

The Sirens Call



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*A Dark Fiction
and Horror eZine!*

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

Spotlight Author:

*A.F. Stewart,
plus a short
story from her
latest collection
'Visions and Nightmares'*

Featured Artist:

*Photographer
Erin McGorry*

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Ellis plucked off his hat and swiped his brow with a grimy forearm. He gazed up, craning his neck, squinting into the green light. It was raining hard above the tree-tops, but only a few drops reached his upturned bearded cheeks. He plopped his hat on his head with one hand, bent to lift his ax. "That canopy is damn thick, Louie," he said to the man behind him.

Fellow fitter Louis Sykes pushed through thick bracken and came abreast. He made a clicking noise out of the corner of his mouth as he turned in place, his ax handle on his shoulder. "I don't like it. No one should be lumberin' here. The river loops around this place on three sides, and there's a mountain to the south. How in the hell them damn mules gonna get 'cross the cliffs and the water to haul any logs?"

"Not for us to say. Orders are to scout the best route for the skid-road, and notch the biggest trees."

"I don't like it. It ain't right."

Ellis sighed. "Come on, let's do what we came here to do." And he began pushing his way through a thick stand of bramble bushes, trampling debris under his heavy, muddy boots.

Louis followed, glancing up once as he heard thunder. "Ain't this private property? Belongs to Granny Thorpe," he said to his partner's back as he climbed over brush and boulders. "When I was growing up hereabouts, no one dared go on her property. People said she was a witch."

Ellis leaned back for a moment and brought the ax into position, then swung it at an oak tree that was no more than eighty years old. He hit again, leaving an "X" to mark their path. "Was private, until old lady Thorpe died. I heard they found her all dried up like kindling, like one of them 'Gyption mummies, on her front porch. The boys at Hutchinson Lumber Company danced a jig over that, I bet. They grabbed the land and logging rights quick as a lick."

Louis grimaced. "Surprised they waited until she passed on." He hopped his ax in his fist so that he gripped it just under the lip. "These 'uns are the babies. Let's go find their mommas," he said, referring to the white oak saplings that surrounded them.

"Supposed to be setting the skid-road. But okay." Ellis didn't feel the same level of awe that his friend did, when confronting the great, ancient trees of West Virginia's virgin forest. Or what was left of it in 1910. Logging was a job, to him, better than going into the coal mines or laying track for the mountain rail lines. He only wanted to take care of his family.

"Oh my geezus," Louis shouted from ahead of him. "Come here, look at this!"

Ellis could see the root system and feel the massive presence before he broke through the network of twigs and leaves and faced the fissures and furrows of the immense trunk.

Louis' chin was pointing straight up; he blinked as a few droplets hit his eyes. "Mother of God, do you see this big 'un? White oak, but at least thirteen-feet across, maybe—whatcha think? Hundred-fifty-feet high?"

"Yeah," Ellis answered. He studied the tree, thinking of how long it would take to saw through, and how many teams of men would be needed. And how many logs it might yield. He glanced to his right, and could make out the shadow of another giant through leafy branches and ash blossoms. "Damn," he said, "There's a whole army of these monsters."

"Yup," Louis said, walking ahead. "Heard tell there's a wall of trees older than Christmas around the Thorpe cabin. Must be them."

"You 'heard tell' a lot about this place," Ellis said. "How do you know so much about it?" He shoved aside some locust leaves and caught up with his coworker just as the latter halted in front of very old and beautiful, one-hundred-foot tall hemlock. "Good, solid lumber. Notch it on the opposite side," Ellis ordered.

Louis nodded but didn't otherwise move. Thunder shook the forest. Rainwater suddenly began to roll in rivulets from bough to bough, evergreen needle to needle, dripping onto the forest floor like tears. "I grew up hereabouts. My momma was a Thorpe," he said in a lighthearted way.

"You're kidding me, right?" Ellis said, laughing. "You're a real joker, Louis."

