high
in sky with clouds tinged with mauve
Stars peeking down from darkening cover
of night as crickets serenade
our 2-D shadows splayed out
on empty street in forgotten town.

Lights flickering in windows as we pass, roaming endlessly searching for Never-Never Land,
My ghosts and I.

Negative Force Field | Ivanka Fear

Meeting a new terror as reality wanes and nightmares wax rampant, trapped between worlds, between fact and fiction, my mind enclosed in foggy greyness, I struggle, caught in this shadowy realm.

Pushing me over, dragging me under, pulling me up then down, forward then backward, leaving pieces of me here and there, it slowly drains my life energy burning my logic in effigy.

Too weak to fight it, too tired to outrun it, unable to scream for help,
I will it to dissipate before my eyes as I aimlessly wander into its domain.

Donning my strongest armour, securely fastening my helmet, shielding myself against its onslaught, searching for a way to break through it, I face it alone, and hope for mercy.

Limbo Land | Ivanka Fear

Turquoise water, deep indigo where it meets the cerulean horizon, waves alongside the pier, soft breeze blowing as sun shines warm. Me, arms outstretched, I float away, forgetting for a moment... startled out of reverie into my reality.

Drowning in my dreams, nightmares dragging me under... where I'm lost, lost at sea.

Under the birch trees, leaves swaying gently, here I repose, where yellow lilies bloom and beach grass covers the sand dunes. Me, eyes transfixed on the blue water, forgetting for a moment... startled out of reverie into my reality.

Buried by my fears, Terror smothering my senses... and I'm lost, lost out in the desert.

Waves lapping onto sandy shore, seagull voices calming, boats shimmer far away, lighthouse beckons to safe harbour. Me, dipping toes into the lake, forgetting for a moment...

Forgetting for a moment... that I'm lost in limbo land.

About the Author:

Ivanka Fear is a retired teacher and a writer from Canada. Her poems and short stories appear in or are forthcoming in *Spadina Literary Review, Montreal Writes, Adelaide Literary, October Hill, Scarlet Leaf Review, The Sirens Call, The Literary Hatchet, Wellington Street Review, Aphelion, Muddy River Poetry Review, Suspense Magazine,* and elsewhere. She is currently working on her third novel.

Home Sweet Hideaway | Brian James Lewis

Used to be my summer nights were spent sitting on a lawn chair and staring off into the swamp behind my trailer home But these days, I'm a much busier man Now frogs sing in a madness choral while fireflies dance in misty gloom All of us waiting for the spirits to arrive in the eerie moments under a blood moon Giant shadows glide silently between the pines, hemlock and poplars Leaves wagging like tongues in the gurgling breezes that bring Raw smells of the ancient ones Huge, flapping dinosaurs and others without names that held the pointy headed nuts of the KKK at bay Blam! Blam! The beavers' tails report As they cruise on patrol of the stagnant creek where jack lighters dispose of deer carcasses and assorted filth Used condoms, beer cans, panties, wallets and even cell phones adorn the muck beside the old bridge that crosses over a bone filled body of greasy water Deer move silently in the growing dark feeding here and there as I watch motionless in my chair as anticipation fills my mouth with sticky juices Don't move! The swamp shadows are creeping closer. Air crackling as more fire flies join the dance-picking up speed until it flares like chain lightning

I'm not lonely as the dark closes in This is a busy place, with barely enough room for the living as the shadows crowd around laughing Before this home sweet hideaway I didn't know where I fit in. But this lot full of clapped out cars and derelict trucks needs my mechanical madness The food I catch here at night is tasty Someone is yelling in the darkness, but I only see flesh. So I just chuckle and keep on rending, tearing, and stripping No time to waste. There's much to do With a snap I release my knife. Hah! Demons, bring around my rusted hearse The evening hunt is on!

Alien Ambassador | Brian James Lewis

Aliens talk to me through my kitchen radio and tell me everything they think I should know So that I might serve them much better in the future

In between songs by the Beatles and ads for men's health boosters 'Restore your natural libido TODAY!' Aliens explain why theirs is the best way It sounds like clicks and bursts of static But it's really a secret code

At first, I was annoyed
But then I tried to spread the joy
Explain the gospel to my neighbors
But, they didn't understand
Instead they called the cops
Then laughed and ran away

That made the aliens mad enough to come down to my pad Their silver ship and bright lights set off my neighbors' car alarms Causing more trouble for me when I told the truth to police

My alien friends mean no harm Why can't everyone just chill? Stop breaking down my door and forcing me to take pills! They make my radio go dead But the aliens are in my head

Okay, maybe I'm a bit unique and should watch it when I speak But unlike my 'smart' neighbors who keep guns handy for protection I would've never hurt a soul nor shot myself by mistake

About the Author:

Brian James Lewis is a disabled poet, writer, and book reviewer who feels that writing is as important as breathing. He is a member of the SFPA and has been reviewing dark poetry and speculative fiction since 2016. First published in 2014, Brian writes daily on vintage typewriters, including one previously owned by Rod Serling.

Website: Damaged Skull Writer and Reviewer

Twitter: @skullsnflames76

Where Are the Hands | Garth von Buchholz

Where are the hands that would not restrain? The mind that plotted so coldly precise A certain end, a dénouement, the ultimate, That spared no page but only covers to close.

Where are the hands that would not restrain? The mother who drowned her four children, Submerging progeny who would have not breathed Had she not given breath, had she not given birth. All wails of betrayal turned to bubbles in a bath.

No, none can seize hands cloaked beneath Death, For whatever we extend we may not retract.

Where are the hands that would not restrain? The man who gassed himself in a garage, Surrounded by gray clouds, flying a kite, Into lightning above the cumulus towers.

After the key is turned in the mechanism, In the instant current lights the wires, No God in the machine may impede its flow, And only a switch awaiting a hand May sever its sequences.

When we in secret our destinies chase, When we lie in ambush awaiting ourselves, When we prey upon the one we would become, We are the Ouroboros that consumes itself.

About the Author: Garth von Buchholz is an author of dark poetry, short fiction, nonfiction and stage plays. His work has been published in numerous books and anthologies, including *Kill Switch* (2019). Garth is currently writing his first novel, *Thy Fearful Symmetry*. He works in government and also teaches social media at Royal Roads University in Victoria, B.C., Canada.

Blog: <u>Dark Eye Glances</u>
Facebook: <u>Garth von Buchholz</u>



She Caresses Her Lover's Arm in a Bookstore | Brian Rosenberger

Browsing the Horror section, Keene, Ketchum, King, Koontz, Lansdale, Laymon, Lee, Lovecraft And she eyeballs a rare McCammon And on the next shelf - What are the odds? An even rarer edition, an out-of-print novel by her lover. One of her all-time favorites. To be honest, his books are all her favorites. She touches the book's spine then his arm, His writing hand, his exquisite fingers. Goosebumps, her excitement contagious. The rest of him, her favorite underground writer Remains buried. Only she knows the locations. His bones rot but his words, preserved between pages, Wait discovery by another reader. She grips his hand, moves to a different section. After all, she already has a personalized copy.

Our Elders | Brian Rosenberger

We loved them and cared for them, And will always cherish their memory,

But they became too much,
A burden, an albatross, a reminder
That time is not kind.

Loss of memory, loss of mobility, loss of bodily functions.

They became no use to us but as cannon fodder And we still had an ample supply of the Poor.

They grew increasingly unreasonable,
Argumentative even,
Their ears deaf to any options
Unless options of their choosing.
We were already tasked with raising our Offspring
And had no time or desire for compromise.

Our solution.

Professional. Military.

One shot. Kill shot.

No suffering, save for the surviving family.

And they better have plans to bury the past

And move forward.

Otherwise, we also have a solution for them.

Witch Bait | Brian Rosenberger

The wind moves them, makes them dance.

Makes them sway. They hang from trees. Some in bunches. Others swing alone. The fresher bodies still drip a crimson-red. The forest floor stained with their blood, Their sins, like a spilled wine. Daughters of *Hecate*. Tried, judged, and condemned. Once we burned them. That solved nothing. Now we wait, ignoring the swaying above us, A deaf ear to their tempting whispers, A blind eye to their lust, our lust and longing. They dangle from the branches like puppets. Lovers, sisters, mothers, and wives. The forest moves. The motion of hooves and horns. They stole our women. We, the survivors, the men, Wait in the shadows, beneath corpses. We wait to avenge them.

Red Rain | Brian Rosenberger

Blood splatters the Moon.

Crimson clouds drip, staining our World.

We should be used to it by now.

The Heavens hemorrhage. We are baptized in blood.

Our new Gods eclipse the Sky and slaughter their own sacrifices.

They are the lucky ones.

We drown or survive in the drippings.

Like a Biblical Flood with neither Ark nor Noah, We, the Sinners and Swimmers,

Were ill prepared, ignored the warnings.

We, the Survivors, all red-skinned now. Race no longer an issue. Survival all that matters

The skies bleed unity, insanity, and apathy. We are considered pets at best.

If considered at all.

That Time of Year | Brian Rosenberger

The Ford hauls ass, tearing down a deserted, dirt road, spitting gravel.

A Skeleton-masked Reaper at the wheel.

His girls dressed as nuns, riding shotgun

With locked and loaded rifles. Just in case.

It's that special time of year and the family leaves nothing to chance.

They have witnessed when things go awry and can recant cautionary tales.

His girls are black-nailed, their trigger- fingers on the itchy side.

His nuns eyeball the corpse in back, still leaking, modern art blood trails.

Arrival time just in time. The stars at their zenith.

Campgrounds. Beer cans, used condoms, and discarded foam coolers.

A picnic table serves as the altar. The coolers serve as kindle for the flames.

'Carl loves Sue' and 'Mike and Tina 4-ever' carved into the grain.

Sentiments give the wooden altar weight for what is to come.

The deceased looks like a reader.

Coke-bottle lenses, librarian bun, 30ish Brunette,

A grey business blazer and skirt with skin to match.

Pretty as pretty can be when you've been dead awhile.

The Reaper impales the reader. The pitchfork, a family heirloom.

Lightning targets, more than strikes. His Majesty's Will.

May We all Burn. May We all suffer.

The latex mask melts to the Reaper's face, suffocating.

One lives anew. The other dies to be reborn.

Shotguns fire in celebration.

She adjusts her glasses. A blood-stained smile.

His Will Be Done. Tonight, one sacrifice.

Tomorrow, more to come.

About the Author:

Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of As the Worm Turns and three poetry collections - Poems That Go Splat, And For My Next Trick..., and Scream for Me.

Facebook: Brian Rosenberger Instagram: @brianwhosuffers

Dental problems | Christopher T. Dabrowski

It finally happened... The second one broke...

Too many sweets is a death for the teeth.

But what can we do? Now everyone is eating sweets.

Not so long ago this would have been a tragedy.

I would have starved to death.

Or died?

No, I didn't die - you can't die twice.

Too often I forget that I am dead because in some ways I am alive.

Anyway, there's no denying that I wouldn't survive.

And now, all you need is a dentist with garlic on his neck and you can have new fangs.

Implants in fact, but they work.

The spiritual dilemmas of the spirit | Christopher T. Dabrowski

She's was an old lady living in a haunted house but she hasn't complained.

He was making terrifying noises.

It had no impact on her.

She was peacefully making cocoa every morning.

He was afraid that he was unscary:

- Can't I scare a stupid woman?

He came up with an idea to slam the door in her face!

Granny thought it was a draft.

- You are killing me! - Ghost moaned.

He didn't know that the woman was deaf.

Ghost showed himself

- I am old! Am I supposed to be afraid of ghosts? I'll become one soon. - laughed the old lady.

The gods order | Christopher T. Dabrowski

I got hit by a truck. Death on the spot.

Body grotesquely bent.

I don't care, it's not me anymore.

I was floating above all.

Free from the carnal shell, joyful and free

I was rushing up the mountain fast. I flew into the tunnel.

At the end of the tunnel there was a light.

I was unable to turn back, this light sucked me in.

After a while I came to my senses.

I was in a bag of a gigantic vacuum.

Billion souls were imprisoned there.

The vacuum cleaner was a large luminous creature.

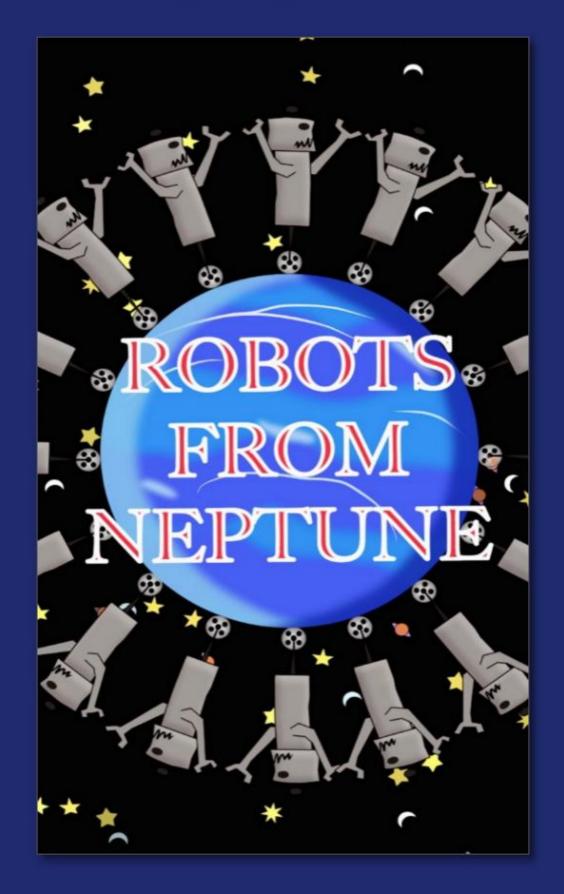
Nothing like god's order!

About the Author:

Christopher T. Dabrowski was born in 1978 in Poland. He lives in Krakow, with his wife. His hobbies are books, cinema, travel, healthy eating and an active lifestyle. Before he discovered that he was good at writing, he tried to become a director, guitarist, vocalist, actor, camera operator, and photographer - but it was writing that turned out to be his life path. He has written: Books in USA: "Escape", "Anomaly"; Books in Spain: "La fuga", "Anomalia"; Books in Poland: "Deathbirth", "Anima vilis", "Grobbing", "Deathbirth and other stories", "Z życia Dr Abble", "Orgazmokalipsa", "Anomalia", "Ucieczka" & "Nie w inność"

Anthologies in: USA, England, Australia, Poland, Russia, and Germany.

They want our garbage. They can't have it.



Amazon, IMDB & YouTube

Broodsac | Andy Perez

I can feel them, moving inside of me, crawling under my skin.

I try to pry them out.
I pull
and scratch
and tear at
my rotting flesh,
but the knife isn't
sharp enough,
the knife can't
dig deep enough.

I can feel them, chewing on my eyes, sucking on my blood, fucking in my stomach.

I can't take it anymore, it hurts so much, I can't take it anymore, please make it stop.

I can feel them, burrowing into my brain, seeping into my mind, hatching into my...

I...
I can't feel anymore.
I fall to the floor,
crawling on
hands and knees.
I see what they see,
I hear what they hear,
I am what they are.

I no longer feel, I only obey.

About the Author:

Andy Perez is the author of the horror collection "The Spirits of the Night". He is an acolyte of the macabre, and his work explores where beauty and the grotesque intersect. He loves the finer things in life: literature, film, art, wine, and the tangy taste of human flesh (helpful tip: use plenty of barbecue sauce.)

Website: Andy Perez Author
Instagram: @the mad poet 666



Muruch Gollerus | Sarra Culleno

A fisherman threw nets to sea. An unexpected catch made he; he hauled to boat a Mer-beauty.

Bewitching luminescence shivered. Gleaming fins of pearlise silvered. In all Her iridescence shimmered.

Quick as a thief, Her cap he took, for he had read the legend's book, avoiding Her anguished look.

Her song sad, low, enchanted-toned: "By one who caught my cap I'm owned and from my Ocean, I'm dethroned".

Fisherman brought catch to shore. From nets he could not ask for more. His wife a Merrow, to be sure.

At home, near craggy Smerwick Harbour, hid Her cohuleen druith from Her, lest She escape back to the water.

Into legs Her tail did split.
For rearing sons She was made fit.
But moonlight, Her child silver lit.

One night, tapping, tiny knocks came from a drawer decked in locks. She here, Her cap found in a box.

Her siren sisters called from tide, from home, before She was made bride, reminding Her of Queenly pride.

So from his crib, Her nursling gathered. By cap, they came untied, untethered. He would be crowned, his kingdom Mothered.

Full moon guides Them to silver sands. Legs to tails. Waters from lands. In water-worlds They now command Her folk, mer-folk, Ocean's clan.

The Mother Saile | Sarra Culleno

THE 1840s famine grips County Wicklow. Her babe, past all wails of hunger, White and frail, his little limbs still, And none of her people are left among her.

Cold lips root for dry empty breast Though too weak to cry 'weila waile'. Her desperate devotion takes her To take on the Mothers of River Saile.

She cannot tend barren land alone. To save them from winter requires silver. Mother and child both skin and bone. His absent daddy, a missing sailor.

Together they face a sorry fate. She clutches Sonny to her heart As winter threatens a stretched chill, It's worse still if they must part.

She wraps rags around him tightly To keep cold air from tiny hands. Barefoot over brambles, then shingle She walks them onto softer sands.

Brittas Bay shore laps her ankles Turns silver her skin Under moonlight. She wades to her waist Holding him close, while under and in.

Salt burns their throats as she clutches
His sweet perfect body releasing
His sweet perfect soul to flow
In love's embrace, both tender and freezing.

This bond defies their Time.
Engulfed in salt tears he emerges
His thin form now filled out and whole,
His smile, wide, divine, surges

And swims towards her; his Angel. He heals his torn mother By grasping her hand, leading away Under silver, together, to The Other.

Oma's Song | Sarra Culleno

Peg is Gefion's merewif, dividing land and sea. She's Grendel's vengeful Modor: Ides, the Valkyrie.

Peg Powler, High Green Ghostess, with crown of tresses green. Her ribboned reeds, and lacing weeds, are manacles, unseen.

With skin of frog and fingers webbed, she rides a log, half-sunk.
Her skin's disguised in garments, sewn of algae and muck.

Peg tangles wading ankles from shallows to the deep, her Ginny Greenteeth dragging catches silently to sleep.

The surface scum is Old Peg's Cream, to warn of the Child-Drowner. You'll know her by the water's froth, the Suds of Old Peg Powler.

About the Author:

London born and Manchester based, Sarra Culleno is a poet, mother and English teacher who performs at poetry events across the UK. She writes about children's rights, motherhood, identity, gender, age, technology, the environment, politics, modern monogamy and education. Sarra is widely published. She features in many podcasts and radio shows, and was longlisted for the Cinnamon Press Pamphlet Prize. Sarra co-hosts Write Out Loud at Waterside Arts, and has performed as guest poet at numerous literary festivals.

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Graveyard Hours | Lori R. Lopez

A spook must flee the Sun's rude shock!
The crowing Rooster's "Ode To Peacock".
Whether ruled by gears, a mechanical tock,
Digital clickings of hands to mock
The passage of Time in ticks or Epoch;
An endless flow round the chimes of a clock.
In Graveyard Hours do revenants flock . . .

Ere the light reclaim their stagnant breath.

Bound by the iron of bars and gate —
A pen that is stifling however ornate —
When left outside to perambulate —
A soul may tread the earth too late —
Drifting the gloom on a certain date —
Alarming those who investigate
In a vain attempt to communicate —

Or scare the living half to death!

Chained to their motives, fickle of plot.

Springing from earth like a Forget-Me-Not.

Skipping, slipping from shade to inkblot.

Restless and flimsy, haunting a house With the stealthy scur of a secretive mouse, Temperaments prone to moan and grouse.

Drafty and aloof, transparent or opaque, The spirits are willing to keep you awake! Phantomesque figures clad in heartache, Flimsy and tattered as a paper snowflake. Preternaturally eerie as Unbirthday Cake; Perhaps undertaken by a dismal mistake, Yet home they must at the crack of Daybreak.

Melting quicksilver through a closing Veil . . .

Wan traces remain; few slippers are shed.
Apparitions may travel to where they lie dead,
But back to the Nether at Dawn must head,
Drawn by the yank of paranormal thread —
Jerked from the Surface; Quantum-sped.
Though some will appear in the shining stead
To fill bright hours with a curtain of dread . . .

Ghouls are less frail in the moonlit pale.

Crackling and lucid, masters of surprise; Traversing with a wail to terrorize . . . A specter inhabits the blinks of our eyes, Then pounces out and we realize No space is empty where darkness lies! If you listen close you can hear the cries Of the Gloaming's roamings and lullabies.

These Graveyard Hours are rather brusque For wisps who have lost their physical husk — Mere loominous sparks in each drop of Dusk.

Leviathan | Lori R. Lopez

There are legends of kiddies robbed in their sleep Rumors that give fodder to our fears and frights Of wily creatures causing doubts and dreams That stalk the depths of the darkest Twilights

Tales of woeful wrongs and tearful tribulations
Of slithering, smithering, blithering events
The terrible attempts to distract and confound us
Abysmal dismal horrors that nothing prevents!
There are moments we all might fall out of step
Or have yet to smother our druthers and rues
When surprises can beset from an inken vast
Upending our path into ground we don't choose

Unstable footing that wobbles and warps
And constricts our muscles, our chest in a hug
Like an Anaconda's ever-tight squeeze —
Crushing our body — a fist of snug

With a wily unsmiley sense of humor
The virulent viperent disdain of a Snake
Complete and replete with cold shoulderless bane
A dastardly film too sticky to shake
And so it was a child would wraptly disappear
In the misty must of downspringing showers
A monsoonish tempestuous storm in her town
Led to a mudbath, some roof-leaking hours

'Twas a rapid napping, a despicable crime For the wondering eyes of kin to behold Who blamed themselves and shamed each other Deploring the vacancy in their fold

To a pair of parents with a burgeoning brood The whole were precious; a family divided They couldn't a single sweet darling spare And should fetch her back the lot decided Marching off did the Hoffs trek a wendful track Fretting their every step was too late Mitzy may be the youngest one born But her memory bore a pond'rous weight.

Stolen too the most obvious signs of abduction Rain washed away a monster's grim tread Till at last sighting traces of the abomination that plucked a wee child from her bed

This journey brought a close bunch nearer still Toward faraway reaches rocky and parched On the trail of a heinous Hornless Leviathan Ventured the staunch as if starched Tense over the fate of beloved Mitzy Taken by a thirsty ravenous Whip-Kraken — They found the girl had completely tamed A Sealess Land Serpent's temper to slacken

The Hoffs adopted an ungainly pet Who hasn't chomped or gulped them yet!

Into the bitter arms of Night | Lori R. Lopez

Stalwart plods traverse the dark of a solemn Twilight. Quiet steps ring loudest when all is calm and minds are hushed; as clocks wind down to Nil, and the soft still tempo of nocturne refrains underscores each tread in notes of dread. Tension slowly raised like crimson velvet before an owl's watchful stare, under the Moon's burlesque pearlesque hue, the blinkless survey of an eventide's stark mood. A plain shadow-laced atmosphere unfolds, misty trails inviting, forged by an inkwell ocean that has no beginning or end despite what we might think.

Yet into the arms of Night go we: intrepid, dauntless, dream-eyed voyagers most without a moment's apprehension of the bitter straits and turbulence we may encounter. Sailing toward the distant Dawn, a Ghost Ship gliding through the haze of murky unconscious, our hopes and daylight reveries entwined.

Between Finale's lowered drape

and Morrow's early rise, the curtains descend ever more, and I am most tranquil drifting, floating amidst no shores, my aims at rest and needs at bay . . . I am simply here, rocking in Comfort's cradle, nothing to interrupt the current of thoughts. A serene flow, gentle waves, the dance of Sleep Fairies painting a deep blissful scene.
Until the jolt of abrupt collision tosses me awake! Alert . . .

My vessel run aground, my peace disrupted. The embrace of bedtime withdrawn, peeled away like the skin of a ripe Banana laid open to the bite of monkey teeth! My soul bared to the perils of Dusk for those who cannot rest in a state of ignorance; who cannot submerge to the depths of the mind's abyss — the plane where bodies lie inert, abandoned, and spirits take wing on magical flights — where the worst terrors cannot reach, unless we allow them in. Until the rebirth, the return to light, before next we set sail, shut eyes and sink . . . back to the bittersweet arms of Night.

Firebird | Lori R. Lopez

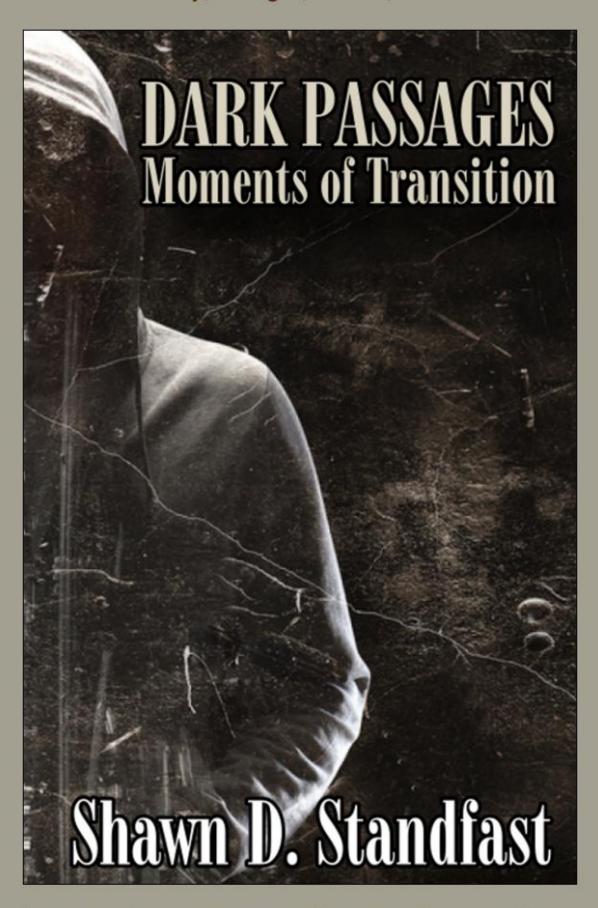
I am soaked in death's mildew, crawling, unable to stand, eyes and heart swollen by tears, limbs blackened with the decay of being lost, forgotten, somewhere beneath where the voices of the damned and the innocent mingle and cannot be heard. Except by us. We listen to each other's misery, the wailing of doomed tormented souls, arias of remorse and despair. A dark twisted poetry. Verses from the void. And it only adds to our own personal suffering. A beak tears at my neck, searing flesh, its febrile bite hotter than the blazes of this landscape. Beyond lies an opposite horror, the cutting edges of frozen knifeblades. I have reached a threshold in my struggle to escape, yet ice will neither dull nor extinguish the burn of this place. I could conjure a thousand worthless excuses for being punished — no different than anyone else's habit of self-defense or abuse. Guilt, like depression, can manifest tangible shapes, convincing forms that make us believe we are impaired, tainted, afflicted, our moral or physical or mental disease, condition, far worse than in reality we are. Do not trust. Them. Shadow figures. Phantoms. Illusions. They are not actually there. Hallucinations. But I am afraid this bird of fire is no mere fiction. I fear that I am truly in the Abyss for no good reason! I fear the hellbird is me.

About the Author:

Lori R. Lopez is an author-illustrator, poet, and wearer of hats. Verse has appeared in The Sirens Call, The Horror Zine, H.W.A. Poetry Showcases, Weirdbook, Bewildering Stories, California Screamin' (the Foreword Poem) and more. Books include The Dark Mister Snark, Leery Lane, An III Wind Blows, The Witchhunt, three volumes of her Poetic Reflections Series, and Darkverse: The Shadow Hours (nominated for a 2018 Elgin Award). Her poems "Crop Circles" and "Nocturnal Embers" have been nominated for the Rhysling Award in 2020.

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A collection of poetry caught in shadow, interweaving the remnants of memory, thought, dream, and desire.



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The Green Men of Gladdenhoe | Alex Grey

Gerald of Gladdenhoe emerged at the first blush of Midsummer dawn, eager to experience again the mystical joys of the solstice. He breathed the fragrant air, relishing the sensory delights of a world full of spring's green life and the promise of a bountiful autumn. He brushed his fingers against the saplings that he had caused to germinate a few years ago -- holly, rowan, hazel -- all doing well. Gerald was a Guardian, the twelfth and youngest.

One might mistake him for a stripling, but his brown eyes revealed an old soul. His smooth face bore a greenish cast; his hands and feet were gnarled, like old roots. Grass flourished in his footsteps, shrubs leaned towards his touch and flowers bloomed wherever his gaze fell. Once a year, the Guardians awoke from their stony sleep to complete their ritual, celebrating the great cycle of life and blessing Gladdenhoe Parish for the seasons to come. Gerald expected the others to join him through the afternoon, though it was likely that the oldest, Simeon and Andreas, would appear at nightfall.

Gladdenhoe Hill peaked three hundred feet above Gladdenflod Valley. The rush of the distant river reminded Gerald that today time flowed for him like water. As the sun ignited the horizon, the joyful carillon of the dawn chorus echoed across the landscape. The sound of the river was muted by the noise of the birds and the loud humming of bees eager to forage in the wildflower meadow surrounding Gladdenhoe Church. The first rays of sunshine touched the bronze gnomon of the sundial that the Parish had built to mark the arrival of the third millennium. It stood on a plinth made of flints mined from the heart of the parish. It was meant to be a wholesome symbol of peace for the future, but Gerald recalled a history embittered with ignorance and superstition.

"Witch!" denounced the new priest. "She cursed her husband, causing his axe to thirst for his blood. Her evil magics filled his wounds with fire. She turned away my righteous prayers. Who but a witch would be so wicked?"

Gerald's mother pushed him behind her as she wept and denied the priest's ravings. Many parishioners had come to bear witness to the priest's accusations. Some had eyes downcast, afraid to speak up, but others cheered, looking at Gerald's mother hungrily, greed etched deep into their faces. Sylvia of Gladdenhoe had inherited a farm from her father, then another from her husband. She was land-rich, but man-poor; there was no one to defend her.

Gerald saw the mob lift her, wrenching and twisting her limbs as they dragged her up the steep hill to Gladdenhoe Church. He ran behind the grim procession, shouting, "She's innocent!" until his voice grew hoarse. The mob chose not to hear. He saw them loft his mother onto a tall pile of firewood, laid earlier by the priest, who knew that the parish would uphold his accusation.

"Let the county see this beacon of righteousness!" the priest shouted as he thrust burning torches into the pyre.

Gerald ran into the church, kneeling hidden between the tall oak pews. The thick stone walls protected him from the sick heat of the pyre, but they were not thick enough to muffle his mother's screams. He heard her last cry, "Pray to the Green Men for justice!" before the crackle of the voracious flames silenced her, the fire's greed as nothing to that of the men who murdered her for her land.

As he heard the crash of the pyre collapsing in on itself, Gerald fell onto the stone floor, shivering with shock and despair. His mother had warned him they might be evicted, but she had not predicted her execution. He was fourteen years old and would forever be tarnished by the verdict passed on her – he knew he would soon be dispossessed.

High above him, the flickering light of the flames cast strange shadows onto the church walls, animating the carved faces of the legendary Green Men of Gladdenhoe. Each one was unique, believed by some to be the likenesses of the stonemasons that had brought them to life. Yet the faces were wild, adorned with hair of ivy crowned by garlands of fruit; vines grew rampant from their generous mouths. Their wise eyes had watched over the church for centuries. Although the congregation had assured the new priest that the carvings were symbols of God's bounty, he believed the figures to be pagan devils. He had tried to remove them, but his chisel blunted with every strike.

Green Men, please grant me justice for my mother, prayed Gerald, clutching to his mother's last words. In the muted hissing of the flames and the cloying whisper of the smoke, he heard their sibilant voices murmur, Come at Midsummer. Come for justice.

At noon, a few weeks later, the June sun blazed above the blackened circle where Sylvia of Gladdenhoe had perished. Gerald, unkempt and starving, stood and waited. Moments later the Priest entered the churchyard, the iron wicket gate clanking noisily in his wake.

The Priest recoiled when he saw Gerald. "Why are you here? Do you mean to threaten me with evil rites? I warn you; God protects me."

The priest held out his rosary, fingers slick with guilt and fear as they twisted their way through the prayers. "No, I am here for justice," Gerald replied.

The sundial stood where his mother's pyre had burned.

The Green Men's justice had come with a price, of course; but as he sat on a bench watching the gnomon's shadow sweep slowly across the dial, Gerald reflected that it had been worth it.

Enough, he thought to himself. He got up and wandered around the church, stopping at intervals to read the twelve inscriptions etched roughly into the walls. The first, worn and lichenous, read Here lyeth the cold corpse of Gerald of Gladdenhoe in the year of our lord 1553. There was no need for sentiment. If a man had been desperate enough to seek the justice of the Green Men, then he had not been dearly beloved of anyone.

His was the most recent inscription. Gerald stopped by the others, taking a moment to reflect on the thousand years of murderous sacrifices that had led these men to seek justice. Matthias' infant daughter, left naked in the churchyard at Midwinter to die for the curse of having green eyes; Andreas' sister, banished to the Parish boundary as a sacrifice against the plague; Simeon's wife, sold by Gladdenhoe's mayor to the marauding Vikings in exchange for the village's safety; all lives taken before their time. In return for justice, the twelve had given up their mortal lives to become Green Men, eternal guardians of the natural cycle of life and death.

It took Gerald an hour to circumnavigate the church. Then he turned North, threading his way between timeworn gravestones until he reached an ancient cist. It was around six feet square and three feet high. There was no inscription, but around the walls, twelve shrunken skulls protruded from the stone. They seemed to ooze from the granite like boils, mottled and evil. The stone was cold, no amount of sunshine would warm it. The lid looked heavy, though a fine seam marked where it must once have been opened.

Gerald recalled when the lid had last been lifted.

That Midsummer Day in 1553, no rosary could have saved the Priest as he prayed desperately at the altar, hoping to exorcise the witch's influence.

Young Gerald had watched as the Green Men, faces etched with concentration, had extruded themselves from the church walls, their bodies taking shape as the stone warped around them. Each man looked much as they had in life, some tall, others short, but all radiating strength like mighty oak trees. They emerged naked but took a moment to form garments according to their will - tunics, doublets, robes, a crusader's armour – the familiar clothes they had worn when they first gave up their mortality.

The Priest had gaped and gibbered, the rosary useless against their implacable resolve. Gerald saw the Green Men grasp the priest with root-like hands, crushing and twisting his limbs cruelly as they carried him to the cist. Simeon and Andreas lifted the heavy lid and threw the priest down. Far below, the bright quicklime used to bury the plague-ridden dead was dotted with white bones. They crunched as the Priest landed amongst them; he screamed as the caustic lime burned his skin. The Green Men replaced the heavy lid. On the side of the cist, Gerald saw a skull burst onto the surface like an evil fungus.

Simeon and Andreas turned to Gerald.

"We will not suffer the living to take a life, thus is the justice of the Green Men served. Neither may we grant a prayer without payment. Are you ready?"

At midnight, with the solstice sun barely set, Gerald entered the church. He stood by the wall, alongside Matthias, who had, until then, been the youngest of the Green Men. Gerald felt his body sinking into the stone as he gladly gave up his mortal life. Far above him, a new carving emerged as the twelfth Green Man of Gladdenhoe took his place.

A warm breeze swept his memories aside. Gerald stretched his sturdy limbs; he was not yet 500 years old, vigorous and vital on this living day. Peace had reigned in the Gladdenhoe parish since Gerald had avenged his mother. Few now visited the church, most that did so were sightseers, possessed of no more than an indifferent goodwill.

He was surprised, then, when he heard querulous voices on the steep path that led to the churchyard from the village below.

"That was a great pub lunch." A man's voice, petulant, panting. "Saved me from your cooking again."

"I try my best, Kevin." A woman's voice, apologetic, fearful.

"Daisy, you can't cook, you can't keep the house clean, god knows you're not a looker, why is it I keep you?"

Gerald saw the man yank the wicket gate open roughly and pass through before letting the gate slam back into the woman, who struggled to squeeze her pregnant belly through the narrow gap.

"I was going to ask you to marry me, but look at you, fat, useless."

"Look I'm sorry, it's just a bit of baby fat, I'll lose it as soon as he's born, I promise."

She cradled her belly protectively, her thin arms showing the effort she'd made to stay trim for Kevin.

"You promise! You? Promise? That's rich! Like you promised to dress a bit nicer, put on a bit of make-up, to look less of a slag?"

Gerald saw Daisy reach out appeasingly, but Kevin was incensed. He shoved her away roughly. She stumbled and fell awkwardly, her belly hitting the sharp flint edges of the sundial's plinth, the bronze spike of the gnomon slicing her scalp.

As Gerald strode forward to comfort the woman, Kevin lunged for him, fists raised belligerently. But no blow fell. The assembled Green Men of Gladdenhoe had silently surrounded the angry man and grasped his arms.

Gerald turned to Daisy. Her face was a ghastly grey as she scrabbled desperately to staunch the blood that was soaking through her skirt. Gerald touched her belly gently. He sensed the child within, flailing, drowning. Gerald called to the child, but the precious spark of life faded before his power could rekindle it.

"The Green Men can grant you justice if you ask it of us" he said.

"Is my baby alive?" Daisy whispered, barely conscious.

"Your son is one with nature. Yet he will never walk the fair earth as a man."

At first, she sobbed, but then she looked up at Kevin, who was still struggling against the rough grasp of the Green Men. Her eyes blazed, her hatred giving her the strength to shout, "Green Men, give me justice!"

"Will you pay for our justice by pledging your body and soul to guarding the cycle of life?" Gerald asked.

"May my unborn son guard with me?"

Gerald looked questioningly at Simeon, who nodded.

Daisy nodded her assent and lay back against the sundial.

Gerald stood up and joined the Guardians, who now stood in a rough circle around the grovelling man at their feet.

"You have perpetrated a monstrous act, murdering an innocent with your mindless malevolence. The justice of the Green Men will be served upon you."

Kevin writhed and kicked out. He opened his mouth to remonstrate, but his voice gargled as green shoots sprouted from his throat. Their vine-like growths swayed downwards and twisted around his neck. He tried to scream as more vines grew from his nose and his ears. His belly swelled as the plants took root and devoured him from within. His eyes were wide and white with terror as questing tendrils drew his eyelids together. His last breaths rasped painfully. When it was over, the plants crept away, taking root and flowering all around the husk of skin and bone that had been Kevin.

With some ceremony, the youngest Green Men lifted Kevin's remains and carried him to the cist. Andreas and Simeon removed the lid. They hurled the body, such as it was, into the pit. As they replaced the lid, the cist's stone wall bulged as a festering bubo burst into a new skull.

In the dark hour between the sun fading in the west and rising in the east, Gerald carried Daisy into the church and laid her on a pew.

"Rest here awhile," he murmured, before returning to his companions, now gathered around the sundial.

The Green Men knelt and plunged their fingers into the earth, seeding the Parish with enough energy to nurture the great cycle of life for another year.

When the Guardians returned to the church, Gerald saw Daisy standing by the altar. She had changed. Her face was serene and glowed with power as she cradled her belly. She gestured to the Guardians to approach her. One by one, they knelt as she baptised them tenderly, dipping her fingers into the placental blood that had pooled by her feet. As she christened him with the blood of her son's sacrifice, Gerald was filled with a sense of belonging. The grace of the Green Mother embraced him and bound him to his eternal family.

At midnight, time stilled as the year balanced at its zenith, a second later, time tilted and started its fall towards winter. The ancient church rippled as thirteen bodies sank into the walls, and the Guardians resumed their stony vigil.

The next morning, the sun rose early over Gladdenhoe Hill. In the church, the carvings of the Green Men gazed towards the altar. There the Green Mother watched over all, her tranquil face crowned with a halo of brambles, her sleeping son's cheek nestled gently against hers, forever.

About the Author:

After a lifetime of writing technical non-fiction, Alex Grey is fulfilling her dream of writing poems and stories that engage the reader's emotions. Her ingredients for contentment are narrowboating, greyhounds, singing and chocolate – it's a sweet life. Of her horror writing, Alex' best friend says "For someone so lovely, you're very twisted!"

Blog: <u>Ideal Reader</u>
Twitter: <u>@Indigodreamers</u>



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An Artist and a Writer | Cat Voleur

"You know, I'm always going to support you, no matter what."

That was always the hypothetical situation with Nate, and it probably always would be. He liked to talk about some mystical date in the future when he would be successful, and the money would be pouring in. He liked to describe this fantasy, often in the context that it would happen, probably because he realized that it never would.

Nate was a hack.

It wasn't the day-dreaming itself that bothered Greg. All artists had a certain level of disconnect from reality, he knew he was guilty of it himself. It was the fact that in this portrait being painted daily of their future, his role in it never changed. Sometimes Nate did collaborations with authors whom he spent nights pontificating about with condescension. Often it was that his sole publication was picked up by a publisher for another three installations. Once it had been an adaptation into an original series for their preferred streaming site that he himself directed and cameoed in for his fictional, adoring public. But the stories always ended the same way, with him supporting Greg.

"Sure you will."

Greg had endured these ramblings for years, and he was never the star in these fantasies, never a co-star. They were never even equals. Nate liked him being more of a prop, it would seem.

"I mean it. I'm going to take care of you."

He spent so much time thinking about that future that he didn't even seem to realize Greg had been the one taking care of him for years.

"I know you would," he said flatly.

"I will. This is going to happen."

"Sure."

It was hard to give monosyllabic replies that sounded sincere, though, and his attempt to evade further discussion had just pulled him deeper into the whole mess.

"Oh, so you don't believe in me now?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't really have to. I can see it in your face. You don't think that this project is going to happen. You don't think I'm going to make any money off this." Nate's wounded tone was the type of accusatory that begged to be soothed. The two men had been to this point before, but never further.

"I think you have to finish the book, first."

Somehow it had slipped out and the tension was palpable between the lovers. His situation had worsened considerably, but his chest felt lighter, even as his partner looked at him with the wounded eyes of an animal that has only ever known imagined pain up to this point in its life. "Wow."

"Look, Nate-"

"Do you have any idea how hard it is to write a novel?"

"I've written novels, Nate."

never slide back into what it had been.

"Do you have any idea how hard it is to publish one, then? No, you don't. Making money in this business isn't easy. It's 99% networking — and that's why you don't have your name on the shelves."

"Your name isn't on shelves either!" He was losing control of the situation, but it felt like it might be better to just air all his grievances at once. "You wrote one e-book seven years ago and you've been talking about it ever since."

"I have written plenty of other things since then, Greg! Which you would know if you ever paid attention to my work."

"You've started two other novels since then, and one short story that overstayed its welcome by about four-thousand words. That's not enough content for so much time — even if you had finished one of them. I could list every stage of every draft of every project you've considered since we've been together, because I have to hear about it for hours every time you

manage to cough up a couple hundred words. I have to pay attention to it because it's all you talk about all the time."

It felt so good to say it all out loud. The words carried with them momentum and the knowledge that their life would

Nathan, clearly, felt the shift as well because he had fallen out of his victim routine, perhaps for the first time since they'd known each other. His wounded outer layer was peeled back to reveal something nasty and real that Greg had only ever caught glimpses of before. "Well, forgive me for wanting to do work that I'm actually proud of."

That was a low blow, calling him out for doing the contract work that had been paying both their bills. When they had started dating, Greg had been the sort of man who would never stoop that low in a fight. Then again, when they started dating, he thought he was in love with another writer. The insult was falling from his lips before he could even think of stopping it.

"I would rather be a sellout than a prideful creator with no creation."

"How. Dare. You." Nate snarled.

"That's really the heart of the problem, isn't it? You have no work. You have no ideas."

"I have ideas!"

"The same ideas! The same three fucking ideas for your entire career — if we can even call it that."

"Stop it!"

"No! I've been coddling your ego for too long. I'm tired of hearing about what a genius you are every goddamned day and reading the same unfinished story over and over every time you change some punctuation. I can't do it anymore."

"You won't leave me."

"I'll do one worse. I'll tell you the truth. You're the sort of writer who likes talking about his work more than he likes working on it — and the only market that sells to is the campus kids down the street who are as pretentious as you."

Honesty felt so good for Greg.

What followed felt exponentially better for Nate.

The knife was in his lover before he even knew what was happening. It had been sitting there, on the table where he had eaten alone because Greg had to work late. It hadn't been cleaned up yet because Greg was too tired to ever dream of helping out around the house, let alone go to events or have a real conversation. Nate's boyfriend, who had always been afraid to open up, was now spilling his guts all over their hardwood floors.

The irony of that struck Nate as incredibly poetic. As he let the body fall to the floor, at last he tried to describe the sentiment in his head, to imagine how he might put it on paper. The words evaded him though. He couldn't think of any that could truly capture the beauty of it all. It was something that he never could have imagined; a tragedy for the ages all bundled up in a warm euphoria. His metaphors kept mixing, and even in the thrill of the moment, the imagery was hard for him to hold onto.

He ached with the potential of the scene before him, and all he wanted in the world was to preserve the elation before his inspiration withered away.

Taking just a moment to wipe his hands on his jeans, he retrieved his computer and sat down next to the carnage. He had the word processor up in seconds, but still, the story wouldn't come to him. Not even in what he considered to be his finest moment.

An abyss of white stared back at him, and the stand-off until his vision was blurry and his brain hurt.

Some work days were just like that.

"I told you, you're not a real writer."

Nathan tried to block out the sound of the corpse beside him, taunting him, just as it had in life.

"You're never going to see your name in print, you can't write a single word."

"Shut up!"

"Why don't you tell me about the story you want to write, now that I'm truly a captive audience?"

"You don't deserve to hear it." He spat in anger.

"You have nothing."

"I have everything I need."

"You're not a writer."

He looked down at the body, half-expecting to see it sneering as it challenged him, cackling with its victory over his life and sanity alike. None of that was true, of course. Greg was just dead.

"You're not a writer." This time, Nate was saying it to himself.

He'd just had the biggest breakthrough of his career. He wasn't a writer after all. Maybe he never had been. He closed his laptop with a grin, feeling relief wash over him as he realized he'd never have to struggle with word count again.

There would be no more query letters, no more rejection, no more feeling inadequate, and especially no more trying to fool himself into believing he was something he wasn't. He wasn't a writer; he was an artist. He was a visionary, a prodigy, someone who had created a masterpiece their first time around.

The last seven years hadn't been a waste. They'd pushed him to the point of brilliance and now that he'd found his calling, he could finally claim the success he knew he'd been destined for. He stood up a new man.

For the first time since his publication he could go to bed and rest easy, knowing that it had been a fulfilling day of work. He looked down at the floor one last time, and exalted in the pride he had for his new creation.

About the Author:

Cat Voleur is a professional horror blogger and writer of speculative fiction. She enjoys music, gaming, and the study of fictional languages. When she isn't traveling, she's most likely at home with a good book in the company of her feline army. They're all rescues who have received appropriately nerdy names and are incredibly loved.

Blog: <u>Catvoleur.com</u>
Twitter: <u>@Cat Voleur</u>

Making Faces | Andrey Pissantchev

You've probably walked past me on the street many times. I go out for a stroll every day, and never get bored. I've been around for a while – and I've learned to get enjoyment out of the simplest things.

It is springtime, cool and sunny, parks lined with trees in bloom. I go past elderly couples walking hand in hand and office workers rushing back in after a quick cigarette break, salesmen hawking phone cases and cheap sunglasses.

All of them are complete strangers and yet, they all seem familiar. I pick out traits that I've seen before, a regal slope of the nose or a sensual thickness of the lips. Maybe it belongs to the niece or great-grandson of someone I've seen long ago. Or it could be just one of those coincidences, like an archetype that manifests itself regardless of race or nationality.

I spend a lot of time looking at faces. It's part of what I do. I take note of those subtle patterns, memorize them, sketch them out when I return home. I take pride in my attention to detail, and that's what makes my work so believable. You've probably walked past me on the street many times, and not suspected a thing.

Of course, I don't take it all too seriously. There's a lot of fun to be had. It comes with the territory.

I'm on a bus now. The commuter rush is over, and the late morning sun reflects off the empty seats. There's a mother in the seat in front of me, facing the direction of travel. She's tapping away at her phone, and her baby is looking back over her shoulder, visibly bored. I glance around. All other passengers are glued to their devices. An opportunity presents itself.

I tilt my head to catch its attention. When it notices me, I grin, raising my eyebrows comically. The baby is old enough to understand my expression, and it beams a smile back at me.

Without moving my eyebrows, I pull the corners of my mouth down in a grimace, exposing my bottom teeth. The baby gurgles with delight. It's enjoying the show so far.

I follow up with a lopsided pout and a cross-eyed stare, after which I flare my nostrils and move my ears all at the same time. My audience of one is enthralled.

At this point I pause, as any great entertainer will do before stepping up their act. I cover my face with my hands and when I remove them, I have taken the look of the bus driver, a jolly overweight man with a bright ginger beard. The baby squeals, pleased by the colours, and waves its hands in a way which I choose to interpret as applause.

I place my left palm above my face and sweep down, returning to my previous look, but I also add a twist: as I uncover my mouth, I reveal an outrageous black moustache. It sticks out to the sides and stoops down, rigid like the jaws of a beetle. I include in the similarity, opening and closing its halves soundlessly.

I squeeze my eyes shut, they disappear completely. They open on my cheeks instead. I retract my facial hair, while my eyes start shifting about, chasing each other around my nose.

Throughout this performance, the baby watches me with glee. I'm a bit disappointed. I would have expected it to be in tears by now. So I decide to take things a bit further. I know just the thing – it nearly drove a priest insane back in 1635.

I relax and bring my face back to normal. I then focus. I let three thorns grow out, two at my cheek bones and one on my forehead. At the same time, my teeth grow sharper and my face elongates, turning a green tinge. The protrusions on my face stretch out into spikes, curving towards the baby's skull.

I pause. Nothing! The baby mumbles to itself, still smiling. I return to my old face again, plus a furrowing of the eyebrows I do not quite intend.

I plan out my next steps, but then I notice the baby is looking at me. Not the normal unfocused baby gaze. It looks at me dead on, with a hint of slyness in its face, like it wants to show me something.

I narrow my eyes. Go on.

The baby blinks, and when its eyes open they are jet black. I sit up straight. It's an old trick, but not one I expected. Not from what appears a baby on the bus, at least. My curiosity is piqued. Even better, I sense a game of one-upmanship is afoot. So I wink with my left eye, then right, turning the first one deep blue, the second brilliant red. I then open scores of tiny eyes all over my face in a dazzling display of colours.

Your move, kid.

The baby tilts its head and chuckles in a way that seems completely unbabylike.

As I watch I find its eyes seem larger, even though they haven't increased physically in size. I lean in to get a closer look. Within the blackness I notice clusters of white dots. No, not dots. Stars. I make out more and more of them, cold points in a vast and uncaring starscape. I am no longer observing, I am within, moving at a great speed.

Before I can get my bearings, I am flung into a nearby planet. Clouds roll past me, thick and impenetrable. I push through. I fly above dead streets now. Flashes of lightning illuminate the concrete ruins beneath me. I realize the pale shapes on the ground are human bones, hundreds of them.

Familiarity dawns as I notice the shape of the city, the blighted parks, the remnants of office buildings. *I know this place*. I look ahead in anticipation. I can tell where I'm headed already. My own apartment block, still miraculously standing. I fly closer to a window, and recognize the figure moving within. It's me.

I wear the same face I'm wearing right now, but my clothes and belongings are in tatters. I study my own expression, observe my body language. My shoulders are hunched up, and my arms tremble as they move. My eyes are empty. There are no physical wounds on my body, but I know I am broken.

My other self is holding something. A long rope. There is a look of resolve on my face as I turn it into a noose. I see myself attach it to the ceiling, then slip it around my neck.

The world lurches around me, and I scream. I find myself back on the bus. I am on the floor and everybody is looking at me. I don't know whether the baby is still facing me. I can't bear to look. My head is splitting. I can taste blood in my mouth.

I feel the bus slowing down. I don't know if it reached a stop or a red light. I bang on the door until it opens, then scramble out.

I somehow make my way back to my flat. I look at the mirror, and the reflection that looks back is a distorted, melted thing. I pull myself together and mould my face into something more proper. I sigh. I think I'll need to go into hiding for a decade or two.

One thing is certain. I'm not going to play games with strangers ever again.

About the Author:

Andrey Pissantchev is a Bulgarian writer based in Leeds, UK. He writes odd fantasy and horror, and avoids interacting with people on public transport altogether. While this story originally appeared in Weird and Whatnot, Andrey's stories have also appeared in Tall Tale TV and Factor Four Magazine, among others. His first poem is upcoming in Spectral Realms.

Website: Andrey Pissantchev

Laughter is the Best Weapon | Holly Saiki

Shannon's hyena-like laughter shocked the comedian into silence, making him fall to the stage floor with a loud thump, blood poured out of his orifices. The audience sat in awkward silence for a few seconds before they panicked, high-pitched screams pierced the air.

Shannon walked through the now stampeding crowd, a smile of pure satisfaction on her face. She may have had to remain silent while she and her family watched sitcoms to prevent their gruesome deaths; but it felt so very good to use her gift against the comedians who thought whining about their terrible dating life was amusing.

About the Author:

Holly Saiki is a part-time retail worker living in Kapolei, HI on the Island of Oahu. Her fiction "The Graveyard of Skulls" has appeared in The Siren's Call's June 2019, Issue 45.

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Precipitation | *Merethe Walther*

Rebecca pulled the front door open just enough to stick her head past the jamb, a grin plastered to her cheeks alongside the sticky remains of peaches from her lunchtime MRE.

She watched the snowflakes sprinkle down from the menacing black clouds far above. The neighborhood was devoid of life, each rowhouse stoop barren as the next, silent but for the soft rustling of flakes falling on a line of empty cars stretching down the street in either direction.

She'd never seen snow before. Real snow! She glanced behind her at the dark house; her mother was listening to the radio in the living room. The soft hiss of static and worried voices drifted through the guiet hall.

Now was her chance.

Feeling brazen, Rebecca leaned from the doorway on one pink-socked foot and stretched a hand out for the flakes to flutter down onto. It took a couple tries, but tongue against her lips in concentration, she managed to grab one, capturing it in her palm and squeezing tight.

She pulled her hand to her chest to sneak a peek, but there was nothing. No wetness; only a smudge of dirt remained where the flake had been.

With a frown, Rebecca leaned out again, a little farther than before, reaching wide to catch another. Her hand open to the sky, snow fell around her, caressing her cheeks and dusting her hair. When a flake landed against her palm like a fallen angel, she didn't crush it, but instead peered down in confusion. Weren't snowflakes supposed to melt? And be... *cold*? She poked it with a finger, but the flake—gray, not white like in the Christmas movies—disintegrated at her touch, leaving a faint pile of embers behind.

She bent down to sniff it then, tentative, and pressed the tip of her tongue against the stain. She reared back, her face scrunched up in disgust. *This* was snow? *This* was what you were supposed to play in and throw at your friends? She slapped at her lips, trying to get the bitter, acrid taste to go away, but it was slow to fade. It tasted... burnt. She stuck her arm back out the door, wiping sweat from her brow with the sleeve of her t-shirt, determined to try again. Maybe she'd just gotten a bad one?

"Rebecca Ann!"

Her mother's voice was sharp as a pinprick against her spine, and Rebecca spun, arms tucked behind her back, shame and worry in too-wide eyes.

"Y-yes, Mama?" she asked.

Madeline's face was stricken as she approached from the hall. She eyed the open door and her daughter's dust-covered hair and skin, her stomach churning. She put down the heavy candelabra and crossed the room in three fast strides, yanking Rebecca away from the door and slamming it closed, locking the bolt. She didn't even remember leaving it unlatched. How had she gotten so forgetful—especially with all the warnings on the radio lately...? She looked outside, watching the roiling clouds in the sky, then down at the entryway, where piles of gray had wafted in for them to trample on.

"Show me," she commanded, kneeling down to eye level.

Rebecca looked to the floor, then withdrew her arms from behind her back, revealing the gray stains of ash across her palms and forearms. Madeline stared at the dark splotches and forced herself to reach over and tuck a strand of her daughter's dirty hair behind her ear with a shaking hand. There were smudges around Rebecca's mouth and eyes; across her nose. Dark streaks mingled among sticky flecks of peaches; an emergency ration meal they'd gotten from the National Guard a week before in an effort to enforce the curfew and keep everyone inside.

"I just wanted to see the snow up close," she said, lower lip trembling. "But it tasted gross and it isn't cold, and I hate it."

Madeline forced a smile to her face as she wiped the stains from Rebecca's hands and face with her sleeve. "I know, but I told you not to touch it, right?"

Rebecca nodded, barely managing to hold her tears at bay.

"This 'snow' isn't really snow... It's..."

Madeline's gaze drifted to the window, trying to come up with a better lie than anything she might already have told her, but she drew a blank. The radio kept promising an end was in sight; the situation was getting better, they swore, but they'd been saying that for months now.

Madeline didn't think she'd ever get the scent of burning hair and skin out of her nose.

"I know what will make you feel better," she said, standing and holding out a hand for Rebecca to grab before the tears could pool in her eyes. "Let's get you cleaned up. A nice bubble bath. And no more going outside until the snow stops—you promise?"

Rebecca looked through the glass on the door, at the sky stained black, and frowned. "But it always snows now," she complained. "When will it be over?"

Madeline tugged her along, trying to ignore the streaks of soot on her daughter's hands and mouth. Maybe she should tell Rebecca that even now, her own father might be out there, falling to the earth with all of the other dissenters in little pieces of ash.

Perhaps it was his remains that drifted to her from above.

Perhaps it was his remains that lay scattered across their foyer.

Perhaps it was his remains that Rebecca had... thinking it was snow...

Madeline couldn't bring herself to finish the thought.

"I don't know, honey," she whispered, picking up her candelabra and guiding them up the dark stairwell to the second floor, a track of cindery footprints in their wake.

"But I hope... soon. I hope... very soon."

About the Author:

Merethe Walther is a professional editor, author, and short story writer whose work has won awards with Readers' Favorite and Writers of the Future.

When not working—or trying to explain how to pronounce her name correctly—you can find her playing video games and board games, reading, and spending time with her husband and cat in Atlanta, GA.

Author Blog: Merethe Walther
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Beach Body | Nate Ealy

I coughed and water came out of my mouth. Gritty saltwater, actually.

I looked around and beside me on the beach were the destroyed remains of the yacht. I don't remember what happened, but the once mighty ship was now in pieces on the shore of this God forsaken island. I couldn't even see any trees on this little rock.

"Steph! Paul! Mark!" I called out.

No one answered. There weren't even footprints in the sand.

Out on the horizon, the sun was burning orange and disappearing. I needed to think fast, and act faster, if I wanted to endure the coming night.

My first thought went to fire. I needed warmth, but had no way to start one. Sure, there was enough fuel around me to get one going, but nothing to light it. Instead, I made a makeshift hut out of the driftwood and curled up to sleep. My stomach rumbled, but there was nothing to do except let it roar.

I woke long after dawn. More pieces of debris had washed ashore overnight, and I went to pull them out of the surf. While I was grabbing for driftwood, I noticed one piece wasn't like the others. It wasn't even wood. It was a body.

My hand shook, and my heart raced, as I grabbed the white shirt and rolled the man over. It was the Captain. His open eyes stared up at me.

I put my hand over my mouth and turned away. I didn't care about the driftwood anymore. I just found a dead man on the beach.

I spent the rest of the day in shock. I couldn't find anything to eat, and there was still nothing to drink. However, my situation got worse once I remembered a little piece of info from the boat.

The Captain smoked.

He had a lighter on him before the wreck.

I swallowed hard. I had to search his cold body for the lighter so I could make a fire. That way I could stay warm overnight, and maybe even signal a passing ship. Boil water. Or cook something if I ever got something to cook.

I walked back to the beach to where I left Captain. He hadn't moved. Dead men don't move. I'd see him walking around this tiny island anyway if he did.

His arms stayed splayed out, and I hesitated before reaching my hand into his pockets, the fabric of his clothes dried stiff. The first pocket was empty. The next had a pen. The third pocket I tried, his breast pocket, had the lighter.

I shouted when my fingers touched the zippo. Quickly, I flicked the lighter open and saw a flame. I now had fire!

I ran back up to the hut and decided what I needed to survive and what I could burn. Then I lit up, baby. The very next thing I did was start boiling water.

I slept good that night.

Day Three on the island started the same. More driftwood and debris washed ashore, and with it two more bodies.

I watched as Paul and Mark lifelessly rolled in the waves. I pulled my dead friends out of the water and dragged them up to where I laid the Captain earlier. Paul's long hair covered his face, but some fish ate off Mark's nose and cheeks. I pulled his shirt up to cover it.

There were some small fishes in the driftwood today, and I cooked them over the fire. I thanked the Captain for his bad habits and ate. My body almost threw up the first bite, but I made it work.

I think its Day Five now, or maybe Six. I can't really tell. Everything is running together. Debris still comes in every morning, and yesterday Steph's body came with it. She was still in her black clothes. Her pretty face was intact, but her one foot was gone. The foot with the flower tattoo. It wasn't a clean break, either. Something nasty chomped it away.

I cried when I saw her wash ashore. I cried for a long time. Then I buried everyone in the sand in one mass grave.

I still have food to eat since sea creatures come in with the tides and driftwood too. I still boil water. I'm still alone.

I've completely lost track of days. I should have kept a tally on one of the boards.

I've given up hope that someone will see my smoke signals. Also, I'm feeling blessed that the yacht was a *big boat*. I didn't realize just how much it entailed. Every morning still, things wash ashore. There are no more bodies, though. There were only five of us on the boat when it left Jamaica, and we're all here now.

Today I woke before dawn to watch the materials roll in. It's kinda become my thing.

After I saw the black shapes stop in the sand, I went down to the surf to claim my prizes.

There was a large pile of debris, and a piece of the hull with MADONNA on it was on top. I figured that should become my hut's roof. When I shifted it, a pale hand flopped out of the mess.

I stepped back. That hand shouldn't be there. There's no one it could belong to.

I then threw the piece of the hull off the pile. The hand was connected to an arm, a shoulder, and a whole body. One more person washed ashore. Someone with my hair, my barbed wire tattoo, the scar on my leg, my *everything*.

I screamed when I saw the man's dead eyes, and I backed away knowing why I was trapped here on this island, why no one had seen my smoke signals. Those dead eyes were mine.

About the Author:

Nate Ealy is a huge sports fan in Western PA, and when he's not watching something to do with a ball, he's writing. The Siren's Call eZine, Gathering Storm Magazine, Romance Magazine, and Fairlight Books have all published something by Nate. He is currently working on a novel.

Amazon Author page: Nate Ealy



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Seller's Remorse | Daniel Braithwaite

On a sunless and dreary winter evening, Lynn Jackson again found herself in her spare bedroom workshop. Lynn kneeled in front of a weather-beaten wooden mirror, mouth agape in puzzlement at which color would bring out the mirror's best features. Frayed varnish snagged her fingers, as she ran her hand along the frame. She would frequently lose herself in these moments, where sight and sound would slip away to imagination. Hobbies and passions have those effects on people, getting lost that is, and at this point, she made a hefty chunk of her income from it, but she still saw it as a hobby opposed to a profession; in her way it kept her grounded and it fed her hunger for creativity. Once completed, a piece could take as little as a week or as long as a month, she would post them online. Restora was her main choice, an app designed for the express purposes of the talented to outshine the bland; and Restora hosted all of Lynn's antiques and restorations.

Lynn glanced at her watch, back to the dresser, down to her watch again, it still read 6:45 PM. She spent her remaining time before 7:00, re-polishing the oak table in the workshop. Once she deemed the table clean, she dusted off her fleece sweater, reclined in a chair and sipped her warmish tea.

THUMP! THUMP! The knocker on the door clacked throughout the house. Lynn breezed past the shelf cluttered with trinkets and dust collectors, paused for a moment to center herself before she turned the brass doorknob affixed to the cherry wood door.

The door opened.

And Lynn peered from a foot-wide crack, leaving most of her body behind the door and her head poked out like a human sock puppet. Inches from the threshold stood an elderly couple, give or take seventy or eighty in age, smiling in the near evening twilight. The man wore a pressed suit with a collar too long, something which would be in style thirty years ago. The woman wore a black sun hat obstructing her eyes, along with a dark denim jacket. Lynn smiled, the couple reciprocated, but both refused to initiate like all three were trapped in a silent dance neither chose to partake in.

The silence finally broke when the man spoke: "We talked over—"

"Email yes," Lynn said.

"-About the table."

Not wanting to seem desperate for a sale, and desiring to show an air of importance, Lynn responded: "Which one? The oak or mahogany?"

"The oak one." The man said, resting his hands behind his back.

"Right, if I recall you're Jo-" Lynn said, darting her eyes up and to the right.

"John," He said, patting his hand on his chest, before gesturing to his companion. "And this is my lovely wife Jane."

Jane nodded at John then towards Lynn with an added smile but didn't utter a word.

"Glad you guys came," Lynn said. "It's right this way."

A swift stab panged in her stomach. She usually didn't invite people into her home, strangers that is, the winter weather changed that, she didn't have a choice. The couple's age added a tiny bit of comfort but still, the queasiness lingered. Lynn widened the door, turned around and walked in from the vestibule.

John and Jane didn't follow; they stood motionless just beyond the door frame.

Lynn spotted them from the corner of her eye, turned back and said: "You guys can come in, it's right this way."

John waddled through the threshold into the vestibule, Jane peered over her shoulder, then limped behind John. Lynn noticed Jane's uneasiness, and it calmed her further, thinking she was experiencing a similar emotion. Or so she thought.

Down the hallway, Lynn lead John and Jane passed the local artist's paintings adorned on the beige walls. "Here it is," Lynn said, her arm outstretched into the workshop.

John paused for a moment, wiped his eyes, then approached the table. "It looks like the one my father owned."

"Glad you like it," Lynn said, holding back a wide grin.

"We'll take it," John said, his voice high, before looking back at Jane. "Could you get a blanket from the car dear?"

Jane nodded again, still not uttering a word.

"This really is a beautiful piece, Ms. Jackson."

"Thank you very much, I try my best," Lynn said, not even attempting to fight the emotion any longer.

"Probably realized by now, my wife is very ill, she doesn't talk anymore," John said, his hands pressed against the table.

"I did," Lynn said, as she took a step closer to John. "I'm sorry if you like I could give you a—"

"She refuses to take her medicine sometimes."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear," Lynn said, rubbing her thumb between her fingers.

And in an instant, the old man straightened his back, breathed a deep sign then said: "Anyway let's move this table, if you will."

"I can do it myself if you want?" Lynn asked.

"No, I insist."

At one end of the table, Lynn, on the opposing side, John; They both lifted and turned the table. Out of the workshop and into the hall, with the local paintings. Lynn remarked at the elder's strength, despite his age John carried his share, more even.

When Lynn and John lumbered into the living room, the hair on Lynn's neck raised. She frantically scanned the room, her search stopped when her eyes met the mirror on the wall. It showed Lynn and Lynn alone carrying the table. She whimpered, but before she could think the table crashed to the floor, Lynn's hands still clasped to the legs.

John spun and lunged over the table, his face changed, his cheekbone protruded, removing the wrinkles from his face, his chin pointed, his teeth like shards of broken glass, giving him the appearance of a rabid porcelain doll.

Lynn fell backward, her ass catching her fall, when her eyes rolled back from the momentum, she spotted where Jane had disappeared to, the ceiling. Curled up into a ball, Jane rolled across the stucco, weightless, her limbs thrashed like an octopus snatched from the ocean

Panic-stricken, Lynn threw her hands over her face, but John swatted them away and lifted her by the neck. Face to face, Lynn stared into John's lifeless eyes. John shot his head back like he was generating an unseen force and thrust his razor-sharp teeth into her jugular.

The pain traveled through Lynn's neck, firing off each nerve in her entire body. But she was powerless, as much as she budged, her limbs wouldn't move like she was trapped in a dream.

Another bite came from the opposite side, and with each drop of blood, she felt weaker and weaker. When she was near empty, Lynn went limp, and John and Jane slumped her body to the floor.

Conciseness drifted between reality and hallucination. Lynn's final moment before she died from blood loss, wasn't euphoria, but the vision of the strangers who robbed her of life.

"Grab the table Fred, we're here already."

"Don't need the damn thing."

About the Author:

Daniel Braithwaite is a speculative fiction writer, with a primary focus on horror. He hails from Toronto but currently resides further North in the city of Barrie. You can read his work in bathroom stalls or you can read more of his work in the Sirens Call Publications: Issue 28, Issue 32, and Issue 36, and Black Hare Press Dark Drabbles Vol. 3.

Facebook: Daniel Braithwaite



Salvage | Rivka Jacobs

The middle-aged lady and her husband of thirty-five years shambled along the water's edge. She was plump now, wearing cutoffs and a tank top, but once she'd been curvy and bikini-beautiful.

Her husband appeared self-absorbed and tense. When she reached her fingers to brush his dangling hand, trying to stroke him into taking hers, he quickly withdrew this arm and caught hold of his open blowing Hawaiian shirt.

She smiled. "I'm so glad you agreed to come back with me to Key Biscayne," she said sweetly, squinting into the late morning sun as it sparkled off the blue-green ocean, relishing the feel of the sea-breeze and the smell of brine.

He grimaced, his eyes unreadable behind retro-style aviator shades.

The children dashed up and down the beach, their feet slapping on the wet surface that was exposed as the foamy water was sucked back into the Atlantic Ocean. A collection of seven colorful bathing suits, dripping pony-tails and glistening crew-cuts caked with sand paused to jump and shove one another as the incoming waves flowed once more around their ankles.

They took off again, screaming and chasing each other. They passed by and outdistanced several adults wearing sunglasses, hats, and tennis-shoes who ambled in the same direction, heading for the old lighthouse at Cape Florida point.

School was out for the year, and the kids felt invincible. They'd left Key Biscayne Elementary and Mrs. Saint Claire's fourth grade classroom at three-thirty, climbed on their bikes, and rode like racers down Enid Drive toward the beach club. Parental permission had been given ahead of time—it was the year 1963 and no one thought twice about a pack of nine-year-olds biking to Crandon Park or the club or anywhere else on the Key. This was a new suburban development, a safe place to live.

One of the boys jogged about ten feet ahead. "Hey, we're almost there," he shouted, waving his arms and spinning to face the others. His name was Henry and he was golden, wiry and hyperactive, always in trouble at school. Now he was in his element.

His friends caught up to him. They rounded a curve of white dunes dotted with cord-grass and sea oats and came to a stop. Rolling jade-green sea stretched to the horizon on their left. Hard-pack damp sand spotted with shells and streaked with seaweed deposited by the previous high tide spread before them. The sounds of sea gulls and a constant wind hummed in their ears. They shaded their eyes and gazed up at the blackened red-brick lighthouse tower as it rose into the sky.

A large, solid girl with strawberry hair and skin to match stuck her fists on her hips like Peter Pan. "Now listen to me," she said. They quieted and formed a circle around her, toes turned inward and chins lowered with respect, as she continued, "no climbing the lighthouse. No swimming by the old seawall. We gotta stay together, okay?"

"Okay, Linda," said Chris who was stout with a black flattop. He and his brethren then impatiently bolted away and began to skip and hop along the water.

Linda walked regally in their wake, swinging her arms and singing as loudly as she could, "'You'd better watch out when the hearse comes by, you'd better be ready to die, die, die ... they wrap you up in a clean white sheet, and drop you in a hole six feet deep...." She giggled as the others took up the chant.

"'The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out, the worms play ping pong on your snout ... they use your bones for telephones and call you up when you're not home!'" The seven friends squealed and guffawed and pranced around each other.

"We need to talk," he said.

His wife tilted her head and contemplated how the contours of the shore, the shape of the dunes seemed so different, due no doubt to the ravages of several hurricanes and global warming but also, possibly, the result of the contrast between childhood memories and an adult perspective. "I used to walk from the beach club to the lighthouse nearly every day during the summer, when I was a kid," she said.

"How did you get us into the local 'beach club' anyway?" he asked, choosing to ignore the fact that she was avoiding the point. They were staying at the Ritz-Carlton next door, and it occurred to him they shouldn't have been allowed where posted signs read: *Private! Members Only.*

"I am a member," she answered, and stretched her mouth as if smiling. She reached for his arm and this time held on to it when he tried to move away. "I've always been a member. Even when I moved off the Island to go to college, me and my oldest friends, we all kept our memberships." She added, "We come back and see each other every so often."

The children compacted into a knot and slowed as they kicked through the brightest sand and approached the jumbled breakwater that jutted perpendicular to shore and marked the beginning of the coastal sea wall. This was the last open area before the ground became scraggy under the Australian pines and palm trees surrounding the lighthouse proper.

"Hey, what's that?" one of the girls, Rosario, asked. She was smaller than the others, nut-brown and round in her bright yellow bathing suit with the ruffles along the top.

They stopped. Something lumpy and strangely colored lay on the shore about ten feet away, half in the frothy water, half on the firm beach that the retreating tide had just uncovered. They could see that a scurry of crabs was already inspecting the mass, and sea gulls were diving closer and closer. A large, dark bird circled high and silently in the blue overhead.

Henry trotted right up to it. He dramatically pinched his nose with a thumb and forefinger. "Ewwww, that's gross," he announced as he bent his knees and leaned over, studied the find.

The rest of his friends bounced to his side. *Neat-o* said Wayne, who was usually reserved and quiet. *What is it* asked the awkward and tall Nancy. *It's dead* said Rosario with certainty. Linda narrowed her eyes and titled her head. "It's a dead person," she stated.

They all exhaled an "ahhhh" together, staring with equal parts disgust, fascination and admiration at the tangle deposited by their bare feet. There appeared to be something of a face, smiling at them. Eye sockets were empty and waxy colorless skin was peeling from the skull. The grinning teeth were exposed by a gaping misshapen hole where the lips had been eaten away. Bloody strings of muscle were still attached to the jaw. The backbone was completely visible down to the pelvis, curved in a bow, greasy-looking, with ruddy sinews and black cords of tissue fastened here and there to a few ribs which were caught in the folds of blue-checked material that once was probably a shirt. The remains of arms—yellow-green skin stretched tightly or peeling in places revealing gray bone and white tendons that glowed pearlescent—were tied together at the wrists. One bare leg was gone at the knee, the other was swollen, covered in bite marks, and seemed to be twisted backward. The bottom half of the corpse was naked, and what part of the genitalia hadn't been chewed off was puffy and pink.

Cathy, sunburned and shy, the only one of the group who wore glasses, gazed at the remains. She pointed at the pubic area and said, "Must be a man."

They silently pondered this. The girls appeared bemused, the boys amazed. Without thinking, they formed a perfect circle around the body. They reached to one another and held hands. The gulls flew away. The only sounds were the shushing of the ocean and the sighing of pine needles and palm fronds.

After a while, Linda said, "He's ours. We found him. He belongs to us."

Vaguely in the background they heard adult voices but they didn't care. Parents didn't matter much when they were at the beach. The children stayed in their round, lifting and lowering their linked arms while Linda chanted, "He belongs to us, he belongs to us!"

The vista of gleaming and hot sand became more crowded with umbrellas and towels and tourists as they approached the Bill Baggs State Park lighthouse. The structure had been rebuilt and refurbished and now glowed chalky white in the glare of day.

"Linda," he said, "We need to discuss our future."

"I know, dear," she answered. His elbow was still hooked in the crook of her arm and she pressed more tightly against him. "Did you actually consider taking out a contract on me, hiring a hit-man?" she asked, laughing.

He abruptly halted, pulling her to a stop as well. "What're you talking about?" He tried to separate himself from her but she clung tightly. "I never ... I wouldn't...."

"Oh, I know you wouldn't have gone through with it. But you considered it, to the point of planning it. So much easier than splitting property, dealing with lawyers, paying alimony. One of our mutual friends told me. He was worried enough to tell me. But sweetheart, if you want a divorce and want to run off with that twenty-one-year-old piece of ass-crap, all you have to do is ask."

"Young lady, answer me!" broke through, immediately at Linda's ear. One of the four beachcombers who they'd passed earlier was standing behind the girl, and she shouted again, "Young lady, what in the blazes are you up to? Answer me! What is going on here?"

The two men arrived; one of them was Henry's neighbor on Cypress Drive. They were army veterans who had served in Europe less than twenty years before, now sunburned and paunchy businessmen in their mesh shirts and Bermuda

shorts. They pushed the nearly hysterical woman out of the way and one of them grasped Linda's shoulders and turned her around. "What in the hell is this?"

"He's dead and we found him. He's ours," Linda blurted, her face turning scarlet as a deep rage flared. "You can't have him. He's salvage. We found him."

The men and two women seemed to see the dead body for the first time.

Henry raised his eyes. "Mr. Peretz, we're okay. We found him first. We get to keep him."

The other woman, wearing a floppy hat tied with a scarf, removed her sunglasses and tried not to retch as she got a closer look at what the children guarded so jealously. "Helen, you run back to the beach club and call the police; see if there's a lifeguard who can come down here," she said to her friend, hoping to distract her and calm her down.

Mr. Peretz forced his way between two of the clasped hands. He squatted beside the remains and looked stricken. He quickly came to his feet and glanced outward at the Atlantic. "Tide will be coming back in soon; this needs to be removed."

"No one's moving him but us," Rosario interrupted, stepping right up to the towering men, a tiny fury. She curled her fingers into fists.

"You can't have him, kids. This is a person ... something terrible ... happened to him. You have to give him to the police so they can find his family," Mr. Peretz explained.

"He's not a person anymore," Linda countered, and all seven children begin to yell, "He belongs to us, we found him."

They resumed their stroll in silence. There really wasn't anything else to say. Linda surveyed the approaching lighthouse with a tinge of sadness; she liked it better unpainted, the way it was. The entire area surrounding the tower had been updated, replanted and landscaped. Replicas of the lighthouse keeper's cottage and other structures had been constructed, and to Linda these cluttered up the view.

Linda paused and patted her husband's wrist. "I'm expecting some friends," she said.

"What?" he answered, but didn't really care. Once he finished playing his part in this endgame of their marriage, he would be free.

"My oldest buddies. We all grew up here. We meet every so often, at the lighthouse, when there's need."

"Yeah?" he said. "Need for what?"

"The need to salvage. When one of us is in trouble, or needs help, so we can have what they took away from us, back then. A life for a life."

He wrinkled his brows; his sunglasses moved and caught a flash of sun. He shook his head slightly and frowned. Linda had always been a bit strange.

They climbed in silence, up to the brick walkway at the base of the lighthouse, and headed for the cottage. All the Australian pines were gone now, replaced with native vegetation, including Palmetto palms and sea-grapes and young hardwood trees. Her husband absently observed the scenery, his mind elsewhere. He didn't pay much attention to the group of middle-aged men and women who approached them. His wife released his arm and squealed, "Rosario, I'm so glad to see you again!" and shot in the direction of a portly, petite matron wearing an expensive, yellow pants suit and lots of gold jewelry.

He drew himself off to the side as his wife enthusiastically greeted several others; he heard the names *Hank*, and *Chris*, and then *Wayne* and *Cathy* and *Nancy*.

Linda turned and with one arm around the shoulders of Rosario, the other embracing the waist of the tall, balding, lanky man she called 'Hank', she nodded in her husband's direction. "He's here for us. He's the one."

About the Author:

Rivka Jacobs lives 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* and the *Women of Darkness* anthology. In the last few years she's placed stories with *The Sirens Call* eZine, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Tell-Tale Press*, and the *More Alternative Truths* anthology. Rivka most recently worked as a psychiatric nurse.

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Summer Supper | Nicole Henning

"Ok, I'm going to ask. What is Summer Supper?" Mike looked at Tina as she drove down the highway.

Tina didn't answer him right away and barely looked away from the road that was rushing past them. After turning off the highway to drive on a gravel road surrounded by trees, she finally looked at him. "Summer Supper is a tradition for my friends and I. You know how people do a Friendsgiving for Thanksgiving with their friends? Well we do Summer Supper. It's a time to get together and celebrate our lives." She gave him a sly grin and rubbed his thigh suggestively.

Smiling back at her Mike reached over to her thigh and tried to bunch up the material of her skirt to slide up her legs. He almost had her thigh uncovered when she slapped his hand. He moved his hand swearing under his breath at the sting of the slap. His complaints were short lived as they pulled up in front of a sprawling log cabin nestled in a thick grove of trees. There weren't any other vehicles in sight, but the front door opened and four women ran out excitedly. They surrounded Tinas side of the car and opened the door grabbing her out just as she undid her seat belt. Mike watched as the women took turns hugging her and kissing her cheeks before passing her to the next. Shaking his head Mike got out of the car and started to carry their bags towards the house.

Before long a strong hand grabbed at half of the bags and Tina was walking next to him carrying her own bags and grinning widely. As they walked, she called over her shoulder to her friends, "This is Mike. Mike these are my friends. I'll introduce you after we get cleaned up for supper. It's a little bit of a formal affair."

Mike frowned when four sets of hands pushed him to the left as Tina went to the right. He got a glimpse of a living room before being shoved into a long hallway. Walking down the hall he could hear strange chanting music began to filter throughout the space. He reached the end of the hall and found himself having a hard time opening the door he was standing in front of. When finally inside he couldn't really focus, he dropped his bags and fell on the floor.

He woke up to a steel toe boot being driven into his side repeatedly. He grunted and struggled, attempting to sit up. He failed three times before a pair of strong hands dug into his under arms and lifted him up. The strange women were standing around him wearing matching white dresses that flowed around their legs. The women guided him down the hallway, the chanting music getting louder as they walked out into the living room.

Tina was standing in the middle of the room smiling and swaying with the music behind a single wooden chair. The women shoved Mike into the chair roughly and then began to dance around with Tina. It felt like an eternity of watching the women spin around him before they dropped down on all fours and stared at him. The only person left standing was Tina who looked at Mike with disinterest and walked over to the wall to push a button. A large skylight opened up directly above where Mike was sitting. A warm beam of sunshine washed over him. The woman backed up a little bit staying out of the suns reach while Tina came to stand in front of Mike. The sun made her dress shear and he could see her body through it. Even in his mind fogged state his hormones responded, and he was squirming in the chair. She dropped to her knees and spread his knees wide so she could kneel between them.

He swallowed against the lump in his throat and croaked, "What is happening?"

Tina laughed and ran her impossibly sharp nails along his thighs leaving five slices along the top of his pants. She stood up and spun in a circle as the sunbeam over him began to diminish. "Today is the Summer Solstice. The longest day of the year and a special day for my friends. We participate in Summer Supper every year to ensure that we will have another year of youth and vibrance in human form. One of us has to bring some unlucky male to this cabin every year." He looked around as the women growled from the shadows. "As soon as the sun sets, we will have our Supper, you."

She smiled serenely as she bent to kiss his lips as the sunbeam died. His screams rose into the sky, echoing through the trees.

About the Author:

Nicole Henning is a book-a-holic who lives in a big-little town in Wisconsin. She surrounds herself with all things scary and bizarre and enjoys creating unique art. When she isn't writing she enjoys playing video games and spends a lot of time snuggling with her dog Allie aka Princess Prissy Pants. Reading, writing and horror are her biggest passions in life.



Wasteland Beast | Naomi Brown

The beast woke with a mouth full of sand and a head full of dead memories. The first it hacked up in globules of dusty phlegm as it pulled itself up out of the heap of dust it had woken in, the second sat as fragmented shards littering the bottom of a hollowed-out mind. It searched for some marker of who or what it might be and came away empty. There was a spiralling void within and at its centre... a need. Intent cannot quite pass for personhood but in its limited understanding of both, it decided that that would do for now.

Rising to its feet, it cast an eye on the desolate landscape that stretched out around it, empty but for the jagged shapes of a settlement off in the distance. *Harken's Rest* the ghost of a dead life said; it was the only settlement with a water source not ruled over by despot or gang in at least a hundred miles. Not quite happy but close enough to matter to those that lived there. This body had once lived there. It had been a woman in her late twenties, a scavenger who risked the wastelands for long lost resources or survivors. Jen Kelly.

The beast looked over the body that had once been Jen Kelly with passing disappointment. It was smaller than it would have preferred with flat, useless claws and flatter, more useless fangs. Nails and teeth, the dead memories said. Just as useless with specific names as without. No matter, the body was fit and strong without any glaring weaknesses beyond the lack of natural defences and that could be changed. Picking up the flattened hat collecting dust beside it, the beast placed it on its head; the beginning of a grin glittered in the light of the rising, merciless sun.

It walked.

The dust clung to the weathered boots and battered coat that whipped about in the rising winds. There were always winds here. Even on a still day, the winds still blew unseen. The beast could feel the winds press against its ears, its mind, heard the howls that echoed deep within them. It felt something new: resolve. Intent and resolve? That could work.

It continued to walk.

The town grew closer and closer, weather-beaten buildings huddled low against the ground, extensions and defences protruding like strange growths from the crumbling stone. In the beast's mind, the town seemed to thrum slightly with the almost undetectable glow of life. The smile widened.

There were people gathered at the gate, just a handful, guns drawn, eyes wary. As it approached, closing the distance, they relaxed and lowered their weapons. One spoke to it, words a jumble of strangled noises that grated against the beast's mind. The fragments of dead memories stirred enough for it to give a satisfactory reply and the guards nodded, allowing it entrance into Harken's Rest. More people were scattered about the street, all doing things, busy with their work and their lives. There was no time for dozing about, not even for their young; the beast watched the fat little legs of a toddling man-pup wobble as it followed its parent around with a basket of tools clutched in its round fists. They worked as soon as they could walk here. Good. There should be strong bodies aplenty.

Taking a moment to search through the fragments of the old mind, the beast decided to deal with its first issue. Weapons. A blade maker worked out of a half-standing house a few streets over. She was said to take special requests and this would be special indeed. As it walked, the beast searched through the pockets of the coat and came up with a handful of metal trinkets on a string. Enough? Who knew? It would not matter, even with the pathetic state this body was in, the beast inside was more than capable of ending the life of some simple blade crafter.

For some reason, the blade maker gasped when the beast entered. Eyes wide with emotion, she flung herself at the beast and wrapped her arms tightly around it. Stiffening in distaste, the beast wrinkled its nose and then carefully pattered her on the shoulder making word noises of reassurance. Finally pulling away, the blade maker wiped moisture from her cheeks, speaking through a smile. When the beast didn't respond, she frowned and leaned closer again, pressing a hand to the beast's face.

More words were needed and the beast wrung the memories out for enough of them to waylay fears and questions. It seemed enough for the moment and the beast found utensils with which to draw its new weapons. The blade maker was confused. She gave more questions, tried to draw out more words but the beast was spent for now and managed only the façade of exhaustion that the blade maker seemed to accept. As it 'rested', she worked. She did not want payment. A relief.

After several hours, the beast exited the half-standing house with its prize cupped within its hands. It was not exactly excited but the intent burned within its chest with such a ferocity it struggled not to run. Soon. Soon it could run all it wanted but first, it needed claws.

In the hovel that had once been Jen Kelly's home, the beast took a pair of pliers it had lifted from the knife maker's shop. The useless flat nails did not enjoy being pried out, one by one, and the blood that welled up in protest

did not make the process any easier. The dull memory of pain beat like a tiny heart within each finger but the beast ignored it. Once the useless nails had been discarded, the beast picked up its new claws, all of metal and beautiful sharpness. They were easier to get in.

As the skin healed over, sealing them in place, the beast admired its new blood caked claws in the light of the sun and smiled. Fangs would follow but later, later. For now, it had other work to do. The wind picked up again and it heard the howls, louder now, closer.

Soon.

Stepping back out into town, the beast picked up each memory fragment and laid them out in its mind, judging, comparing. Which of this pitiful lot was suitable. It needed four bodies; healthy, strong, unoccupied. The first two aspects it would have to find naturally, the last was easy enough to manufacture. It was just a question of who?

It scaled the wall of the nearest building it could find, new claws gripping the misshapen stone with ease, and it stared down at the moving figures below. Decisions, decisions, decisions. It would have to be careful even after it chose, it couldn't do this too recklessly or the game would be up before it had even begun and they would all need sustenance before their hunt could begin. Carefully, carefully, slowly, slowly. The tracking and the stalking must come before the chase and there was pleasure to be had in all three.

It found pleasure in this. The wide brim hat protected it from the sun as the body adjusted to the new occupant and the eyes grew stronger, ears keener, nose sharper. Muscles would follow, then organs and bones. Soon it would *run* and *hunt* and *kill*.

But not yet. It needed a pack.

The first it chose was already a hunter, seeking out the beasts that stalked this land to drag their carcasses home. She already stank of blood, sweat and the thrill of the chase.

Hiding beneath the truck as the hunter worked, the beast waited till they were alone. Seizing the hunter's ankles, it dragging her into the dark. Surprise was key here, struggle was over before it started, the beast's claws buried in her neck. The wind rose. The stiffening body moved again and it was all at once familiar. Kin. They looked at one another with shared intent then it climbed out, wiped the blood from the quickly healing wounds and began scouring the workshop for supplies.

The second was a courier, young and sprightly. He ran around town carrying messages and packages quicker than any other person could. The speed in his legs was already unparalleled. It could grow stronger.

It was almost pitiful how easy it was to follow him into a deserted alleyway from the rooftops and leap down onto his unsuspecting back. His neck was broken before he noticed. The wind rose. There was a cracking noise as what was broken repaired itself and another of the pack shifted in its new form. Their eyes met and intent was shared. Rubbing its neck, it picked up the fallen package and continued along the path the courier had been taking. There was a new prowl to its step.

The third was an eagle-eyed guard. Quick with a gun and vicious with a blade, she defended her home ardently and brutally. She could always spot incoming dangers before anyone else and seemed to sense the dust storms before they had crested the horizon.

This one was harder, always surrounded by other guards. It took patience and an annoying amount of word exchange before she agreed to go on watch with the beast one night, just the two of them. The beast slipped gloves over its claws and a smile over its mouth. As the sun dipped down beneath the dusty horizon, the beast waited, anticipation alighting its nerves.

The guard spoke, wistfully of a dream of mayhaps and maybes, what ifs and could haves. The beast did its best to feign attention. Waiting. At last, the guard turned away, something on the dark horizon catching her interest.

The beast moved to strike but the guard was prepared and turned, knives in hand, driving the beast backwards. More words, accusatory, questioning. Eagle-eyed guard's noticed when things were wrong and she knew that something was very wrong with Jen Kelly. Baring useless flat fangs in a grin, the beast raised its gloved hands and tried to find words of reassurance. But the dead memories were disintegrating under every harsh touch. Soon they would be all gone and there would be no words left at all.

It settled for a growl. The guard struck. Blades flashed. Blood spattered across the rusted metal of the watch tower. Not the beast's. The eagle-eyed guard gasped as she looked down at her own knife handle sticking out from her chest. Her legs gave way. The beast cradled her.

The wind rose. Kinship flared in the empty eyes and it shifted in its new form, pulling the knife out with slow deliberateness. The pair continued their watch in silence, turning their eyes to the town instead. To the people that it held. One more.

The four met as the sun rose, brilliant and cruel in the sky above them. They shared intention, memories, curiosities and ideas, the concepts passing easily between them without the muddy clumsiness of words. The one that had been the hunter had found the last one. Its intention was filled with anticipation, with excitement. Soon they would be whole. Soon they could begin.

Together, they prowled through the streets, eyes forward, ignoring the stares. The mask was slipping. The townsfolk were afraid. Good.

Beneath the shade of a fossilized tree, they found her. An expectant mother. New beasts for their pack, bodies coming with readymade fangs and claws, never dragged down by dead memories or pointless words.

The pack approached and the mother seemed to sense them, sense something. Fear blossomed across her face and she attempted, in vain, to climb to her feet. The beast darted forwards, catching her arm in a vice-like grip. Blood drained from her face and it smiled. Almost disappointingly, she didn't try to scream, perhaps some part of her knew that she was already dead. Perhaps she was simply too scared to make a sound.