"No sir, not foolin' you, Ellis. Don't know nothing 'bout inheritance laws, so I can't say this should be my land. Just ... just that...." He took a couple of steps back from the hemlock trunk. "This is the tree. It surely is the one." He raised the ax high, then carefully chopped downward once, then again, and again, and again.

Ellis, surprised, sidled away a short distance. The sharp, deliberate whack of each powerful ax stroke stabbed into his ears. "What are you doing, Louie? We ain't supposed to bring any of these down yet. And it's gonna fall in the wrong direction ... if you want to do this, let me help...."

Louis Sykes paused and turned, breathing heavily, his face flushed and shiny. He smiled in a friendly way, pulled on the brim of his hat. "No thank you, Ellis. I got this. My job." He shifted once more into a wide-legged stance and continued hacking at the rough bark.

Ellis watched, feeling a mixture of anger and growing confusion. "You ain't doing that right," he said. "You're slicing off the side of it, not trying to bring 'er down. What are you doing, man?"

Louis didn't answer. The sweat poured down his forehead, dribbled from the tip of his nose even though it was cool enough to see the air puffing from his open mouth. Abruptly, he stopped--the last echoes of chopping faded. He swayed then dropped to his haunches, the ax-head resting on the splinters and debris.

The rain dwindled, a last few drops landed, sounding like silver bells. There was utter quiet as if the entire forest was holding its breath.

Ellis rocked forward and backward, his heels planted, impatient but not sure what to do next. "Okay, Louie," he stated, then he noted the interior of the hemlock that had just been exposed. "What the hell is that? It don't look like the insides of any tree I've ever seen." He half turned to get a better view, leaned closer to the tree. Where there should have been pale orange sapwood and the old, dark heartwood, this living, healthy tree was hollow. Hollow except for a bulbous sack-like spongy thing--maybe a foot and a half long--that undulated above their heads, suspended from filaments that pulsed and beat as if they were arteries and veins.

Louis slowly rose to his feet. He faced Ellis. He appeared to be laughing and crying at once. "No, it don't look like any other tree. That's 'cause it's special. It's exactly what she said it would be. And I only half believed her!"

Ellis tried to say something tough and professional, to make some effort to get his relationship with Louis Sykes back on solid ground, but the strange thing in the tree caught his eye. "It just jumped!" he nearly shouted. "There's something in that thing, something's tryin' to get out!" He stared, unable to break away. His chest heaved rapidly. "What in the blazes ... look at it ... what is it?"

"I'm sorry Ellis. I'm truly sorry for Carlotta and your girls. It ain't personal."

"What?"

But Ellis never said another word. Louis drove the sharp edge of his logging ax deep into the middle of his partner's skull. "I'm so sorry, brother," he repeated, as the blood and brain-matter splattered and squirted and one of Ellis' eyeballs popped out. "So, so sorry." He put his boot on his friend's neck and wrenched out the blade. "But my granny needs your life's blood right now."

The womb suspended inside the middle of the hemlock tree throbbed and writhed. It burst apart. Dark, syrupy fluid spilled, splashed. A slimy, shiny, pink form began slipping out.

Louis Sykes threw the ax aside and dove. He caught the newborn baby girl just as she dropped and emitted a howling cry.

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*, *Fantastic Floridas*, and the *More Alternative Truths* anthology. Rivka most recently worked as a psychiatric nurse.

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The silence of the long-abandoned cemetery felt welcoming to Rick Cruise like the embrace of an old friend. He was finally within arm's reach of his goal, an escape from a lifetime of alienation by a brutal uncaring world. He spent the entirety of his youth piecing together scraps of whispers and half truths passed down through the decades to find this place. He felt the dark secret laid here was his only chance to escape the austerity of this world. He dug a shovel with one arm behind him pass the graves looking for the one. The moon was mostly obscured by clouds and twisting overgrown trees with long gnarled branches.