Placing a hand on the mother's stomach, the beast closed its eyes and felt the souls within. They were tiny budding things, they were not awake, nor were they whole. The howling in the wind rose and shifted in confusion. This was not expected. But what was expectation? Something based on memory? On the past? The past was dead, buried beneath so many tons of sand and ash. The past had burned. The beast did not intend to die anytime soon and merely smiled as the howling winds relented and the last of its pack, one old, one new, took root inside the unborn young inside the mother's womb. The change was immediate and noticeable. With a screech, the mother writhed as black veins spread across her skin and her stomach distended, shifting and moving as the malleable unborn bodies mutated. Sweat drenched her and she spoke, asking questions demanding answers. Words. So many twittering words. The beast took her tongue and the words stopped. Peace at last.

Mutely terrified, she could do little to stop them as they took her to a cellar in the centre of town and broke her limbs. They kept her body fed as much as it needed but ignored her whining cries and tears. She did not matter. She was a vessel, nothing more, and vessels did not need caring for.

And so they waited.

They were not idle in their waiting, no, they worked. Replacing nails with claws, filing down teeth into fangs. They plucked townsfolk from the shadows and held their throats till the air ran out and laid the lifeless bodies down with the mother and her terror. Fear nestled into the cracks of the destroyed buildings, in the lines on people's faces, in every shadow, every flicker of movement. Fear, ripe and delicious.

The pack drank fat off that fear, as they waited, as they changed.

The day came, when most the town was little more than desiccated husks, slumped in doorways and buildings, drowning in their fear and exhaustion. Down in the basement, surrounded by corpses, the mother screamed and her body spasmed and broke. The pack watched, almost curious.

Within hours, the pack was at last whole. The two new-borns were larger than any human young would be and they immediately set themselves upon the task of devouring their mother and the other corpses lying in wait for them. Flesh added to flesh and soon they would grow.

The beast stood at the edge of the town as the rest of the pack picked the place clean. The idea of soon had been echoing through it for days now, resounding through its bones, its core. Patience with no goal did not come easy to it, but it managed, barely, and finally, it was rewarded.

On the winds, it found it. A scent. The scent.

It let out a harsh, screeching cry and the pack assembled around it, eyes fixed on the horizon, anticipation growing between them.

The hunt had begun.

About the Author:

Naomi Brown is a twenty-three year old writer currently living in Suffolk living with their mother, cat, two dogs, corn snake, two rats, three guinea pigs and five chickens. Writing since approximately seven years old, they have always used writing as a form of understanding the world. They have just finished a University Course in Psychology and Sociology and don't know what to do now.

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The Man in the Painting | Destiny Eve

The man in the painting wears a gray hat. He rides a bike down a hill on a long winding road. His face is exuberant. His smile upturned.

As I pass the painting on the way to my hotel room, the man appears to move down the road. Each night he gets closer and closer to the edge of the frame.

At first it was subtle. I thought it must be an illusion. Now though, the painting no longer resembles the original. The man with the gray hat was once hidden in the background. Now he is front and center. So close he could step right off the canvas.

His smile has faded into a menacing frown. His eyes pierce through me.

I shudder and hasten my step. I close and lock my door. I peek through the peephole. The hallway is empty. I struggle to find sleep. Maybe I should just go to another hotel. I turn over for what must be the hundredth time. No don't be silly, it's just a painting.

My weary mind drifts off to sleep.

"He's coming for you. He's coming for you!!" A voice yells out.

I wake with a jump. The room is black. My heart is racing.

I turn on the lamp so fast, it almost tips over. Sweat covers my face as I stare into the room. Nothing. There's no one here. I sigh in relief.

Determined to prove to myself that it's just a painting, I head for the door. I first look through the peephole. The hallway is empty.

I step out of my room toward the painting, muttering under my breath how illogical this is and how silly I must look wandering the halls in my pajamas in the middle of the night.

When I get to the painting, my throat tightens. The man in the gray hat is gone. The painting is just an empty winding road on a hill.

The hair on the back of my neck prickles and I run back toward my room but stop a few feet away. There's something out of place.

At the end of the hallway lays a bicycle.

I turn toward my room and see that the door was left open. In my sleepy state I must have forgot to close it.

I scamper inside and shut the door, quicker and noisier than I intended. I click the deadbolt, and then peer through the peephole. The hallway is still empty. I breathe another sigh of relief.

I turn around and come face to face with the man in the painting. He's wearing a gray hat. His face is exuberant. His smile upturned.

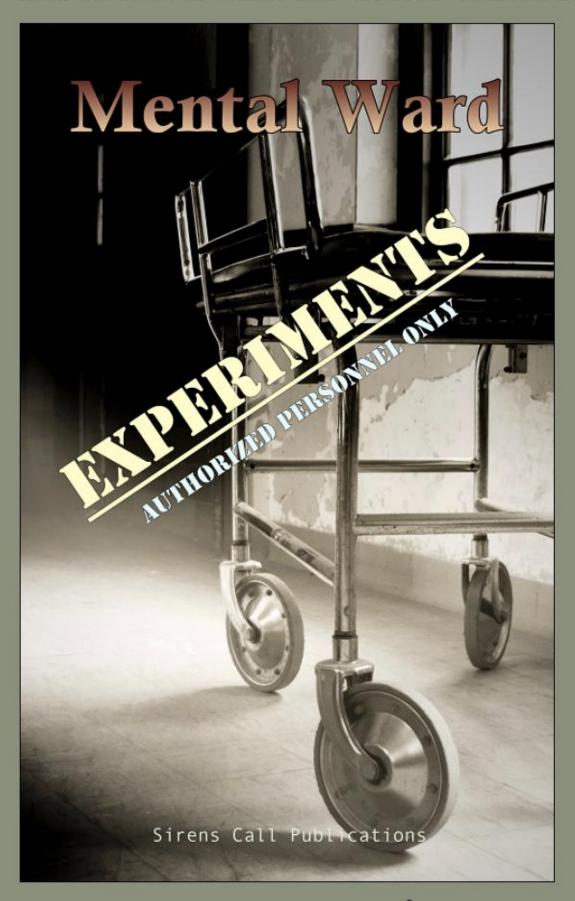
About the Author:

Destiny Eve has been writing since childhood, dabbling in several styles including fiction, nonfiction, short stories, flash fiction, poetry, screenwriting, and blogging. As a novelist, she primarily writes love stories with a dark edge. She currently resides in Northwest Minnesota with her three children.

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Step into a world where sanity is left behind, and horror is what the doctor ordered!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

The Itch | Rebecca R. Pierce

I twisted under the soft, cotton T-shirt, trying to get away from my own skin. I was careful not to scratch it this time. Last time, I bled. And there was a weird greenish-yellow discharge. If I left it alone, maybe it'd heal.

Or maybe it was time I saw a dermatologist.

My diet's unchanged, been using the same laundry detergent—unscented and free of dyes—and I wasn't stressed. At least, I wasn't until this rash showed up.

I cringed. There was only one thing that might have caused this bad reaction, and I didn't want to think of Damian that way.

Damian with his golden eyes. They weren't amber, no. Even through the fog of cigarette smoke and lights dimmed to make everyone more attractive in the bar, there was a luminescence behind those eyes that made them look 24 karat gold. Paired with a million dollar smile and hair the color of expensive coffee, I knew what we would be doing later. And he knew it, too.

We spent the next twelve hours banging it out in a hotel room, screaming and grunting until I thought he was trying to kill me with his penis. I wished the son of a bitch would cum already, or that I would die; I didn't care which. And then he did. All over my back.

We were practicing safe sex, so that came as a bit of a shock to me. That wasn't something I agreed to, being marked like that. But you know, twelve hours of sweaty cardio, and I just hugged the mattress, purring in contentment, grateful for sleep.

He wasn't there when I woke up. It was just as well. I never liked the awkwardness of the morning after. Do you go for breakfast? Offer up an imaginary chore and run? I didn't want to be the asshole in the situation, but I didn't want to seem clingy, either.

Still, waking up alone without so much as a note soured my stomach. He chose to be an asshole. Fine. I was an adult, I can take it. I showered my stiff and sore body, about as hungover on booze as I was on sex, collected my things, and headed home.

That was ten days ago.

I stared at my cellphone. Should I call him? And tell him what? That I was allergic to his cum? I sucked my teeth.

Thinking about it made me writhe again. I hitched my breath and reached for the lotion. Two or three squirts into the palm of my hand, and I eased it gently over the scaly bumps. I hissed under the slight burn of alcohol. It was definitely an open wound. Raised in some areas, indented in others, and evenly spaced, it was coarse to the touch. Psoriasis? Eczema? But why was it localized to my back? No, it had something to do with Damian and that night. There was no other explanation for it.

Small tickles moved under my skin. I shuddered. Every time I thought about it, it itched. And I couldn't *not* think about it. It was a Catch-22. My hands bunched into fists, determined not to touch it.

"Leave it alone. Just leave it alone. It'll heal in time," I murmured to myself a reminder.

I should make an appointment. But I hated going to the doctor unless it was absolutely necessary. Was this necessary?

My stomach churned. It was some sort of STD, I just knew it. A doctor would know what I've got and what I did to get it. My cheeks flushed with shame. Oh, god, just kill me now; I'm going to die of embarrassment, anyway. Ugh. I'll go in, get a couple of shots of penicillin and consider switching doctors. Never see him again.

Much like Damian.

When I went to the bar that night, I had an itch to scratch. This was not what I had in mind. Sure, I had some of the best sex I've ever had—but at what cost? I can forget laying out in the sun this summer. No swimming in community pools, either. I've tried everything from over-the-counter antifungal creams to tea tree oil. Nothing seemed to work.

I bit my lip. Call the doctor or call Damian? Well, shit, what have I got to lose? Damian, if he meant to see me again, would've called by now. And maybe he could shed some light on what the fuck was going on with me. If he had some communicable disease, he should know so he's not spreading it around to anyone else. For fuck's sake, if he's experiencing any symptoms, he should've called me. It's the responsible thing to do.

Heart thumping fast, I looked him up on my phone. I hit the call button and waited. Chest tightened, my breathing pinched with anxiety as I listened to it ring. Once. Twice. Three times. With each ring, my jitters worsened. I almost hung up. I didn't feel up to getting dumped into his voicemail to be forgotten a second time.

"Hello?" his husky voice answered.

"Yeah, hi, it's um—" I swallowed hard. Would he even remember my name? His confused tone made it clear he had erased my number. Fantastic. "We met at Finley's Bar last week."

Damian laughed, musical and lazily seductive. "Oh, that's right. Web designer."

My jaw clenched. He could remember my job, but not my *name?* "That's right. Listen, after...that night, did you...experience anything...strange?"

There was a long pause. The sharp inhale followed by a distinctive exhalation indicated Damian was having a smoke. Finally, he said, "I had a fun time, if that's what you mean."

I was working up the nerve to say more when he abruptly cut me off, "I hate to say this, but I'm a busy guy. I'm not really looking for more than a one-time thrill, know what I mean?"

"Well, yeah, I get that, but—"

His voice smiled. "I knew you would. Bye then."

And the bastard hung up.

I stared at my phone in shock. I fucked this man. He fucked me. For twelve fucking hours. And he couldn't give me five minutes to hear me out?

"You arrogant prick, this isn't *about* you!" Throwing the phone down in disgust, I growled and stomped toward the bathroom. A shower would make me feel better. I needed to wash the memory of him off me.

Slamming the bathroom door shut, I jerked back the shower's sliding glass door with a violence. I torqued the faucet until the water became nearly scalding. Then taking a deep, shuddering breath, I slowly let it out. There was nothing I could do but let it go. Damian wasn't worth it. Shower first, call the doctor after. That sounded like a plan.

Peeling my shirt over my head, I tossed it to the floor. My pants and underwear soon followed. When I stepped into the steaming shower, it offered, as always, some relief from the scaly, scabby itchiness of my back. I sighed, pressing my head against the cool tiles. No more random encounters. That was a promise you can bet on.

The skin on my back stretched.

I froze. The water continued its downpour unperturbed. What was that? I didn't move, yet I know what I felt. *The skin on my back stretched.* I turned off the water as if silence could help me feel better. My rash moved. It shifted slightly, like a ripple.

The fuck was going on?

I stepped out of the shower and looked in the mirror. It was foggy. I couldn't see a damn thing. Grabbing a towel, I smudged it clear, but it steamed up just as quickly. My back itched again. With a frustrated yelp, I threw the door open. The room cooled, the mirror cleared. Twisting around, I looked at my back.

It was pockmarked. The thick crust had softened under the heat of the water. The entire mound moved on its own accord. Scratches came from underneath my skin. And then tiny hairs poked through. No, not hairs. *Fingers.* Golden fingers pushed through one of the jellied holes in my back, punching its way out. Tiny hands.

I gaped.

Several other holes awakened. Fingers. Hands. Then a head emerged, toad-like, with golden eyes, eyes like Damian's. It looked at me unblinking before it leaped into the sink. Screaming, I smashed it flat. It exploded into a goo, like mucus against the palm of my hand.

My back heaved. I turned again, staring into the mirror. A multitude of these things thrust their hands out in unison, popping the blistery holes in my back. Tiny demons rattled their cage, shaking the crusty layer spackled to my back. I gagged. Heat flashed through me in a wave of nausea. My back erupted first.

A swarm of small toads pulled themselves out of their separate cells, wiggling through the hive of my skin. Barefooted, I stomped, tiny skulls cracking like nutshells under my heel. My back itched. Tiny scratches dug into the holes in my back, biting me.

Shrieking, I bashed my back into the wall behind. I pressed against the frameless edge of the full length mirror that hung nearby and scraped against that thick covering on my back. My skin tore open like used wallpaper. A cool wetness fell like a sheet down my ass and legs, splashing the tiled floor.

By their chirrups, I knew they were not dead. Tiny hands, tiny feet crawled across the nape of my neck. Instinctively, I shrugged. Small needles of teeth bit down on my earlobe. I swatted it off, and it thudded on the bathroom counter, stunned but wiggling. Another landed on my shoulder, tearing my skin. I slapped it. It burst like snot, but the sharp edge of an arm and a leg remained, partially sticking inside my hand. Several more toads tangled in my hair. I shook them free, yelling as I stamped each one out.

But there were too many of them. I turned to run, when my foot twisted on the slippery floor. They pounced. I flipped onto my stomach, and they fed off my torn back, widening the wound. Two leaped onto my face, ripping little holes into my cheek, my nose. I wiped them off with my arm and crawled toward the open door. I rolled and twisted, crushing them under my weight. I knew it was useless. I knew it was useless even before I heard that laugh, that musical, lazily seductive laugh.

I lifted my head. Damian stood before me. How he found out where I lived, I didn't know. But he wasn't here to help me.

"You're supposed to feed my children," he said. Then pressing his foot down on the back of my skull, my entire body stilled, submissive and paralyzed.

But that didn't stop me from feeling. And his spawn continued their feast.

About the Author:

Rebeca R. Pierce is a poet and short story author of both horror and erotic romance. She likes to scare people then cuddle afterward. Her other hobbies include D&D, playing the Sims, and otherwise dreaming up ways of killing off people. Fictional people, of course. Or so her lawyer has instructed her to say.

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I Am Mine | Kelly Matsuura

He lays in a pool of blood; eyes wide, seeing the monster. Me.

So much blood. It drips from his severed limb onto my bare feet; warm, and strangely comforting. But it's not blood that nourishes me.

The hunger is unbearable. Tossing his arm aside, I pounce on his chest. I fill myself with *chi*, his essence. His last breath tickles my cheek as I place a kiss on his cold, blue lips.

Husband number five. I wail, not only for him, but the lonely years of suffering to come.

They say time is man's greatest enemy.

I am mine.

About the Author:

Kelly Matsuura writes diverse YA, fantasy, and literary fiction. She is the creator of The Insignia Series' anthologies (Asian fantasy themed) and has had stories published with *Ink & Locket Press, A Murder of Storytellers, Black Hare Press, Harbinger Press,* and many more. Kelly lives in Nagoya, Japan with her geeky husband. She loves traveling, knitting, cooking, and of course, reading.

Website: Kelly Matsuura



Drawbridge | *Kieran Judge*

"Oh, you've got to be joking."

That was Jessica's first reaction to the sandcastle. Small and basic, with perfectly formed bastions and decorated with tiny bits of sea glass, it sat alone and forgotten. A sandcastle on a beach is natural enough, but when you think the picturesque cove leading down from the holiday cottage is yours and yours alone, evidence of young intruders is bound to put a dampener on anyone's mood. To make it worse, Jessica hated children.

Russ looked up and down the sands. The sea lapped quietly a small ways out. Not even seagull footprints marked the smooth white dust. That was as it should be. Everything had to be perfect with Jessica, and it was his job to see that it was so. "There's nobody here now," he said. He pointed with their towels past the monument to a cluster of dunes which formed a little inlet. "Let's try over there. Should keep us out of the wind."

They walked over and lay out the towels. Jessica applied slathers of sunscreen to her arms and got Russ to do her back. He looked out at the waves. It was exactly like the photos had promised, and having gone through thirty-seven cottage choices until Jessica said yes to one, he should know. When you remembered that most of the photos would have been staged and processed through the magic of Photoshop, it was all the more impressive.

"Now this is living," Jessica purred. She lay back and closed her eyes, head in the shade. "No phones going constantly. No parents. Nobody's kids running around your feet."

"Except the ones that made the sandcastle."

Jessica lifted her sunglasses and looked at him with something like panic. "You've seen them?"

"No," Russ admitted.

"Good. I'd have to move."

Russ settled down onto his towel. "I'm sure they'd leave us in peace."

"I guarantee they wouldn't. I should know; I teach the bloody things."

"And it's a wonder you're still at it."

"They can't afford to get rid of me. I'm just that good."

Seagulls wheeled above puffy white clouds. The deep blue of the ocean matched the colour of the sky. All was calm.

An itch formed behind Russ' eyes. The sensation was similar to smoke going up his nose, only a thousand times more irritating, and too high up his face. He rubbed his eyes under his sunglasses, but it did nothing to alleviate the prickling. The itch then flooded all the way across his face, behind his skin.

"Something the matter?"

He scratched his scalp. "Just an itch. Must have very irritating sand here."

Irritating sand? He'd never been one for cutting edge humour at the best of times. Jessica rolled her eyes (despite the sunglasses, Russ knew she'd done so), and settled back down to drift off.

Russ tried to follow her lead, but the itch was driving him mad. He lay on his hands but his fingers tried to burrow their way out. After five minutes of suffering, he got up and wandered down to the shore.

He didn't go into the water despite its calm, quiet invitation. Not just yet. Perhaps in a minute or so, if the itchy feeling didn't disappear. Might be the sun getting to him, a bad reaction. He'd jump in and cool off.

Russ.

Russ. That's what the sound of the trickling waves sounded like. His name, called over and over again. But it was ever so slightly different that time, slightly higher in pitch. Russ refused the urge to look to Jessica. She was out for the count already.

Russ.

He stopped. That had definitely been his name, called, whispered, by someone. He quickly confirmed his suspicions about his wife. Atlantis could rise just out to sea and she wouldn't feel it in her dream.

Russ.

He looked up the beach and saw nobody. The dunes didn't hold a soul; there wasn't even a breeze strong enough to tickle the reeds. Out to sea was, of course, ridiculous. He wasn't about to take the plunge and believe in mermaids and sirens calling him from beneath the glassy waves.

That left back down the beach, the way they had come from the house, the only house for miles. There too he was greeted by nothing but an empty shore of bone white sand.

Empty, except the sandcastle.

Russell.

"I'm going mad," he said to himself. Damn heat was too much for him. Not only was it making him want to scratch himself like a cat confusing its tail for the arm of a settee, but he was hearing his name on the wind. He watched heat haze rise off the sand. He squinted. Definitely losing it, he decided, because the sandcastle now looked bigger.

He found his feet moving on their own, walking him towards the castle in answer to a deep, bodily summons. Now that he was closer he could confirm that it certainly it was bigger, or at least bigger than he remembered. An extra turret protruded from its side, and there was a new drawbridge that extended over a barren moat. Not only that, but whereas before it had barely been knee-high, now it was up to his waist.

He circled it, frowning. Somebody must have knocked the old one down and built this one whilst he was in the dune circle. But he hadn't heard a sound. A further mystery was the lack of telltale signs of human activity. There were no trenches where hands had dug for wet sand deep down, no little scratches on the walls, and no fingerprints on half-crumbled parapets. It was like a natural formation eroded from a single dusty rock.

Russ retreated a few paces. There was something inherently disturbing in its naturalness which terrified the instinctual core of his being. He wanted to lash out and kick it into mud, but his foot wouldn't obey him. It didn't want to touch those walls, the ones with tiny shards of sea glass decorating them like mirrors.

He turned to head down the beach to Jessica. They'd pack up and go. Anywhere to get away from this thing which made his legs feel like he'd just come off a term on the International Space Station. Jessica wouldn't understand, but would humour him regardless; that was how their marriage worked. He decided he'd say that there were kids around that had made it. Her dislike of children despite her profession was incredible.

Russell.

A child's voice. He turned back around despite the deep loathing in the back of his throat. The castle was now eight feet tall with spindly wings and buttresses. The fragments of sea glass were now small windows, and Russ, even from several meters away, could see his pale face in their reflections.

"Jessica?" he called behind him. "Are you seeing this?" Pointless, really. He knew it was, but called anyway, just to hear the sound of his own voice. The only other sounds were the lapping shore, and that child's voice calling him.

Russ. Russell. Russell.

It was coming from inside the sandcastle.

And then an understanding washed over him. It wasn't just any child, but his own. It had his intonation, his extension of the letter 'u'. Even a slight lisp which Russ had managed to eradicate with a lot of mental effort after being mocked for it at the start of high school. It was the voice of the child he wanted that Jessica would never give him.

He couldn't see it, but he knew the voice as well as he knew his own. It was the one that spoke to him inside his head; that still small voice of calm. A child with his own, internal, secret voice.

He stepped towards it like a sleepwalker. The heat haze faded and then he was at the drawbridge. It lowered for him on dusty chains. He stepped across the moat. He wanted to throw up at the touch of the wet, clay-like sand underfoot. The doorway had grown to be taller than he was.

"Hello?" he called.

The child's voice had stopped, but somehow that made the pull even stronger. He wanted, needed, to go inside, all the more now that he'd been given that taste. He had to see the face of the child. He had to look upon his son yet to be conceived.

He was disgusted by the castle. He hated the way that it ascended seamlessly from the beach with rounded edges at the floor. He hated that it didn't just smell of sand and salt but of coppery blood. He hated the way the walls seemed to pulse ever so slightly, in and out, like lungs.

But he had to go in. He had to know.

Russ stepped forward into the belly of the beast and was swallowed whole.

A moment later, Jessica got up off her towel. Where had he gone now? He was always wondering off like this, and it pissed her off. The idea was that they were meant to relax together, and now she was on her own. She couldn't be having him still wandering off like a bored five year old after twelve years of marriage.

"Russ? Where've you gone?"

Jessica.

"That you, Russ?"

She left the dunes and looked down the beach. Russ was nowhere to be seen.

Jessica.

"Ok, wise guy. Get your ass out of those dunes and stop playing Halloween, or I'll come up there after you." The dunes were silent, and Jessica knew they would be the instant she spoke. Besides, she didn't want to go after him, anyway. Her face had started to itch like crazy. Her eyes were already red and raw, and she was likely to gouge them out completely if it went on much longer.

She spied the sandcastle. Still such a titchy little thing, like a pimple on a beautiful, unblemished face. The more she looked at it, the more she wanted to kick it down. And then before she had time to think about it she was on her way over, ready to topple the proud fortress.

Jessica.

Her foot hovered over the roof of the castle. Russ's voice had come from inside the castle no bigger than an iPad. His voice had come from the sand. It grated at her mind, behind the itch. She was the only one in her family who'd been able to stand nails going down a chalkboard, but now she understood what it must be like. Each syllable was a scratch on her skull, every letter etched onto the bone in long, hard scrapes.

Jessica shivered uncontrollably. She brought her foot down violently, like stamping on a spider. She felt the sandcastle mush between her toes. It was cold and wet underneath the dry top layer.

Then the sand rippled and the clumps of wet clay shifted. Drawn together by some unseen power it reformed into a fist and caught around her ankle. The fist clamped down hard and Jessica screamed. "Get off me!"

Russ' face pressed out of the sand. The eyes were two chunks of green sea glass. The lids blinked. The sea glass shone in the sun. "Sorry, Jessica," Russ' face said in a dry rasp. "I wasn't comfy over there. I'm better now."

"Let go!"

"Let go!"

"It's nice and warm down here. Presses you in like tight new bed sheets. You'd like it. Make a child down here."

The hand around Jessica's ankle began to sink into the sand, and her foot was pulled in. Jessica toppled forward. She mashed into Russ' face, and the sand kissed her lips.

"Come join me. Give me my son."

A tongue of clay darted into her mouth. She choked eyes wide. It wriggled its way down her throat. She felt it rummaging around in her stomach, through into her intestines, constantly feeding in.

The sand swallowed her wrists and, splayed out in a starfish, Jessica sank. When she was fully submerged, the beach formed back up. Anyone wandering to the cove a minute later wouldn't know anyone had been there. All they'd find were a few towels and parasol in the dunes, and a tiny sandcastle from a cheap plastic mould a little ways down the beach.

About the Author: Kieran Judge is a writer from Powys, Wales. He writes articles for TheFilMagazine.com, HorrorAddicts.net, and Horror Reviews By The Collective. His fiction has appeared in *Lovecraftiana*, *Schlock! Quarterly, Thuggish Itch: Hospitality, A Tribute to H. G. Wells: Volume II*, and four previous editions of *The Sirens Call*, amongst others.

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Major Arcana | Gregory L. Steighner

"I can't believe we made it," Carina said, pulling her backpack out of the land-rover's hutch. "It took forever to get here on those back roads."

Ed closed the driver's door, "Well, you wanted the scenic tour."

She tightened her belt emblazed with seven stars, making sure that the pouches were secure. "It does look forbidding, dark, and remote... Away from him."

"Not a person for miles." He said putting on the down coat, a legacy from his grandfather. He quickly rechecked that all the items were properly arranged before zipping close the circular pockets. "It's a mile hike, but if we make a good pace there will be enough light to set up camp."

"You won't slow me down." Carina tied back her long chestnut hair at the nape of her neck with a crimson scarf embodied with roses.

Ed gave her a sarcastic laugh while pulling out his backpack. After a quick once over to make sure nothing was left behind, they shouldered the packs and donned matching hats crafted by Carina's grandmother. He thought the feathered caps were a bit dorky, but they did a great job keeping their heads warm and dry. Balancing themselves with their walking sticks, they moved along the path that snaked beneath the cliff towards the campsite.

The warmth of the late April day teased the couple, the bright sun-closed down in the west as the quarter Moon was like a pale island in the blue sky. Ed knew that there would be a heavy frost tonight. Carina kept her promise, he pushed to keep up with her to the campsite. Although the forest had darkened, enough light remained for them to set up camp for the night.

"This is all your uncle's land?" Carina finished furnishing the tent with the sleeping bags and air mattresses.

Raising his arms to point in opposite directions. "One mile west, four miles east, two miles north and south."

She stood and stretched out, "Dating a rich boy."

"Not really. In the past it was worth much more, there is a restored strip coalfield and there are oil wells scattered about. Not anymore." Ed paused to reflect, then said, "I'll get a fire going."

The warmth of the open fire and the cool evening released their tension. Ed woke up curled against Carina with her head nestled at his chest. He slowly jostled around into a more comfortable position without waking her. He failed. "Ed do you hear it?" She whispered.

He listened as the wind shrilled between the mountains. After a few seconds, he heard a low melody mixed into the winds' texture. It's possible to hear the whistle of trains from the rail line miles away. This sound was different. It was musical, flowing in pitch and tone.

Carina slipped from the sleeping bag, putting on only her glasses, before crawling out of the tent. Ed followed joining her beside the glowing remains of the fire. The cold air teased her naked skin causing a flourish of goosebumps to arise. The fat crescent of the moon was poised to disappear. The constellations dotted the sky as the tune continued deeper into his soul. Carina turned, closing on him into an embrace. Her eyes caught a hint of starlight as she kissed him.

Carina awaked refreshed, ready to start the day. She hopped along the trail ahead of Ed.

"Seriously, every campground has at least one story."

"I'm telling you that I've never heard that before." Ed closed in on her.

She turned, pushed up the broad trim glasses, "So, that's new. You think we should tell what happened during?" "I rather not."

Waiting for him to catch up and give a quick kiss, she said, "It was amazing to let loose not worrying about the neighbors hearing. I felt trapped in a zoo."

Ed kept looking at the dark clouds pushed down against the mountains. "We need to go back."

"So what if we get a little wet?" She pulled him forward, pointing to the right. "What is that?"

A hundred feet from them stood a gray decayed building trapped in a meadow of flowers and small thin trees. The towel was a broken skeleton sprouting from the machine building. Ed explained, "It's an oil derrick built during the boom in the mid-nineteenth century"

"Let's take a look." Part of Carina's charm was an impulsive drive, so he didn't try protesting. The entrance appeared as toothless maw.

A rumble shot through the valley heralding a wall of hard dark rain. Drenched in an instant, they scrambled into the building. Rainwater poured from holes in the roof to create streams leading towards the forgotten well. Lightning ripped through the sides, flashing like a strobe light. Carina walked among the rusted tools of dreams for wealth.

"This is amazing. I should have brought my sketchbook." She rung the water from her hair.

"What's the theme, The Joy of Tetanus?"

She reached out to touch one of the parts of the pump, only to stop less than an inch away, "It's inspiring."

He focused on the storm. The winds swirled against the ruggedly defiant tower creating a dramatic clamor. The song returned, stronger, more complex than last night. It resonated with Carina, she stood flushed, her breaths heavy.

A lightning bolt scorched the air, the thunder closed in as she released, "I'm not afraid of dying, Ed. Ever since the accident, it's engraved into me."

Ed transversed the maze of rotten machinery to get closer. The melody progressed deep to tear away their souls.

"Are we sure there is no way out?" He asked, as the tempest reached down to claim the stage they were on.

She synced her pose with the elementals, lightning and thunder, highlighting the moment, "He will chase me down, Ed. You don't simply leave that type of person."

He said with calm dread. "We'll hide-out for a few days before getting onto Michigan."

"You really think we can truly disappear?"

"We can stay under cover through the summer until my friends makes all the arrangements."

The room whistled with a rush of wind, scattering the loose debris into the air as the structure rumbled. A flare of white thunder blasted the spire. Flames sprung from wooden reservoirs of oil. The way they came collapsed, but Ed remembered the loading platform. He sprang froth with Carina in tow, racing through the falling flames to reach the stage, to leap away into the cold deep rain.

The inferno resonated into the harmony among the squall, and they followed.

Soaked and exhausted, they managed quite well along the muddy path back to camp. As they approached, Ed noticed tracks embedded in the muck. Carina, exhausted hung on his right arm, spoke up, "it looks like animal tracks." "Yeah." He wasn't familiar with one, it was off, "It's more like a person's walk."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Been hunting since I was able to hold a gun. Uncle Rich taught us everything about the outdoors. I know a human stride."

She stepped away from him, following the footprints in the mud left a clear imprint. "Those are goat's feet."

"Are you sure?" Ed asked.

She huffed once, "Grew up on a farm. I know animals. That's a goat!"

"There are feral goats around here," Ed stated, looking around.

"That walk on two legs?" She said sharply.

"It does lead up the trail...."

A surge of dread caused them to hurry along the trail. Pushing past the fatigue, they reached the campsite. A quick glance revealed that someone rummaged through their things. They inspected everything, realizing that the invader simply poked around. Save for a few opened packets of food nothing seemed out of sorts. Except for the several cans of beer Ed brought. Apparently, their guest took a taste from one, tossed the mostly full can, and trashed the rest leaving five empty cans scattered about. The thief took Carina's sketchbook and his writing journal. Why take only those things?

After restarting the fire to warm up and dry their clothes, they dined on a dinner of hot dogs. The only thing that annoyed Ed was Carina playing with her phone.

Her head bopped up finally, "A satyr."

"What?" Ed asked.

"I typed in two-legged goat creature." She turned the phone around, its warm glow encircled an image of a hairy-chested horned man with goat legs. "A satyr, a woodland spirit known for its lustful and drunken ways."

"A frat-boy?" He joked.

Carina smiled, "Yeah, times ten. According to this article they enjoy ravishing women, are tricksters who love messing with people's things. They are master performers, especially with songs and flutes."

"Great, someone who is in a band." Ed poked the flames, the crackle and sparks morphed into musical tones. He listened for a bit until he was sure, "You hear it."

"Yeah. It's close. We should leave."

Shaking his head, "No way. That path is dangerous at night."

She closed the phone, "Ed, this night, its April thirtieth."

"So?"

"It's the eve of Beltane." Carina took in a deep breath. He didn't know what that meant, so he waited for her to go on. "Back in the day, Beltane marked the beginning of summer. According to myth, it's a time when the barriers of the spirit world becomes thin."

"Like Halloween."

"Yeah. What if it's true?"

Ed laughed, "Oh come on. Really?"

Carina silently gripped his hand hard, painfully focusing his attention towards the creature at the rim of warm light, staring at them. A near match of the images except it was a female.

"Ed, is she real?" Carina clung to him.

"I don't know." He shivered.

She approached the fire, unshouldering an ivory horn to hold before them.

"She brought a gift," Ed said reaching out to accept it. The Satyr gave a drinking hand motion with a grin. He popped the cork, the hard scent turned his nose but took a gulp. "That's wicked."

She pointed to Carina, who understood and drank. As the shock took hold she said, "Whoa."

Their reactions pleased the Satyr, her feral face smiled. She sampled his beer, disliked the taste, so offered this in exchange. Who was she? Other than a rustic backpack, she wore no clothing. If this some elebathe weather was too cold for nudity. She strayed to the fire, picking out several cut logs to place into it. The flames strengthened, crackling with jovial life. She swayed to each spark.

"Ed, there is another one." Carina curled closer to him.

The Second Satyr squatted on the Oaktree stump, twice the size of any linebacker with large horns like a buck. Like the woman, his nudity defiantly conflicted with the chill. His right hand held a series of wooden pipes. Ed trembled as he placed the instrument against devilish lips. The stout tones rose over the camp, mingling with the air and fire to surround the couple.

The woman rhythmically returned to them, when in arm's length, she touched her chest, speaking, "Texia." She began caressing Carina's arms, as she answered, "Uh, Carina. This is Ed."

Texia seemed fitting, Ed thought, as he watched her play with his girlfriend's heavy sweater. He didn't like the way she explored Carina, pawing along until reaching the left pocket. Carina stuck in a swoon gave her a free hand to remove the bottle. Texia shook it, the pills rattled breaking the harmony around them. She gave them a frown, shaking her finger as the bottle entered the fire.

Ed wanted to scream but remained entranced. They ruined their plans to escape from consuming emptiness that hunted them. He whispered, "Carina, now what?"

Carina stared at the Satyr, enraptured by Texia's primal beauty while she made a series of gestures. After a minute or so, Carina said, "She wants our clothes."

Before he could protest, Carina slipped out of her sweat pants and sweater, tossing them in front of Texia. Strangely, he stripped away his clothes in the same manner as walking, without actually thinking about it.

The music embedded deep into Ed, ripping through layers of hardened emotions until they erupted as tears. Carina, facing the high flames, danced with arms raised towards the sky. The half-moon appeared to flee the blazing stars of Leo. They would leave this world among this cold splendor.

Watching Carina immersed by a crimson halo, he remembered their first meeting. A basement rave two years ago. Unlike that moment, he slowly came up behind her, allowing her to slide into him. Their mouths locked, kissing for a masterpiece.

The rising W of Cassiopeia just emerged from beyond the horizon. The campfire still burned with quiet low flames. Ed turned on his side to look for Carina. She was near the fire-pit resting on her knees with the sketchbook on her lap, clad with her glasses and glistering golden chain coiled around her body. With a pencil in a frantic hand, she worked on the page.

He remained quiet, noticing a second chain resting next to him. It led towards their guests into the hand of the Male Satyr. Texia leaned against him, both waiting on him. His right hand took the end of the chain. He looked at Carina, as she closed the book. It was like the moment they decided, no spoken words, just this simple understanding to do it.

He thought they took their choice away, instead, they gave a way out to live. The chain wasn't heavy as he entwined into it. He joined up with Carina following the Satyrs into the darkness of the West.

McCloud arrived at the campsite first, surveying an empty camp with a battered tent, a cold fire-pit, and no sign of the couple. The flapping tent opening drew her attention. Carefully she recorded the scene, documenting it for her clients. Disappointing them could prove dangerous. Although she had the feeling where this would lead. Examining the tent space, McCloud noticed an artist's drawing book with a piece a green paper marking a page. It must belong to the girl, Carina Bentley.

Carefully, she opened the book to the page. A remarkable pencil drawing a gifted artist revealed a troubled soul. An image of two people leashed to a satanic figure. McCloud noticed that figures resembled the missing couple crowned with horns and tails. A very curious addition she thought.

About the Author:

Gregory L. Steighner is a writer and photographer from Western Pennsylvania, residing his wife Nikki, mother-in-law, and three cats. He enjoys writing Urban Fantasy, Horror, and anything in in-between. You can find him online at Facebook.

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Heaven's Doors | Marge Simon

He doesn't remember how he got here, yet there is a staircase behind him. He must have climbed up, therefore can return down the stairs, but they shimmer and disappear before his eyes. Moments pass and he recalls being in the hospital. An elderly physician is shaking his head. His wife sobs, clutching his hand tightly, and then everything goes black. Therefore, he must be dead, and this has to be Heaven, for indeed he'd climbed the stairway. Before him are three closed doors of different colors. "These must be Heaven's Doors," he muses aloud. "You'd never expect it to be this way, you're taught there is but one."

It is very hot on the Heavenly level. The tiled floor is spotless, and the air reeks of disinfectant. He approaches the white door on the left and tries the knob. It swings open, and his eyes are half blinded by a brilliant light. When he covers them, he is immediately aware of agonized shrieks and moans issuing from an unknown source. Quickly he slams it shut. The next door is painted sky blue. Someone has tried to break into it, the wood has been dented as if by the pounding of fists. The handle will not turn and comes away in his hand. The third door is barn red. It slowly opens to reveal a blackness thick with portent. The music of a cello lures, a daunting challenge he cannot deny. He finds himself plunging forward into the core of that Unholy Dark, which is when the voices begin chanting. They surround his mind, shredding his identity, sucking him into the infinite wailing vortex known as the Hereafter.

About the Author:

Marge Simon is an award-winning poet/writer. Her works have appeared in Daily Science Fiction, New Myths, Polu Texni, Clannad, Silver Blade and four pro anthologies in 2018. She is a multiple Stoker winner and Grand Master Poet of the SF & F Poetry Association.

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A View of the Water | Steven Wynne

The sun mimics my father; painfully distant, impossibly overbearing. Home is a full day's walk behind us as we head for the Cove. Mickey always said he wanted to see the open water, and damned if I'm not gonna let that happen. I wasn't spared the Militia's cruelty merely to survive indignity after insult, leading to a sad, lonely death in the ugly husk of an exsanguinated world. I was spared because I have one last chore to do; one last task for my son.

If you stick to the road, this far south there normally aren't many of the monsters that plague the wasteland closer to the cities. In every city there was a zoo, some idiot lets all the animals free; almost like the most hell bent on bloody carnage and complete human destruction operated with a hive mind. Fortunately, those animals stay close to the larger cities and colonies where survivors persist in larger numbers. I've never seen a lion or a bear or any of the other hideously irradiated beasts the wasteland can cough up whenever it feels a phlegmy rumble in its chest. What little things still roam this far south, Mickey and I can handle.

The Militia hit like the fist of God. I barely had time to crawl into the shelter underneath the cabin, let alone find Mickey. Davis, the man I'd been living with, I could live without. He provided little, other than a roof and occasional speaking privileges with the man they called the Mayor. People in this world like to pretend they matter, that they hold positions of power and capability, but the longer you spend on this earth, you come to feel nothing but pity for those who still believe in things like that.

Sounds to the east. My eyes scan the dunes, probe the cliffs. Always be prepared for the worst. I send prayers out to whatever Gods may still be there, even though if they ever were, they're not listening. Every whisper on the breeze tells you you're alone and fucked, but I'm not alone. I have Mickey, my only son, right here with me, keeping pace with his mother like a growing boy should.

I'm so proud of him.

The steel of the silenced 9mm stays cool against my skin, somehow. I think it's because it's not absorbing the sunlight and is under my cloak, or whatever. We need silence. We can't be discovered by any of the gangs of raiders out in these parts. I have three clips to get us to the Cove, and from there, I couldn't care less. All that matters is that we get there in one piece.

The east falls quiet and still. If the sound was from anything not imagined, I'd guess maybe a rotfly or brush dog at worst, or more likely, debris on the wind from whoever came through here last. There has been trash littering the road here and there, some of it looking rather recent. I suppose it might be best to hang back and let whoever we're tailing get some more distance, but we only have so much food and water to last us until the Cove. We can't risk our stores running dry before we get there.

"Mom, when will we be there?" Mickey asks, a welcome but ill-planned breach of silence.

"We'll be there soon, dear. Now hush, we can't make noise." I whisper back to him.

It's a miracle I found him after the raid. I found Davis nailed to a cross, along with the Mayor and just about everyone from the City Hall building. Four nails apiece, one through each foot, one through each wrist. I remember hearing something about crucifixion before, and I couldn't place the source, but I thought nails were supposed to be driven through the hands?

What do I know.

The Sun dragged its abusive ass across the sky. We marched our stubborn feet across the wasteland. Tit for Tat.

A sign for Exley shot from the ground like a tumor, and beyond, wooden framework latticed the skies. We kept walking, right through the opening gates, as they were, into the ashing and tarnished relics of a time worth living in. In town square, we turned eastward, out to the Cove. After what happened back home, I had no desire to be surrounded by tall buildings ever again. I felt eyes on me as I carried my son from the shadows of town, hand firmly on the grip of my gun, and only breathed easier when the town was well to our backs. The wasteland forgets, and never learns faces enough to understand forgiveness. The towns and settlements, on the other hand, will lie and thieve and connive.

These are things I cannot tolerate. Not when I have a promise to keep to my son.

As a woman, you don't tolerate the slightest threat on these roads. I keep one hand on my gun, the other, I run my fingers through Mickey's hair. He needs to know his mother won't let him down, that he'll get his view of the water .

Sounds to my right, from the brush. My gun is out and pointed to the sound before I have time to assign agency

to the disturbance. The blood-dripping ears of a brush dog flare up and out as the canine abomination pinwheels its rotting legs, running open-mouthed toward us, gaping maw right about level with Mickey's head. I take my time to aim, and send two tickets to purgatory directly through its mouth and out the back of its neck. It falls, jaws still open upon impact with the rocky ground. My gun is back up to the brush, waiting for the rest of them. Dogs almost always travel in packs, and it's rare for one to attack a person by itself.

Moments pass in deceptive silence. When no further noises break, I pat Mickey's head. "We're all clear, baby. Nothing's going to hurt you." We continue east, the mountain ridges jut out as daggers before us, the earth itself warning of what lies beyond and within.

We find the path through, and keep to the shrubbery and slight cover of the side of the trail. Whatever cover we can keep is highly preferable to the open trail where anyone can see. One hand on the gun, the other on Mickey, reassurances all around. I'm able to throw together a small lean to by the time the sun goes down, and I'm able to see it's adequately camouflaged enough to justify a brief nap. With a bit of luck, we'll be at the Cove tomorrow, and I'll need all the strength I can get.

I only manage a few hours of sleep before a voice stirs me from rest. Poking my head from the shelter, two figures stand, backs facing us.

"Mom? What's wrong?"

I slap my hand over Mickey's mouth, unable to risk more speech. He's silenced, but not before one of the sentry's ears prick up, and he swings his head in our direction. I drop my head to the ground, slowly pulling the gun to my chest. Approaching footsteps accompany my quickening heartbeat.

"See something?" A voice calls.

"Heard something." This voice is closer.

This is not a drill.

Both hands find the grip. I prop myself up on one elbow as I scoot back behind the shelter, gun at the ready.

"Someone's been camping. Can't believe the patrols missed this one so close to base."

"Probably didn't. Must be a new arrival." The voice, farther away, chuckles.

I don't breathe.

"All right, fuck head. Come on out." A boot hits the scrap metal covering us. I close my eyes and plant a kiss on my index and middle finger, and deposit it on Mickey's lips.

If I don't make it. . .

A second kick tears the cover from above us. The moonlight kisses my already drawn pistol as I paint the wasteland air with the Militiaman's brain matter. He drops, ass drilling the ground and sending his kicking leg skyward. I spin to my left, silenced pistol coughing shell after shell at the dead man's partner. He dances with the impacts and leaks his corrupt juices back into the decrepit world that spawned him. No sooner has he hit the ground do I eject my spent clip, and slam my second to last saving grace home into the butt.

I grab Mickey, and we're running.

The Militia is here. That means they've set up base at the Cove, which also means we're close. Soon, I can give Mickey the view he's dreamed of since he learned to dream.

We keep to the brush, still forgoing the easy route of the open path. My footsteps are shotgun blasts in my ears, probably the same to anyone else in the area. The jaunt uphill robs me of much of the energy I gained from the sleep, and adrenaline powers me through. As we crest the hill, orange and purple auras seep from the horizon and spill into the water below.

"We made it, Mickey." I almost laugh as the haunting vision dances before us.

"Take me down, Mommy, I wanna see!" Mickey sings in my ears. "I want to swim!"

Our elation is excised all too quickly as the creeping light betrays the path ahead. At the base of the cliff, the outlines of tents and buildings stand above the shadows. The pale horse of the Militia stands before us. The cover of night is fleeting, as are our chance of getting by their guards before the two we've killed are discovered.

It's never wise to stray far from the paths, but when faced with a choice between the unknown and the Militia, you take the way you know you have a chance at surviving and throw yourself headlong into that great question mark. The Militia is death, and countless humiliations and violations on the way there. However, a camp as big as this one has to have drawn beasts out of the caves. An irradiated tiger, say, you can run at headlong and end it quickly. Or, you can silence a few rotflies and make it through okay, relatively speaking.

Gun out and at the ready, Mickey's hair in my fingers gives me courage. We are so close, the salt dances in my nose and lightens my heart. This is all he wanted, and I can finally give it to him. The ground under my feet is stable, and the lingering dark will have to provide cover enough as we sneak our way around to the south and away from the greater concentration of Militia outpost buildings.

We're halfway there when a rock explodes to the right. By the time the crack of the gun catches up to us, I'm running. I grip Mickey tight and kick off every jutting surface I can, weaving in and out, bobbing up and down. I can't let the bastard get any sort of lock or bead on me. Pebbles slap my ankles and legs as bullets punch the cliff, far too many for a single sniper. It seems backup has been found, and a chorus of death sings a song of early endings for my son and I as we leap for the crystal water. The sky cracks auburn and copper beyond the Cove. It would be beautiful in other circumstances, but at present, all I see is the promise of blood.

Shouts bark behind me as I'm a few leaps away from reaching the ground, leaving a forty yard dash to the water's edge. I'm mid leap when a jolt rocks my shoulder, and I spin, downward, landing hard on the fresh exit wound. The pain is acute and crippling, and it burns through every sinew and muscle. I move my arms; my left shoulder doesn't work right, but my elbow and hand still respond.

I tear my satchel off, reach in, and grab Mickey. I wrench him out, lift his face to mine, and plant a kiss on his cheek.

"We're here, baby. Nothing's going to stop us now."

His blood has long since congealed where the Militia sawed off his head. I wish I could have taught him how to swim at the Cove, but just seeing the water will have to be enough for my little man.

I prop myself up with my hand, and take off as quick as I can. The fall has taken much from me, much more than I'd hoped, but I limp along, looking back to take a few pot shots and the Militiamen behind me. There are four, all gaining far too close for any semblance of comfort. The one nearest raises a 10mm submachine gun and takes aim. I turn back, eyes only for the water, and pump my legs as hard as I can.

A peal of blasts rend the morning air as the four men scream in terror behind me. No puffs of dust strafe the ground near me. Without breaking stride, I peek behind to see four gigantic lionesses that materialized out of nowhere. Three of them are charging after the Militiamen, who have turned to flee, occasionally spraying a futile cloud of shots at the invincible monsters. The fourth predator has eyes only for me.

I crash into the cool water of the Cove as the cursed Sun shows its face on my dying day. I lift Mickey's head to my lips and kiss him one last time.

"Here you go, son. I love you."

I toss the head of my son into the water. The Sun mimics his grandfather; painfully distant, impossibly overbearing. The rays catch the mockery death has made of his features which dance along the broken, slivered surface of the water. The screech of the beasts behind me doesn't frighten me anymore. The screams of pain and horror of the Militia don't delight me. For once in my life, here, at the end of it all, I have given my son what he wanted.

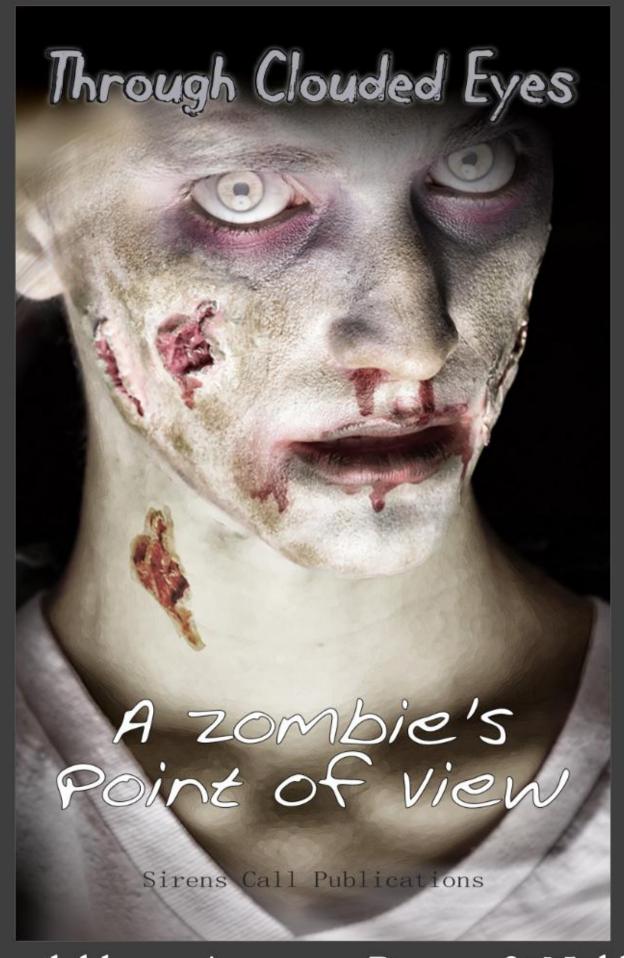
I kiss the silencer on the mouth, and I join him.

About the Author:

Steven Wynne writes dark fiction. He was born in Central Pennsylvania during Reagan's reign, and has yet to escape. Where some people just believe they can't have nice things, Steve actively demonstrates that he can't. His work has appeared in Siren's Call, Death's Garden, and elsewhere.

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

Hell | Mark Steinwachs

"Hell. You think you have it all figured out. Fire and brimstone, sinners writhing in agony, cries of the forsaken. You think that's it, but you're wrong. You cursed me there when you drove the knife into me because I was different. You cursed me there when you watched me bleed out. You cursed me there in the name of God. I didn't belong there. Not until your knife pierced my skin. And then I knew hatred. You taught me. As my life slipped away on the grass, as you spit on me, you taught me hate. And in that moment, you sent me to hell."

My smile melts into a sneer. They lie in their bed, both paralyzed by my touch. His wife screams, but no sound comes out. His eyes are wide, mouth closed. Ten years have taken a toll on him, though my body is the same.

I yank him to me by his worn collar. "Does she even know?" I toss him into the chair beside the bed. His limp body slouches in it. "She doesn't, does she? You never told her." Roughly I arrange him into a proper sitting position and scoot the chair closer to the bed, twisting it so he faces his wife.

I sit on the edge of his bed, our knees almost touching. "Hell is filled with two types of people. Some are like you—they're the ones writhing in eternal fire." I lean forward, my lips at his ear. "Physical and mental anguish worse than you can fathom."

His response is to void his bladder. An acrid smell fills the room.

"Are you scared? Truly scared, maybe for the first time in your life? Now you know how I felt." I recline back so I can watch my words' effect on him. His eyes dart around the room then back to his wife, then to me. "Then there are people like me. You sparked hate in me, more powerful than anything I had ever felt. When I took my last breath, I didn't wake up in a fiery pit. No, I landed in a little gray room. That's where my training began. Where I nearly died again. You made me hate so deeply that I was chosen to thrive in hell. To live eternally with my hatred, become one with it, use it how I see fit."

His eyes flicker with false understanding. I laugh. I tip his wife's chin up. "He thinks he gets it. He doesn't, but you are beginning to, aren't you?" I snap my fingers and her terrified shriek fills the room. I let her body spasm on the bed, assaulted by raw emotions, the first real ones she's ever felt. I snap my fingers again. She stills. Silent screams return.

I turn back to him. "You don't know real hate, real anger. You are a fool, duped by those you follow. Your life is a lie and now you will bear the fruit of that lie." I rip open his shirt.

Closing my eyes, I'm back in the little gray room. My teacher tried to break me. Bombarded my body and mind. Intense pain as my skin melted from an atomic blast, slow agony as ebola bled me out, despair as a child breathed her last in my arms. I know them all, and thousands more.

My finger touches his chest, freeing his body enough to tremble. He vibrates through me. I trace the edge of my fingernail down the center of his ribcage. The stench of burnt flesh hits me. I open my eyes and am met with his silent wail. Beautiful agony. A razor-thin line of scorched flesh flares then disappears.

I walk behind him. "This is where he stabbed me first," I say to his wife as I push my nail next to his left shoulder blade. His body jerks in the chair and I release his scream, a guttural cry of animalistic pain. Flesh drips off him. I growl, "From behind. He's a coward and he's going to pay."

I shove him to the floor and tear his shirt the rest of the way off. With precision I inflict every wound he gave me ten years ago, every cut etched into my being. White heat erodes his skin.

His wife's eyes, once wide, narrow as he sobs and drools on the bed. I haul him up and reposition him in the chair. "Five in the back," I say to her. "Seven more in the chest."

Each cut elicits raspy gasps. His knife drove deep but I barely pierce his flesh. Ten years' worth of hate doesn't need much of an opening to do damage.

I silence him again and sit back on the bed. "And then he did two more things," I say quietly, my head low. "He spit on me as blood poured from my body. All of that wasn't enough, though. He bent down and ran the blade across my neck."

My hands on my knees, I push myself up and glide to the far side of the bed, close to her. "I won't spit on him, though. I'm not a base creature. Unlike your husband, the murdering coward."

I look at her and see myself. I place my palm over her heart and press. The physical act mirrors what is already done. I let her husband hear her final breath before I no longer need to keep her bound.

We both know what comes next.

She gulps for air, bucking and slamming against the wall of the little gray room. Her head swivels as she takes in her surroundings. A furious yell fills the small space.

I smile. It's time to begin her training.

About the Author:

Mark Steinwachs is a former roadie that has retired to shop life as General Manager of Bandit Lites in Nashville, TN. Years of traveling the road on tour buses, plus time in the United States Marine Corps, and as rave DJ/promoter has given him a unique set of experiences to draw on for his stories.

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It Will Come Tonight | Radar DeBoard

As I sit here in the tub, with steam rising off the hot water, I know it will come. It always comes on nights like these. With my will at its weakest and my resolve almost nonexistent. I never know where it comes from, or where it goes afterwards. All I know is that it will show itself to me. One second it will be just me in the room, and then it will be there.

I can picture its sunken, black eyes staring at me. The two shining black masses studying, judging my every move. The complete lack of hair or fur anywhere on it only adds to the unsettling nature of it. It has the most unpleasant shade of gray for skin color. A shade that is almost an exact match to a cadaver at the beginning stages of rot. I can already imagine the distinct clicking noise of its long claws hitting the bathroom tiles.

My mind cannot rid itself of the image of the abnormally large tongue hanging out of its mouth. The appendage moves as if it is a sentient creature that is separate from the horrifying monster. Yet, with all of these horrifying things, it is the way the thing moves that I find the most unnerving. It crawls on all fours even though it has the build of an emaciated man. It's as if it believes itself a lizard and must move as such. The slight hunch of the back and the movement of its neck are all too accurate imitations of something from the reptile family.

As I hold the straight razor close to my chest, I can feel its presence. I see it out of the corner of my eye. It has placed itself halfway up the wall in the right corner of the room. It gives me one of its disgusting smiles, showing off rows of razor sharp teeth. It slowly moves down the wall with its disturbing movements. I can feel more adrenaline flow through me as it gets closer. I know that the time is now or never. I move the straight razor in one quick, sharp movement to complete my task.

It lets out a roar of pain as its eyes meet mine. There's no reason for me to look down, I know what has happened, but I do anyways. My gaze gradually moves from the creature's eyes and down towards the bath water. I can see the water has already turned black from the rancid liquid that freely flows from the creature. Its newly injured arm is laid over mine, gently holding my arm in place. Yet again it has reached me in time. Yet again it has thwarted my efforts.

After several seconds of complete stillness the creature begins to move. It reaches towards my other hand and carefully slides the straight razor out of it. Then it lightly places the razor on the bathroom floor. The creature widens its lips into another toothy grin as it stares at me. Then it whispers in a horse voice the only words I have ever heard it utter. "Not tonight", it says as it slowly backs away from me. My gaze drops as it continues to move back, and when I look up it is gone. It has left me alone again. Alone with the life that I wish would end. The life that the creature will never let me take.

About the Author:

Radar DeBoard is a new author living in Kansas. He is a lover of all things horror. His largest hope for his work is that people will enjoy has writing enough to share it with others.

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Sorry | Daniel J. Volpe

Jackson looked at his laptop. The white screen with the black letters glared at him. "Sorry, what you are looking for cannot be found," he whispered to himself, reading the message. "Fuck me," he said.

He closed the laptop, careful not to slam it. A broken screen was the last thing he needed right now. Since his divorce from Helen 3 years ago, he'd been trying to control his anger. The classes helped, but he hadn't attended one in nearly 2 years. Instead, he decided self-medication with copious amounts of alcohol and tobacco was the next best option.

Jackson, deciding he needed more medicine, flagged down the waitress.

The waitress, a 50 something year-old, with too much make-up caked onto her creased skin, stopped at his booth. "What can I getcha?" She asked. Her black shirt had flecks of food and mystery stains dotting it. She had a round tray under her armpit and a pad and pen in her hand.

"Another beer and whiskey. Whatever is cheapest." He grabbed his pack of cigarettes, lighting one. "Just put it on my tab."

"No problem, Hun," she said in a raspy, too-many-cigarettes, voice. There was no need for her to write down his order; he'd been ordering the same thing for the last 4 days.

Jackson was an insurance salesman for a less than successful company out of upstate New York. The company was barely keeping its head above water, with all of the bigger, national companies in the area. Their only option was to look for potential clients elsewhere. New York City was a bastion of poor and usually illegal peoples. Jackson's boss was a reasonable and greedy man, who saw a niche. People needed insurance, but not being a legal resident, made it difficult for some. That's where Jackson's company came in. They didn't question things such as legality or social security numbers, as long as the client could make their monthly payment.

On this business trip, Jackson was just outside of NYC, in the City of Yonkers. His hotel was paid for by his company (a fine 2-star lodging, with battering ram marks on the door from police raids). Jackson always travelled with sheets and a pillow, so the bed wasn't much of an issue. He didn't find any bed bugs (after staying at almost every dump in the state, he knew exactly where to look), so that was a plus. The TV was somewhat modern, albeit small, but the reception was clear. The best part of his hotel was the proximity to *Roosevelts*, the local dive bar. Jackson could walk over after a long day of milking illegal immigrants of their hard-earned money and stumble back to his room. He'd usually cap off his night with a pathetic round of masturbation, leftover food or maybe both. Sometimes he mixed in vomiting, but his body was pretty good at holding alcohol.

The waitress set his beer and whiskey down at his table. She took his empties away and dumped his ashtray in one of the glasses. She set the empty ashtray back down, just in time to catch the ashes from his cigarette.

"These are from Tahlia," she said, pointing to the bartender.

Jackson looked over at the woman behind the bar.

Tahlia was cleaning a glass, but paused to give him a wave.

Jackson nodded to her, raising his beer glass. He sipped the light beer. It was watery, but it was free and free booze was the best booze. He let his eyes linger on the bartender for a moment longer. She was back to cleaning glasses. Jackson looked her body over and thought how she could've landed in such a dump.

Tahlia looked to be in her early thirties, but sometimes he thought she could've been as young as 25 or possibly as old as 45. She had dark hair, which she kept down, and a piss poor haircut. Her body was trim and her breasts filled out her black tank top with ease.

Jackson, who was feeling the alcohol he'd been drinking for the last few hours, wondered what color her nipples were. She had an exotic look about her, with dark eyes and hair, but defined Anglo features. Maybe she was Jewish or possibly Italian, the name 'Tahlia' could go either way. Jackson realized he'd been staring and broke his gaze.

Since his divorce, he hadn't much luck in the sex department. Sure, he'd gotten lucky a few times (mainly on business trips) but nothing consistent. If he was on a serious dry spell, he would spring for a rub and tug at a seedy massage parlor, but his wallet didn't appreciate his splurges. He wasn't much to look at: 35 years old, a do-it-yourself haircut on his thinning scalp, shitty looking skin, and an ever-growing beer belly. Beggars can't be choosers and Jackson's case, he was quite the beggar. He hadn't been laid in so long, the haggard waitress was starting to look good. Now that pussy was a hot commodity in his life, he knew how men could resort to homosexuality while

in prison. He never thought about fucking another man, but he also didn't think he'd want to fuck a 50- something year-old dive bar waitress.

Jackson set his beer down, now half empty, and picked up the shot of whiskey. He tossed it down in one gulp. It burned, but not enough to make him grimace. The liquor warmed his belly and spread to his extremities. He was starting to feel good. He opened his laptop again and saw the stupid message looking back at him. "Fuck you," he said to the computer screen, closing the current window. "You don't know what I'm looking for." He clicked on a file folder. It contained a list of names, mainly Spanish. "Ok, Mr. Figueroa, let's check up on your policy."

Jackson stared at his computer. The words swam around the screen and he considered shutting down shop for the night. He pulled up his sleeve and checked his watch. It was nearly 2 am and he was the only one left in the bar. Well, the only customer. Tahlia was sitting at the bar watching TV and munching on peanuts and the waitress was gathering her coat, which was obviously fake fur.

"All done for the night, Kitty?" asked Tahlia.

"Yeah, all the side work is done. Tell Jordan he needs to order more green olives on the next shipment." She pulled a cigarette from a purse-looking case. The case reminded Jackson of the one his grandmother had when he was a kid. She lit the thin cigarette and exhaled through her nose. Her make-up had long overstayed its welcome on her face. "I'm beat, Hun," she said to Tahlia. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight," said Tahlia, who was walking back around the bar.

Kitty turned the 'open' sign off before walking out into the crisp New York night.

Jackson realized it was time to go. He'd been thrown out of many bars in the past, but this time he would leave on his own. He was shutting down his computer when he noticed Tahlia standing next to his table. "I know, it's late," he said, winding up his power cord and stuffing it into the computer bag. "I didn't even realize it. I'm sorry if you're going to get in trouble with the boss." He looked up at Tahlia, who was holding two beers in her hands.

She smiled and set the beers down. "No rush," she said, slithering into the booth.

Jackson's mood brightened and he flashed her a drunken smile. He knew he wasn't the most attractive man in the world, but he had the power of liquid confidence.

"Thanks," he said as he took the beer. It had a bitter aftertaste and he figured it was the bottom of the keg. He'd have to tell Tahlia to make sure she changed it before the next shift. Jackson motioned towards his cigarettes. "Do you mind?" he asked her. He'd been smoking all night, but it still felt right to ask her, since she was sitting across from him.

"Not at all, as long as I can have one too." She said, looking at him with oil slick eyes.

"Knock yourself out." He slid the pack towards her.

She leaned towards him, cigarette in her mouth, and breathed in the flame of the lighter he was offering. Jackson could smell her perfume through the smoke. His blood began pumping at an almost alarming rate.

"Thanks," she said, sitting back. Smoke flowed from her mouth. "So, I couldn't help talking with Kitty about the stranger in the bar." She flicked ashes in the tray.

Jackson looked at his cigarette, "Yeah, I start to talk quite a bit when I'm a little tipsy." He took a drag and a drink of his beer.

Tahlia smiled at him, catching his eyes. "Don't we all," she took another drag. "The thing that interested me most was your divorce."

Jackson was frozen. Was this hot, young bartender coming on to him? No way in hell. She could fuck anyone she wanted to and he was far from a prime candidate.

"Ah, yeah. I guess I said a little too much." He finished his beer. The bitterness was worse towards the bottom of the glass. "I've been divorced for 3 years. No kids, parents' dead, a sister in Seattle whom I haven't talked to in 5 years. That's me, a lonely bachelor in a shit job." He stopped talking and wished he could've taken his words back. That was it. Any chance he had to fuck her was just tossed out the window. He didn't mind a pity lay, but he came off as downright sad.

"I know how you feel," said Tahlia, reaching out and placing her hand on his. Jackson almost recoiled from her touch.

"My parents were killed when I was just a girl. This place was my inheritance. Bills keep piling up, but business is just good enough to keep me above water. I would love to sell it, but where would I go." She looked towards the cigarette pack. "May I?" She asked.

Jackson slid the pack towards her. His hand moved in slow motion. The alcohol and lack of sleep was really getting to him.

"See, this isn't just my business, but my house too." She blew a cloud of smoke towards the green light above the table. "Not only my house, but my children's too."

Kids? She had kids? She wasn't that old, how many rug rats could she have? He thought. It didn't matter to him. Besides, her body didn't look like it ever held kids. Smoke floated up from her cigarette. A thin, grey snake making its way to the light. His thoughts floated with the smoke. Something is wrong. He thought.

"We live in the basement. It's old and has some dampness, but it's home." She said. Her breasts seem to swell, pushing them higher. Her cleavage was something to behold.

Jackson's eyes were glued to her chest. He was staring without shame or care.

"Would you like to meet them? The kids?" She asked, already standing.

"Sure," he said, his brain felt like mush. He stood and took her hand. It was powder dry and cold.

She took him behind the bar to an old wooden door. "Down there. We'll have some fun." She said.

"Mmmm, I could use some fun," Jackson mumbled from his fugue.

The stairs were dark, but Jackson found a railing. He never reached for a light switch and Tahlia never offered to turn one on. They creaked under his weight, at least he thought the sound was the wood shifting. He reached the bottom and stopped. Jackson was teary eyed, but he couldn't stop. He was on autopilot. There was nothing he could do to stop it.

"Just walk forward; there's a pull cord for the light. You'll feel it." She breathed behind him.

A thin chain hit him in the face. He stopped and reached up for it. His clammy hand wrapped around it and he pulled.

The lone bulb lit up most of the room, but shadows still lingered. Something shifted in the blackness. Jackson strained his eyes to pierce the gloom and find the source of the sound. Two sets of yellow eyes looked back at him from the shadows.

Tahlia's children emerged from the pitch black; twisted horrors of monstrosity. They were creatures of wretched flesh and meat. Claws and teeth bristled from grotesque appendages. Boils oozed from cracked skin, fluids making their bodies glisten under the light bulb. Their mouths had bits of flesh stuck in them and Jackson, moments before his horrible death, saw a scalp stuck to a dagger-like tooth.

Jackson tried to scream, but they descended on him much faster than he expected. He was torn apart in a flurry of jagged bone, organs and blood. The children feasted on him, slurping and crunching, until he was consumed. They smiled at their mother, who was sitting on the steps smoking one of Jackson's cigarettes.

Tahlia flicked the cigarette butt into a small puddle of blood. It hissed as it died.

About the Author:

Daniel J. Volpe is a native New Yorker, who has loved horror since childhood. He is the author of numerous short horror stories, including "Teeth", which was featured in "Twisted 2: A Twisted Anthology". When he's not writing horror, Daniel enjoys spending time hunting, fishing and training dogs. Even though horror is king, Daniel has dabbled in the world of Steampunk and Fantasy.

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Crow | Naching T. Kassa

The story races through my mind. I must tell it before it's too late.

My sister has always been afraid of crows. That's why I used them to drive her insane.

Clara had to go, you see. Both of us were to receive an inheritance upon the death of our father. And, when he finally breathed his last, it was she who stood between me and the \$100,000 which lay moldering in the bank. She was younger than me, and though I could not bring myself to kill her, I could not wait another year for her to leave the earth. Driving her insane would work just as well. When they made me her guardian, I could spend her \$50,000 just as easily.

The feathers came first. Lustrous and black, I laid them on her pillow before slumber and smiled as her shrieks filled the hall. When I rushed to her room and she motioned to them, I pretended not to see them, sowing seeds of doubt in that oh so fertile mind.

The sounds came next. I slipped into her room without notice and hid the player under her bed. During the darkest hours of the night, the raucous cries filled her room. They propelled her from deepest sleep to fear-gripped wakefulness. She would scream my name, but I would not answer until all the cries had ceased. I would peer at her in puzzlement as she described the fearful cacophony, telling her I had heard nothing. Then, I would return to my bedroom, cover my head with a pillow, and laugh with delight.

The last thing, the one which drove her over the edge, was the bird I set upon her while she slept. A particularly vicious and hungry creature, it pecked at her hands and fingers until I pulled it away. Her mind had gone by the time I switched the lamp on.

A new month found her in a new residence. Her inward stare now encompassed the wide, lush lawn of the institution to which I had committed her. My long days of penury had ended. The money now filled my bank account.

I returned to my home and removed all trace of her and our father. The house was a fresh page and I would fill it with what I craved.

After dinner, I took a stroll in the woods behind my home. I pretended a new childhood, one without my family and my sister. One in which I played alone. I took a path I'd avoided since girlhood, intent on creating my new past.

And, there I saw him.

He stood alone at the end of the trail, dressed in the black uniform of a chauffeur, the brass buttons glinting in the dying sunlight. The overlarge and denuded skull of a crow covered his face, long feathers grew upward.

I stood frozen as his vacant eyes gazed upon me. And, then he spoke a single word.

"Rita."

The sound of my own name sent me scrambling in the opposite direction. I had forgotten this monster, this creature which had haunted my childhood. He who had turned even the sweetest dream into a sanctum for nightmares.

I cast a fearful glance over my shoulder as I ran, but he had not pursued me. I burst from the woods, dashed up the drive, and into the house.

The lock clicked and I leaned against the door, my heart in my throat. Memories flowed in like water over a broken dam. I now remembered how Clara and I had wandered down the path. How we had found him and how he had haunted us. Every time we came near the woods, he had followed us, stalking us from the brambles, watching from behind the trees. One night, he'd even come to the window and gazed in upon us. We had screamed for our parents, and though he stood but inches from the glass, they did not see him. Only when he crept away did we grow quiet.

We knew we could not escape him.

The next day, Clara had come to me and taking my hand, said, "There is only one way to get rid of him, Rita. We must turn our backs on him and forget. More than that, we must never go down that path again."

I squeezed her hand and as one; we forced him from our minds.

The trick worked. We never saw him again.

But Clara still feared the crows.

It was she who always kept me on the right path and away from the one he inhabited.

I trembled as I mounted the stairs and hurried through the empty hall. When I reached my room, I fell upon the bed and closed my eyes against the darkness which filled it.

I tried to push him from my mind, tried to erase him as I had before.

I must've fallen asleep because when next I opened my eyes, moonlight streamed through the window blinds and the digital clock read twelve. I rose and realizing I had not yet eaten, made my way toward the door.

Movement caught my eye.

I didn't want to turn my head. I didn't want to see the figure, which had been crouching in the corner, rise to his

feet. I didn't want to see the pale bone headdress in the silver slivers of moonglow. I shut my eyes against him, even as I stood rooted to the floor and his soft footsteps crossed the carpet.

I tried to forget him. But his cold fingers, like claws, closed around my arm...

Now, I sit in the same room as my sister. Dressed in a similar robe, seated in a similar chair. Someone thought it would be kinder to keep us together, that somehow, it would bring us out of the spell which binds us. From dawn til dusk, I stare into her face.

Clara just blinked. She sees me for the first time. Her eyes are sad. She speaks but I can't respond.

Perhaps, she'll make a full recovery.

I will forget Clara in the days which come, but I will not forget him, and he will not forget me.

Even now, he waits in the shadows of this room.

Waiting for darkness to come.

About the Author:

Naching T. Kassa is a wife, mother, and horror writer. She's created short stories, novellas, poems, and co-created three children. She lives in Eastern Washington State with Dan Kassa, her husband and biggest supporter. Naching is a member of the Horror Writers Association, Head of Publishing and Interviewer for HorrorAddicts.net, and an assistant at Crystal Lake Publishing.

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The Red Line | Patrick J Wynn

They had all been told countless times but as five year old's tend to do they push the limits. Jenny, Thomas, Jack and Jules all stood back as Billy stepped up to the red line and glanced around to see if any adults were watching.

"Billy don't do it" Jules whispered.

"You know we are not to step over the red line" Jack said nervously not wanting to get into trouble.

"Do it," Jenny giggled.

Billy gave one more look around and then put one foot over the red line. He left it there for a few seconds then yanked it back laughing.

"See it's no big deal," Billy laughed.

"I'm gonna," Thomas giggled as he stuck his foot over the red line. He counted to ten then smiled at Billy daring him to go longer.

Billy frowned knowing he'd been bested by his friend then not to be outdone he jumped over the red line with both feet, He counted to fifteen and then scooted quickly back across the red line. Thomas nodded and jumped over the line and counted to twenty. Before long Billy and Thomas were jumping back and forth over the line giggling as each dared the other to go further over the red line.

"Watch this," Jack called out just as he took a big jump over the line.

The kids all turned to watch Jack jump but as his feet landed they skidded out from under him and he fell forward coming to a stop within inches of the fence. Panic filled Jack's face as he tried to scoot away from the fence but a dead gray arm shot through the fence and grabbed Jack by the hair. The kids all screamed in terror as they watched Jack being pulled through the fence and torn to pieces.

About the Author:

Patrick J Wynn is an author of short stories that contain shades of horror, humor and are just a touch weird. His works have been published in Sirens Call, Dark Dossier, Short Horror, Weird Mask and Trembling with Fear. You can follow him on his Facebook page and look for his short story collections on Amazon.



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Amor Malus

Thank you to everyone reading and perusing! My name is Danielle Wirsansky. My biggest passion is storytelling, and my two primary mediums are photography and playwriting. My photo series, "Amor Malus," was the project that hit the sweet spot and satisfied both mediums for me.

I've been a writer for as long as I can remember. When asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would always say "Author." I was very lucky to go to art schools growing up, so I started majoring in theatre in the 4th grade and I added creative writing as a second major starting in the 8th grade, and I ended up getting a BA in Theatre and a BA in Creative Writing.

My start with photography did not come until I was almost finished with high school. My family had just restarted the family business, The Bead Bowl, which produced jewelry and other accessories. I ended up taking photos of our products and having a blast doing it, even organizing whole photo shoots. While in college, I got involved with marketing for theatre and took photos of theatre productions happening on campus. I found that I really loved this, the fact that I could capture a story with only a few photos and I got more involved. When I finished graduate school, I started working at a professional photography studio where I learned such important skills that really elevated my work.

I am also pretty passionate about history, where again, I am drawn to the stories of the past. It was less about years or facts and more about interesting figures with even more interesting stories to them. I ended up pursuing an MA in History, where my major was Modern European History. I specialize in WWII/Holocaust history, which has its own darkness. I've been fascinated with this era for a very long time. My grandfather, who I revered, was a veteran of WWII, which got me started. His stories were so interesting and I kept finding more stories of WWII that were so unique that finally, I was hooked. I became most interested in espionage, which is a hugely important theme of "Amor Malus."

I wrote a collection of short plays, where each play was centered around a real figure from WWII history that was somehow related to espionage. One of these plays was about Marcel Petiot, one of the most infamous serial killers of this period. I had discovered his story in high school and it had lingered with me. He had not strictly been a spy—instead, he'd been a well known and celebrated doctor in Paris. It was right after the war had ended, and someone saw smoke coming from the chimney of his townhouse. If you have seen Paris, you know how tight together all the homes are. His neighbors were afraid that he had a chimney fire and that, if not contained, it would spread to their own homes. When Petiot could not be found, the firemen broke into his home to put the fire out. They found that the smoke was coming from a furnace in his basement. When they opened the grate to put out the fire, a human arm swung out.

As the firemen explored the house, they found more horrors. They found containment rooms where he had held prisoners, piles of his captives belongings sorted by type, random body parts scattered around the house (enough to prove he'd had at least ten victims), and even a lime pit in his stables where he had disintegrated bodies.

Petiot rode up to house on his bicycle, only to be confronted by the police. He told them that he was part of the resistance active during the war and that the bodies in the house were those of German traitors and spies, people who deserved to be killed for trying to harm France. He pled to be released so he could keep his valuable paperwork from falling into the wrong hands, lest all those deaths be for naught. The police were convinced and they let him ride free.

It was later that the police discovered that he had no ties to the resistance. Instead, he had been tricking people into connecting with him, promising to help them to flee to South America for safety. They would pay him for passage and then go to his house. He would have them write letters to their families saying that a doctor was helping to smuggle them across the sea and not to expect to hear from them for a while. After that, Petiot would kill and dismember his victims. He was ultimately captured, put on trial, and finally beheaded by guillotine.

Petiot's story was one of these plays, and I decided to take the actors from the production and stage a photo series illustrating his story through photography as well. I enjoy photographing actors because they use their

whole bodies and especially engage viewers with their eyes and facial expressions. The actor playing Petiot looked eerily similar to the real man, which I thought added an extra element of dark wonder to the photos.

We kept the costuming simple, suggesting the style of the 1940s. The model playing Petiot was also dressed with red accents, those these details were ultimately lost when the photos became black and white.

These photos were taken in Tallahassee, FL, at an abandoned cement factory that became my favorite place to photograph at. It had many different buildings and types of fields, even train tracks, so that I could simulate many different environments without having to go to or create different sets. I loved the contrast between the natural areas like the woods and the fields of tall, golden, waving grass against the urban sprawl of the abandoned factory, covered in graffiti, and its warehouses.

There were certain moments and elements of Petiot's story that I wanted to capture. The way he stalked, chased, and cornered his victims. His lack of remorse. I wanted his charm to come across, as well as the fear his victims felt. I find his story darkly compelling. However, I also think that remembering his story, his treachery, and his victims are also incredibly important.

Thank you again for taking the time to take a look and delve into today's history lesson and the story behind "Amor Malus" with me. I so appreciate this opportunity from Sirens Call Publication to share the story of Marcel Petiot with all of you!



About the Artist:

Danielle Wirsansky is a photographer and writer whose main passion is storytelling. She works with clients and also focuses on fine art photography. Her works have been published in such publications as Inkwell Journal, The Weird Reader, Anti-Heroin Chic Magazine, Genre: Urban Arts Magazine, Tiny Spoon Literary Magazine, and more. She was named a Top Local Artist by St. John's Magazine in 2018. To check out more of her work, please visit the links below.

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Avenger of the Abyss | E.H. Davis

Singing the garbled, suspiciously-familiar syntax of those who profess to speak in tongues, the supplicant known as "Mummer" shivered, shook, and fell writhing to the floor, eyes clenched shut, surrounded by a ring of congregants keeping others from stumbling onto their blessed star, he who was conversant with God. He was speaking in tongues, or *glossolalia*, hard to fake because of the physically wracking, ego-annihilating presence of the Holy Spirit.

At sixteen, Mummer appears to have undergone a genuine Shaker conversion, convincing not only the staff at the psychiatric hospital where he resided of his moral awakening, but also the Shakers who – in desperation, with the complicity of Child Welfare – had sent him there.

As forgiveness is a precept much extolled by the brethren and sisterhood, he was welcomed back into the community, though on a trial basis. He was sent to the Hancock Shaker Village in western Massachusetts. Here, he was kept busy from dawn till dusk, exhausted in body and spirit by backbreaking farm work.

Farmer Steve, known for his severity, took to heart the curse of Original Sin, that "man shall eat his bread in the sweat of his face." Indeed, he capitalized on every occasion to inflict the precepts of the Gospel on young Mummer.

Two years passed without incident while Mummer stoically suffered Farmer Steve's interminable preaching, punctuated by his spittle-riddled Vermont annunciation.

Farmer Steve's pulpit consisted of the entire farm, its facilities, and wooded surrounds from which he expounded the virtues of blood, sweat, and tears as an antidote to the temptations of the flesh. Since he had come to the farm a widow with a young daughter and had taken on the yoke of Shaker celibacy late in life, doubtless there was an element of self-admonishment in his preaching. One can imagine him —a vigorous, pink-fleshed, curly-haired man in his late 30s — wrestling with his own daemons in the dead of night, when there was no one else around to blame for his prurient thoughts.

In the light of day, with a knowing twinkle in his eye for God's awesome ability to see into man's recondite heart, Farmer Steve rained down fire and brimstone on poor Mummer, who throttled the urge to bash in his skull with a rock, like Cain killed Abel, and halt his bombastic torrent once and for all.

Not surprisingly, Farmer Steve was right about Mummer who, in the privacy of his attic room in a far wing of the main house, secretly engaged in black arts rituals, while regaling himself with fantasies about what he would do to his tormentor when the time arrived.

Mummer never knew who or where he came from, other than what he'd been told by the handful of brothers and sisters of the Shaker faith, a Quaker offshoot, known for its elegant utilitarian furniture and speaking in tongues. On a crisp winter night with the snow-covered roads leading to the Sabbathday Lake Maine community enclave treacherously iced over, he'd been abandoned: a colicky, malnourished, underweight infant.

Details of his parentage never emerged, as there were no remorseful notes or letters pinned to him expressing a mother's regret for abandoning her own flesh and blood. Wrapped in an old Army blanket inside a crate bespattered with cow flop, he was discovered at dawn in the barn by one of the good sisters.

For better or worse, the orphan christened Jon Elliot Mummer (named after a deceased eldress) was raised in this austere tradition, nurtured by hard-bosomed women who channeled their motherly instincts into Catechisms, strict grooming, and stricter toilet training. Whether by direct instruction or physical discipline, they attempted to indoctrinate young Mummer with their nihilistic belief in sex as a crime against God, citing Original Sin.

Mummer, however, was not an apt communicant. From an early age, he fought a losing battle between obedience and desire, faith and depravity, lust and shame. *Nurture*, comprised of relentless catechisms on the evils of the flesh, was no match for Mummer's *nature*, or his daemon – his fate or character. As typically evinced in serial killers in their youth, he was a late bed wetter.

All day long Farmer Steve spewed his Godly venom, while Mummer bit his tongue and pleaded for an act of Providence from the Dark Lord to set him free, knowing his own hand alone would be efficacious. If patience is a Christian virtue, then Mummer, coming into his strength as a man, is to be commended for his charitable restraint.

His daily chores became a battlefield upon which he wrestled with his own demons urging him to take action. Till now, murder had been only a fantasy – part of his late night rituals. For relief, he imagined vivid murder scenarios utilizing various farm tools – ploughs, tongs, axes, and spades – employed in the course of his chores. In Mummer's reveries, Farmer Steve was dispatched painfully in a variety of serendipitous locations and ways. Accidents all – excusable, given the tacit danger of farm work.

With limitless opportunities for Mummer to end his own suffering by dispatching Farmer Steve, what was holding him back? The farmer's daughter, of course, Marie – grown into a fetching elf of eighteen whose nascent curves Mummer had long admired, hidden though they were beneath the drab, ankle-length skirts and high-necked blouses the sisters forced her to wear.

It was a night in early spring, buds just forming on the maple, elm, and birch trees bordering the farm, when the extended congregation of twenty-eight souls gathered for evening worship in the main music hall, a large cedar-paneled, high-domed venue that resounded with their prayers. Here, like a force of nature, male and female voices rose in chorus, praising the simple gifts of Creation, accompanied by the militant pounding of their booted feet on oaken floors – a drum march intended to put supplicants in the thrall of the Holy Spirit.

From the periphery, Mummer watched with amusement, observing his fellow congregants in the throes of abandon. Some were bent over, shimmying like Gospel singers. Others stood swaying back and forth in humble supplication. They raised their arms to the heavens in pious thanksgiving, then gathered into neat rows, feet thumping. They advanced, retreated, whirled, and pushed into the center to form a tight circle three and four deep. Only to break away once again in song, flailing, whirling, and circling back – working themselves into frenzy. Some began talking in tongues, but like rusty outboard motors they sputtered into silence.

Uttering the litany of prayers like the others, Mummer slipped into the circle. Weaving in and out, he kept an eye out for Marie, ready to launch into tongues, which he'd learned to turn on at will. Tonight, his "possession" by the Holy Spirit would be stronger and bolder than usual – sure to win her admiration, which he'd been cultivating for as long as Farmer Steve had been haranguing him. Recently, her stolen glances as they went about their chores – a forlorn dreamy look on her face – told him that the spells he cast were working, and she was ready to play her role in his revenge plot.

Happily, Marie caught him in her arms as, when speaking in tongues, he swooned. She bent to him, cradling his head in her lap and wiping his brow, as he jerked about in epileptic spasms of feigned ecstasy. Meanwhile, the congregants' chanting and shaking, attenuated by Mummer's *glossolalia*, brought them to new fervent heights.

Marie, face aflame, suddenly jumped to her feet and pushed through the circle, her hands covering her face. Mummer stood looking after her, willing her to look back, testing his powers. Before she acquitted the room, she dropped her guard and bestowed him a parting look that was unequivocal.

Woe to the father who loses his lamb in a moment of inattention. Mummer had begun his apotheosis in evil. Without explanation, he shoved his way through the circle and left the hall, retreating to his room to prepare for his great transformation, his anointing, his down-going.

Later that night, like a ghost flitting between the shadows, Mummer made his way to the isolated cottage where Farmer Steve and Marie lived on the edge of the enclave. The layout of their two-bedroom cape was known to Mummer, as he'd had occasion to drop by on errands, ostensibly to see Farmer Steve, but really to feed his growing fixation with Marie.

Now, he circled around to the rear of the cottage where he knew Marie's bedroom was located under the second-floor eaves. A yellow beam from a mounted lamp, buzzing with moths, washed over the backyard and cottage, casting all in gray-green shadows – like the night vision of a predator on the prowl.

He was that predator. The transformation that had begun earlier in his room – his Baphomet ritual heightened by popping amyl nitrate – was complete.

He was a gimlet-eyed demon – burnished, leering – with claws and a scimitar beak ending in a row of jagged teeth. (Don't forget the horns, hooves, and tail!)

Mummer was transformed – into the Avenger of the unholy Abyss. *He*, who was feared and worshipped of old. Willing himself invisible (no doubt one of his implicit powers) – his furtive movements pressed against the velvet of the night – he edged along the wall to the shingled bulkhead, ready access to Marie's room. Farmer Steve, he knew, slept in the master bedroom on the ground floor. As though seeing through walls – across the kitchen and living room and into the bedroom – the Hunter imagined Farmer Steve asleep, snoring and grunting, oblivious. The Hunter sent a spell to deepen the pig's slumber.

Mummer sprung onto the bulkhead and reached up to Marie's window, open to the mild spring night. His sheep knife snicked through the screen. Reaching inside, he released the catches, raised the screen, and climbed inside.

The air around him rippled with shifting energies: something wild, unworldly, unaccountable had been loosed. Later he would remember this moment as his last conscious one that night. He'd been transported to a world of unholy beauty and horror, of ineffable light and dark, good and evil. Mummer was no more. But the Avenger was.

A low howl came from somewhere in the night. A befogged silence settled over all. He observed himself as though from afar. He was preternaturally aware of every flicker, ripple, quivering breath of the universe, as it pulsated on the verge of sublime chaos.

Marie was sound asleep on her side, the covers outlining a long coltish shape – all legs, ribs, angular hips – on the verge of blossoming womanhood. The Hunter studied her face, with its immature features delicately rendered, tentative – nose, mouth, eyelids and brow – wet clay, left to dry. Puffs of air troubled her pert lips. The breath of life – the soul's suspirations, which he could snatch away at will.

He slipped the covers from her shoulders, down over her thin arms white like porcelain; down, down, ever so slowly so as not to wake her. The orbs of her eyes flickered beneath silken lids – so like a new born in her trusting slumber.

Soon he would wake her and take what was rightly *his* – his because in his banal guise as society's trash, a castoff, an orphan, he was considered unworthy. Yet now, as one conversant with the secrets of the universe, he was a god no longer beholden to the laws of man!

He reached out to her, his hand trembling, unreal. He had a moment of arrest when he saw with double vision the horny claw of a Gargoyle jittering alongside his own. He knew there was nothing he could do to stop this wave of ecstasy, power, and glee. Nor did he want to.

The time had come for Farmer Steve's punishment. Mummer slipped from the room, a Beast on the prowl.

The black candle of bees-wax flickered and flared on the dresser beside Mummer's bed, revealing glimpses of the symbols of his black arts.

The requisite inverted five-pointed star with the Sigil of Satan, the Sabbatic Goat Baphomet, encompassed the center, representing all good, all evil. Beside it, an ornate dagger with the proverbial inverted hanged man adorning the hilt, signifying the crossroads of action.

Before the candle guttered out with an ominous hiss, it revealed the supplicant Jon Elliot Mummer in his bed, no longer warmed by the embers of his lurid fantasy of murder and mayhem. No more the Avenger of the Abyss.

At once an oily miasma – a cloud of anti-matter – descended upon him and sucked the life from his body, leaving a soulless, shriveled shell. Naked you came; so shall you go.

Mummer never left his attic room that night, having failed to survive the massive coronary brought on by his abuse of amyl nitrate – ironically a remedy for heart failure. Though in his case, it might be argued that he was without a heart from birth. An unwanted child, he had grown into an unwanted man.

Will no one shed a tear? Should we feel sorry for him? Who can be blamed for his failure to develop a soul? Would a kind word from Farmer Steve have turned the tide in Mummer's case, overcoming nature with the balm of nurture? Or might the love of an innocent like Marie have infused him, over time, with the heart and brain of a human being? Like Frankenstein, saved by love? We'll never know.

From a darkened corner of the room, a figure crouching against the wall rose in silhouette. Stifling a sob, Marie approached the dresser where the altar of Baphomet had grown cold. She struck a wooden match, its blue and yellow flame illuminating her features as she touched it to the candle, lighting up the Goat of Baphomet, Mummer's god.

With wet eyes she forced herself to survey the details of Mummer's death tableau: the blue skin of his face; his tongue lolling from his lips; the dried spittle at the corners of his mouth; the black leather belt around his neck, still cinched, never released from the bedpost overhead, not even in the throes of his massive coronary.

Fingers trembling, Marie reached out to release the belt. Images of the prayer meeting earlier that night, when she allowed herself to be "possessed" by Mummer, flashed before her eyes.

A spasm – serpentine, primal – wracked her body. She jerked a hand to her breast to mollify the beast within, recalling the rush of feeling Mummer's talking in tongues had brought on. She touched the candle's flame to the four corners of the bed, immolating her beloved.

Backing away, never taking her eyes from the burning pyre, she paused to make the sign of the cross on her gleaming chest. Her face revealed no emotion, though a Madonna-like smile threatened the corners of her mouth.

About the Author:

E.H. Davis's fiction has appeared in The Pacific Review, Mystery Weekly, Otherwise Engaged Literature and Arts Journal, New Pop Lit, Literary Heist, Valiant Scribe, and Vinylwriter. A credited screenwriter, novelist, and poet, his debut novel *My Wife's Husband: A Family Thriller* will be followed by *Forsaken* in the fall of 2020.

The Child Snatchers | Rie Sheridan Rose

"Twelve degrees starboard, Larakin," ordered Captain Stilskin. "There's a hovel on the hill looks promising."

"Aye, aye, Cap'n." The mate turned a brass crank, and the complex system of gears powering the steerage of the island meshed to start the whole of it into a ponderous turn.

Stilskin stepped to the edge of the island, looking out over the sea of clouds that billowed around them. The sun was beginning its dying arc, and the clouds were gold and bronze.

This was his favorite time to pounce, at the dying of the day when distances got hazy and children grew careless trying to squeeze out one more round of tag or one more game of hide and seek.