'Eat the fat off the eternal corpse' He was told. Rick felt like he had stepped inside a pocket dimension, wholly separate from the normal world. With the moonlight piercing through the fog and twisted overgrown trees at just the right-angle Rick saw it. A slab of unmarked marble tombstone almost entirely covered with brush and tree roots.

"Finally!"

His eyes widened in excitement. Despite both his mental and physical exhaustion he dug like a man possessed the second he reached the grave. Rick was so consumed with uncovering the object of his desires, he did not notice darkness closing in. The further down he dug the closer it got, so much so, that by time the shovel head hit the top of the coffin; the grave he stood in existed in a void.

"I can almost taste it." He said aloud as he wiped all the dirt off the coffin lid and prepared to open it.

All exuberance and joy fled from his form when he saw what was in that old wooden coffin. Any thought or feeling of regret Rick Cruise might have had was drowned out by the inhuman wailing from his lips when he saw what lay inside. A mockery of Death itself. A universe of space and matter inside this forgotten grave caricaturing human form. He tried to look away, but there was nowhere else his eyes could travel. Darkness had enveloped everything until only the contents of that coffin remained.

The middle-aged man sat on top of a pile of dirt next to the freshly exhumed grave, shovel in hand. His worn, disheveled attire befit someone consumed with a singular distressing purpose, but the expression on his face could not be a further contrast from it. A look of childlike glee radiated from his eyes. He playfully turned a shovelful of dirt onto a casket that obviously contained a still moving occupant. The increasingly desperate thrashing from inside the coffin gave him a malicious smile.

"Hey, keep it to a dull roar down there, will you? You are going to wake up your neighbors."

He fumbled around in his coat and pants pockets looking for a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He examined them with a sense of novelty for lighting one.

"It's been decades since I had one of these and oh boy, they do not make them like they used to."

He stared off into the slowly receding darkness of the cemetery while smoking his cigarette and occasionally throwing a little more dirt down into the grave with his free hand.

"You probably have a lot of questions, of which I am happy to answer a few. You, like others before, came seeking power, didn't you? Or was its eternal life? Maybe, it was untold amounts of wealth! I don't remember anymore; I change up the details every couple of generations. Like countless prior rubes, your hubris has freed me to roam once more. Of which I am *eternally* grateful." He put a sardonic emphasis on eternally. "Through your body I live, and the casket built for me now imprisons you. You can try to scream if you want, but good luck with your jaw wired shut. Now I know you might be wondering, when will consciousness leave, when I will be free from this prison of decaying flesh? The answer is never, at least not until the worms and fungus have reclaimed every bit and returned it to mother nature leaving only the bones behind. Then you will be free."

The man then stood up and looked around the old cemetery with a sense of purpose.

"While I would love to stick around chit-chatting and watching the sun rise together, I have things to do. Besides, this dirt won't bury you by itself."

Indiscernible pleading through clenched teeth accompanied the caskets occupant. Alas, he ignored the pleas as he quickly filled the six feet deep hole with an almost superhuman quickness before heading for the unhinged gate that led out and into the mountainous forest. The man that was once called Rick Cruise took one look back at the cemetery hidden so far away from humanity and waved goodbye to the now immortal tortured soul interred within. He then crossed the gate and disappeared into the night, and the cemetery along with it until only a mass of trees, hills and brush was in its place.