The bright sound of laughter rose through the air to the island from the hovel on the hill. Yes! A pack of laughing children spilled out of the shack and danced down the sides of the hill.

A pretty little red-haired girl in a torn smock caught the captain's eye.

"That one, Larakin. I'll have that one."

"Aye, sir."

The goblin strapped on his steam apparatus and jumped off the side of the island. The whirligig attached to the top of the device began to spin, and he maneuvered until he was right over the girl's head. With a swooping dive, he snatched her up and was back into the clouds again before she had time to scream.

"Excellent work, Larakin!" the captain cried. "Put her with the others for now."

Larakin nodded and shoved the struggling child before him until they reached the crumbling ruin that was the island's only structure. He took a huge brass key from his shirt and unlocked the door to the cellar.

"In you go, dearie," he ordered, giving the girl a push.

That made a dozen in the cell. The goblin horde would eat well this month.

"Let's go home, Larakin," called the captain.

"Aye, aye, sir."

With another ponderous turn, the island headed for its mooring. The hunt was done for now.

About the Author:

Rie Sheridan Rose writes many things. Her favorite genres to work in are horror, humor, and Steampunk. In her off-hours, she herds a sizable stable of cats. Her least favorite things about the quarantine have been its disruption of Pokemon Go and the pounds she's put on.

Blog: <u>The Bardabee Poet</u>
Twitter: <u>@riesheridanrose</u>

Unseen | G. Allen Wilbanks

Laura raked the soiled hay from the floor of the barn, piling it beside the wheelbarrow. She would cart it out to the composting heap later. For now, she need only move the mess out of the way as her husband, John, pitchforked the refuse out of the stalls before adding fresh straw.

As she worked, a pain lanced through her side. Laura ignored the discomfort as much as possible and continued to drag the rake over the ground. She did not think anything was broken, but John had struck her several times in the stomach and chest while in a blind rage two nights before and the bruises were unpleasant. Still, it could have been worse. It could always be worse.

"Would you fucking move?" John yelled at one of the horses.

The brown and white Paint shuffled back and forth in its stall but was refusing to be led out to the paddock where three other animals now grazed. John grabbed a short coil of rope from one of the wooded slats of the stall gate and lashed out at the stubborn horse's flank.

Please don't hurt the horse, Laura thought, but said nothing. She knew better than to draw her husband's attention when he was working himself into a mood. Best to be quiet, unseen. She stepped to the side, deeper into a nearby shadow and waited quietly for whatever would follow.

John whipped the horse again along its rear haunch with the rope. Once. Twice. Three times. He cursed and shouted at the animal to get out of the way. A rear leg flashed backwards, driving a metal-shod hoof hard into John's chest. The kick knocked him off his feet and sent him hurtling across the barn, arms and legs flailing until he landed on his back several feet away. He moaned loudly, then began to cough. Laura stayed frozen where she was, not rushing to his aid or even speaking to ask if he was okay. She knew if he got back to his feet, John would be looking for payback for this insult, and she did not wish to become the focus of that ire. If he didn't get up... well, that would be alright, too.

Laura watched with a vague sense of disappointment as her husband rolled over and pushed up to his hands and knees. He groaned again, hunching forward with his hands around himself, clearly in pain. He spat onto the ground and Laura thought she saw a flash of red in the spittle. She wondered if he was bleeding from the mouth, or maybe somewhere much deeper. Perhaps a fragment of broken rib had done some damage to his lung.

It hurts, doesn't it? she thought.

"Go call the doc," said John. He coughed and spat again. "I think that fuckin' horse got me good."

Laura did not move. Her husband remained on his knees, crying softly from the pain of his injuries. She thought he looked like one of those condemned prisoners in a medieval movie she had seen once, back bowed and head extended toward the executioner's block, resigned and waiting for the axe to fall.

"God damn you. Go get me some help!" he ordered.

Laura ran, but not to get help. She lurched forward into a sprint. She moved on impulse, trying to outrace her own conscious thoughts, acting before her fear could stop her. As she ran past John, she swung her right foot, letting the momentum of her forward progress drive her heavy work boot across the side of her husband's temple. It was a kick any professional athlete would have been proud of.

John's head was driven sideways, stopping only when it struck his right shoulder. Laura stopped and turned in time to see her husband slump forward into the dirt, unmoving. Suddenly exhausted, she let herself collapse to the ground, hugging her legs and staring at John's motionless body over the tops of her knees as she breathed out a long shuddering breath.

Laura remained in that position for several long minutes, waiting for something, anything, to happen. But John did not move. It did not appear that he would ever move again. She began to cry, but the tears she realized were not those of regret or sorrow, but rather of profound relief. A long, terrible ordeal had at last come to an end.

When she was reasonably sure that she had herself back under control, Laura crawled to John's body and searched for any signs of life. He was not breathing, and she could find no pulse when she touched his wrist or neck. He was gone.

Laura sat again, this time leaning back against one of the stall gates. She would need to call the police. Eventually. She did not want to hurry, however. It would not do for some eager paramedic to accidentally bring her husband back to life. The longer she waited, the less likelihood there was of that scenario occurring.

She wondered for a moment what she would tell the police, then decided on staying with the truth: a horse had kicked John and he died a few seconds later. The Sheriff would believe that, just as he had believed John when he insisted Laura's frequent cuts and bruises were the results of her own clumsiness. Long, painful years of personal experience had taught her that people often accepted the easy explanation when reality became too messy.

After a few more minutes had passed, Laura decided it was time to make that phone call. She did not want John's body to get so cold somebody might ask why she waited so long to get help. She climbed to her feet and sucked in a harsh hiss of breath as fresh pain pricked her ribs. She touched her bruised flesh gingerly.

"Asshole," she said to the body at her feet, then headed for the house.

About the Author:

G. Allen Wilbanks is a retired police officer living in northern California. He is a member of the Horror Writers Association (HWA) and has published over 100 short stories in Daily Science Fiction, Deep Magic, and many other anthologies, magazines, and online venues. He has published two short story collections of his own, and is the author of the novel, When Darkness Comes.

Website: <u>G. Allen Wilbanks</u>
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A Day at the Sea Park | Sheri White

The manatee drew big crowds, as did the killer whale. The front row loved it when Ramu would saturate them with seawater.

But a tragedy changed it all.

The investigation revealed that the rollercoaster was tampered with after inspection. The culprit was never found.

Bodies splattered to the ground; some landing in the aqua theater tank, the blood driving the killer whale into a frenzy and turning the water a pastel pink.

Crazed, the whale killed its trainer, pulling her down to the bottom of the tank. The audience ran screaming, horrified.

But one person stayed in his seat, smiling.

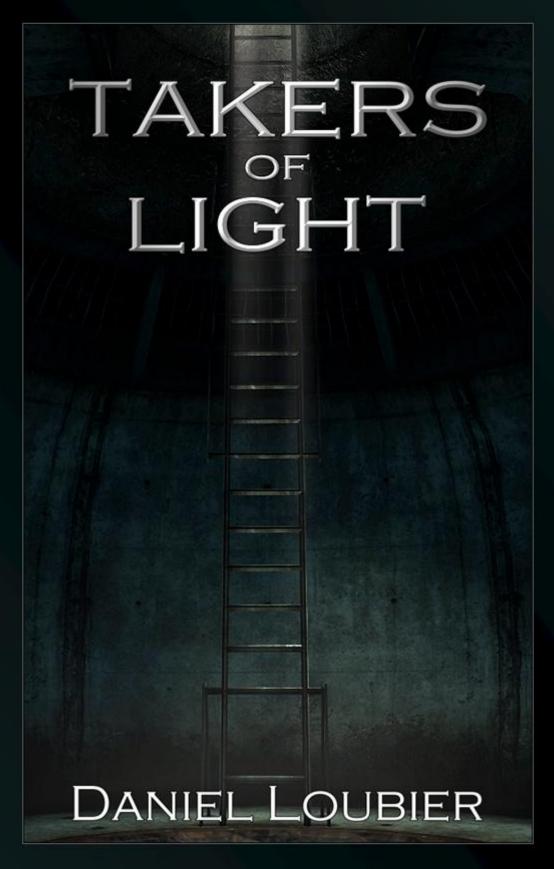
About the Author:

Sheri White's stories have been published in many anthologies, including *Tales from the Crust* (edited by Max Booth III and David James Keaton), *When the Clock Strikes 13* (edited by Kenneth W. Cain), and the upcoming *Tree Lighting in Deathlehem* (edited by Michael J. Evans and Harrison Graves) and *New Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* (edited by Jonathan Maberry).

Facebook: <u>Sheri White</u>
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Driven underground by those of the light...

Now known as The Dark Dwellers...



Available Exclusively on Amazon for Purchase or Borrow!

Vatsala The Water Spirit | Shashi Kadapa

There! There it was, the apparition in the flowing white saree, floating above the Ashtakoni Talav, well in the Lohagad Fort at Pune. Shiva, the security guard had been warned about it. It seemed to beckon him, disappearing into the waters as he went to it...

The first drops of rain had turned into a deluge, shrouding the fort ramparts in a thick mist that covered the countryside below in a suffocating blanket. Shiva, a WWI army veteran pulled his army-issue trench coat tight against the rain that struck him like bullets. He tottered out of his quarters near the well, struggling against the strong winds to warn picnickers to take shelter in the caves.

The fort was managed by the British regiment in nearby Lonavala hill station. It was the 1920s and wives and children of the British officers often vacationed in the hill station. Some of the younger children and staff members often trekked to the forts, making merry, and enjoying the breathtaking views.

His main task was to stop dejected, drunk, lovelorn people jumping from Suicide Point. Suicide of a British citizen was bad news, and when someone died, his Sergeant would shout at him for 'bloody sleeping on the job.'

The suicide point was a thin strip on the cliff informally called Vinchukada, Scorpion's tail, flanked by a sheer drop of a thousand meters into the backwaters of the Pawna River. Vinchukada was a favorite spot for suicides.

Built by Kings about 2000 years back, the Lohagad, the Iron Fort had changed ownership over the centuries. The village of Lohgadwadi nestled at the foothills and which Shiva visited for provisions and to drink mahua, country liquor brewed fresh from the mahua flowers.

Over the years, the fort had acquired a sinister reputation, complete with an urban legend about Vatsala, a female ghost. Visitors were advised against spending nights there.

An old villager told Shiva the tale. "Many centuries back, a chieftain guarded the fort. He had a beautiful daughter named Vatsala. The king, who was a tyrant saw her on a visit and wanted to violate her. She had to either agree or watch her father die."

The villager lit a beedi, and continued "In desperation, she jumped into the Ashtakoni Talav, a well in the fort complex and gave up her life. It was summer and the well was dry. The legends say that River Pawana rose in the well and received her. Her atma, her soul is trapped in the well and haunts the fort. The tyrant died later and is buried in the tomb near the well."

"Why does she come back?"

"Her soul is stuck in the well, the nether world. She seeks someone to guide her to the after world. The evil king watches and prevents her escape."

Shiva was skeptical about this story and smirked "It is an elaborate ruse to attract visitors to the fort."

The villager lashed out "Sipahie (soldier), just wait. She will appear and take you. Her image is carved on the well wall."

Shiva rued that rather than blame a ghost for the deaths, irresponsible weekend picnickers and hikers were to be punished. The visitors were young, careless, drank, smoked ganja- weed, acted promiscuously, and they imagined themselves as seasoned trekkers. He had even caught a few making love in the old Hanuman Darawaja, a temple of the monkey god Hanuman, and the old tomb in the fort.

He had lashed out at them "Show some respect. Kings and soldiers fought and died protecting this fort." His tough-soldier demeanor and his trusted Khukri were sufficient to quiet them.

As Shiva rushed out of his quarters, the wind howled and he struggled to move forward. Some of the hikers had made it to the cave and were laughing at the thrill of braving the elements.

Shiva shouted, "Is anyone missing?"

They looked around then answered "Sara and Richard have gone to Suicide Point."

Shiva turned back into the storm. A stout knotted rope ran from the fort's rampart to the beginning of the strip. There was nothing beyond. He grabbed the rope, hunched down and started forward. Through the rain and wind, he could dimly see the duo on the ground, clinging to a rock. The storm shrieked and plucked at them as they flailed their legs. They probably had a few seconds to live.

Suddenly, a white apparition rose from behind the couple, shrieking above the wind. Long hands reached out and tossed them from the cliff. The apparition turned towards him and he imagined it screamed "Jump!" before it disappeared.

In anger he shouted "Why do you kill? What had they done?"

Next morning, a search party went hunting for the bodies, and found no trace. Villagers said that Vatsala had claimed them.

The next few days were calm, bright, sunny, and brought hikers in droves. The deaths and the lurid tales recounted by the villagers inflamed the visitors. Shiva stood guard at the strip warning people to behave.

The tale of Vatsala was fascinating and Shiva wanted to confirm that the carved figure was indeed on the well wall. During a break, he went to the well and looked carefully at the outer walls for any carved figure. The placid waters were slightly murky. The well was very old and over the centuries, artisans had carved various figures of deities and stories from the Puranas on the outer walls. He had almost given up looking when a small carving of about four square inches caught his attention.

It was near the base and unlike the other figures made of granite, this was carved in marble and half covered in soil. He scooped out the mud and washed it with water from his water bottle. A beautiful figure of a woman stared back.

She had delicate features, rounded thighs and up thrust breasts with a saree draped over the shoulders. The figure looked back at him and their eyes locked. Shiva felt himself dragged inside the eyes.

A cohort of hikers ran across shouting and the spell broke.

After dinner Shiva slept in his hut. He woke with a start to the sound of anklets and an overpowering smell of decaying stagnant water. The figure from the marble carving hovered above his bed, her hands reaching out, dripping with water.

In a trance, he grabbed her arms and shrank back in terror when he grasped decaying, water-logged skin instead. She came forward thrusting her beautiful face, framed with full lips, straight nose and large eyes. For an instant, before he could react the face changed into a decayed mass with small fish and crabs crawling in her eyes and mouth. Then as suddenly it turned back to her beautiful self. He jerked awake drawing his khukri.

In a hypnotized and dreamlike state, he walked behind her as she led him to the well.

"Oh soldier! I am Vatsala. I beg you. Please complete your vow to protect the weak. Take me from this Nether World through the portal of light to the After World."

Lightning rent the night, hitting the ramparts and breaking off chunks of stone and mortar. The water in the well was a roiling mass of flesh, blood, and bloodied limbs. She jumped in and Shiva completely in her spell followed. His senses clogged with the stench of decaying flesh.

She held his waist and Shiva swam warding off the fishes and snakes that bit him. Vatsala gave him new strength and he fought with the beings.

Something cloying seized his leg and he glanced back to see long tentacles with suckers pulling him into a dark hole. He slashed at the creature with his Khukri and they dove deeper.

He expected to drown but found he could surprisingly breathe and see through the muddy waters. It seemed that Vatsala had given him new powers. Slashing, he fought through the mass of bodies that swarmed them. These were the souls and bodies of the countless that had died over the centuries. They were decayed with gaping skeletal mouths and bit him, disintegrating with the first blow.

After a long struggle, he could see a faint light at the bottom and they swam to it even as he kept cutting at the endless stream of beings grasping at them. Something huge and glowing blocked the light, it had a formless body, a large face, and fire rimmed eyes, with mouth bared and claws reaching out for Vatsala. It was the evil King and it caught her by the waist.

Swimming powerfully, Shiva went under the flailing arms and struck with his knife deep into the soft decaying belly. The creature let go Vatsala, turned and grabbed Shiva by the chest pulling him to its mouth.

Their struggle had brought them near the light at the bottom. He was at arm's length from the gaping mouth. Shiva lunged and thrust his Khukri into an eye. Bubbles of ooze erupted and the creature loosened its grip on him.

Shiva grabbed Vatsala and they swam to the light. Realizing that they were escaping, the creature turned, kicking up a cloud of mud and came after them, long claws thrusting out to shear and impale.

They made it through the light and broke into the tranquil and peaceful waters of the river. Shiva passed out.

Shiva woke to English and native voices that gathered around him. The fort ramparts stood far above, the sun shone brightly, and he was alive. He looked across the waters and saw the beautiful spirit, complete in her form, prancing on the waters. She looked at Shiva and bowed, folding her hands in a deep namaskar.

Yes. Vatsala's spirit was free.

About the Author:

Based in Pune, India, Shashi Kadapa is the managing editor of ActiveMuse, a journal of literature. His short stories have appeared or shortly due in print anthologies of asagrande Press, Anthroposphere (Oxford Climate Review), Alien Dimensions #11, Agorist Writers, Escaped Ink, War Monkey, Carpathia Publishing, Verses of Silence, and in online publications of Spadina Literary Review, Nymphs Publications, Schlock Webzine, and others.

Amazon Author Page: Shashi Kadapa

In Your Hands | Owen Atkinson

Irena slipped through the crowd like a stream passing between a bed of stones, eroding all that it touched. Her fingers darted in and out of pockets with smooth, practiced motions, barely touching the fabric at all. If the pocket or purse were too narrow to get out clean, a cut in the right place would drop the mark's coins into her waiting palm. No one ever noticed. Subtlety was her art, science and religion.

Tonight she artfully played the part of a downtrodden waif, identical in all relevant respects to half the surrounding folk. The rest had shown up for the only free entertainment in the dank undertown: the fight pit. Irena didn't care for the fights herself, but a better diversion for her work was hard to find.

The other half of the crowd, the ones not clad in rags and dirt, were here to bet. If Irena felt any guilt for the people she robbed, it wouldn't be for a gambler. The silver knife in her hand was all she had inherited from her mother, the only thing that selfish bat hadn't gambled away before the pox took her. Just as well; Irena may not have been born with a silver spoon in her mouth, but she found the knife suited her far better.

A dark, battle-scarred woman held up both hands, calling for silence.

"You came to see a fight," she began, "and have we ever got one for you tonight."

The crowd roared, eager for bloodshed.

"On my right, winner of twelve bouts, including a seven-round cruncher with Ramkor the Restless..." the crowd booed at the name of the pits' former champion, now floating downriver in a sack, "...Gavin the Lacerator!"

Cheers arose from the crowd, earning Irena another three purses' worth of coin as her knife slashed this way and that. She didn't bother to look at either of the fighters; to her, the only thing worse than gambling with coin was gambling with your life. Whichever fool got his guts ripped open tonight was of no interest to her, yet the announcement was impossible to ignore.

"And on my left, a newcomer to the pits. Let's see if he has what it takes to survive. I give you... Ornlu the Beast!"

Boos rose from the crowd, making it clear who the odds-on favourite was. A newcomer against a twelve-bout veteran? He didn't stand a chance, Irena thought as she lifted a few silver pieces from a jeering punter's pocket. But then her gaze happened to pass between two gamblers' bodies into the pit, and she changed her mind.

She'd seen Gavin once before, drenched in the blood of his foe and giving a primal scream of triumph. He was quick and vicious, a sick man who liked to play with his food before finishing it off. In short, everything the announcer wanted in a pit fighter. The other one, though, this Ornlu... he didn't look like a crowd-pleaser. Like Gavin, he was stripped to the waist with tight cords of lean muscle across his body, and carried a long dagger in his hand. There, however, was where the similarities ended.

While Gavin had his share of scars, Ornlu was covered in them. Deep gouges had bitten into his flesh far enough to crack bone, to pierce organs, and more times than Irena could count in a glance. His body and face had been used as a whetstone, and yet here he stood. There was strength in that, a quiet confidence that radiated out from under his lank rusty hair and rough beard. Gavin had come here to fight, but Ornlu was here to kill.

The announcer held up her hands again and then threw them down.

"Fight!" she snapped, and the two men threw themselves at one another. Gavin's dagger flashed past Ornlu's face just before they'd closed the distance, shaving a few hairs off his beard and forcing him back. That had been a warning shot; a split-second later and it would have opened his throat. Ornlu bared his teeth and crouched low, like a predator about to pounce.

Irena watched the two fighters circle each other, momentarily forgetting why she was there. Suddenly Ornlu sprang forward, slashing at his opponent's major arteries. Gavin sidestepped the first strike, ducked below the second, and with the blade pointed down he drove the pommel up into Ornlu's jaw. The scarred man fell back as the crowd cheered, but righted himself and rolled onto his feet. Even from up above the pit Irena could see that he was bleeding from the lip and furious.

Then he did something no one expected: he threw his dagger. A gasp rose through the crowd as the blade sought its target. An experienced fighter such as Gavin must have known the daggers weren't weighted for throwing, and so would likely miss him altogether. Nonetheless, he couldn't help but put his arms up to protect his face as the blade sailed past.

Ornlu seized the opportunity. Before the dagger had even left his grasp, he launched himself forward. In less than two seconds he closed the gap, just long enough for Gavin to realise the dagger had missed, but too soon for him to respond. Ornlu's left hand closed around Gavin's raised wrist, keeping the remaining dagger up out of the fight while he delivered two solid body blows with his right fist.

Gavin tried to fight back with his free hand, but Ornlu locked their arms and headbutted the bridge of his nose. Irena heard the crunch of cartilage even over the fevered crowd, followed by a howl of pain from Gavin. Unable to free his arms, blinded by tears and with blood running freely down his face, the seasoned pit fighter appeared to be out of options. But he wasn't.

The dagger slipped from Gavin's grasp and the crowd sighed with disappointment, taking it as a surrender. Only Irena seemed to notice that the blade fell pointing at Ornlu. As it dropped to waist-height, Gavin jolted forward with his knee, connecting with the dagger's hilt and driving the blade into Ornlu's gut. The crowd gasped again, uncertain of what they had just seen as Ornlu staggered back, two inches of steel digging into his belly.

Then something happened, something that when she thought back to it hours later, Irena still couldn't quite fathom. Ornlu lurched, every muscle in his body tensing at the same time. For an instant, he almost seemed to have grown in size. Inexplicably, the dagger fell from his abdomen onto the stone floor, as if he had pushed it out by sheer force of will. When Gavin reached for the blade, Ornlu suddenly struck out with a backhanded blow that sent his opponent sprawling.

Before anyone could even figure what had happened, Ornlu was atop his prey. With an animal ferocity he hammered the heels of his hands into the man's head, over and over until gore spattered his chest and all resistance stopped. Finally catching up to the moment, the crowd erupted in a mix of cheers and curses, depending on which way they had bet.

Eventually, Ornlu seemed to come down from his bloodlust, standing up and wordlessly heading off to collect his winnings. He barely seemed to notice the wound that would become the latest scar in his collection. But Irena had, and as he moved away from Gavin's corpse, she noticed another. A quick glance around the stands told her she wasn't the only one to see it, either: a deep wound across the beaten man's chest.

Claw marks.

Irena followed Ornlu as he left the pits. He was easy to spot even in a crowd, not having even put on a shirt or cloak despite the chill of the night. *Perhaps he didn't have any other clothes*, she thought. Such a notion might have touched her with pity had she not just witnessed him bludgeon a man to death with his bare hands. *Always act as if your marks are dangerous and they never will be*, she reminded herself. But somehow that didn't quite ring true in this case.

The scarred man passed through alleys, shantytowns and finally sewers, giving Irena a far more intimate experience of the city's undertown than she'd ever wanted. Eventually, he led her to an outflow pipe that passed out into the moonlight. Had Irena not already been clad in muddy rags to blend in, she might not have waded after him through the waste of an entire city. But she had to know who this man was... what he was.

A fresh breeze kissed her face just as the moonlight reached her. Though she was grateful to be out of that pipe, Irena covered her skin and moved into shadow, eager to remain hidden. As it happened, Ornlu hadn't much farther to go; before them stood the old Grantham sawmill, creaking slightly as the river turned its water wheel in the pale light. Piles of logs and tree trunks lay patiently waiting for the morning when the mill's workers would arise and split them one by one.

Except Ornlu didn't seem to want to wait. Rather than turn in to the small barracks where the other workers would be sleeping, he continued straight on to a chopping block, picked up an axe, and got to work. Irena watched bemused as he split log after log. Who chops wood in the middle of the night, especially when they've just won a small fortune in gold? But then she saw him miss an axe strike and not even react, for his ears had pricked up, eyes piercing the darkness. He wasn't working; he was waiting.

As if on cue, three burly figures marched up to the sawmill from the direction of the city. Irena immediately recognised them from the pits: beggars and thieves who had seen the claw wound on Gavin's chest. As they closed to thirty feet, Ornlu turned to face them, the axe held loosely in his hand.

"Took you long enough," he said in a deep, abrasive voice. "Something I can help you boys with?"

The middle of the three men took a step forward and pointed an accusing finger.

"We saw't you did in the pits," he drawled. "We knows what you are."

A tight grin flashed across Ornlu's scarred face.

"I doubt that"

"You's a beast! A Were!" the man exclaimed.

"And so you've come for my head," Ornlu finished. This situation did not sound new to him. "But I am no threat to you."

"Not yet maybe, but what abouts when the moon's full?"

"You mean... tonight?" Ornlu asked, gesturing over their shoulders. The men looked and sure enough, a full moon beamed down on the four of them. And yet the accused Were stood before them, perfectly human. Ornlu hefted the axe up and rested it on his shoulder.

"Let me explain something to you. The creatures you've heard of are the ones that failed, the ones too weak to control their nature. If I change, it's because I want to, or am forced to. And right now, I don't want to." He let the alternative hang in the air. Your move, he was telling the men.

The men's leader swallowed hard and took another step forward, raising the wooden cudgel in his hand.

"Turnin' in your hide'll fill our bellies for a month."

Ornlu responded by pulling the sack of coins from his belt and tossing it at their feet.

"My winnings," he explained. "So now you have a choice. If this is just about providing for yourselves, then take the coin and begone. But if it's blood you seek, come get it."

The three men exchanged glances, before the leader replied, "We'll take the gold, and your hide, monster!" The other two nodded in agreement, greed and bloodlust simmering beneath their lowered brows.

Ornlu sighed. "As you wish."

Irena covered her mouth in shock as the scarred man changed before her. The transformation took but a second; in a blink Ornlu was twice as broad and half again as tall, wielding the heavy log-splitter like a shortsword. Even as dark bristles of fur punched out of his skin, he was already moving. He hurled the axe into the leader's chest before launching himself at the next, springing forward with savage agility. With claws of black, he pierced the man's shoulder and tossed him into the still sawmill. The man's spine cracked like a musket shot, followed by a shrill scream of anguish.

The last man tried to run, but in a single leap Ornlu the beast closed the distance, landing hard on the man's back and driving him into the lever that operated the mill. With a click the water wheel connected to the mill's gears, setting the machinery in motion. Ornlu's jaws clamped down on the man's neck and tore his throat out, spilling a gout of blood across the grass. Irena stared in horror as the mill fed its paralyzed victim to the saw. An agonized shriek cut through the air as the helpless man was sawn in two, jets of his blood spraying all over the lumber pile.

The carnage had taken only seconds. Crimson dripping from his animal snout, Ornlu looked over to the thief in her hiding place, his feral eyes narrowing onto her position despite the darkness.

"And you?" he demanded, his voice a guttural snarl emanating from deep inside. "Do I need to kill you as well?" Irena flinched in her hiding spot but didn't reveal herself.

"I can smell you," he continued, "and the shit you followed me through to get here."

Irena shuddered to her feet and stepped out into the light. Remembering the silver knife, she drew the blade and brandished it at him. The Were paused.

"You really think that'll stop me?"

"No," she answered in a trembling voice, "but it'll hurt like hell."

The fact that he didn't move told her she was right.

"You didn't have to do that," she said, unable to keep her eyes from the scarlet-soaked mill. Ornlu shrunk back down into his human form.

"They wanted a monster," he replied. "They got one." He eyed her again. "And what did you want?"

"I just wanted to understand," she answered truthfully. "What you are, and who. Tell me, why did you come back here, after you'd won all that coin? Why chop wood in the middle of the night?"

"Because I said I would." Ornlu's eyes flicked regrettably to the mill owner's house, where candlelight was already visible. "Mr. Grantham was kind to me."

Without another word he walked away, leaving his bag of winnings on the ground. For a second Irena was tempted to take it for herself, but it felt too much like a gamble.

"You forgot your coin," she called after him.

"No, I didn't."

About the Author:

Owen Atkinson used to write marketing copy before he realized he'd rather just make stuff up. A fan of fantasy and true crime, he blends these into dark speculative fiction with a bit of gallows humor thrown in. He lives in Brisbane, Australia with his two fluffy cats who only sometimes sit on his keyboard.

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The River | Candace M. Meredith

They seldom speak of the incident. She most often; an attempt to nudge his memory. He does not fold; long aware of her attempts.

The grim creature came from the river; footprints dried in the hardened mud. The thing they cannot speak of was mostly skin and eyes; it peered from behind slits across what would be a face if it had one. It was akin to wearing a mask. The river seemed to give birth to it. The creature stood erect with elongated fingers and arms; skinny, waxy. They wondered if it had bone. It was not wet despite having emerged from the water. It didn't speak; there was no mouth for a voice to come from. It had a hole through its neck, and from it a tongue-like appendage ejected and grasped its prey; they suspected it's what happened to the neighbor's dog. The saliva must have caused the bone to deteriorate like some kind of snake bile.

"The dog dissolved." He spoke of it once and then acted as though he forgot. Martha knew better; Sam would never forget an incident like that. But he is too proud, can't explain it – even in his own head. Who would believe him if he could? So he chooses not to acknowledge it. The neighbor's cat also went missing. Martha no longer leaves the protection of her porch; the creature seems to be afraid of the sun. She wonders if the wax exterior would deteriorate and leave flesh exposed under the beating rays. Perhaps it would burn. Martha watches as the neighbors look first for Max and then for Tabitha. Martha would warn them not to go by the river if she thought they would listen. Perhaps they would listen, then gossip would spread. Martha wonders if any among them could explain the imprint it left in the mud. She hears a scream.

"That thing got another one, I 'spose?" Sam mocked and took a swing from his flask; he's been drinking harder since they saw that thing, blames the recollection on the booze.

"I don't drink," Martha retorts.

"It's something in the water, then." he muses nervously staring dead into her eye; hers stoic, his wide as saucers with hope that she'll absolve him of the memory.

"Yup," Sam says "they've seen it." A brief moment of clarity.

"Wonder who it ate this time," Martha replies, mildly perplexed.

"There's footprints," they hear as neighbor Ned gets his shotgun.

"Be better off bringing the sun." Martha intones.

"Won't be any sun 'til next week," Sam speaks candidly. "Let the man get his gun out, and when the cat comes back, I'll just say I told you so..." his mind retreating again.

He humors her.

But she doesn't give in.

About the Author:

Candace Meredith earned her Bachelor of Science degree in English Creative Writing from Frostburg State University in 2008. Her works of poetry, photography and fiction have appeared in various small presses. She also earned her Master of Science degree in Integrated Marketing and Communications (IMC) from West Virginia University. She currently lives in the Shenandoah Valley with her fiancé, son, daughter, six cats and three dogs.

Facebook: Candace Meredith



Vultures of the Aftermath | Heinrich von Wolfcastle

All things come in threes. The end justifies the means. The end justifies the means. Amen.

The men of my family are providers. We put food on the table—end of story. More than just a satchel swinging beneath the gut, we are patriarchs. We Greberts come from a long line of 'em. And when my father moved our lineage to the States, our fambly name came with him.

For centuries, we dug graves for the wealthy to bury their dead. Like my father before me, and his father before him, I learnt how to break ground with a shovel. But when you shovel soil day in and day out, the body has a way of wearing down on you. Sometimes it's the shoulders burning with each stab into that mud. Sometimes it's the back freezing on you and making it impossible to stand upright. Sometimes it's the knees, just aching from a long day diggin'.

I had worked for a few funeral homes in my day. Sometimes shoveling, other times doing a different kind of dirty work—dressing, casketing, or cosseting the dead. We Greberts ain't just diggers, you know; we're opportunity takers. And when I seen that the real money was in owning a funeral home, I saw an opportunity, and I took it.

The job required more bookkeeping than I would have liked, but the business of caring for the dead came easy to me—being from a long line of Greberts and all. I enjoyed overseeing the process: taking a corpse to be buried and presenting it back to its fambly with make-up and other tricks to cover up those hideous gashes and wounds that scar a body. A desairologist, they called me. A lot of it was just common sense, like tying the arms together behind the back when we presented 'em. Because, otherwise, their arms would stick up like they're reaching out to get you. Or sometimes using some good 'ole toilet paper and glue went a long way to fill in those missing pockets of flesh—good for bullet holes and all.

While I did the meetings with famblies and the planning and decoratin' pieces of it, my boys did the diggin' for me. Had to start 'em at the bottom, teach 'em about an honest day's work and all. There was Eric. He was the oldest of the bunch and reminded me of myself—hungry to learn more, to do more. He would be first in line to take over the business after me, and he had the wit to do it too. Whatever I did, he watched and learnt—no questions asked. He was real respectful like that.

Next in line was Peter. He was named after my father, and I hoped he would be more like Eric. But he was a shy boy—real gentle. I think he always wished to be in my role, meeting with the famblies and doing the consoling, rather than getting his hands dirty in the earth. But, goddamn it, Peter, the last thing a fambly wants when they're burying their dead is to have their mortician crying like a fag in front of 'em.

Then there was Beauregard. My boy Beau. Beau was born with some kind of clinical retardation, the doctors said. Now, I never quite understood it, because he seemed to be a fine boy until one day when he wasn't. But, accordin' to them doctors, Beau was a retard. Now, I tried to get him to do work for us, but he din't listen to me much. His brothers got him to do their work sometimes though. Just a little praise and Beau would be clapping and squealing, just pleased as can be that he made his brothers happy and all.

The business problems started early on with a big bank loan. We lived in a small town, and in a small town, people just don't die all that much. So, we'd miss one payment and before you know it, one payment cost as much as three. So, if people weren't passin' away, sometimes you had to help them along—just nudge 'em a little. It ain't all about work ethic; I had to teach my boys about shortcuts too.

The first one I helped along was old man Mathers. Mr. Mathers had lived well into his nineties, having long survived his wife—Mrs. Mathers—and was achin' to see her again. I knew Mr. Mathers well, and my boys were friends with his grandsons. So, when Mr. Mathers invited me over for a drink, I poured him a strong one and maybe even a strong second or third. I helped him to get into bed on his back and, wouldn't you know it, he died in the middle of the night smothered in his pillow. And just like that, he saved the business! He was a bit dehydrated when I went to work on him, but some wax took care of that. His boys shook my hand and had themselves a nice little burial.

No questions were asked at the next two or three funerals, but eventually the town constable came sniffing. I welcomed him into my parlor and answered all of his questions. He *knew* the principal business strategy I employed, but with the right private donation, he pursued other leads regardin' the mysterious accidents befalling our small town.

I encouraged a reg'lar line of business to be carted through our doors, and I enjoyed caring for those bodies. I made sure they wore their Sunday best when they returned to meet their maker—hair parted with the grain and all. Their famblies would cry when they saw how beautiful they looked. So, I never felt bad about my intention to eat well, especially after so many years of hardly eating at all. Eric had talked to me about how it was his time to take over the

business, that I done well enough to earn my retirement. But I just wouldn't listen—stubborn like that, we Grebert men are.

Once the constable could no longer be encouraged, a tragedy in the shape of a swinging shovel befell the back of his head. I was surprised to learn of it myself, and I imagined my boys would be mutually pleased when they heard the news. But, when I went to tell them of it, Beau was already squealing and clapping away, proud of the work he gen'rated for the business. Before long, we were no small business, and I stood on a mound meant to be a fortune. The end justifies the means, amen.

Now, they say the last sense to go when you die is your hearing. They say the ears will keep on ringing, pickin' up on any sounds around them. I don't know that I saw any evidence of that when I was building my—let's say—clientele. I remember lookin' some of 'em right in the eye and thinkin' that they were long gone--far away and anywhere but here. But, for me, yessir, the hearing was the last thing to go.

The day we paid back our loan to the bank, I was gearin' up to take my boys to a steak dinner worthy of our celebration. I put on my Sunday best, and Eric saw to it that he and the boys were dressed in their finest too. I was about out the door to meet the boys when I noticed a fire poker missing from the fireplace. Strange thing that a fire poker might go missing in the early evenin' on a summer day.

Like a fool, I went over to the fireplace to see if it was laying nearby, and I was overwhelmed by the sound of breaking rocks. I never saw myself fall, and there was no pain—no white lights and no angels—just breaking rocks, and then a lot of squealing and happy clapping and hollerin'. Damn fools had done me in! Meant to take my fortune before I could enjoy it, not realizing they'd have to pay for my funeral—a price for which they'd have to take out another dang loan from the bank! But, just like that, my boys—like their father and his father before him—became true patriarchs and providers for their fambly. And for that, I say, "Amen."

About the Author:

Heinrich von Wolfcastle writes by candlelight from his castle in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. An unofficial paranormal investigator and horror writer, his debut anthology of short stories titled *Screams Before Dawn* was called "an engaging page turner," by *Scream Magazine*. Though he lives the life of a recluse, he has been known to emerge from the shadows for Trick-or-Treaters on Halloween night.

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Paying Lip Service to Legends | John H. Dromey

Fairytale Princess Isabelle was strong-willed and fiercely independent. Priding herself on her natural beauty, she refused to apply skin lotions or wear makeup of any kind.

One blistering hot summer day, sans sunscreen, Isabelle spent all afternoon au naturel splashing around in a shaded pond on the palace grounds.

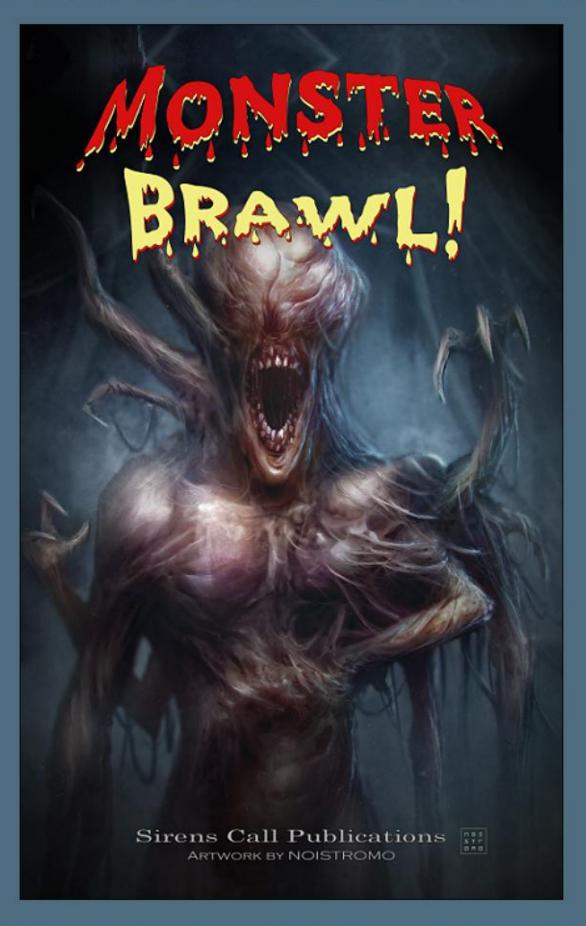
With a butterfly net, the princess caught a succession of bullfrogs and gave each a protracted kiss before tossing it aside.

"You'll never find a prince that way," another lady—in wading—chided. "You're wasting your smooches." "Au contraire! With climate change, what better organic way to soothe my chapped lips?"

About the Author:

John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri. He likes to read—mysteries in particular—and write in a variety of genres. His short fiction has appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Flame Tree Fiction Newsletter*, *Hybrid Fiction*, *Mystery Weekly Magazine*, several previous issues of *The Sirens Call eZine*, and elsewhere.

It's time to let the monsters out!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

On the Morrow | Elizabeth Nettleton

Kiera fled to the road, the uneven stones threatening to trip her every desperate step. Ahead, she could see curling tips of smoke peeking above the thatched cottages, and a scream rose in her throat. *No*, she thought, her hand on her lips, *there's still time*. There has to be.

Shops and blacksmiths replaced the cottages, and then the town square opened up around her. A crowd pressed together around a statue of a long-lost king, and in front of them, thick black smoke poured into the sky.

"Today, in this great year of 1645, we finally follow in the footsteps of our dear friend, Witchfinder General Matthew Hopkins. He does not tolerate heresy in this land, and neither shall we!" Doctor Markell declared. He stretched his arm out to the pyre, where the orange fire cackled as it consumed its offering. Kiera fell to her knees, her anguish lost within the cheers of the crowd. *Annabelle, sweet sister...*

"There is now one less witch in England!" the doctor yelled.

She could taste the blood in the air, an ancient kinship reduced to a metallic taste upon her tongue. Staring up at the doctor through her long black hair, Kiera imprinted his smile. Then she brushed the dirt from her knees and left the square.

"Did you hear that the Witchfinder General put sixty-eight witches to death during his recent visit to Bury St. Edmunds?" the doctor asked, his voice booming across the table. "Sixty-eight! How the town must have rejoiced when he rid them of that evil."

"How they must have rejoiced!" His wife Belinda echoed.

Kiera watched the couple from their garden, her fingernails tearing into her palm. She flexed her fingers, forcing herself to relax, and held her hand over the soil beneath her feet.

"Contrario mortem et malum," she whispered.

A fire alighted in the garden, turning the dirt into ash and licking the vegetables until its hunger was satiated. Kiera dragged her finger along the grass and the fire followed, making a path to the doctor's house.

"Do you smell something, darling?" she heard Belinda ask from the sitting room.

Kiera placed her hand in front of her body. "Lateo," she said.

Magic became her cloak, concealing her from human eyes. Belinda and the doctor stepped through the doorway and Belinda screamed.

"Fire!" she cried. She filled a watering can and poured it upon the flames. The fire danced under the water but did not extinguish.

The doctor walked along the flaming path, fiddling with the hem of his coat. He knelt beside the ashen ground and placed his hand over the fire. It turned purple as it leapt at his skin, and he pulled his hand back, frowning.

"Curious," he murmured.

Kiera went to the doctor and kissed his cheek. The fire died upon the ground, and the ash became dirt and grass once more. Belinda blinked stupidly and raised a hand to her forehead.

"Edmund, darling, what are you doing out here in the garden?" she asked.

The doctor spun on the spot, his eyes wide. "The fire is gone!"

"What fire?"

"There was a fire right here! It burnt our vegetables, and made a path to our house..."

"Darling, I'm confused," Belinda said slowly. "There's no fire. Look, our vegetables are fine."

She pulled a thick orange carrot from the ground and the doctor examined it. Sweat pricked upon his forehead.

"This morning was very exciting, my dear. Perhaps I should lie down," he said.

His wife nodded, unconvinced, and walked back into the house. The doctor paused, then pulled another carrot from the ground. The vegetable turned to ash in his palm. He dropped it and tried to wipe the soot from his hands, but the dark stain could not be moved. Kiera pressed her mouth against his ear.

"You burnt the wrong witch, doctor. The mark is upon you, and you shall feel every part of the fear and pain that Annabelle Edwards did. That is my promise to you. On the morrow, you shall burn."

"There are witches in this town, and we must get rid of them before they kill us all!" the doctor screamed. His face shone with sweat.

A crowd collected before him in the village square. The morning chill urged them to return home, but they resisted, their eyes following the doctor as he paced in front of them.

"I was warned...in a dream...that this town is more infected with evil than I ever dared suspect. So, while it pains me to make such a decree, we must test each woman to ensure we capture every witch. If you are a woman, step forward. Yes, girls too. Hurry now!"

The townsfolk glanced at each other, and the women reluctantly formed a line. Doctor Markell walked in front of them, inspecting each for blemishes. A teenage girl with a red birthmark under her eye fidgeted nervously.

"The mark!" the doctor screamed. He fumbled inside his bag and pulled out a large, crudely made needle.

"Come to me, girl. I am going to prick your mark," he said, his words tumbling over one another. "If you find it painful, you are innocent. If you feel no pain, you are a witch and will be burned immediately."

The vicar, a graying man with hooded blue eyes, pushed his way through the villagers and placed his hand upon the doctor's shoulders. He stared down at the crowd, and his gaze lingered on Kiera for one brief moment.

"There will be no punishment for heresy until we have conducted legal trials. Accuse who you will, Doctor, and we shall hold a trial for each after church tomorrow. If I had been here yesterday, I would have advised you to do the same with Miss Edwards. Alas, I was not. The sentence was handed down while I was in London." The vicar's expression hardened.

"Tomorrow is too late. We must burn them today!"

The doctor's eyes rolled wildly, and the vicar leaned forward. "Careful doctor, or you yourself may be accused. Go home. Rest. We can discuss your list of the accused later."

Doctor Markell bit his lip until a thin line of blood fell upon his chin, then nodded. The vicar led him to Belinda, and the crowd followed them with their eyes, fear and confusion painted across their faces.

"On the morrow, doctor," Kiera called. The doctor's head jerked in her direction, but he could not find her in the sea of voices.

"On the morrow," he croaked. He twisted his hands around his belt. "On the morrow."

Belinda almost carried the doctor up the hill, her slight body bundled beneath his arm.

"You mustn't despair," she comforted her husband. "The witches shall be found."

Kiera trailed at a distance, her hands tightened into fists. This doctor knew Kiera and her sister; he had even treated them before they developed their powers. But the words of a madman, this bloodthirsty Witchfinder General, seemed to have embedded themselves into his soul until his once gentle hands had become hard and cruel.

No more, Kiera vowed. You shall kill no more.

Kiera waited as Belinda led her husband into the cottage, then crept outside the kitchen window. "Incendium," she commanded.

Fire leapt from the stove, its flames blue and orange. Belinda raced into the room and her eyes widened.

"Edmund, fire!"

The doctor grabbed his wife's shoulders. "You need to leave this place. Now. Go to the village and warn them that the witch is at our house!"

Belinda nodded and sprinted out the door. Kiera met her outside with a smile.

"Obliviscatur," she said, running her fingers through the air above Belinda's head. Belinda frowned. She took a few deep breaths, and then noticed Kiera.

"Oh, hello Miss Edwards. I'm afraid I must go; I need to buy some more potatoes from the grocer. Shall I see you at church tomorrow?"

"Yes, you shall. Have a pleasant trip!"

The doctor's wife walked down the hill, her arms swinging clumsily at her side. Kiera watched her for a moment, then turned to find the doctor staring at her from the doorway. Thin tendrils of smoke curled around his head.

"I saw what you did," he croaked. "I saw what you did to my wife. You will burn for your sins, witch."

"No," Kiera said coolly. "But you will, doctor."

She held her hands in front of her and the doctor rose into the air. He kicked wildly, panicked, and flew back into the house. His head cracked against the cottage wall.

"My sister was good and kind," Kiera whispered as she walked to him. "She used her powers to help people. She healed everyone that she could, and she protected people on their travels. And you *burned her!*"

The fire in the kitchen crackled loudly. Doctor Markell stared up at her, the whites of his eyes glowing through the smoke.

"Please, have mercy," he begged.

"I will show you the same mercy that you showed my sister."

The doctor's eyes filled with tears, but whether they were from the smoke or fear, Kiera could not tell. She held her arms out to the side and drew all the strength she could into her core. Purple mist curled over her, twisting around her arms and sparking upon her fingertips. Pressure built inside her until her hands shook, then she opened her mouth and screamed. Fire burst from her hands and landed against the sides of the house.

"Perdere," she shouted.

The doctor scrambled to his feet and ploughed into her, knocking them both off-balance. The flames lost their intensity for a moment, and the doctor grinned.

"Ah, snuff out the witch to snuff out the fire, eh?" He threw himself on top of Kiera and placed his hands around her throat. Kiera raised her hands to hit him, but none of her blows made him loosen his grip.

"Do you want to know the funniest thing? I asked your father for her hand in marriage, many years ago now. He thought I was too old. So, after your father died, I asked her myself. I thought she would say yes, but she didn't." The doctor's eyes narrowed. "She spurned me."

"So, here's what I want you to take into your eternal damnation," he continued. He lowered his face to her ear. "I never knew that your sister was a witch."

A fierce anger burned under Kiera's skin. "Lateo!" she choked out. The enchantment covered her, hiding her in plain sight, and the doctor released her in surprise. She sprang to her feet, adrenaline compensating for her body's weakness, and the doctor snarled.

"Get back here, witch!" he roared.

Kiera steadied herself against the wall. "Sanguis!"

Invisible daggers dragged themselves down the doctor's chest, staining his doublet with bright red blood. The doctor screamed and fell to his knees.

"Don't worry, doctor. That pain just means that you're not a witch!" Kiera squealed. She walked over to him. The flames were staying back for now, waiting for her to give the command, but she could tell they were hungry. Soon, my princes. Soon.

"Annabelle was my closest friend, yet she never told me that you proposed to her. That is what I want *you* to remember as you go to your grave; the woman you obsessed over for twenty years cared so little for you that she didn't even think your proposal was worthy of being gossip."

Her words were lashes upon his face, drawing more tears from the whimpering doctor.

"Hell is too good for you, but I am sending you there anyway," she said. She lifted her hand and flames jumped onto the doctor's clothes.

"No!" he screamed.

Kiera bundled power into her hands and pushed an orange orb of light onto the doctor's chest. A force tightened around his arms until they were pinned behind his back, and his legs slammed together. She lifted her hand and he floated above her, writhing against his unseen bindings.

"What are you doing?" he asked, his voice hoarse.

"Burning you at the stake."

A stream of urine fell from the doctor's breeches. "I'll do anything. Anything! Don't kill me, please!"

"I'm sorry, doctor, but Annabelle was the kind one in our family."

"Mercy! Mercy!"

Kiera pushed her hands forward one final time and the cottage erupted into flames. Smoke poured from the chimney, and fire climbed the side of the house to devour the thatched roof.

"Mercy..."

People collected at the bottom of the hill, pointing at the fiery cottage. Kiera strode through the flames and ran to them, her skirt in her hand.

"Belinda! Oh, Belinda, your home!" she gasped.

Belinda's mouth fell open and she raced up the hill, the townsfolk close behind her. They reached the house and Belinda fell to her knees. "Edmund!" she screamed.

A group of women huddled over Belinda, stroking her face and murmuring comforting words. Four men from the village pushed against the door until it tore open, and found the doctor curled against the fireplace. They lifted him together and carried him outside, lowering him gently onto the grass.

"Is he...?" Peter, the town's butcher, asked.

An elderly woman named Dana knelt beside the doctor and placed her fingers on his wrist. She waited, then slowly shook her head. Somewhere behind them, Belinda wailed.

"What's he got in his hand?" Peter asked.

Dana opened the doctor's hand to reveal a piece of parchment, somehow unburnt.

"Is it in the doctor's handwriting? What does it say?"

"Aye, it's in the doctor's handwriting. I know his lettering well," Dana replied, frowning. "It says, 'peccavi.' What does that mean? Was the doctor's death by his own hand?"

"That we shan't know until the police examine the scene," the vicar said. He parted the crowd and crouched beside the doctor.

"Why would he do this?"

"The doctor was a troubled man," the vicar said. He took the note from Dana and placed it carefully inside his pocket. "We saw that yesterday, and one of our own paid the price for it. I want to hear no more talk of witches in this part. If you suspect heresy, I want you to come to me first." His large blue eyes fell on Kiera. She raised her chin and returned his stare.

The vicar paused, then pulled himself to his feet. "I shall see you all at church on the morrow. We will perform the funeral after the service."

The crowd offered their condolences to Belinda, who sat upon the grass, her eyes glassy.

"On the morrow," she whispered. She looked up at Kiera, and something flickered across her face. "Yes. On the morrow."

About the Author:

Elizabeth Nettleton studied Law at the Queensland University of Technology, Australia, and now lives in Oxfordshire, England, with her family. She enjoys writing dark fiction and horror, and her work has been included in The Sirens Call eZine, Trembling with Fear, and the "Forgotten Ones" and "It Calls From The Forest" anthologies by Eerie River Publishing.

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Lantern in the Snow | Marge Simon

This is a night that won't leave me alone. I can't sleep, so I grab my parka for a walk along the water. Ice spiders come with the fog, spin rainbows in the chilly air.

Someone is playing a jazz harp, forms move in the flickering light. I stop to watch, but they turn to shadows.

I come to a lantern full lit on a wall covered in snow. Gazing into it, I see a woman's form. So strange, a thing like this. I touch it, my fingertips chase her reflection in the glow of the cold glass. She drifts there, this ghostly doll, beyond my reach, her face lit with something beyond words, familiar and not. Her image reminds me of a former lover, Iris. A hellion in bed, she was. Quite inventive too, crazy about me—but I was young. I said goodbye, she screamed a curse—and that was that. A stream of others took my fancy. Mesmerized, I watch as the flame within the box flickers out.

The sea bucks in a mad frenzy. A passionate goddess, copulating with the rising wind.

Now I can smell Iris' perfume, feel her breath upon my neck. I run forward to meet her as she bids, into the icy waves.

About the Author:

Marge Simon is an award-winning poet/writer. Her works have appeared in Daily Science Fiction, New Myths, Polu Texni, Clannad, Silver Blade and four pro anthologies in 2018. She is a multiple Stoker winner and Grand Master Poet of the SF & F Poetry Association.

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A Crow in an Alley | J. David Thayer

He looked around himself. All he surveyed was superficial and poorly executed besides. A fractured and then reassembled mosaic of some once familiar place the whole of which was now all but unrecognizable. Strange and inexplicable hues. Counterfeit objects crafted by unskilled artisans. Rushed and without care. As if all the world were temporary and purposed solely to execute some ruse upon an intended fool who had not yet arrived. The fact that he was standing there in the midst of this was equally surreal. A single living prop added to a collection of slapped together two-dimensional set pieces assembled onto a squalid exterior soundstage. A low budget movie set without actors or a director of even a film crew. Not a soul to be found in any direction. What the hell was this?

Thomas tried to retrace his steps as far back as he could manage but this was a difficult enterprise. The details in hand were fuzzy and unsequenced and utterly nonsensical. If there were any meaning to any of this it remained squarely beyond his reach. He needed to think. He steadied himself at the railing and then he added the discovery of a railing to his mean list of established facts. Had a railing always been there? Uncertain. It may not have existed until he needed it to exist, but that was a ridiculous notion and also off topic. Back to the matter at hand: understanding where he was and what events had led him here. Now comparatively grounded, hand still on the railing, Thomas began to sort his splintered memories into separate piles. From these he constructed the following crude timeline:

First came the laughs and the drinks and the conversations. A vague sense of things going very well. He was on his game and he was charming. Made impressions. Scene change and it was later. He was heading home and it was very dark on the road. Wheels on the shoulder. Then came the accident. Next the screams and the sirens and the lights and the people trying to talk to him. After that, the ambulance and then the rolling on a gurney through a hallway flooded with light and lights. More people trying to talk to him and talking to each other and frantic movements and desperate and invasive procedures. All the while within himself a growing numbness and a sensation of slipping. His fingers clawing to hold on but to what he could not identify and neither did his actual fingers grab at anything at all. His will could no longer direct his limbs. Panic. Eventually a different light. Somehow a spacer was inserted into the narrative to allow for an undetermined stretch of elapsed time. Here some event occurred that was now gone from memory entirely. Finally a darkness and in it there was nothing. And then his consciousness awoke in this place. Not a dream. Nothing at all like a dream.

Suddenly Thomas came to understand where he was. At least part way. The railing that might not have been there before but certainly was there now gave the thing context. A fixed point from his past connecting him to other memories. He knew that railing. A tactile visitation out of his ancient days both confusing and alarming. He felt of the railing again. His fingers remembered more. Now he was even more certain and yet all the more in the dark. Why here and how and what now?

Thomas stood on the porch of his childhood. Yet it was not that porch. The steps were correct. Certainly the railing was exact. There was a door leading into what would have been his apartment but he understood that the door was false. It would not open and there would be nothing behind the door if it did. He did not try to knob. Also on the porch a potted plant, just where it should be, but twisted and angry and flat. He looked to the sky and its coloration moved from a yellow on the horizon up to a deep vermilion and then burgundy and finally a vacuum of utter blackness beyond that. Flaming bricks of sulphur fell to the ground here are there like so many toxic meteors. Dread began to gnaw at his soul, if indeed one remained in his possession. This place was either Hell or he was back in Hawthorne, California. Neither idea suited him.

He descended the steps and walked back into the alley. Carports and grease. Bits of splintered glass and garbage and indecipherable graffiti. A malignant copy of what once served as Tommy's de facto playground, right before his family relocated overseas and never returned. A place of bullies and beatings and sometimes worse. Out of every crack in the concrete sprang up thorny weeds of all sorts. Strong stalks and blackened seed pods and crops of hate. How many years had it been since he had even thought of this place? Another flood of old memories washed over him and none of them cherished. Many things had happened here that informed the man he would become. It all started right here. He looked as far down each end of the alley as he could squint but he saw no other creature. All was vacant and silent and exotic and void of comfort. On the edge of complete despair, a voice called down from above.

"Greetings, sir. You have the look of one who is lost. Welcome."

Thomas looked up and found a solitary crow perched atop a tarred and rotted telephone post. Once its crooked crossbeams might have supported wires, presumably, but this only added to the strangeness of it all. Such instruments were useless here.

"Why, hello there! Yes, I daresay I am. I beg your pardon, but am I speaking with a crow of all things?" Thomas laughed to himself. "Incredible! And what is your name, sir?"

"I am a crow today and today has many hours. My name is too old for you to utter but you may call me Hector."

"Hector, then. Where am I?"

"Always the most obvious questions with your kind. I am certain you know well enough."

"I take it this is not Heaven then?"

The bird ruffled slightly and adjusted its feet.

Thomas laughed again. He had a vague sense that things were not going well and he was not on his game and he was not making an impression. And he did not feel charming at all. The ancient rook cocked its gnarled head and said nothing. Hell seemed the more plausible possibility on the table and an unjust one. Thomas began pleading his case to this unlikely emissary. An absurd option and his only option.

"Right. Well, I can't imagine why I am here. I am a very good person."

Nothing.

"I've known far worse, I can tell you that! I could draw up quite a list. Generations of awful people long gone ahead of me should be populating this entire neighborhood. And where are they?"

Not a word.

"This is not justice! I am here while more egregious offenders against humanity are not? Me? Me! How? I volunteered much of my time in service to my community."

Nothing.

"Gave to many charities."

Nothing and a loud nothing.

"Kind and helpful to my neighbors!"

The same.

"I did far more good in my life than bad, add it all together. That has to count for something! How can a few errors in judgment render the whole of me? Point to person who never made a mistake, if you can. Otherwise I demand to be set loose!"

The crow called Hector sat motionless. Thomas began to wonder if the bird had ever said anything to begin with. Maybe he had projected a conversational ghastly fowl, stereotypical to these surroundings, in the same way he possibly projected the familiar hand railing. And if the crow had bloomed out of his own understanding, of course it could not answer questions beyond whatever reasoning Thomas could assign to it. Sanity was hard to measure just now. But hallucination or not, the haggard crow was the closest thing to company available in that apocalyptic alley. Thomas pressed on.

"Right! Well, I must say. If this is in fact Hades, it isn't at all what I would have imagined. I know this place, for starters. And beyond that, it's abandoned! A bloody ghost town minus ghosts!" He laughed again. "No one is here at all! Present company excluded, sir."

The crow could indeed speak and it did so again. A lyrical voice of doubled octaves and equipped with perfect diction.

"Many are here and you will meet some of them soon. Eventually you will meet them all and countless times. There is no need to hurry. Today has many hours and there is no end of days beyond this one."

Thomas's hair and Hector's feathers were stirred by a heated wind coming from what was once called the north. A stench was on the air, foul and old. Full of decay. Notes of pain. It passed as a breeze. Thomas resumed.

"Well, I am at a loss for what comes next." He laughed again and searched his new friend for signs of understanding. Hector offered none. This was how Thomas spoke to peers and colleagues and even adversaries during uncomfortable situations. A veneer of merriment tended to put the other party at ease no matter the unpleasant business transacting. But the technique was not working and Hector was not uncomfortable.

"What should I do, Mr. Hector? Should I venture out of this alley and onto the main streets? Search out companions? Or should I stay here where at least I'm safe?"

"Safe?" The rook cocked its head again. "It does not matter whether you linger or wander. You will do both many times and always meet the same ends."

"Yes, I see." This was a lie. "Well, as I was saying. Considering what one hears about this place, I can't say it's anywhere near as bad as one imagines. You should hear the tales, Good Hector!" He laughed again and heartily this time. "I mean, this is nothing pleasant I grant you. But if this is eternity, so be it! One could do much worse. Oh, I think I'll learn to get along well enough. Better than most, I can assure you! I'm a survivor, you see! Made myself the man I am today."

"Indeed you have. Now you are coming to it at last."

"Hard work and resiliency, sir! Adapt and one survives! Yes, Mr. Hector. Let me get settled and learn the ways of this world and over time I think I should manage just fine!"

This he declared emphatically and he laughed once again and for the very last time.

"No?"

The crow looked at Thomas.

"No."

What was a bird for today remained stony and stoic and abruptly ended their acquaintance. Hector spread its ragged black wings and lifted from its post. Off it flew with slow elongated flaps, loping across the fiery atmosphere, never looking back. Thomas watched until its diminishing image became a black speck against the melting sky and continued watching until it was gone altogether. Until he was alone in the alley once again.

But he was not alone for long.

New noises began to grow off in the distance and from all directions. Soon a relentless cacophony of wailing began to impale his new set of ears. Thomas was suddenly afraid these sounds alone might portend a tale of terror far eclipsing all the stories he had mentioned and summarily dismissed only moments before. But it was too soon to be certain. Today had many hours and there was no end of days beyond this one. One by one the familiar pieces of stagecraft began to dissolve and reveal in jigsaw an underpinning landscape to complement the burning sky. Another welcoming to the neighborhood would soon begin in earnest.

About the Author:

J. David Thayer is an educator living in Texas. His works have appeared in 24-Hour Short Story Contest (2nd Place), The First Line, The Last Line, Fantasy/Sci-Fi Film Festival, Flash Fiction Magazine, Bewildering Stories, 101 Word Stories, Tall Tale TV, Black Petals, Farther Stars Than These, Terror House Magazine, 50-Word Stories, The Drabble, 365 Tomorrows, Scarlet Leaf Review, and Pilcrow & Dagger. nothingsignificantcreations@gmx.com

Here Comes the Sun | Sheri White

Allison remembered when she practically prayed for warm sun. On those days when ice and snow covered the landscape, she dreamed of the beach, margaritas on the patio, and her polished toes in the sand.

Now the sun hadn't stopped shining for months, even at night. The earth was dying without rain. Experts tried to explain what was happening, but it didn't matter what they said. Life was ending, and nobody could stop it.

Allison grabbed a beer from the fridge. It was warm; electricity failed weeks before. She winced at the bitter taste and dreamed about ice and snow.

About the Author:

Sheri White's stories have been published in many anthologies, including *Tales from the Crust* (edited by Max Booth III and David James Keaton), *When the Clock Strikes 13* (edited by Kenneth W. Cain), and the upcoming *Tree Lighting in Deathlehem* (edited by Michael J. Evans and Harrison Graves) and *New Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* (edited by Jonathan Maberry).

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Digging Up the Dead | Edward Ahern

The hardest part of digging up the dead is the paperwork. Greedy descendants, stuffy ministers, meddling historical societies, all filing motions and complaints. Getting final approval from the town or city was the easiest, they just wanted the low rent corpses gone to make way for taxable buildings. This little thirty-acre cemetery was known as a shooting gallery for drugs, which made things easier.

Thanks to an on-line course and a short exam I'd been recently licensed as a funeral director, my family's calling for generations. Once I'd won the contract and fought off the do-gooders for a few months, my two crews could finally begin gouging out graves with back hoes. I stood by, close enough to smell the mold and wet rot in the turned earth. The cemetery wasn't quite old enough to be historically significant, but plenty old enough for caskets and contents to have decomposed.

One morning I was supervising a tractor trailer offloading stacks of 2x2x4 foot wooden boxes. Nice raw-pine homes for the evicted. The corpse bits we could find would fit snugly into them, with a little cramming. I shifted my feet. I needed to tally the boxes and pay the trucker, but the longer I was away from the diggers the more likely it was that they would find and pocket something valuable, like a diamond ring. And I hung onto all the souvenirs.

"Can you work a little faster?"

The truck driver, who ran his own fork lift, kept his expression stoic and said nothing. His face was the color and texture of overcooked oatmeal, and I wondered if he wouldn't soon be joining those I was disinterring.

Ten minutes later, boxes stacked, I was able to go back into the cemetery and perch like a vulture as my crews dug. I hadn't asked them for any paperwork when I'd hired them, illegal aliens were less likely to report some of my shortcuts. Like having them sleep on site so I could work them a little longer.

Just then, the tines of the closer backhoe scoop struck metal.

"Un Momento, Tomas!" I yelled. I loped over to the back hoe and stared. Two boxes, blacker than the dirt around them, were partially exposed. I jumped into the hole for a closer look. The boxes shined silver where the blade had scraped them.

The smaller box could have held a fancy hat, the larger one a midget. *Dumb-assed luck*. I directed Tomas with my fractured Spanglish and gestures. "Don't crush them. Set your scoop lower and pick them up with the dirt. Then bring the load over to my shed."

Tomas stared at me with amiable incomprehension, but with more gestures and broken Spanish I was able to get the boxes picked up and moved. Once at my shed I hosed them down, then took out my pen knife and scratched the bigger box. The soft metal looked like either sterling or coin silver, and either way worth a lot. It was time to get some advice, and I made a phone call.

"Bună zuea bunica"

"Speak English, Anton." Her voice rasped of too many Romanian cigarettes, and I could almost smell the burnt tobacco and bad breath.

"Hello, Grandma. I just found two silver boxes- one small, one large."

"Tell me you haven't opened them!"

"Not yet. Probably a hundred years old, so no knowledge of the present."

"Good. You're wearing it?"

"Of course," I lied.

"Use the gimmick I taught you. It has to be an agreed bargain, even if it's a bad one."

"Okay."

"Remember what I taught you- they can take possession only at night, and will try and steal back their bones."

"I remember Grandma."

We talked about family for a few minutes and hung up.

I left the silver boxes where they lay and walked over to my camper. It took me almost fifteen minutes to find the silver medal and chain. The design on the medal was not Christian, but a far older rune. I put it on, went back to the shed, and took a closer look.

Both boxes had stamped images on their top sides, including the rune I now wore and an image of the St. Benedict medal. They were locked, but the iron locks had rusted through and broke off in my hands. I opened the hat box first and stared at a skull with a brick stuck between its teeth and down into its throat.

Well hello there. Somebody really didn't like you.

I pried open the bigger box and found the rest of him, legs bent backward and broken at the knee so the body would fit in. A black metal spike stuck up between some ribs and a quick scrape told me it was also probably silver. There were no remnants of clothes, so he'd been buried naked, and no name recorded anywhere.

I sat down for a second to think things through, then got up and checked the cemetery records and grave site map. Somebody had freeloaded, burying the two boxes unmarked between two legitimate graves.

So no records, no heirs to worry about. Found money.

I drove over to the stack of pine boxes, pulled one off, and drove it back to the shed.

You're going to get a proper, almost Christian burial, son, not that you'll like it much.

Grandma had repeatedly told me that strigoi could only be handled during the day. I pulled the silver spike out and set it aside, then grabbed the rib cage and shoe-horned it into the pine box. The arm and leg bones came loose as I tried to move them, and I wound up cramming them in along the sides. He'd been a big sucker, and when I tried to put the skull in, it wouldn't fit. I pulled out the brick, used it to crack some ribs, crammed the skull into what had been the guy's stomach cavity and stuck the brick back between his teeth. Then I picked up the bigger silver box and tipped it so all the little hand and foot bones rolled into the wood box. As I reached for the lid the bones settled, as if they were getting more comfortable.

I nailed the lid on the box and used a dye marker to write John Argentclad on the lid. He wasn't going to get recorded anywhere, but I didn't want my crew asking questions about an unmarked box. *Requiescat in pace, buddy.*

I set John's box outside next to my shack, and wrote "Do Not Touch" and "No Toque" on the lid, and chained it to a tree.

I maybe should have left the silver spike in place. Tomas dropped off his backhoe, stone dead, a week later. He'd been pale and increasingly disoriented for several days. My new friend John had decided to make trouble. I called the cops, reported the death, and arranged for Tomas' shipment back to Mexico. I'm not heartless. They briefly questioned me, but there was no apparent injury or trauma. Not apparent to them anyway.

When, six mornings later, Cesar came out of his tent looking like he'd pissed half his brain away, I called him over to my shed.

"Come in, Cesar, and shut the door behind you."

"Jefe?"

His tone was subservient, but his belligerent eyes gave him away.

"You know what Cesar knows, and Cesar can speak some English. So listen up. I know what you are, and how you suck out our brain functions, but not what to call you."

There was silence for half a minute, then what had been Cesar shrugged. "You titled my remains John, that will do."

"A couple questions, please, John, before we get into it. Why are you called a vampire when what you mostly drain is electrical impulses and spinal fluid?"

"Spinal fluid? Ah, the mind's life water. Because your kind stopped trying to figure us out once you learned how to imprison us."

"What happens with the energy you take? Your body is never reanimated."

"You have perhaps guessed the answer. The current carries a life essence that keeps my own spirit active. I draw it out and feed."

"Okay. John, I released you so we can do something together."

The was-Cesar- now-John took a step toward me, but stopped, staring at the medal on my chest. Even if he could have tried to hurt me, Cesar's wasted mind wouldn't be able to coordinate much. His eyes were focused hate.

"You think you know me, Romany. Run away before I consume you."

"John, John, all that dirt has muddied your mind. If I pop the silver spike back into your skeleton today, and stick you in the silver boxes before dark, you're back to eternal starvation. Do you really want that?"

His eyes shifted. The hate was still there, but I could see intelligence churning. "If you were going to do that you wouldn't tell me. What is it YOU want?"

"Ah. You've had a really long time to get familiar with this cemetery. I need to learn where the valuables are buried, which sadly dead ones I should focus in on. I want jewelry of course, old coins from the eye sockets, old rosaries, but as importantly antique mementos like silver picture frames and watches. If you tell me that I'll put you in a prime feeding location that will last you at least a half century."

"I have no need of your help."

"You're such a shitty liar. We both know that you're bound to within a couple hundred yards of where you're buried, and that you can only take over one of us after dark. Even if I don't re-imprison you, your pine box would be moved to a remote wooded area where you'll get to occasionally suck out possums. If you help me, I'll put you on a site with a dense population of human goulash."

John stared at the medal. "Your people did this to me."

"Not my people. We Romany have a live and let kill attitude. Here's what we're going to do. You get to finish up Cesar, of course, but I can't have you slurping your way through my work crews. Once you've sworn agreement and told me what I need to know, you have to quit feeding for a while."

His snarl was wolf-like.

"Hear me out. You've just fed twice, after a century-long abstinence. You'll surely be able to handle a six-month feeding break, after which I'll let you loose on a buffet of literally hundreds of us. And I'm pretty sure you won't be detected."

"I cannot trust you."

"I will swear with the oath we cannot name that what I've just told you is true. You just swear by the same oath that the information you give me is true, and that you will dry out for several months. What do you have to lose? If you don't agree I'll just put you back in your silver boxes."

"Who would I be feeding on?"

"Affluent, educated adults who've been well fed and nourished their whole lives."

"Where would you place me?"

"Right here. In a while this will be luxury accommodations with three hundred plus residents. Easy pickings. I'll set you in the foundation hole just before they pour the concrete. But if you can't point out enough gold, jewelry and antiques to fill both your boxes, your future is forfeit, and you'll be Argent-clad again."

John was silent for a few seconds. "Six months is too long to starve."

I smiled. We were merely negotiating terms. "We can't have you draining somebody who'll attract police attention. Tell you what. We'll finish up here three weeks from now. I can throw in one more worker before you go on a diet."

"You won't wear that medal forever. Are you so sure I won't find you?"

"Don't trouble yourself, John. I plan on always being out of reach."

"I am timeless and vindictive. Do not think to cheat me."

"What I've said is literally true, and I'm ready to swear this to you. Shall we proceed to the oath taking?" John nodded Cesar's head. "I seem to have little choice."

I wrote out the terms and conditions and had him read them. Then we swore the oath that is not to be named. (I had to refer to a little black grimoire that looks like a child's missal) We had no choice but to honor our pact, and John spent several hours telling me where to focus in on.

He sucked out only one more of the help, and after they'd dug the foundation cavity, I snuck in one Sunday late afternoon, dug a little deeper, and popped in John's pine box. The jewelry, mementos, gold and silver netted me almost a quarter million dollars. John's silver boxes alone got me more than ten thousand.

Six months later the building was ready for occupancy and they started bringing in tenants. In wheelchairs and on gurneys. John hadn't asked and I hadn't told him about who would live there. It was a hospice for the about to die. Even if he lucked into a night staffer, John would have to suck out some of his energy in one shift. I was hoping that with all their decay, disease, dementia and drugs, the terminally ill would taste terrible. I had put John in culinary purgatory, suffering if he starved, repulsed if he ate. I do like tidy solutions.

About the Author:

Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had over two hundred fifty stories and poems published so far, and six books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of six review editors.

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Detriment | Joe Moses Leggett

Okay, so you know the classic set-up where there's an old abandoned house at the edge of town that's derelict and creepy looking and kids in the town tell ghost stories about it so basically everyone stays away from it? And you know how there's always at least one cocky bastard who can't resist taking a look-see inside? Well in this story that's me. My name is Baz Walding.

But it wasn't *just* me. I was accompanied by Flick, my 'Associate in Financial Activities'. A well alright fella I had come to know thanks to a mutual acquaintance of ours who owned the place we rented, a small property in a run-down area we'd been occupying for a little over a year. Petty theft and the odd, carefully timed burglary paid the bills.

Said break-ins were all under my direction. I'd sit out and watch my marked houses for hours on end, sometimes several days in a row, hoping to spot regular vacancies. I'm a bit of a cunt like that. Have been for a while. I was fourteen when I left home with the majority of my family's hidden stashes of money and smallest, most expensive possessions. It was impulse more than anything, and I kept rolling with it from that moment on. For almost ten years I was (just about) sharp enough to make it work. Then I thought it a bright idea to enter the Spooky-Death-House at the edge of town...

Flick and I should never have gone to that fucked up place, but we hadn't looted anywhere for a few months and our street work was getting the better of us. It was the onset of winter, a season neither of us liked, and our mojo seemed to be dwindling with its approach.

We'd both heard multiple stories, as had everyone, about the various residents that used to occupy that house, the jewellery and treasures left behind, the spiteful spirits that lay wait intent on claiming the lives of anyone who came hunting, and the few missing or dead people from town who apparently *had* gone hunting.

Bored and hungry we decided it was worth checking out. We weren't superstitious, but we knew most of the town was, so we'd be left alone to do as we pleased. We knew it was unlikely there would be much, if anything, in there, but it would kill some time and maybe provide a few kicks.

Stupid. We had no idea...

It was dusk when we approached the house, located on the outskirts of town away from anywhere particularly important or populated. A fully detached, two-story wreck surrounded by a tight ring of bare, twisting trees. The bark of the trees looked like charcoal. A tall, rusted gate stood chained shut between two trunks. Each of us being a skinny twenty-something-year-old, we scaled it without much trouble.

The house was crooked and grey, its wooden exterior rotten and falling apart. Every window was broken and boarded up from the inside. The roof had about half its tiles left.

"Look at the state of it." Flick had smirked before running and kicking the front door. That was all the encouragement it needed. It landed with a dust-raising wallop. Flick gestured for me to go in first. "Your idea to do this," he reminded me.

Man... The inside was worse than the outside. By the lights of our phones we could see the floor and ceiling were cracked, with patches of mold dotted about the place. The air was predictably musty. There was a door to our left split in half down the middle and one a few meters in front of us was sewn shut by ivy. What surprised us about the place though was that every inch of every surface we could see was covered in carvings. Words. Various barely coherent ramblings about death, suffering, curses etc. No passage looked like it was repeated, and each was in a different handwriting and size, some scratched lightly, others etched deeply. There was one thing they all had in common though. One word that popped up in every contribution. In all capitals every time: DETRIMENT.

There was a staircase to our right that was knackered but usable. I gestured for Flick to lead the way. "Your turn." He glanced at me, unamused and visibly unnerved, then muttered "Thorn in my arse," before heading up.

The decor upstairs was no less welcoming. Untidy lines of carvings were still visible everywhere we looked. There was a closed door near the top of the stairs, fully intact, and two more down the end of a hallway. One was to the right, sewn into the wall by ivy like the one downstairs, the other was to the left, almost nonexistent from rot. The latter looked like it would be easy to negotiate.

"How about you look in this one and I go down there?" I suggested.

"Fine," replied Flick. "But I'm feeling sketchy. I might leave without you." He didn't seem to be joking. He was rubbing his stubble anxiously as his eyes jittered about place. "It feels wrong here."

"Whatever man," I had responded dismissively. "Just have a good rummage around before you go."

I treaded carefully on the aged floorboards as I headed to my chosen room. I shone my light through the massive hole in the middle of the door. I couldn't see a lot inside other than shadows and vines, so I climbed in.

The room was a dud. It mostly contained plant life that had crept in from the outside. It looked like there used to be a bed and a wardrobe present, but now they were in pieces, consumed by ivy and cobwebs. Like with the rest of what we'd seen, there were carvings on every visible surface. I'd just noticed that these particular writings contained grotesque pictures when the screaming began.

Shrill. Terrified. Agonised howls. It was Flick.

My heart nearly stopped. My skin turned to ice. I hesitated to move, my mind suddenly racing. Was he messing about? But after a few more of Flick's deathly shrieks I damn near obliterated the remains of my door as I bolted towards his. Halfway down the hallway the screaming abruptly ended. Whatever had happened, I knew it must've been severe. I wasn't wrong.

By the time I hit the already ajar door I'd gained some momentum. It swung open with a loud clap. Flick's phone was on the floor in the middle of the room, it's light glowing upwards. Combined with the light of my own I could see clearly enough what had happened.

It was at this point I understood how poor our decision making had been that day. It was at this point I saw *her*. In all her glory. A hideous fury. An abomination of hate.

DETRIMENT.

She hung from the centre of the ceiling, lowered by four spindly legs that stretched upward past her back. Her torso was no larger than that of a heavy-set person but her abdomen was huge; from it dangled a thin tail like that of a rat. Her arms were taut and muscular. Each of her hands had two long, sharp fingers and two similar thumbs that were grasped around a visceral mess. A mess from which hung Flick's arms and legs, streaming with blood. It had only been a matter of seconds before I had gotten there but already his chest was open and his face completely gone. *Her* face, however, I could see quite clearly. Thin greasy hair hung down either side of it. The sharp teeth of her upper jaw glistened crimson. Three tongue-like appendages, that existed instead of a lower jaw, trickled as a pair of bent, pointed mandibles twitched and shuddered. From deep within the black cavities at either side of her head, two red, vertical slits glared at me intently.

I stood in awe. Was this real? She dropped Flick. My very essence began to feel violated. I could sense thoughts that weren't mine trying to penetrate my mind. She leered towards me.

I made a decision and lunged forward, grabbing the door by its handle and heaving it shut. I felt it as she slammed against the other side. Wasting no time, I turned and bolted down the staircase, three steps at a time. One near the bottom gave way beneath me and I took a tumble, but as I hit the floor I was able to roll forward and spring back up, admittedly with a bit of a stumble. A crashing noise behind me suggested the monster was out of her room. I leapt over the now permanently open front door and sprinted to the trees in four large bounds. I could hear her voice as I climbed the gate, filling my ears with whispers, reminding me of her name. I didn't look back to see how close she was, I just jumped and ran.

I kept running all the way home, over three miles away. I could feel her presence in the back of my skull for the entire journey. We'd seen into each other's eyes and now we knew each other...

I am marked.

Whatever story is contained in that house's past is beyond my comprehension. Something wholly otherworldly has taken hold of it and I have no intention of falling victim to it the way Flick did. I can imagine it now. How he must have looked up just in time to see... It makes me shudder.

I've written all this as something vaguely decent to do with my last night. A posthumous warning to all. Also a brief confession of my shitty existence, for which I do not apologise. To anyone.

I had the urge to carve my story into the walls but I'm glad I typed it instead. It was mid-evening when I got home; It's now about an hour before dawn. I had a feeling she'd be here sooner or later. I was beginning to worry she'd find a way in before I'd have the chance to finish this off and make my escape. It would've really sucked to die the way my associate did instead of on my own terms. I've just finished consuming the contents of our fondly labelled 'Medicine Box'.

I can't really get my head around how any of this came to be, but here we are. That's what happened to Flick and that's why I'm dead (hopefully just from a simple overdose). My story is pretty far out, I know, but still I hope it stirs up enough of the heebs and jeebs to keep people well away from that Spooky-Death-House at the edge of town. And if not, well, you were warned.

About the Author:

Joe Moses Leggett is an author of short horror fiction, based in Suffolk, UK. Detriment, his first finished story, was originally published in the 2019 anthology The Toilet Zone by Hellbound Books. Under the pseudonym Aberrant Dabbler, Leggett is also a multi-instrumental musician with a taste for the experimental.

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A Penny for the Rides | Josephine Queen

Lila saw the first one as she startled from sleep back into the reality of the jostling, dim train carriage. A figure on the far side of the track, standing in a weedy culvert, silhouetted against the too-big moon hanging in the bruised sky. The person—if it could be described as such—was looking right at her, the glint of its silvery eyes melding with the flashes still exploding in hers.

There had been a near miss on the drive to the station—a truck barreling towards her car, only to veer at the last minute; when she opened her eyes it had passed by, but left her with tingling fingers, a racing heart and flares bursting at the edges of her vision.

She had sat in her car gripping the steering wheel. Time slipped from her. The early train was long gone by the time she reached the station, leaving her to wait on an empty platform under the darkening sky. Graffiti was scrawled across the walls and rubbish piled in corners. The carriage was just as empty, the conductor nowhere to be seen. When Lila tucked the ticket back in her purse her fingers brushed against something hidden inside the lining. She had pulled a lone coin through the ripped seam and held it up—a ride token from the pier; heads—Helter Skelter; tails—Horror Hotel. She held the coin tightly in her hand and settled down for the journey.

Bishopstone, Newhaven, Southease, Falmer. She always whispered the names of the stations for comfort. Along with the steady thrumming of the wheels on the track, the recitation allowed sleep to reach up and pull her under.

Twisted metal, smashed glass, the deafening grinding of two objects impossibly sharing the same space.

Lila jolted awake once more. The lights in the carriage flickered and buzzed. With each illumination the graffiti shifted, the shadows lengthened, the color of the seats faded then brightened. She watched the darkening world slide by and more of those silver-eyed people gathered along the track. Who are they? What are they? A flutter of unease turned Lila's stomach and she closed her eyes against the wave of nausea.

Southease, Bishopstone, Falmer, Newhaven. No, that wasn't right; the stations were out of order, and they had passed those stops already.

This must be the direct train, Lila thought. But they seemed to be going in circles, not just passing through the stations.

It was late. The girls would wonder where she was. Every summer for twenty years Lila and her friends met at the pier. Jenny, Suki, May and Lynn. Names to ward off evil when held on her tongue—like the stations.

With salt in their hair, sand on their calves and the pink kiss of the English sun on their shoulders, the girls would skip along the boards. Sticky with candy-floss and toffee-apples, they wasted pennies in the arcade then squealed on the rollercoaster and tumbled, giggling, down the Helter Skelter.

The train trundled past Falmer station. Again. Lila rested her head against the cool window and closed her eyes.

The unholy screech of tires, the smell of burning rubber, the booming of metal meeting metal. A body flying through space, and tarmac reaching up, up, up...

Lila opened her eyes to the flickering light of the carriage. She pressed her hands to the sides of her head. The truck passed by. It was a near-miss—nothing more. Wasn't it?

There were more figures lining the tracks now, standing unheeding, knee-deep in marsh water, staring from the center of roads, clustered by buildings and trees.

Newhaven, Southease, Falmer, Bishopstone, Jenny, Suki, May, Lynn.

The girls always saved The Booster for last. They called it 'The Death Ride,' always in a deep, slow voice, as if announcing the latest movie playing at The Odeon. The ride resembled the latticed boom of a crane with a pod grasped in claws at each end. It flung them, screaming, out over the black waves of the North Sea, out to the wind turbines standing as sentinels, out to the icy horizon, then back over the calliope music and sugary aroma of the pier.

At the end of the day the girls would walk slowly and quietly back along the boards as the sun melted into the sea and the lights of the fair pierced the growing darkness. Happy and high on sugar and friendship, they would bade farewell and promise to meet the next summer—a single ride token clasped in each sticky hand as a reminder to come back.

Lila rubbed the ridges of the token she still held.

The figures were gathering in droves—there was none of the jostling or pushing of crowds, they simply stood shoulder to shoulder, watching the train pass. They lined the tracks—Lila watched, fingertips brushing the foggy glass of the

train window, as more and more of them shuffled from behind trees, clambered spider-like over walls and pushed up through piles of debris in abandoned yards. They stood in silent hordes and marked Lila's passage. She gasped and backed away from the window.

"Is someone here?" Lila asked the empty carriage. "Hello? Can someone help me?"

She stood and tried the door connecting the carriages. It was stuck. Or locked.

"Hello? Does this train stop in Brighton?" Lila called.

Does it even stop? she wondered.

She ran to the other end of the carriage and tried that door. Nothing.

"Hello?" She didn't like the tremble in her voice.

She sat back down and ran her fingers across the token. She turned it over and over and gasped as the ride images melted away, like candy-floss dropped in the ocean. She looked closer. On one side, it showed the Grim Reaper, the other her car - broken with nickel flames pouring from the hood. She dropped the coin and it spun on its edge, then wobbled to lay flat on the dusty carriage floor.

The brakes screeched and the train slowed. The lights flickered, then dipped into darkness and Lila looked beyond the windows at the immense mass of figures standing in the gloom. The crowd parted and formed a pathway down to the banks of a wide, black river. A hooded figure stood at the prow of a boat.

Lila stepped back and prayed for the doors to stay closed. She bent to retrieve the token from the floor—she might need it for a ride after all.

"Jenny, Newhaven, Suki, Southease, Falmer, May, Bishopstone, Lynn," she whispered.

About the Author:

Josephine Queen grew up in England and now resides in the northeast corner of the US. She writes flash fiction and short stories that err on the creepier side of things. She just completed the final draft of a novel length middle-grade fantasy, which she hopes to get published in her lifetime.

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The dog fate | Christopher T. Dabrowski

Fafik comes to his owner with his tail wagging. His owner does not notice him. As usual.

He used to be a good person, he played with him but not anymore.

Fafik hears his name. The man holds something to his ear, he says to the air:

I miss Fafik. You're right, the end of mourning. It's time for a new pet.

He goes to the shelter.

Fafik enters the body of a shelter dog and greets his former owner.

I'll take this one.

Returning, the man said to the new dog:

You know, you really remind me of someone.

About the Author:

Christopher T. Dabrowski was born in 1978 in Poland. He lives in Krakow, with his wife. His hobbies are books, cinema, travel, healthy eating and an active lifestyle. Before he discovered that he was good at writing, he tried to become a director, guitarist, vocalist, actor, camera operator, and photographer - but it was writing that turned out to be his life path. He has written: Books in USA: "Escape", "Anomaly"; Books in Spain: "La fuga", "Anomalia"; Books in Poland: "Deathbirth", "Anima vilis", "Grobbing", "Deathbirth and other stories", "Z życia Dr Abble", "Orgazmokalipsa", "Anomalia", "Ucieczka" & "Nie w inność"

Anthologies in: USA, England, Australia, Poland, Russia, and Germany.



Mrs. Christmas | Heather Stewart

Mrs. Christmas rules the house. She's been here forever, some installation of ugly modern art in the upstairs bedroom, moth-eaten, bedraggled, dress the same pattern as the wallpaper and just as stained. She wears what I hope is a wig.

She doesn't ask rent, all she asks is that when we go out, we bring her back something nice. At the moment here it's just me, Rob and Claws. We're always together, me and Claws. It took me a long time to get used to that fact, to not fight. Accepting who you are is a struggle for most people, but once you do, you can do anything, things just happen around you. Maybe there's no great epiphany, but suddenly the way ahead clears, no more internal wars, just a neutral zone. I am Switzerland.

It's 7am, there's a half eaten Big Mac on the table. The sauce has soaked the bread into mush, sharp and sour, but it will tell my stomach to stop being hungry for now. I trudge up the stairs, bare wood bows down underfoot, sinking where it has a thousand times before. The wallpaper is peeling, the ceiling relieved of plaster, skeletons showing through the floor above. I go into Mrs. Christmas' room, Claws appears on my tail.

"The old bat wants fork-lifting out of here, why doesn't she pop her clogs and leave us the house. The best thing a parent can do for a child is die young," he says.

"She's no one's mother," I say.

"Then why are you beholden to her? Running her errands like you've nothing else to do."

"Is there anything particular you want from town today, Mrs. C.?" I ask her, ignoring Claws.

"Bring me back something nice will you?" she says, looking up briefly from her magazine, her sagging face lifting into a pseudo-smile before disappearing back into the folds of paper.

"What a surprise, like she doesn't have enough crap here," Claws starts pushing piles of junk around, boxed toys, spangled banners, a feather boa from the eighties, books, bottles, Gary Lineker's head from Madame Tussauds, a stuffed fox and every copy of *Okay* ever published. He runs out of steam and we set off.

It's a hot day, no clouds, it'll be busy. The sea is still today, blue. Like the Nile, it feeds a thin oasis of land where the people converge, and beyond are the wastes. Caravans of people travel the mile or so, collecting paraphernalia, balloons, candy floss. At night the same crawl takes place, the wares shift to shots, calloused heels, STDs. By midday the sun has caused a few dozen ice creams to splat onto the pavement, given several toddlers headaches that they express through screams and nestled itself silently into the skin of a handful of people, one day to re-emerge as a cancerous growth and leave a scar. Claws and I sit on the beach.

"You still haven't found anything, and I don't want to have to go to the tip again," says Claws.

"That was one time, and I wasn't well."

"A slight cold."

"Pneumonia."

We watch the families waste their afternoon on the beach, hours lost to the wind in games. The street stinks of stale cooked sugar, chip fat and sweat. The day ends, we slip silently down a side street, and wait. I spot a likely suspect, there isn't any CCTV down this street, we know. My heart begins to beat as though it hadn't been bothering all day, I love this part, the chase, the building tension in my body.

"Excuse me, do you know which way the station is?" I ask, he turns round, slim built man, early twenties, so mediocre the police'd never get a decent sketch. His shirt has a small print floral pattern, it annoys me.

"I've just come from there, it's..."

I swing a right hook into his jaw, his hands come up to defend himself, contact, pain in my hand, tension leaves me, another jab to the stomach, he's breathless, tries to push me off but I don't hold for a second, swing again and again, he curls up. I want to taste blood, my breathing stutters, catching with the sudden emotion, relief, like coming home, to a good home anyway. The man groans, I take his wallet. His face is a puce bloody mess. I lick my knuckles, it tastes as I remember it, somehow comforting.

We leave him on the grass. Some bride-to-be has dropped a plastic wand on the way to a hen night, I pick it up. The cool night air sobers me up, houses flash past, ours, door open as always. I start running my hands under the tap.

"I brought you back some takeaway," says Rob, coming in from the lounge with a box of prawn crackers, "it's in the fridge."

"What did you put it in there for?"

"Don't want you getting salmonella."

"Be more likely to catch it by putting it in there."

"There's the thanks I get."

I hold my hands out under the water, check for the shakes but they're perfectly still. After eating I go upstairs, throw the wand on Mrs. C.'s bed. She cranks an arm over to pick it up, twiddles it round her sausage fingers.

"It won't do Danni," she says, "I'll expect something better tomorrow."

"Or what, ask her or what," says an indignant Claws.

My eyes burn, feet ache, hands throb, I rock back from one foot to the other, just want to sleep, but Claws is right.

"What if I don't?" I say.

"Excuse me?"

"What if I never bring anything back again? What if we left?"

"You've seen people come and go, but you always stay. Have you wondered why? You need me. You have nothing else. You're underage, I can call social services, they won't overlook your little problems like we do."

As she speaks the edges of the room fade to black, the floor buckles, it's suddenly cold, I shiver, Claws shivers, hair stands on end, shadows loom tall and I put my back against the wall. I can't stay there, we run. Run downstairs as the shadows chase us.

Wake up alone, springs digging into my hips, joints stiff, but I need to move. Bare walls crumble and drip, cold, breath echoes, alone, looming out ahead, I can't move. Mouth dry, throat clammy, cold, a crack of light breaks between a board of wood and the window frame, the day is out there. I can't move until I see Claws.

We leave the house. Distance solves more problems than it creates. There's fifty quid from the wallet. One decent meal can't hurt.

"Really? We're going in here?" says Claws, following me into my favourite B&B on the front.

"They serve breakfast until noon."

The coffee is strong, the orange juice is sweet acid, the pancakes topped with syrup. With blinkered vision I attack it, barely surface for air until the plate is utterly clean. Claws raises his eyebrows.

"Coffee smelt bitter. Your plate is chipped, look, and this knife," Claws fingers the edge of my knife, 'blunt, couldn't cut a baby's face."

"Well I enjoyed it."

I sigh and pay the bill on the way out. Kids swirl the backstreets on their BMXs, making circles, sending signals to the skies. Dog owners stoop to pinch faeces from the floor. Old couples patrol the seafront, looking for enemy ships on the horizon. Traffic on the road is almost stood, rivers of pedestrians taking their life into their own hands, suddenly unafraid of the damage metal can do to flesh because it's sunny, and they're on holiday.

They've found me.

I forget how long I've been here, some people came into the house and took me away. Police station at first, then a hospital, now this house. They tell me that Mrs. C. is dead, she's a corpse and not a woman. Are they mutually exclusive? They gave me medication, forced it on me. It makes Claws disappear. Without him, what do I have? But I feel clear enough to make a run for it. I stand and sneak out, it's not a prison, but they will look for me. The streets look different, the meds take away the visions but not the reason for their existence. I walk and look for something nice. The sun is setting on everything. Broken from the house. Cast off. Something nice. There's nothing, rotting food in polystyrene containers, blood-sport for the gulls, bottles, sticky remnants spilling.

The signs are dark, have I been gone so long? Dark amusements, shutters down, blinkered for the winter. I slip into the service door, emergency only but the alarm hasn't worked since spring, I know. On the arcade floor, take the keys from the manager's office, open up a vending machine. I take a bite of chocolate but it makes me feel sick. Empty space lies in front of me, maybe it was full that day, but it's empty now, the shapes of the games turning sinister in the darkness. I open a claw machine and take a squashy green alien. My stomach turns and my

eyes squeeze hot tears out. I yank on the claw's chain, where are you? Come back. Hold onto the toy, take the highest denomination money from the vending machine.

I head inland. Too early for foxes but the cats are out. Stop outside a disused car garage, flick a lighter into flame, set the green thing alight. It singes, smokes.

"What are you doing, Danni?" calls Rob, finally a familiar face.

"It won't burn."

"It's for kids, they make their shit fireproof."

We watch the disfigured alien smoke, the smell clinging to my nose hairs.

"I need something."

"What do you think I've got?"

"Something to keep me up all night."

"More than one way to do that."

"I want the chemical kind."

"I got powdered daylight in a bag, keep you up for a week." Rob hands me a small plastic bag. "You gonna pay for that?" he asks, I hand him my coins.

"This is the best I've got."

"You're welcome," Rob shouts as I walk away.

Pocket the bag, need somewhere quiet, watch everything pass by in silhouette. There's a lank glow from the streetlights, they create empty recesses, blanks. Past the last of the houses to the old arcade of hotels and the one with the collapsed roof. Splintered wood splays out like a half woven basket, withered fingers grasping down. I climb over some rubble and make it inside. Wood crumbles, puddles lurk in damp corners. I find a dry niche, hear the scuttle of some small creature, there's no one else there. Open the bag, sniff the powder. My eyes water but I do it again, ignore the sting, it fades as my head spins out, up, away from me, I fall onto my side, I feel everything and I feel numb. Crawl out of the skeleton house, sharp ground but I don't feel pain, scramble outside to breathe again. I can't see the sea, just black. Crouch by the boundary wall at the front of the house, I can hear something, hear him.

"I'm here, Danni." It's Claws.

"Where are you?"

"I'm right here, I'm back, we can go home."

"There is no going back, and you're not really here."

"Just get that out of your system, we'll be together again."

"Not enough, it's never going to be enough. This is it, this is it."

I wait, see it coming, so slow it seems, slow but my mind is skipping, twitching, seeing ahead of time, I see the lights as gored holes in the night-flesh. Yellow blood-light spills onto the road in front of it, it groans in its pain, the movement pains it, I'll make it stop. I wait, the disembodied Claws waits, the thing that is us. I step out.

About the Author:

Heather Stewart is a writer and Optometrist living and working in the South of England, currently studying for her Masters in Creative Writing part time. She has several books available on Amazon for purchase including time travel adventure 'Nomads', and alien world trilogy 'Tales from Tal'.

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What Then Should We Fear | Matthew Stockhausen

We sit, alone in the stillness, listening hard.

A naked yellow bulb hangs on a short, twisted cord, suspended from the projecting eaves of a corrugated metal shed. From the bulb dim, sluggish light seeps through the hot, sticky air, barely reaching the line of trees fifty feet away across weedy grass. To the left the dented, mud-brown car rests on the gravel drive. Beyond it the house, white paint peeling, the exposed wood brown and damp and slowly rotting, shields us from the distant road beyond. On the road, nothing moves. The night is still. We sit in front of the shed and listen to the stillness, and we are afraid.

Even a still night is alive. Moths flutter in the lamp's liquid light. Flies zip through the heavy air. Small creatures rustle leaves at the tree line, scuttle sometimes through the weeds and grass. Trees creak, insects buzz, animals cry, but all these sounds are familiar. They are the breath and heartbeat of the night. The darkness is a friend, and these sounds show the darkness is alive. They comfort us. The other sounds do not.

We hold still together, as quiet as we can, and listen.

Bit by bit we can hear those sounds that do not belong: a shiver of metal across metal, soft taps and clinks. They come from the shed. They are shed sounds, but they should not be there now. There are other sounds, too: scratching, and now and then a huffing noise, like an animal rooting on the ground. The shed should not make those sounds at all. Now that we can hear them, they are all we can hear. Each one, however tiny or indistinct, taints the air. It sounds like something is moving in the shed. But nothing in there should be able to move.

We have to look, I know. I am afraid, though. I am not as brave as you. I have always needed you to help me and keep me safe.

Slowly we rise, slowly we step to the shed's wooden door. The door groans as it opens. Inside it is dark, the air still and solid. It smells like iron and copper, sawdust and smoke and damp wood growing mold. The bulb outside throws our shadow along the floor, framed in the rectangle of light. The light stretches all the way through the little front room of the shed to the door in the opposite wall. On the ground to the right, an old car engine sits on wooden pallets, partly gutted, parts scattered around it, oil leaking into the dirt of the floor. Around the walls stand worktables, benches, winter windows, solid pieces of our daytime life nearly invisible now in the gloom.

The trip across to the inner door is just a few steps, but I struggle to take the first one. From behind it the sounds issue again: there is a rushing sound, metal clinks, then a moment later that scratching and huffing. I don't want to find what is making those sounds, but we must. We have to make sure we are safe. We have to go into the backroom and see. If we don't we will never stop being afraid. With shaking legs and dragging steps we cross to the second door.

Hand on latch, ear to jamb, we wait, and listen. Above harsh breaths and heavy heartbeats we hear nothing for a time. Then comes a soft low sound, like a moan. My courage starts to give out, I want to run and hide in the house, or drive away in the car and not come back, but you won't let me. We will not run. We will stay. We will open the door and find out what is in there, and if there is something in there, we will fix it. We will kill it, if we have to, so it can't hurt us. We will go in there now.

A minute passes. Soon. We will go in there soon. You could go now, probably, but I am not ready. I need to stand here and listen a little longer. I want to learn more about the sounds in there before we do anything we might regret. Bravery is fine, after all, but caution is often better.

The rushing sound comes again, then a scrabbling against the other side of the door. We cry out and fall back, pulling the door open as we fall. A crow explodes out on whirring, squeaking wings. It flies over us, out the door behind us, and into the night, cawing once it gets clear of the shed and knows itself free.

Shaking, we get to our feet. The shed is quiet now. Was that all it was? A fool crow that got in and didn't know how to get out? We should check and make sure. It is much easier to move now, much easier to step forward into the darkness of the back room, much easier to reach for the chain that will turn on the bulb hanging overhead.

A huff, soft scratching, and another moan sound in the blackness to the right.

The light comes on with a snap and a rattle of the little chain against the bulb. Ahead, knives hanging from the ceiling gleam in the dirty yellow light. A few of them sway in the air, perhaps disturbed by the bird's frantic efforts to find a way out. Below them a car battery sits on a block, wires connected to its leads trailing in the dust. A band saw stands against the wall to the left, the ground stained black around it, the shine of its long blade hidden by dark streaks.

We hardly register all of that, but spin to the right as the huffing noise comes again. The body of a man gleams in the harsh sudden light, half buried in the soft dirt of the floor. He is on his side, turned away from us, one arm stretched out and just touching the wall at the front of the room. Blood trickles from a dozen cuts and larger wounds on his legs, back, and buttocks. As we watch his body spasms, the outstretched hand gropes toward the wall, the fingers scratching at the base of the wall. Then the body slumps, and the huffing sound comes again.

We close our eyes and sigh. We can't help but smile. Why were we so afraid? Everything is fine here. Everything is as it should be. Our tools are in their places and ready for us to use them. The man is here where we put him. He shouldn't be awake yet, but he can't move. He can't run. We can start work again any time. There is nothing frightening here. We are safe.

We step to the man on the ground, cross to the other side of him so we can see his face, and look down at him. His eyes are closed, but we think he knows we are here. We kneel and whisper to him. "We were afraid of a monster in here, but there's no monster. There's just you. If there is no monster, what then should we fear? You should sleep now. You should rest, before we start to work again." We reach out our hand and stroke his graying black hair. It is wet with sweat. His one remaining eye snaps open and rolls, showing white like that of a horse when it shies, and he moans and gropes again for the wall. We stand up fast, afraid he might attack us, but he stops moving again. He is too far gone to hurt us now, too far gone to move at all. We are safe.

We turn out the light, secure the door, and leave the shed. We stand on the porch, enjoying now the soft sounds of the muggy night outside and of the man quietly suffering inside. A moth circling the porch light veers out of its flight for no reason as moths do and flies straight at our eyes. I want to shriek and flinch but you reach out our hand and slap the little thing dead against the door frame. I can feel you laughing. You think I'm funny when I get scared. I get so mad at you for that sometimes. I don't stay mad, though. I know you protect us. I am weak and I used to get hurt when I was alone, but you are brave and strong and together we are safe.

So we sit down together in our chair, and look out into the dark, and we are not afraid.

About the Author:

A former professor of ancient history, John Matthew Stockhausen grew up in Wisconsin and earned a B.A. from Marquette University before pursuing graduate degrees at UNC-Chapel Hill and Ohio State University. He has written technical and political essays as well as fiction. He lives in Columbus, Ohio, and spends most of his time on his first love and greatest joy, his wife and three daughters.

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The Dying of the Light | Rie Sheridan Rose

She looked out through a tangled curtain of thin gray strands that had once been the red of banked embers. The night was cold, her breath dancing with the stars. Every step was a burden...but the end was in sight. Just beyond the ridge, she could rest.

The lantern in her hand flickered in sympathy. It too was tired. Soon, it too would rest.

She struggled up the last hill. At the top, she could see a brilliant beacon, and she smiled sadly. Once, that had been she.

Panting now, she forced her weary feet the last few meters. Her successor danced upon the ridge, eyes shining in joy and anticipation.

Laughing with excitement the child said, "Happy New Year, Mother. You may rest now." With a sigh of release, she blew out the light.

About the Author:

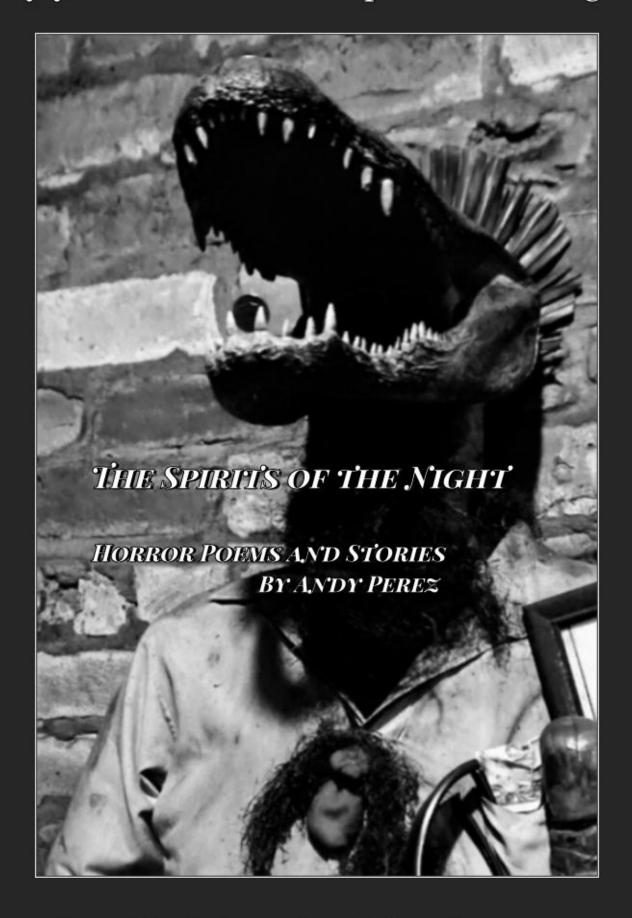
Rie Sheridan Rose writes many things. Her favorite genres to work in are horror, humor, and Steampunk. In her off-hours, she herds a sizable stable of cats. Her least favorite things about the quarantine have been its disruption of Pokemon Go and the pounds she's put on.

Author Blog: <u>The Bardabee Poet</u>

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Pray you don't meet the spirits of the Night...



Available via Blurb.com

The Treadmill | Cecilia Kennedy

Training, at the Executive Experience Hotel, consisted of watching an inspirational video about how a manager of one of the branches helped travelers escape a tornado. He opened the doors to the hotel, even though every room was booked, and let people take shelter. That summer, there were only two of us in training: a housekeeper and I—a newly-hired front desk receptionist. After we watched the video, Crystal, the manager in charge, asked us to give examples of how we would offer 'above and beyond service'. We were silent, so Crystal suggested the following: "How about making breakfast for the guests?"

"Excuse me," I said, raising my hand. "Will I learn how to use the computer to check people in and out of the hotel?"

"Oh, yes! Yes, of course! I'll pair you up with Abigail. She's our most seasoned worker."

So, my actual training began when Abigail checked people in and out of the hotel with lightning speed— hitting random keys on the computer, answering phone calls, and taking different forms of payment. She moved effortlessly between screens and windows on the operating system. I'd never been so confused in my life.

"Is there a manual I could study?" I asked.

"Nope. You'll figure it out in a day or two." But that day or two came and went, and I still hadn't figured anything out. After 30 days, I felt a little more confident, but not much. I was still clinging to Abigail for help, but at least she could take a bathroom break every now and then.

On day 31 of my training, hushed whispers announced the arrival of a certain Mr. Kinsey, an older sour-faced man. He wore a suit and breezed past the lobby. The managers themselves came out of the back room to greet him. His sour face broke into a smile, briefly—for them. The managers decided that Abigail would handle the check in, but I could make the key to his room.

"We'll put you in room 264," Abigail said.

I could tell that he wanted his room quickly, so I made his key by rapidly punching in the codes on the key-making machine. Then, I took out a pen and wrote the number of the room on the key envelope. Mr. Kinsey left with his suitcase, and more customers came in. I decided to help a couple check into their room, but just as I was about to make their key, Mr. Kinsey came storming into the lobby. The first person he saw was Abigail, so he slammed his key on her side of the reception counter and yelled.

"You gave me a room that had someone in it! I was embarrassed when I walked in! We were both embarrassed!"

Abigail looked confused, but she tried to go back through her check-in screens to figure out what went wrong. However, Mr. Kinsey was furious that she was not apologizing. He mistook her silence for apathy. So, he was going to make her care. He slammed his fists down hard on the counter and turned red in the face, but by now, Abigail had figured out the problem. The room she gave him was correct. I punched in the right codes when I made the key as well. I even wrote the correct number on the front of the envelope, but my '4' looked like a '9'. As a result, when Mr. Kinsey went to room 269, the key didn't work, and he had to return to the front desk. While Abigail and I were busy with other customers, a third receptionist re-programmed Mr. Kinsey's key for room 269, which was already occupied.

"It seems that Tara here wrote a '4' that looks like a '9," Abigail told him.

Mr. Kinsey turned his enraged face to me. I looked at the key jacket. The 4 definitely looked like a 4. I had no idea how anyone could mistake it for a 9, but Abigail agreed that the handwriting was unclear. That's when Mr. Kinsey reached over the counter and grabbed me by the jacket lapels and started to shake me.

"You come back here with me now and make this right! You get back here and see what I've had to deal with!" I should have refused. I should have said that there was no way in hell that I would walk with an angry, violent man back to his hotel room, but I did. We went back to room 269, and when he opened the door, there was a man sitting on the bed watching TV. This man looked absolutely bored. In fact, he just kind of turned his head as if to say, 'meh', and then he went back to watching his program.

"Apologize now!" Mr. Kinsey screamed to me.

By this time, the managers arrived and were comping Mr. Kinsey's room. I went back to the reception desk, and a little while later, I received a lecture about the importance of neat handwriting. That wasn't in the training video that I could recall.

In the bathroom, near the back of the lobby, I straightened my shirt collar and tried to hide the chafing around my neck. Flecks of skin throbbed, tore, and bled. Mr. Kinsey had grabbed me hard.

Striding into the lobby, in expensive workout attire, a woman with pursed lips throws her key down on the reception desk. I think she's hoping that this gesture makes an impressive statement, but the plastic card only makes a soft 'click' when it hits the granite countertop. It's my 61st day at the Executive Experience Hotel, and I'm working the morning shift alone. By now, almost every hotel guest has annoyed me, but I still want my name on the Employee of the Month board, so I try to at least pretend to have that 'above and beyond' service attitude that this hotel thinks is its brand.

The woman standing before me looks like she's about ready to explode. Her hair is thin—very thin. I think that maybe she pulls it out sometimes.

"There is a man looking at me in the mirror every time I run on the treadmill in the gym."

I'm not sure how to respond. Is there another man on the treadmill next to her? And is he looking at her in the mirror? How is he looking at her? Does he stare her down and lick his lips? Now that would be disgusting, but I'd have to get a manager, and neither manager is on duty right now.

"Do you know the man?" I ask.

"Do I know the man? What difference would that make? What kind of question is that?"

"What do you want me to do to help?"

This woman takes fistfuls of her own hair into her hands and starts pulling, hard—and screaming. Stringy blond pieces float down onto the counter.

"I cannot believe your incompetence!" she says.

"What does the man look like?"

"He's creepy looking. He just stares at me—and I'll bet—I'll just bet you know him!"

"Okay, let me come have a look. I'll walk over there with you."

The woman rolls her eyes at me, but she leads the way as we go down the stairs into the basement gym. There are two treadmills that kids play on and ruin. Maintenance has to come in and repair them 2-3 times a week. Our tiny pool can't handle much, either. A soccer team, right before I was hired, threw furniture into the pool—along with rocks, mud, and dirt. The pool has been closed ever since.

When we reach the gym, no one is in there. I look straight into the mirror—and I see no one.

"There's no one here."

"Of course not, you idiot! You weren't even listening to me at all. Not even listening. It was when I was running."

I t's true that I haven't been listening. I've been trying to remember her name. I checked her in a day ago, and she hated me at check-in as well. I was too slow for her liking. What was her name? It sounded like 'too slow' or 'groan'—Simone. It's Simone.

Simone is now on the treadmill and is increasing the speed. Her stringy hair slaps her forehead as she runs at a 7-minute-per-mile pace. Suddenly, she hits the stop button.

"There! Right there! In the mirror—there's that creepy, ugly, horrible face. Don't you see it?"

I want to tell her that the only horrible face I see is hers, but that won't go over very well.

"I honestly don't see anyone."

"Get on the treadmill! Get on it now!"

Telling her that I'm dressed in heels, a suit jacket, and a skirt—sans running bra— would be useless. A guest has told me to get on the treadmill, and I'd better do it, so I do—in my heels, with my breasts flopping up and down under my jacket as I hit a 10-minute-per-mile pace.

"I still don't see anything," I say.

"That's because you have to run faster," she says, punching up the pace to 8 miles per hour. I can't stand it anymore. I have to stop.

"Look, I believe you," I say. "If you see the face again, call the front desk and we'll get maintenance in here."

"Oh, my God! You think this is a mechanical malfunction or something? Are you really that stupid?"

"All I'm saying is—if there's someone who is not supposed to be here, maintenance will get rid of him. Maintenance doubles as security around here."

"Well, if you don't handle this soon, I'll just call 911, and you'll have police cars all over and everything. I'll humiliate you."

At precisely 10:55 a.m., 25 minutes late, Abigail joins me on my shift. She's always late, but no one will fire her. We can make as many mistakes as we want because no one wants this job. Abigail checks her computer to see who is

scheduled to arrive. Sometimes, we have regulars. For instance, Mr. Kinsey comes once every month. I've seen him since he yanked on my jacket. He's pleasant to Abigail, but he avoids my station, which is perfectly fine with me.

"Looks like Mr. Kinsey's skipping this month," Abigail says. "He usually checks in around this time, and I don't see him scheduled in the next few weeks."

"Is he your boyfriend?"

"Hell, I'd do him. He's got money."

"Fww."

Abigail places checks into an envelope and gets cash for her drawer. It's an unusually slow day.

"I'm going out for a cigarette break. You can take over for a little bit, right?"

"Sure," I say.

The minute Abigail leaves, a UPS driver enters the lobby, just at the same time that Crystal is reporting for her shift. The UPS driver has a box, and Crystal takes it out of his hands and signs for it.

"This one's from Mr. Kinsey," she says, with an excited look in her eyes.

"Does he often send packages?" I ask.

"No-I wonder what it is."

Crystal opens the white cardboard box marked 'fragile'. Inside is a box of custom-made doughnuts—along with a note. Crystal reads the note out loud. It's from Mr. Kinsey's wife. He was shot dead outside of one of his favorite coffee shops. She suspects it was a disgruntled employee who just 'didn't like him for some reason'. In any case, she hopes we will enjoy these premium doughnuts in his memory.

Crystal places her hand over her heart.

"I think I'm going to cry," she says.

I think he could have left us a lot more than a box of doughnuts, if he truly loved this place 'like family'.

"What's going on?" Abigail asks when she returns from the gym—only slightly out of breath.

"Mr. Kinsey kicked the bucket and his wife sent these doughnuts."

"Cool," Abigail says, while stuffing a pink doughnut into her mouth.

Crystal thinks we're awful.

Sirens and flashing lights outside the lobby interrupt my shift. A police officer, gun in hand, walks up to the desk. "We got a 911 call from a guest in the gym. She says there's a dangerous stalker, possibly armed—and he's, umm, looking threateningly at her in the mirror."

"Oh, for crying out loud! Was the caller named Simone?"

"Yes."

"She's a guest here. She thinks she sees a man in the mirror while she's running, but I've been in there. There's no one there."

"Okay—any guests here fit this description? About six feet tall, male, Caucasian, in his 60s maybe, balding, kind of stocky, with a creepy, unhappy expression on his face—dressed in a business suit."

"Yes—about half of the men in this hotel fit that description."

"I see," the officer says.

Then, he goes into the hallway and takes the stairs down to the gym. I assume he'll talk to Simone. The lights outside flash silently, while people wonder what kind of hotel the Executive Experience is. Thirty minutes later, he leaves, and the lights stop flashing. A very smug Simone, still dressed in workout pants, approaches the desk.

"I hope you all are extremely embarrassed. This is what happens when you ignore guests who feel threatened. We. Call. The. Police."

"Did they get the guy? The guy in the mirror?"

"No, but now they know. Now everyone knows."

Crystal helps me give Simone a full refund. She doesn't even thank us. Instead, she just leaves, with even less hair on her head than when she first arrived.

"Tara, maintenance is busy fixing an AC unit in room 164. Would you mind wiping down the exercise equipment in the gym? I'll take over the front desk while you're gone."

"Sure, Crystal," I say, as I take the stairs to the gym. I open the door and a musty, sweaty odor lingers. The cleaning solution spray bottles are near the water cooler, so I take one of the bottles—along with a rag— and head over to one of the treadmills. I straddle the belt and face the mirror as I wipe off the console—but something beyond the

console catches my eye, so I look up—and out into the mirror. I can feel the spray bottle slip from my grasp when I see another face looking back at me. It's an older, sour-looking face. The face is framed by a business suit jacket, and I recognize the violent, enraged eyes. My reflection, in the glass, hovers over Mr. Kinsey's crooked angry mouth. The frame of my body bends and breaks in wavy lines, while the mirror softens into silver liquid. Two fists plunge through the surface, sending forth shards like knife blades. My neck throbs and aches in response. The skin around my throat bleeds, while the fingers tighten their grip, and Mr. Kinsey pulls hard. My feet uselessly tread the air behind me.

About the Author:

Cecilia Kennedy earned a PhD in Spanish from The Ohio State University. She taught Spanish and English composition in Ohio for 20 years before moving to Washington state with her family. Twenty-three of her short stories have appeared in 17 literary magazines. She also writes a blog called Fixin' Leaks and Leeks, where she details her humorous attempts at cooking and home repair: https://fixinleaksnleeksdiy.blog/

Doctor Visit | Patrick J Wynn

Hattie sat in the waiting room, her stomach rolling. She'd been having stomach issues for some time but when she started throwing up last month she knew it was time to see Dr. Hanz. She called the doctor's office and received an appointment right away. She'd come in at the appointed time and the doctor had asked her symptoms, taking blood and other samples for testing, then ran his tests. They'd call her when the tests came back. The wait for the test results had been the longest weeks of her life but now as she sat in the waiting room she thought maybe she didn't want the results.

"Hattie, you can come in now." The nurse smiled from the doorway.

Hattie rose on shaky legs and followed the nurse back to a small room. The nurse directed her to sit on the table.

"The Dr. will be right in." The nurse said as she exited the room.

The wait was only a few minutes but Hattie felt it was forever. When the Dr. came in she wanted nothing more than to not hear what he had to say. Dr. Hanz sat on the small rolling stool and flipped through a folder for a few seconds then looked up.

"Well Hattie after the test results came back I double checked to be sure of the results and they were confirmed. I'm sorry to tell you but you can't have children." Dr. Hanz frowned and rose to put his hand on Hattie's shoulder as she started to cry.

"You're sure?" Hattie sobbed.

"Yes. The test results are correct," Dr. Hanz whispered as he continued to rub her back.

"But I love children" Hattie whined.

"I know but a food allergy is not the end of the world," Dr. Hanz smiled.

About the Author:

Patrick J Wynn is an author of short stories that contain shades of horror, humor and are just a touch weird. His works have been published in Sirens Call, Dark Dossier, Short Horror, Weird Mask and Trembling with Fear. You can follow him on his Facebook page and look for his short story collections on Amazon.





The Vengeance of His Evil | Harrison Kim

Terrible pressure headaches and pain like bombs bursting from the side and top of his head led Tad Niles to a psychic surgeon, Dr. Munstre Croon. Tad's own doctor diagnosed stress and tension with possible depression and hypochondria. "You don't need a specialist," she said.

"If you won't help me," Tad responded, "I'll find my own cure. Pills aren't the answer here."

Sally, the janitor at Ellis and Company Insurance where Tad worked as supervisor, gave him Croon's name. "This man's a unique psychic healer." she said. "He will charge five thousand dollars cash, but he will solve all your ills."

Tad wondered for a moment why Sally was being so nice. He always criticized her cleaning; she kept leaving half full wastebaskets all over the office, and never scrubbed under the fridge. Tad gave her a written reprimand and announced that the next time she forgot to scrub the wall behind the couch she'd lose her job. "But thanks for the doctor tip," he told her, "I haven't tried the psychic angle, but I'll do anything to get rid of this pain."

Ellis and Company hired Tad to get rid of all the unproductive employees, and he'd been firing a lot of people. Nan, the old boss's secretary was three months from retirement, but Tad dismissed her anyway, "You're too set in your ways," he said.

She pleaded and cried, "I'll lose my pension," but Tad explained that the company couldn't keep 'dead wood'. She picked up all her family photos and ran crying from the room. He noticed Nan weeping with Sally afterwards. Sally gave her a long hug and they whispered together. Tad thought, I'll keep an eye on that janitor.

Tad's headache drilled into him as he sat in Dr. Croon's office, waiting for the healer. Eventually, the Doctor appeared, a very short round faced fellow with big sad eyes. "Sally said you have bad pain in the cranium," he said, in a low and barely perceptible voice. "I'm sure she told you my cost."

"I don't care," said Tad. "No one else will help me." He was raking in the dough in his new position as assistant to the executive director, so had no problem giving the doctor five thousand dollars in small bills. "Cheap compared to the regular rip off artists," he said.

"Let's begin our assessment," nodded the Doctor, as he placed the bills in a paper bag, and then carefully placed both his hands on the sides of Tad's head. "Hmmm," he whispered. "Please put on these glasses."

He stepped back and handed his patient some fake-jewel encrusted specs from a gold case. Tad pulled them on.

"Jeezus," he said. "What the hell is that?"

"Most glasses look out. These are looking in," Dr. Croon said. "What do you see?"

"A giant grey and brown blob!"

"That's your brain. What else do you perceive?"

"Wow, it's pulsating... and there's something on it!"

"Hmmm," Dr. Croon put his hand up to his client's ear. "Now what?"

Tad peered closer with his reverse glasses and exclaimed "Something's climbing around in there! It's got suckers!" Tad gasped. "This thing's feeding off me!"

"Hah!" nodded Croon. "I knew it! Does it look like a devil?"

"Well, it's got spines and omigod, it's looking back at me... it's got no eyes!" Tad ripped the glasses off, his head pounding.

"Yes," said Dr. Croon. "You're possessed with an extraordinary type of cancer."

"Omigod, Doctor, how did that happen?"

"Well," Croon took out a huge pair of curved forceps, at least two feet long. "Everyone's born with a seed of evil, and while some extinguish that seed with good acts, others feed it with bad ones." He clicked the forceps. "Do you want me to take the demon out?"

"Oh, indeed!"

"The tumour has grown very large," Dr. Croon concluded. "You must have done a lot of bad things."

Tad thought of all the hard decisions he had to make in his life. "A man needs to be tough to succeed," he thought. "Sometimes he has to be ruthless.

"Maybe I shouldn't have disowned my son," Tad told the doctor, "but he did marry trash." As if in response, needle like agony squeezed its way through his eyeballs. Tad thought of the demon sucking his brain. "Doctor," he moaned. "I want this to stop."

"Well," replied Dr. Croon. "Then we should go ahead with the operation?"

"Certainly," Tad nodded.

"Sit right there."

Dr. Croon took his giant forceps and stuck the ends inside each of Tad's ears. The forceps fitted neatly over Tad's head, and Croon moved the points further in. "Hmmm," he whispered. "I've never seen such a huge devil tumour." He

adjusted his tool and tapped the forceps on the table to remove the ear wax. "In order for this method to succeed," he explained, "You must tell me the worst thing you've ever done. Get it out there, and the demon will show itself"

Tad thought of all the rotten lies he'd told, all the firings, all the foreclosures and property seizures he'd ordered when he ran a loan company, but those weren't the worst things. Tad wasn't sure he should tell Dr. Croon, but he wanted the pain to end.

"I killed a man," Tad said. "In the South African jungle, when I served in the army twenty-five years ago; he was injured and his wound became badly infected."

"He was one of yours?"

"Yes. I was the patrol sergeant. This stupid guy was holding us back from getting out of there, moaning and crying, he was such a pussy. It was gangrene, sure, but he endangered everybody."

"So you killed him?"

"I strangled him in secret away from the others. Sure, he could have survived but it had to be done. We were out of morphine."

"Well," the Doctor frowned and rubbed his round stubbly chin. "That fellow is the main demon in your head right now, it's our worst sin, fed huge by all the others."

He adjusted the forceps and commanded, "Put on the glasses."

Tad lifted his specs.

"See how fat that sin is." Dr. Croon insisted.

Tad gasped, witnessing the living tumour behind his eyes, and perceiving the demon's attached suckers pulsating on his brain. The devil twisted its horny head, showing hollow skull bones and the demon face like the soldier Tad killed, mouth slack jawed in the moment of death. Tad saw huge growths and lumps pulsating all over the demon, and the being's huge gut, "All your other sins are stuffed into it," said Dr. Croon. "It's feeding now. A good time to pull him out."

"Get it outta me!" Tad yelled. "This thing's a parasite!"

"We will," said Dr. Croon. "Hang on, Tad!"

The forceps moved in, and through the reverse specs, Tad saw the steel pushing; he screamed as the forceps's points jerked and pierced the devil in his brain. He screamed again and the devil screamed too. Liquid and chunks of rancid meat spewed out of Tad's ears. He felt the gushing and pouring, smelled an incredible stench, and experienced an immediate relief from the pain... like lancing a boil.

He yanked off the glasses. "What in the name of God?" he yelled.

In front of him, a demon formed from the liquid rushing from Tad's ears. It twisted and molded itself into human shape right there in Croon's office, and it looked exactly like Tad.

"There's your devil," said Dr. Croon, as the coal eyed sulfur stinking demon snarled and leaped towards Tad's throat. "That will teach you to fire people for no reason."

Tad fell to the floor, the doppleganger tumour ripping his face apart with its teeth, the beefy fingers pushing into his eyes, then the head smashing itself into Tad's head, over and over again.

Tad writhed on the floor as the demon pushed into him completely, forcing all its matter back inside Tad's body. Tad convulsed for the last time and his features shimmered back to normal, as if nothing had ever been cast out.

Dr. Croon pulled out his smart phone and dialed Sally the janitor.

"Hey, Sally," he announced. "This Tad guy seems to have had a stroke or something like that in my office." He looked at the paper bag full of money on his desk and said "I'm giving you a discount. You don't have to pay for the removal of the body, the police will do that for free. I'm calling them now."

Dr. Croon knew it was a bit of a risk, having the police involved, but Tad looked peaceful there, lying with one hand over his heart. The Coroner's report would diagnose a burst aneurism. Croon picked the jewel encrusted spectacles off the floor, carefully examined the lenses under the office's fluorescent lights, and secured them back in the gold box.

About the Author:

Harrison Kim tries to stay away from spectacles and specialists. He worked at a Forensic Psychiatric Hospital for thirty years, and many of his horror ideas come from that ambiance. Over the last year he's had stories published in Horror Zine, Liquid Imagination, Literally Stories, Bewildering Stories and others.

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Sleep | Kane Salzer

The old bloke sat at the end of the bar had been hunched over his beer for so long it had gone flat and tepid. I'd just about forgotten he was even there until he roused himself and began mumbling nonsense at anyone close enough to hear. The early crowd was spread pretty thin and used to minding their own business, so most of them weren't within earshot when he started up.

"Sleep? It's a curse." He took a sip of his beer. "You go down, and your subconscious takes over. That thing's a disgrace. I mean, can you imagine giving control of your body to something like that while you're awake? But you do it happily when you sleep." He shook his head and wiped his nose on a tattered sleeve.

Dirty, unkempt hair hung lank around a face worn down to nothing more than grey lines from age and hard living. Deep dark circles that looked almost like bruises, sagged under his eyes and a scraggly, knotted beard that looked like it had bits of food caught in it completed the picture. "Hey! Leave the other customers alone mate, okay?" I called across the bar.

"Sorry love. Yeah, sorry!" He held his hands up in mock surrender and, even at this distance, I got a whiff of sour body odour. He retreated into his shell, head lolling over his drink.

The general hubbub of work drew me away, and soon enough, I forgot about the old codger. I assumed he was just a harmless kook. Once or twice a week at most, he'd come in, sit down the quiet end of the bar and make a schooner of whatever is cheapest at the time last most of the day. I thought he liked being around other people even if they didn't talk to him. I don't reckon he had that many friends and most of the staff felt vaguely sorry for him in a detached kind of way.

Around noon, people started filing into the bistro and the bar for their lunches. Regulars and newcomers alike, they all strove to give a wide berth to the strange guy sitting on his own. The place was full, and eventually someone was going to end up next to him, even if they weren't exactly enthusiastic about it.

The first signs of trouble were voices raised in anger. A punter was getting vocal because of whatever our old fella was saying to him. I didn't need this hassle in the middle of the lunchtime rush. I headed over to calm the situation "Sorry about that sir if you wouldn't mind going down to the end of the bar, a member of staff will sort you out with a complimentary drink, is that alright?" I said to the aggrieved customer. Luckily for everyone he nodded, leaving me face to face with the source of his annoyance.

I stared the old guy dead in the eyes "I already warned you once." I said, trying to sound tough. His bleary, redrimmed eyes took a moment to focus on me. "Stop harassing my customers. Finish your beer, and clear out."

He gave me a garbled apology and slowly finished his drink. I kept my eye on him till he was done, but he kept quiet and didn't bother anyone else as he walked out. The staff and clientele heaved a collective sigh as the mood in the bar slowly regained its equilibrium. The general hum of conversation swelled to fill the room once more, and the remainder of the shift passed without incident.

The rituals of closing the pub for the night observed, the lights switched off in the bar leaving it cool and quiet. And finally, I stepped out into the back alley to enjoy a moment's peace.

A lonely streetlight flocked by bugs, shedding only enough illumination to turn the big dumpster bins at the end of the alley into solid lumps of hunched darkness. A while back we had set up one of those lights with a sensor, but it had never worked properly, and tonight was no exception. It remained defiantly off. We kept meaning to fix it. But never got around to it, there was always something else to do first.

Sitting on the back step, the concrete worn and cracked from constant use, I sipped my drink and relaxed. I have one ice-cold beer after work. It's my little reward for the long hours and dubious pay. After the noise and rush of the bar, the quiet out here was strange. Unfamiliar but welcome.

Resting in the cool darkness, I leaned my head against the chipped, iron handrail and closed my eyes for just a second. I must have nodded off because I woke with a start. And, as I flailed about, I succeeded in knocking over my beer, sending it hurtling to the ground where it shattered messily.

"Shit!" Between the glass smashing and my surprised swearing, the silence was irrevocably broken. A dog began to bark excitedly in a nearby backyard. "Fuck!" I muttered grumpily. I went in search of a broom. It wouldn't be fair to leave the mess for the morning shift to find.

It was so dark down that end of the alley I had to pull out my phone to light my way, the wan glow of the torch was both too bright and barely sufficient. The faint blue-white LED doing little to penetrate the inky blackness. Rubbish bins, empty beer kegs and crushed cardboard boxes swam out of the shadows toward me as I advanced.

Again, the scraping sound issued from behind the big skips. "Probably just a bloody rat" I told myself. Despite my opinions as to the origin of the noise, my heart hammered in my ribcage in a terrible techno beat. But after what felt like an eternity, the light from my phone swept over the broom handle. A sigh that was part relief, part hysterical laugh bubbled up from within me.

Turning back I could see the open door leading to the bar, sitting like an island surrounded by blackness. I threw myself towards it eagerly, moving too fast, stumbling over cardboard boxes and empty beer cans. The distance was only a few meters, but it felt endless and impossibly far away. And now I could see movement between me and safety.

Stars exploded behind my eyes as something heavy slammed into the side of my head sending me stumbling into a pile of plastic crates. Hot stinking breath assaulted my nostrils, and I gagged, swimming in and out of consciousness. Clammy hands with broken, chipped fingernails scraped at my face, scrabbling at my eyelids. Feebly I tried to fend off my attacker.

Senses returning, my reactions changed from flight to fight! I threw a sloppy punch and felt it connect. For a brief second, hope surged, and I thought I was in with a chance. A second, brain-scrambling impact sent me wheeling down into unconsciousness.

"Don't worry." The words were soupy and confusing, and I kept losing track of them as I swam in and out of awareness. "It's okay I'll give you a hand with all this." Whispered a raspy voice, close enough to my ear that I could feel it's breath.

"Wha? Huh?" Forming the words I wanted to say was proving difficult. Pain impinged upon on my consciousness, a deep aching throb with a stabbing core that made the entire left side of my face feel tight and swollen. "I told ya, it's a curse. Don't worry I'll sort ya out."

One eye refused to open, but the one that did showed I was still in the alley. A flickering, orange light made the shadows jump and shift. I thought it might have been a candle. In this strange half-light a crouched, scarecrow figure moved back and forth.

"Too many people sleep yeah? And I've got to help them all." I recognised the speaker, but my head was pounding, and thinking was proving difficult. Where did I know it from? Fear flooded my stomach, making me feel suddenly cold. It was the old guy I chucked out of the pub earlier!

Now I moved. Something was seriously wrong with this whole situation. Scrabbling backward, heels slipping and sliding in rubbish, I tried to throw myself as far away as possible from him, fear overriding pain.

"No, no, no! Don't run. You need this. You'll thank me after. And I promise it won't hurt too much either." He came hobbling after me.

There as no way I was going to let him anywhere near me. "No! Get away!" My voice sounded weird as if my ears were full of water. The detached, hyper-clarity that accompanies an adrenaline rush suggested it might be blood instead. I needed to find my phone, call the police. Get help!

"Now, this bit's gonna hurt, I won't lie. But I need you to stay real still 'cos if I slip I'll mess ya brains up real bad." Leaning over me, my attacker continued whispering. "But once we're done, you won't need to sleep either. Then you'll be free from the subconscious too." Something metallic in his hand caught the uncertain candle light.

"No. Don't!" I tried to sound forceful and brave, but all that came from my mouth was a wavering, high pitched squeak.

A shake of his head "Nah, look, I know it's scary, but you'll see! You'll see just how good it is without sleep. No, giving control over to some monstrous thing every night, no dreams, sure..." he paused for thought, breathing heavily, "but no nightmares either." Tears sparkled in the uncertain light as they dripped down his ruined face. He was crying!

A mechanical buzzing started up just beyond my line of sight. I tried to look, but moving my head made everything start to fade away, and I knew I had to stay conscious no matter what. "Just going to shave your head a bit, okay? Makes it easier to get to your brains, you know?" He tilted my head to the side, and I felt cold metal touch my skin sending vibrations through my skull. "I'll only clip your hair a little bit, okay? And it'll grow back mostly." He muttered. Now it was my turn to cry.

Lengths of my hair fell softly across my face as he shaved the side of my head. He ignored my struggles and tears, all the while humming to himself. "There! That wasn't so bad now was it?" He placed the clippers reverently to one side. "The next bit's the worst part. You might not make it, but if you stay real still, you'll probably live through it."

He scrabbled around in a dirty, old shopping bag "Ah! Got it." I could not see what he was holding, but it issued a high-pitched whir. I knew that sound, the old drill from behind the bar! "Please no." I sobbed.

His hands closed around my throat in a vice-like grip, pushing me down onto the ground with frightening ease. Frantically I strove to break his hold. Now, I'm not weak, but the terrible old man was implacably strong. As I struggled, I tore strips of filthy skin from those stick-like arms, yet he ignored the wounds. The side of my face scraped against the rough floor of the alley.

"Shh. Don't worry love." He crooned through broken, rotting teeth "I'll sort you out. You'll be right." His bony knee planted itself in the middle of my chest as the whirring of the drill became a feverish whine. "Sleep's a curse mate. But she'll be right. I'll fix it up for you." I'm not sure which was louder, my screams or the howl of the drill as it bit home.

About the Author:

Kane Salzer is a full time parent and writer. Prior to taking the plunge into full time writing and parenting, he worked in financial services and consultancy. He is an avid reader, tabletop role player and multi-disciplinary geek. He is currently working on his first novel and an anthology of feminist horror micro fiction.

Reminiscences of a Shrunken Head | Harris Coverley

The remnants of my neck itch on the wood, but I have nothing to scratch or re-position myself with. My companions are not much for conversation, at best me catching their infantile babblings in their own tongue.

I have no eyes, but I can somewhat make out the living before me. I have no ear canals left, but I can just about hear the shuffling of feet, their joys, their sufferings...

Of good Anglo-Saxon stock, I made my fortune in rubber in the Congo Free State. Trade was free of tax, and labour was ridiculously cheap, the good King Leopold seeing fit to keep those childish natives in vassalage with the threat of a damn good beating or one less hand to make trouble with, only for those infernal busybodies, the so-called 'humanitarians' back in Europe and America, to force the Belgian government to annex the Free State and put an end to poor old Leopold's fair system. It makes my blood boil even now, even though I am currently free of blood.

This was fortunately during the rubber boom in South America, so I gathered my equipment and men from the Basin, left my beloved with a commitment to return home as soon as was feasible, and made my way to Peru. The last packages of land to be offered by the government in Lima were well down from Iquitos, on the *Marañón River* close to the border with Ecuador, and most were too afraid of the fearsome tribes inhabiting the region to make such an investment that at best would be upset by continuous disruption, at worst be fatal. However, being on my last legs and my compensation from Brussels not being much to sustain my livelihood, I used what I had to get the most cut-rate parcel I could in a stretch of jungle known as *Las Tierras de Sangre*—I regret to admit that I did not know much Spanish at the time.

I am used in rituals on occasion, mostly tossed from hand to hand, screamed at and spat at. Whether at a wedding, or the levelling of a curse, or a declaration of war, I do not seem to have much effect, or if I do, I am unaware of it.

I appear not to sleep in my own realm, although I do vague out from time to time, for days or weeks maybe, but I do not stray too far from true reality.

It took two weeks of travel north up the *Marañón* to reach the land parcel on a chartered steamboat that exhausted the very last of my personal funds. This would either have to be a success, or I would certainly return to civilisation a pauper.

We arrived at the beginning of the rainy season, not exactly the best time to harvest rubber, but within two weeks we had amongst us gathered a dozen barrels of sap, and were in need of more barrels and men in order to expand production to make a reasonable profit.

They first slit the back of the neck, peeling back the flesh in order to remove the skull. They then sew up the eyes and the mouth, remove its fat, and boil it in herbed water, before drying it by filling it with hot sand, a group of tribeswomen moulding and massaging it down, until it reaches its desired shape and size.

I felt most of it, although numbly.

It was decided in counsel with trusted subordinates that the ship would be sent back to Lima to gather more barrels, the remaining empties left to be filled by native labour, which myself and a few others would go to the local settlement of Awahjoon people to acquire. We had with us a large quantity of machetes to trade with which we knew they would put to their own uses against neighbouring enemies.

Our conference in the hut of the man we believed to be the tribal chief at first seemed to go well, a *pescador* we had picked up back along the river acting as our translator. However, within a brief moment we had found ourselves deprived of the machetes amidst a great stomping kerfuffle, and my last memory in the world of the living is of hurtling to the dirt, *sine corpore*.

We are on the move for many days through the jungle on foot, until, suddenly, I can sense the water beneath me, through the wood of the canoe.

Now I am back in Lima! Oh joy! Oh glory! Oh civilisation! The sound of voices, Spanish, English, German... Darkness follows.

Cold steel of the ship beneath me, the smoke stretching high above. Wrapped in wax paper, in a chest, a great journey across the oceans, I can feel it...

I am hung up with new heads, having been in darkness for so long.

It seems that while I have been indisposed some new empire has arisen in Germany, one which does not look too kindly on Semites, and we are in the possession of a physician who is quite mad.

The Jewish heads are pleasant enough, and some know English, so, putting aside old prejudices, we can communicate in our little ways.

There is a dominant feeling about us that this empire, in spite of its brutal successes, will soon succumb to its own fires.

I am in a museum, still with the Jewish heads. I can sense the glass we are under, and we know we are lucky not to have been incinerated as many others were.

Museum life is bearable, although so many decades have passed since my decapitation.

I know I must put such things out of my mind now.

The first tour group will be around soon.

About the Author:

Harris Coverley has short fiction published or forthcoming in *Horror Magazine*, *Planet Scumm*, *The J.J. Outré Review*, and *Eldritch Journal*. He is also a Rhysling-nominated poet, with verse in *Star*Line*, *Scifaikuest*, *Jitter*, *New Reader Magazine*, and *Clover & White*, amongst many others. He lives in Manchester, England, where he plans to take up baking again real soon.

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Bent Metal

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

It Bites | Andy Swindells

The first question that I asked was, "Does it bite?" My cousin Vinny stood on the doorstep holding a thick chain leash with a huge pit-bull crossbreed at the other end of it.

"It better fucking had!" he replied. Vinny was nursing a black eye and a chest full of nasty-looking bruises from a recent altercation. With his spiked ginger hair and spotty face, Vinny was an ugly bastard at the best of times, so there was no danger of the beating ruining his looks. "Grab your crossbow mate, we're going for a walk," he said. It was the six-week school holiday break; I had been lazing in the back garden all afternoon, drinking cheap cider and taking advantage of the hot weather.

I grabbed my crossbow and caught up with Vinny. "Where are we going Vin?" I enquired.

"The fucking McCann's have taken over Prussia Park. Five of them jumped me yesterday, they had me pinned on the fucking deck, and their leader Gary put the boot in when I was down." Vinny rolled up his T-shirt showing me the damage to his ribs. "Those cunts have got it coming mate, they took my stash and the wad of notes I had stuffed down my undies." Vinny and I were both small-time drug dealers, selling £5 and £10 bags of grass to local users. It was 1975; we were both aged fifteen, and thick as pig shit. Where we lived it was like the fucking Wild West. The coppers turned a blind eye to what we did to each other, just as long as we stayed within our shitty council estate and left the posh suburbs alone.

"Where did you get that dog from?" I asked. It was a weird-looking thing, all muscle and teeth. The five minutes I had been in its presence it had not wagged its tail or shown any interest in me.

"Winston lent it to me as part payment; he owes me for about five bags of weed." Winston was a mate of ours from school, we sold him ganja and he sometimes paid with stuff he had nicked or fenced. "It's his Nan's guard dog. She's gone back to Jamaica for a family funeral and he's looking after it for her," Vinny said.

"What happens if we damage it?" I asked.

"Isn't gonna happen, mate. Winston says the dog is indestructible. His Nan put a voodoo spell on it to make it immortal."

I stopped in my tracks and said, "And you fucking believed him?"

Vinny stopped and replied, "Did I fuck! If the dog dies, it's his own fucking fault for spoofing us." I nodded, taking his point. We had nothing to lose. Dogs were two a penny back in those days, packs of them roamed the streets chasing bitches in heat and shitting all over the place. There was none of that picking it up with plastic bags nonsense or microchipping your mutt back then. The canal was full of dead puppies and drowned kittens that people didn't want.

"What's its name?" I asked, making small talk, we were close to Prussia Park and could bump into the McCann's at any moment.

"He's called Samedi; I'm just calling it Sam for now. I don't want to sound like a dickhead using that name," he replied. The dog had a massive head with white fur and a black tail. Someone had tattooed a cobra's head on the point where the tail joined the rump, making it look like a snake was biting the dogs behind. As we walked along the canal that day, everyone cleared out of our way, with good reason. I could have got used to that kind of power. You would have been an idiot to tangle with us.

We reached Prussia Park a few minutes later, coming in from the Ancoats side. The McCann's were there; spray painting the old bandstand with their colours. "I bet they bought that paint with my money!" Vinny cursed. We closed in on them from the side. The eldest of the McCann's had their pet long-haired Alsatian dog named Major at his side; he was the first to notice us. There were five of them, but I had the crossbow. "Oy! Shitface! I want my weed and my fucking money back now! Or else!" said Vinny, who wasn't known for his diplomacy skills.

The McCann's stopped spraying graffiti and each of them pulled out a knife ready to fight us. "Or else what? You ginger twat!" Gary, the eldest replied.

"Or else my dog will fuck your dog up. And don't think about running away, my cousin will take you down with the bow. Just fucking pay up and we will let you go." Gary McCann was a couple of years older than us and had a reputation for being a bit of a hard fucker. He had long brown greasy hair and was wearing a V-neck *Black Sabbath* t-shirt and steel toe-capped Doc Martin boots.

"Listen you prick, you and your fucktard cousin, can just turn around, and do one. If you don't get out of our park, we will kill your fucking dog and take whatever money is in your pockets. Don't think that crossbow scares us, the moment you use it we will get you and cut your fucking hands off." he replied. I don't mind admitting that I was scared at that moment; we should have brought a few more of our mates along for backup. Vinny (god bless him!) would never back down, even when the odds were against him. Running or walking away wasn't an option. The moment had arrived where we had to put up or shut up. Samedi the pit-bull was emitting a low growling noise. Gary McCann sneered at the dog and said, "Our Major will fucking have that scrawny thing for breakfast... last chance dickhead to walk away." The two dogs strained at their leash, teeth bared. They were now less than three feet away from each other. I had heard that Major had ripped a few dogs to pieces in the past; it was certainly the larger of the two animals. Vinny stepped towards Gary McCann, closing the gap to a

couple of feet. Suddenly, the Alsatian let out a whimpering sound and broke free of the leash; the dog ran with its ears flattened down and tail between its legs to the other side of the park, where it sat nervously waiting for its owner to come to get it.

"What the fuck!" Gary cursed, looking equally angry and embarrassed at the same time. Samedi bolted forwards, yanking the lead from Vinny's hands. The dog clamped its fangs onto Gary's testicles and began to shake its head side to side, the sharp canine teeth ripped through the fabric with ease, destroying any chance of Gary ever reproducing. To this day, I have never heard a human being make a sound like Gary did. It was a high pitched scream that made your blood freeze. We all stood there rooted to the spot, not knowing what to do. One of Gary's cousins snapped out of it first, he ran over and plunged his knife deep into Samedi's side. The six-inch blade sunk into the dog's ribs right up to the handle. Samedi immediately let go of Gary and lunged at the cousin who had stabbed him. The dog launched itself into the air, clamping its teeth onto the cousin's throat; the spray of hot blood coated us all; as Samedi tore through the jugular vein. The other McCann's were in a total panic shouting for Vinny to call it off. Vinny stood there grinning like a lunatic; he was enjoying this gruesome spectacle. The remaining three McCann's made a group effort to neutralise the mad dog. Each of them plunged their knives into Samedi, in an attempt to kill the frenzied beast. The whole thing was a crazy blur as Samedi turned on them, biting off fingers and sinking its teeth into anything that came near. One of the McCann's made a run for it and Samedi took him down by biting off a huge chunk of meat from the kid's backside. It was turning into a bloodbath, all for the sake of petty retribution. I had no doubts that the dog would have killed them all if left to continue; to this day I don't know what possessed me to fire my crossbow into the cobras head tattoo on the dogs behind. Samedi stopped worrying the McCann kid it had pinned to the ground and turned to face me snarling, with blood dripping from its snout. I hadn't brought any spare bolts with me and the dog knew that I was the one guilty of shooting it.

Samedi walked over to face me, I wanted to make a run for it but I had seen it take the other kids down with ease. I had never been as scared in my life as I was at that moment. To the left of me, I saw Vinny walk over and calmly take hold of the dog leash that was trailing on the floor next to Samedi. There was a moment where the dog and I made serious eye contact. It felt like I was being judged by the hellish creature. It must have had its pound of human flesh for the day, as it pulled at the leash in the direction we had come from. We hurried off before the police came, dashing to Winston's house to get rid of the mutt. Winston opened the door smoking a long spliff; we could hear police or ambulance sirens wailing in the background. Samedi ushered past Winston covered in McCann blood and with the crossbow bolt still sticking out from its arse. Winston didn't look at all bothered. Vinny spoke, "sorry about the dog mate, we are straight with what you owe me." Winston nodded that it was cool. I handed over my crossbow to him, saying that he could keep it. I knew the coppers would be at my house when I got home and they would nick me for owning it. Our plan was simple. We would say that a stray dog followed us into the park and it tried to defend Vinny and me when the McCann's attacked us with their dog.

Long story short! We basically got away with it. Seeing as neither of us owned a dog and the crossbow was never found, there wasn't much the police could charge us with. We kept shtum on the advice of our legal team. Our age helped out a lot, as we were both still considered minors. As for the McCann's; the dog had killed one of them that day, and left the others with life-changing injuries. Gary the eldest brother, ended up killing himself a couple of years later, he couldn't live without having any bollocks and pissing through a tube every time he had to go siphon the python.

I didn't see Winston for another thirty-two years. I was at Crumpsall Hospital visiting my cousin Vinny. He was dying from cancer of the stomach and wasn't long for this world. There had been a post on MySpace, inviting any old Ancoats friends to come and pay their respects. Winston, and a few other toe rags from the past, stood around Vinny's bed swapping tall stories and silently wishing they didn't end up looking like a bag of bones with the big -C like him. At eight o'clock visiting time was over, and we all shook hands, as you do, and said that we would all keep in touch; like you say you do... when you don't actually mean it. Winston asked me if I wanted a lift home, I said yes. He had done well for himself, becoming a legitimate businessman, unlike me. I had been in and out of prison most of my life, between holding down crap jobs that barely paid the rent. As we walked up to his car, a brand new Mercedes, I asked the question that had bugged me for the past three decades. "What happened to that dog?"

Winston stopped and looked at me through his gold-rimmed designer glasses, before replying, "You mean Samedi?" I nodded my head indicating a yes, what other dog would I be asking about. Winston laughed at my awkwardness, before saying, "Old Samedi! My grandkids love him. You should see the way little Joshua pulls his tail and bites his ears. That dog is great with kids."

"Whoa! You are saying that fucking dog is still alive, after all those years. Nice one Winston. Pull the other one mate, it's got bells on it," I said. Winston looked offended; he walked over to the car and opened the back door. Samedi jumped out wagging its tail as it ran over to sniff me. There was no doubt that this was the same mutt, it hadn't aged a day. The cobra tattoo was still there, along with a small scar where I had shot a bolt into it, way back in 75.

"Better than any car alarm mate! No one is gonna nick my pride and joy with Samedi keeping guard," said Winston. The dog looked into my eyes again, before jumping back into the car.

"You know what Winston? It's a lovely evening for a walk, thanks for the offer and all that. We will have to go for a pint one day and catch up on old times." I said.

"Suit yourself then mate, see you around," Winston replied. I watched the Merc drive away and then lit up a cigarette. It was a long walk home for me, but there was no way I was getting into the car with that fucking dog.

About the Author:

Andy Swindells lives in Manchester and is the author of nine books 'Work Rest and Slay'-'Shrewsville' 'Gibble' and the superhero series Badgeforce. He loves playing Bass guitar and singing (to the annoyance of others!) Being an accepted writer has been his lifelong ambition. He always likes taking time out, to talk to those who have read and enjoyed his work.

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AWK-Ward... | Rie Sheridan Rose

"Well...I'm not sure how to put this..."

David blinked. "What do you mean?"

The towering gray figure before him leafed through the pages on the clipboard he held in one taloned hand. "Well, you aren't in the database."

"What do you mean? I worked hard to get on that list! I killed four people—one of them with my bare hands. I burned the car that three of them had been driving before they picked me up hitchhiking—with their dog inside!"

The demon jerked back a step. "Dude! That's just cold."

"See? I told you. I deserve to be here."

"Deserving or not, you aren't on my list. I can't let you in."

David looked over the demon's shoulder. "Look—that guy there--" He pointed at one of the shuffling figures behind the doorman. "--I know that guy. I robbed a liquor store with him in '04. He can vouch for what a really horrible person I am..."

The horns on the creature's head seemed to extend inches as David watched. "You can't get in! Unless your name is on my list, Hell has no place for you."

"Well, this is awkward," David sighed. "I'm dead now, and I am certainly not getting into Heaven. Where am I supposed to go?"

"I don't care," answered the demon, raising one hand to stem David's protests. "You've got to get out of here. The Boss does not like complications. Go on, get out of here!" He made shooing motions.

David sighed, pulling a piece of paper from his pocket. "Do you at least validate?"

About the Author:

Rie Sheridan Rose writes many things. Her favorite genres to work in are horror, humor, and Steampunk. In her off-hours, she herds a sizable stable of cats. Her least favorite things about the quarantine have been its disruption of Pokemon Go and the pounds she's put on.

Blog: <u>riewriter.com</u>
Twitter: @riesheridanrose



John Doe | David A.F. Brown

Dr. Edwards gazed at the man on the gurney, trying to determine if he was conscious. A series of fluorescent bulbs flickered above, casting an icy sheen over the room. In the flashes of light, she noticed some movement. The man raised his hand and curled his index finger, inviting her over to him. She carefully approached the bed.

The man was secured to the gurney with four leather restraints fixed to his hands and feet. He was emaciated and scabs covered his face, some red and puss-filled, others hardened into permanent gaping holes, a common feature of needle users. Patches of black, oily hair spotted his lumpy head.

"How are you feeling, sir?" she asked gently.

"Better than you, Lisa," replied the man as his mouth peeled into a grin.

Dr. Edwards froze before realizing that he must have seen her name on her ID. She looked down at her badge and smiled at the man before glancing at his chart, which indicated: John Doe.

"You're in the emergency room, sir. My name is Dr. Edwards, I'm a psychiatrist. We are going to help you, okay?" She had doled out this introduction thousands of times, but tonight, she felt uneasy and lost in her thoughts. "Do you know your name, sir?"

"Do you know my name?" responded the man, his voice deep and hoarse. He pursed his lips and made a whistling noise, blowing a stream of rancid air into Dr. Edwards' face. She felt a tingling sensation at the back of her neck and resisted the urge to scratch.

"Have you been using tonight? Are you in pain?" she continued.

"Always," cackled the man. His teeth were gnarled and sharp, like coral encrusted with yellow grime. "Let me ask you, doctor, are you capable of shame?"

Dr. Edwards ignored the question. "And did you use anything tonight, sir? Did you take any drugs or alcohol?" She felt sweat gathering at her brow.

"I use you. You use me. That's how this works. You have a family to feed, right?"

Dr. Edwards cleared her throat. "What do you mean by that?"

The man laughed, crow's feet stretching from his eyes. He yanked at his restraints, rattling the metal bars of the gurney. When Dr. Edwards showed no reaction, he stuck out his tongue, bit down hard and began to hiss though gurgles. Blood trickled from his mouth, leaving red streams down his chin. His eyes were large and glossy. He would not break his stare.

"Sir, I can come back when you're feeling better. We can't give you any sedatives until we know what you've taken. We don't want to hurt you."

The man stopped hissing and withdrew his tongue. "You don't want to hurt me, but you hurt someone, Lisa." He turned his head, nodding at a plant on the windowsill.

Dr. Edwards looked over to the window. Sprouting from a white pot, a little shrub stood with clusters of pink flowers in funnel-shaped blooms, surrounded by pointed green leaves. Her veins turned to ice and her heart went into a rapid flutter. Her eyes welled with tears.

"Do you recognize that particular variety, Dr. Edwards?" the man beamed. "The oleander plant, highly poisonous. As your husband knows very well."

"What is this? Who are you? My husband died long ago," retorted Dr. Edwards as she backed away from the gurney.

"Liar!" he spat. His eyes sparked, emitting an intense orange light. He tensed his arms and his restraints transformed into writhing snakes. Sitting upright, the man floated above the gurney, drifting towards Dr. Edwards as his body evaporated to reveal his true form – a creature with a large, spiked tail, razors for teeth and shiny skin, black as tar. Two coiled, bony horns protruded from its skull, its eyes now deep red.

Dr. Edwards turned to run, but the creature was too fast. Its leathery hand, adorned with long, hardened fingernails, clamped onto her shoulder and spun her around. Face to face with the beast, she became limp as it pressed its palm against her forehead, sending her into a trance.

Under the creature's spell, she remembered clipping the pink oleander. She had found it in the woods. Its color was extraordinary and rich, enticing her, as if the universe had drawn her to that very spot, on that very day, and given her permission to protect herself for once, to *love* herself for once. She saw herself mixing the stems into her husband's rhubarb crisp, heard his watery scream, the bone-breaking convulsions. She smelled the deluge of liquid that escaped from his blue body...the stench, my God, the stench!

The creature removed its hand from Dr. Edwards' head, summoning her back to reality. She was no longer in the hospital room; rather, a vast space, an ocean of never-ending fire encompassed by total darkness. Rows upon rows of human bodies burned in the flames, their limbs pretzeled together in a tangle of knots. They bawled in agony as their skin boiled and popped. Glaring into the inferno, Dr. Edwards broke into tears and pleaded with the creature in desperation. "Please, I've done so much good in my life."

The creature nodded, and for a moment, Dr. Edwards thought she might be spared. Instead, it shot its claws into her face as giant wings sprang from its back, lifting off with Dr. Edwards in hand, her head firmly latched to its talons. As they flew over the fiery ocean, the creature spoke to its prey for the final time. "I am Beelzebub, the Lord of the Flies, and you're mine now."

About the Author:

David A.F. Brown is a Canadian author whose fiction has appeared in various anthologies, magazines and podcasts, including *Tales to Terrify*, *Tell-Tale Press* and *Deep Fried Horror*. He was a finalist in the NYC Midnight Short Story Challenge 2019, an international competition of over 4,500 writers. He holds a BA (Hons) from Western University and resides in Caledon, Ontario, with his wife and son.

Facebook: David A.F. Brown

Goodnight Story | Patrick J Wynn

"Annie, finish brushing your teeth. It's bedtime," Mommy called.

Annie ran her pink toothbrush over her teeth a couple of times then placed it back in the holder. She rinsed her mouth and then wiped her mouth with the towel. Jumping down off the small stool in front of the sink she turned toward the door and froze. Holding her breath she covered her eyes and began counting.

"One, two, three, four, five, six," Annie whispered. "OK"

"Annie lets go," Mommy called again.

Annie leaned out into the hall and slowly looked both ways. Shaking a little she darted across the hall into her bedroom and launched herself into bed. Quickly shoving her feet under the covers she then yanked up the heavy blanket over her face and began counting again.

"One, two, three, four, five, six."

"Ok, ok. Mommy is here. It's all fine," Mommy giggled.

From under the blanket Annie heard her mother turning the pages of the book she'd been reading Annie every night since she was two.

"How about the gingerbread man?" Mommy asked.

Annie just shook her head yes without pulling the blanket down.

"You going to stay under the blanket tonight?" Mommy asked.

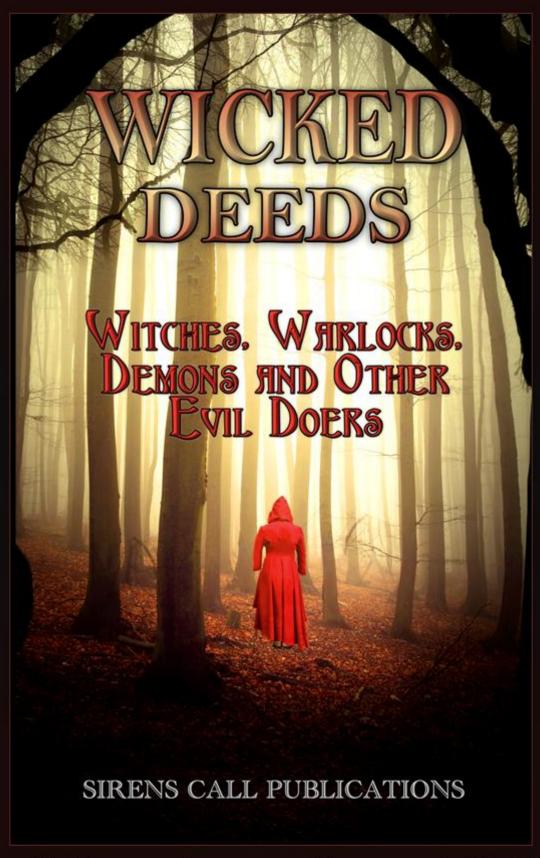
"Yes" Annie whispered.

As Mommy began to read Annie shivered a little. She really enjoyed story time and was happy Mommy came back every night to read Annie's favorite book. But since Mommy died she had begun to smell bad. Mommy also looked funny, kind of grey and rotten. But that didn't scare Annie. No, what scared Annie were the new friends Mommy brought with her.

About the Author:

Patrick J Wynn is an author of short stories that contain shades of horror, humor and are just a touch weird. His works have been published in Sirens Call, Dark Dossier, Short Horror, Weird Mask and Trembling with Fear. You can follow him on his Facebook page and look for his short story collections on Amazon.

Sometimes wicked people do wicked things...



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

Solar-phobia | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

Ten-year-old Sarah was bitten by a rabid-dog—playing tag near woods' edge—the beast materializing from tree-shadows.

I shot it dead, the horrid disease soon confirmed.

Sarah was promptly administered the frightening, long-needled shots in her still-formative abdomen—the deadly progression of virus halted. "No lingering effects," Doc said.

Sarah was eight-years younger; we were married nine-years later.

Strangely, she won't drink plain water. She likes dark-tea, well enough.

She shuns daylight!—but loves the night.

We enjoy stargazing, summer-evenings, letting our imaginations run free.

Sometimes, in full-moonlight, I'm certain I see saliva trickle from a corner of her mouth.

Transplant | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

I awaken to a throbbing headache, temples flaring with each reverberating heartbeat. It's as if my heart engulfs my head, all else seemingly nonexistent.

The room is dark, restrictive. I can't see, or reach, the so-called 'stroke-preventer' pills kept beside my hospital-bed.

I'm surprised I can even think inside this pulsing, noisy pain. I don't know why I now recall the Ancient-Egyptian belief that one thinks with the heart, the brain inconsequential.

Amid scraping air-sounds, the walls of this tiny room expand/deflate—more slowly than the more immediate, slushing cardiac-contractions. Weird—until I suddenly realize, I'm installed in someone-else's chest!

No Escaping that Tune | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

Ever had a tune you couldn't get out of your head?— keeps 'playing,' as though your brain-ridges hardened into vinyl-record-grooves.

Maybe you're humming it silently to yourself, though you don't want to.

In my case, it's not a tune I even like!— *Oh Danny Boy*—more properly, Grainger's Irish *Tune from County Derry*—How dol know this? Saw it on a printed-program when a friend paused, walking past.

I especially detest hearing it in 'tremolo,' on the electric-organ! Excruciating!

If I could only climb out of this cushioned, form-fitting mahogany-chamber—and shut it off—not, transport it to eternity!

About the Author:

Will H. Blackwell, Jr. is a retired professor, botany, Miami University (Ohio), presently living in Alabama where he continues research on aquatic fungi. His short-fiction has appeared in *Brilliant Flash Fiction, The Drabble, Raven Cage Zine, Shelter of Daylight, Trembling with Fear,* and 365 Tomorrows. Poems are in *Aphelion, Black Petals, Illumen, Scifaikuest,* and *Slant*.



Not the Prototypical Horror Fan

I don't consider myself the prototypical horror fan. I've never been a hack and slash or jump scare person and I didn't watch many horror movies or read horror novels growing up. I am fascinated by the inner workings of human thought and what makes things acceptable or not. I feel the best horror comes from things that we believe other people can do or that maybe we don't want to admit to ourselves that we think about.

I think of fiction writing in two basic categories that I equate to television programs. There are the books that are like the hour-long dramas that make you feel everything and take you on an emotional roller coaster. Then there are the books that are the half-hour sitcoms that you go along for the ride and they find those nuggets of truth that hit home in a totally different way. I'm much closer to the latter and embrace that. I want my stories to be easy and enjoyable to read but at the end leave you thinking about a situation you may not have before.

It's easy to say my novel, *The Night*, is a zombie book, and it is, but it goes deeper than that. The zombies put humans in positions where they must make difficult decisions that under normal circumstances would be horrible. Does an unprecedented situation make a normally unacceptable decision acceptable?

Another key part of my writing style is I love writing short stories. As we have less free time to focus on reading, short stories give the reader a feeling of finishing something. If they don't get a chance to pick up the book for awhile it's not as dire because the next page is something new. *The Night* is twelve short stories that carry the reader through the story arc with each story letting me tackle a separate issue that could arise in a situation where ten percent of the United States population is turned into a zombie overnight.

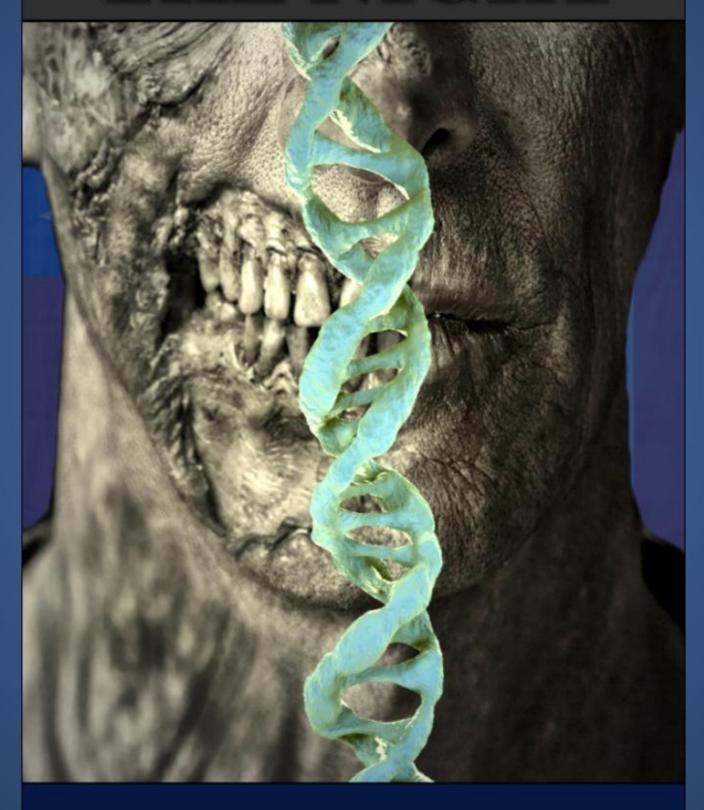


About the Author:

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. Growing up in Buffalo, NY and spending many winter nights reading fantasy and scifi novels he never imagined he would one day be writing his own stories, and oddly enough writing primarily horror stories. He is also a member of a horror writer group called Pen of the Damned (www.penofthedamned.com) where they release new flash fiction weekly. In addition to his fiction works, Mark's blog for Bandit Lites (www.Banditdimmerbeach.com) is one of the leading resources for information about touring in the live show industry.

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THE NIGHT



MARK STEINWACHS

The Beginning

It happened overnight. Everyone always joked that it would go that way. It was a shock that it did. Happening so quickly was probably one of the two reasons it didn't completely spread throughout the world.

One night. That's all it took for the world to change. First a person started feeling sick, a spring flu is all. Take a little NyQuil and you'll be fine in the morning, no big deal. How many spouses do you think said that that night? How many kids were put to bed early by their parents?

It was a quiet death. They stopped breathing. That was it. The body simply stopped.

Stopped.

Then it started again. Just like in the movies. That was the second reason it didn't spread like it could have. Movies, books, and video games had prepared us for this.

There was no other word for it, nothing fancy and scientific. Nothing to make it seem like anything other than what it was.

Zombies.

Ten percent. Ten percent were turned that night. Think about that. In one night thirty-five million people died. Died and came back to life.

Excerpt from "The Decade"

Dr. Rudolph Graham

Recorded 22-April

At Tom Harkin Global Communications Center Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Atlanta, Georgia

Everyone in America was affected that first night. Families were torn apart as they reacted to the situation. Mothers killed daughters, fathers killed sons, wives killed husbands. It was nothing short of brutal. The surviving members of families rarely lasted long together. It was too hard, too much all at once. They would split up and go their own ways looking for safety, or they would get careless as they started to lose the will to fight. Either way, the zombies got them. The first month saw untold horrors, but worse than that were the first couple of days.

Everyone was learning how to cope with this terrible new disease. If you could call it coping.

Excerpt from "The Decade" Dr. Rudolph Graham

Terror pierced the morning air. Jon heard screams from the hallway outside his bedroom door.

He opened his eyes, his brain coming to life.

Mom?

He couldn't make out any words, only screaming.

Jesus, it's like someone is trying to kill her.

Jon grabbed his bat, which he kept beside his nightstand since his first year of Little League, rolled out of bed, grabbed the doorknob, and stopped.

There could be guys with guns out there. If I bust through the door, they may get jumpy and shoot all of us. Gotta think this through ...

He opened the door a crack, just enough to see the hallway. His mother had her back to him and she was struggling with someone, somebody smaller than herself. The screams filled the whole house now.

Where the hell is Dad? What's going on?

His hand gripped the bat tighter as he took a step into the hall. His mother turned, grappling with her attacker. Jon nearly dropped the bat when he saw who she was fighting with—his thirteen-year-old little sister, Jill.

"Mom?"

"Jon?"

"What the hell is going on?"

"Help me," she yelled as Jill pushed her hard and she fell to the floor between her two children.

Jon stood in shock for a second as his brain tried to take it in. Jill was something else, not Jill anymore. Snarling and drooling, her eyes devoid of color. Her skin was gray and marbled with dark blood-pooled splotches. Her eyes ... there was nothing there. No intelligence of any kind. She looked like a wild, angry animal acting on instinct.

Jill let out a sound that was a cross between a shriek and a moan as she lunged forward towards their mother.

Jon's world went silent, his mind focused. Everything slowed around him and his eyes suddenly became high-def. He saw the muscles in Jill's legs tense as she got ready to pounce. He saw droplets of saliva fly through the air from her mouth as she twisted her head side to side. She jumped and it seemed as though she hung in midair over their mother. Jon took a step towards her and swung the bat upward, catching his sister in the shoulder. Her bone popped up at a grotesque angle, ripping through the skin. Her body flipped sideways, sending her crashing into the wall. She slammed into a mirror, fragments of glass exploding around her.

His world came rushing back to him. His mother kept yelling, her attention still directed at him. "Jonathan! Jonathan! What have you done? What did you do to her?"

He looked at the floor, unable to do anything but lower the bat to his side. He stared at his sister crumpled there, her shoulder completely ripped free from its socket, and her head oozing blood.

Fuck, she's dead! I killed her. What the—? Oh, fuck. What did I do?

His mother was on her feet. "What ... what ... what ... Jesus, Jonathan!"

His sister started to move ... slowly pushing herself up with her good arm.

No way. No way. This can't be real!

Jill's head lifted up, heavily as if it were a bag of sand. Her soulless eyes met his. She snapped her head violently to the side and let out a deep, throaty growl as she reached out for their mother.

"My baby girl. Let Momma help you ..."

"Mom ... no!" Jon grabbed his mother's arm and shoved her towards his bedroom. He took a step back and to his right, positioning himself at the top of the stairs where he could get a better swing. Jill finished standing up and took a step forward, one arm hanging limply, the other raised to strike. Jon's bat cut a smooth arc through the air and connected clean with her left temple. The gruesome sound of crunching bone rang in his ears as the bat caved in the side of his sister's face. Her little frame was once again propelled into the wall. There were shrieks from both of the women in Jon's life: his mother in anguish and horror, his sister in pain and anger.

Jill turned to her brother. The left side of her face was crushed and bloody, the top of her nightgown stained a dark red. She focused on him, her intact right eye locked on his body. She growled and stepped towards Jon.

I'm sorry, Jill.

Jon turned his body sideways and brought his bat up. His body easily slipped into the batting stance he'd practiced for so many years. He took a swing as Jill approached. Their mother stopped crying out the moment before the aluminum bat collided with Jill's head. The house was silent except for the sound of cracking bones and she hit the floor for the second time. Jon stood over her, his sister's brain exposed from the multiple wounds he inflicted.

Jon raised his bat.

More blood splattered the hallway. The once pretty girl lay motionless, her face broken beyond recognition.

Jon lowered his bat but kept it at his side. His body tense, ready, adrenaline coursed through his veins. His breaths were short and rapid. Jon looked at his bat, coated in red with only slivers of silver aluminum showing through. He shifted his gaze to his sister, almost headless, her body in a heap. Then he turned to his mother. She sat with her back against the door frame sobbing softly.

What the hell happened? Where is Dad? What the fuck is going on?

"Where's Dad?" His voice was so calm it almost scared him.

His mother looked up. "Wh-what?"

"Where. Is. Dad?" he said slowly, carefully, letting each word hang in the air. Jon slowed his breathing, "Where is Dad? Is he still in bed?"

"Ummmmm. Ye-ye-yes. Why?"

She must be in total shock. Am I? I don't feel different. I just killed my sister and I'm okay. Maybe I am the one in shock. Where is Dad? Is he dead already? Did Jill kill him? Is he ... Oh, shit.

He raced to his parents' bedroom.

Jon stood in front of their door, bat in his right hand, doorknob in his left. He started to turn the knob and stopped.

It's like some bad horror movie, everyone yelling at me not to open the door. Hell, I'd be yelling at me not to open the door.

He let out an involuntary little laugh.

This is fucked.

Right hand gripping the bat tighter, his left hand slowly started turning the knob again.

He pushed the door open gently. His father was asleep in bed. Jon took a couple of steps into the bedroom. The clock on the nightstand read 7:10. Five minutes had passed.

He focused on the bed. Waiting, letting a few seconds pass. His father wasn't breathing. He was lying there. Another few seconds ticked by; the room was silent.

He's dead.

Jon brought the bat up and positioned himself in his batting stance. He stared at his father, not moving, not breathing. The clock changed to 7:11. Still waiting.

Waiting

Did he breathe? No. No, he didn't. What am I waiting for? What is he going to do, jump up and get me? Jesus, I've lost it. I've snapped.

The clock read 7:12. Watching. Waiting for something to happen. Anything. Not waiting for anything; waiting for something.

Then Jon saw it. He brought his bat up a bit higher. His father's eyes popped open. Once green, they were now like Jill's, devoid of anything human. His father leapt out of bed, covers flying off to the side. Jon stood his ground. His father snarled, mouth opening and closing as he took another step. Jon was ready. He stepped in and got a full swing as his father lunged forward. The bat connected perfectly. The sickening sound of breaking bone, something he had already heard too much of this morning, invaded him but he knew that first hit wasn't enough.

His father's skull caved in and he was sent to the wall with a thud. Jon didn't waste any time. His father was on his knees, the side of his head bashed in. Jon stood over him, raining down blow after blow. Another shot to the side of the head, the top, then one to the shoulder. Blood spattered all over the wall, the rug. All over Jon.

Once more he hit his father's shoulder, smashing it into his chest, another blow to the head, one connected on his face. The world around Jon was a mixture of red and broken human flesh.

Jon didn't hear the snarls coming from his father, only the sound of breaking bones. He couldn't stop. He felt tears streaming down his face as the bat connected time and time again.

A quiet voice spoke from behind him. "Jon, stop it. He's gone. They're both gone."

He turned and saw his mother standing in the doorway. Her face was streaked with tears and blood, her torn nightgown coated as well. "You killed them, Jonathan. You killed your father and sister," her voice flat, defeated.

Jon stood with his back to the thing that used to be his father, the bat swinging slowly at his side. He opened his mouth to say something but nothing came out.

That wasn't them. I didn't kill them. They were already dead. They were ... zombies. Jesus, this IS a horror movie.

"Zombies. They were zombies." Jon spoke calmly, casually, as if it made perfect sense. His mother looked at him and shuddered. She started to shake a bit more, tears welling up in her eyes.

"Mom? Mom, stay with me. That wasn't them. They were already dead."

Zombies. Okay. I killed zombies. Now what? How did it happen? Why did it happen? What the hell is going on? "Mom, we need to find out what is going on."

His mother stood and looked at him. He walked over to the window and pulled the curtain away so he could see the back yard. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

What was I expecting ... fires and explosions? This isn't the movies. This is real life.

He watched another minute. Neither he nor his mother moved. Nothing moved. It was just his normal back yard at quarter after seven in the morning. "I'm going down stairs to see if there is anything on the news about what's going on. There is no way this only happened to us."

His mother took a pair of jeans and a shirt from the dresser and turned to follow her son. "Yeah, Jonathan. Let's go downstairs."

Jon led the way. He stopped at the bottom and looked around. The curtains were still drawn, front door shut.

Seriously, what am I expecting here? I must be in shock. That's it. I'm in shock. Any minute my mind is going to catch up with me and I'm going to totally lose it.

The smell of coffee wafted over him.

At least I can get a nice cup of coffee.

Jon laughed out loud, he couldn't help it.

He looked at his mother and shrugged. He opened his mouth to explain but stopped. She walked by him to their living room and sat on the couch. Jon went to the kitchen. He heard her turn on the television. He stopped at the back door and moved the curtain.

No fires or riots. Good.

He went to the counter to make his mother a cup of coffee. Grabbing the mug labeled 'Wifey,' he set it by the pot. Reaching over, he picked up the one that said 'Hubby.' How many times had he heard his parents call each other that? Then he opened a lower cabinet with his foot and put the 'Hubby' mug in the very back. He stood up and poured the coffee into the two remaining mugs. Jon tried to grab the cups and only then realized he hadn't let go of his bat. He looked around the room.

What am I waiting for? What am I afraid of? Put the bat down, take the coffee to the living room, and see what is going on. Maybe it's nothing. Maybe we are crazy. Maybe we snapped. Just put the bat down. Take the coffee. Go.

With the bat still in his right hand, he picked up the mugs with his left, went into the living room, and sat on the couch next to his mother. She took her mug and sipped the coffee. She looked at her mug and exhaled a ragged breath, then turned her attention to the television. Neither said a word.

"Reports are coming into the Channel 5 newsroom that a group of mental patients have escaped and are in the downtown area attacking anyone they see. Police are assessing the situation and are asking that only essential personnel enter the downtown area until the situation is under control."

Jon took the remote and changed the channel. Another talking head, a blonde woman with perfect hair and makeup, was caught mid-sentence, "...seem to have some form of rabies and are biting ..."

CLICK

"Emails and texts are now coming in from the outlying areas of more attacks of people in the street and in some homes."

CLICK.

"... called in to put down riots in both the Riverbend Maximum Security Institution and the Charles B. Bass Correctional Complex."

CLICK

"... outbreaks are being reported from all parts of the country. No statement has been released from the White House."

CLICK.

This time he turned off the TV. They sat in silence, his mother still sipping her coffee.

"It's not only here and it's not only us," he said. "Whatever it is, it's happening all over the country."

He looked at his mother. She sat there with a blank look on her face. Even though she had changed into her jeans and shirt while he was in the kitchen, she still had blood in her hair and on her hands and face. He looked at himself and realized, for the first time, that he was covered in blood, bits of flesh clung to his shirt and shorts. He shuddered and stood up.

"Mom?" No response. "Mom? MOM!"

Shit! She's out of it. Gone.

Finally she turned and looked at him.

"Are you okay, Mom?"

She shook her head. "I don't think things are okay at all anymore, Jonathan. Your father and sister are dead. People are going crazy all over the country."

She stopped, finishing her coffee. "I'm going to get another cup. You're a mess, go shower. When you are done, I'll shower and then we'll figure out what to do." Her speech was calm and even, her voice almost soft.

Is that what I sound like? Is that what people sound like before they snap and go on a killing spree or something? He opened his mouth to reply but couldn't find the words. They looked at each other again. Although her hazel eyes stood out more vivid than ever before, there was also a burned-out quality to them.

It's like her brain flipped a switch. This can't be good. Isn't that what I did?

"I'm going up to my room to get some clothes." He paused, his voice faltered slightly. "I'll be right back after I check on things. Do you need anything?"

She smiled at her son. "No, there is nothing for me up there."

Jon headed upstairs. He saw what was left of his sister first. The blood that pooled around her body was beginning to dry. The hallway was a mess. Pictures were smashed on the floor. A table was turned over and broken. Streaks of red were everywhere. Tears began to well in his eyes once again as everything started to sink in. He stepped past his sister and turned towards his parents' room. The open door beckoned him.

The condition of his father's body was worse than his sister's. His mind raced, replaying those earlier seconds. He stood in the doorway and let the images play. Jon saw himself crying as the bat struck home. He was beating his father—no, the body of his father—into a mess of flesh and bone.

Jon snapped out of the memory and looked at his bat. It was coated in a sticky, red slime. He spun the bat in his hand as he walked to his room. This time he passed by the body of his sister without looking at it.

He went into his room and got his clothes that he had laid out for the day. Jon walked to the window and looked out, the morning sun bathing their back yard.

No fires of hell, no mass chaos, nothing; just another morning. You'd think I'd stop looking, but here I am.

He pulled himself away from the window and looked over at the clock. 7:30. Jon walked from his room and was at the top of the steps, about to call to his mother, when he heard her crying in the kitchen. Sobs and jagged breaths wracked his mother's body, not the anguished cries of a woman grieving for her family but ones of resignation and loss. He slowly descended the stairway, stopping on the bottom step.

I should go to the kitchen. Go talk to her, comfort her. How? What would I say? What can I say?

Jon's head dropped as he turned from the kitchen and went to the bathroom. He shut the door and turned on the shower, making sure the water was hot and letting the room fill with steam.

I should go to Mom. I should be there for her.

His hand went to the doorknob. The last time he stood at a door like that, he opened it and beat his father to death. He took his hand off the knob.

I can't. I can't help her right now. She needs to get it out on her own. Yeah, let her grieve in peace. She doesn't need to see the person who killed her family.

Jon opened the shower curtain and leaned the bat against the wall of the shower. It was the first time since everything happened that it was out of his grasp. His hand hovered close to it. It was hard for him not to hold it again. The water started beating on it, washing away the brutality of the morning. He could make out the word Easton on it as the blood was washed to the bottom of the tub.

He stripped down. For a moment he looked at his blood-soaked clothes. He snatched them up and shoved them behind the toilet, partially hidden.

That will make it all go away. Nice.

He stepped in and felt the hot water rush over him. Once more the tub turned crimson. Jon reached for the soap and washed himself vigorously. The water ran clear when he was done with his hair and he felt cleansed enough to step out. After quickly drying off and getting dressed in his fresh clothes, he retrieved his bat and got ready to open the door. Again his hand paused as it closed over the knob.

How long will this go on for? Am I ready for what is out there? What is out there?

He opened the door and stepped out. He heard the TV, some newscaster talking about the mental patients, but not his mother crying. He went into the living room where his mother had returned to the couch, watching CNN.

"It's happening all over the country. People are going crazy and attacking each other, Jon. It's unbelievable."

"Yeah. Yeah, it is, Mom. Look, why don't you go get a shower? I'll keep an eye on things out here."

She got up without a word and walked past him. She squeezed his shoulder gently as she passed by, and then he heard the door shut. Jon walked to the dining room and looked out the window. It seemed to be a peaceful morning. He looked up and down the street. Some of the cars were gone but a few were in driveways that normally wouldn't be at this time.

As he was about to turn away, the front door of a house down the street burst open. A lady ran out screaming, heading for her car.

Oh, God, what is her name? Jesus, is she bleeding? Dammit!

Jon took off without thinking. He yanked the front door open, sprinted across the road, heading towards his neighbor. Birds scattered from the trees as the commotion tore the morning air. Her husband came through their open front door. He stopped for a beat, stunned by the harsh sunlight. Then he lurched forward and raced towards his wife.

"Help! Please," she shouted, tears streaming down her face. She was frantically trying to unlock her car but couldn't get the key in the lock.

Jon got within range as the man grabbed his wife. He swung his bat catching the man in the chest. Jon heard bones snapping like dry twigs, seeing the zombie's ribs cave in as it hit the ground. His wife dropped the keys. "What? What! Oh, my god! Help me!"

Jon dealt the final blow against the zombie as it got to its knees. It was like a big, fat, slow pitch. In an all-too-familiar scene for Jon, its head caved in, skull torn apart, brains scattered across the pavement. He turned and saw the woman snatch her keys off the ground where they had fallen in the attack and finally unlock the door.

"Mrs. Jamison, wait. Wait a second."

"N-n-n-no. I'm leaving. I'm going to the police."

It was then that Jon saw the open wound on her arm. "No. No, don't do that. Stay here. You can't drive. Come to our house."

"No!" She slammed her car door shut and started the engine. She peeled out of the driveway and sped down the road.

Shit, that can't be good at all.

He turned back. The front door was wide open.

I'm so fucking stupid.

Jon ran back into his house. He stopped, looked around, listened; the only sound was water running in the shower. He shut and locked the front door.

Stupid. Really fucking stupid, Jon.

He flopped on the couch to see what CNN had to say.



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The Night

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