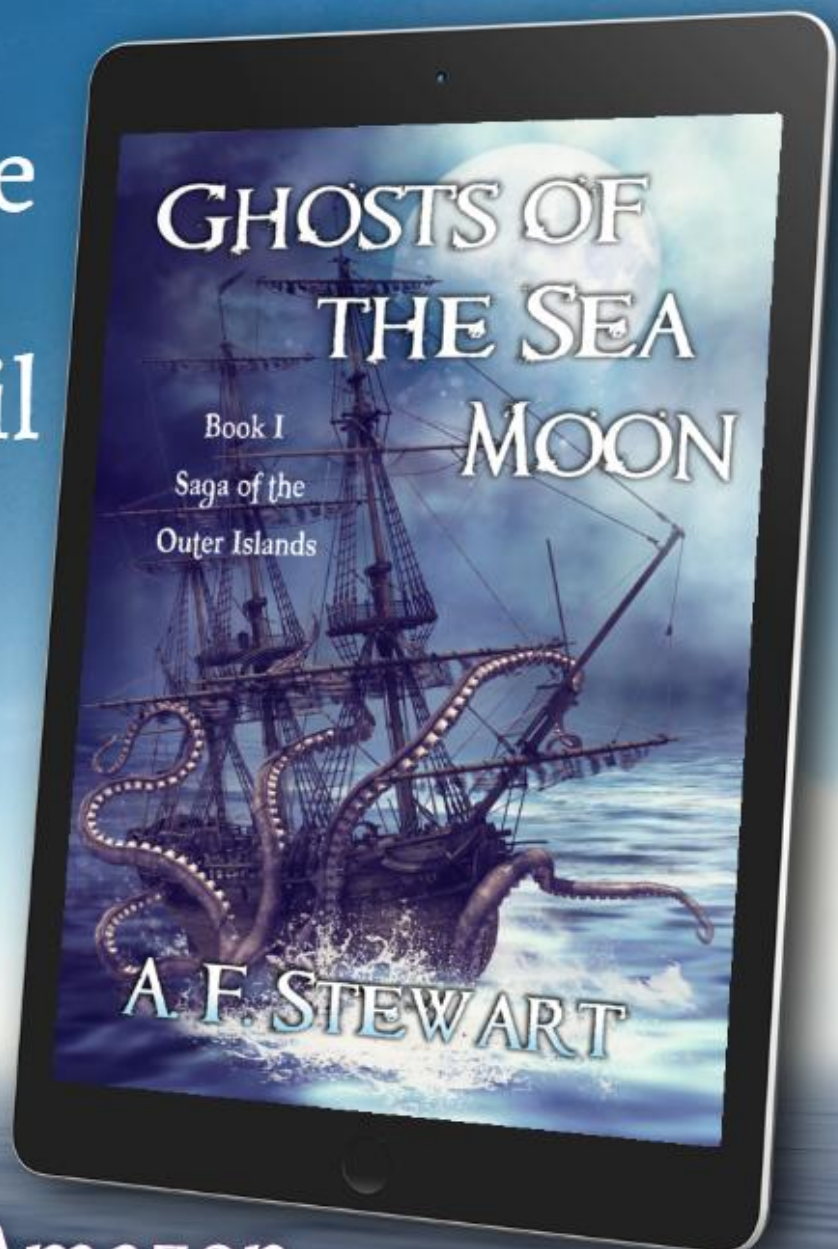
About the Author:

B.B. Blazkowitz is currently stuck helping defend a medieval castle against an army of undead because some knucklehead mispronounced silly words. If you are reading this, please help me get back to my own time.

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and sea monsters.

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It sucks being the only twelve-year-old boy in the world. There's no one my age to hang out with. There's not even a class for me at school. I'm too big to play with the eleven-year-olds and too weird to fit in with the thirteen-year-olds. If my dad was here, even he'd agree there's no avoiding the obvious—no one wants to be friends with a geeky, sunglass-wearing, 'Miracle Child'.

My mum is cool and all but sending me to school instead of continuing to home school is a dumb idea. After a tour of the classrooms, we met with the principal in his office. The first thing he said was "stop slouching" (I wasn't) and "remove your sunglasses" (I'm tempted to). His drill-sergeant mannerism rubs me the wrong way. My mum intervenes before I cause any damage. She explains that my eyes are light sensitive and I've been wearing dark glasses since birth. I've heard her standard excuse so many times I believe it. But the principal says the wearing of sunglasses on school grounds poses a safety risk and I need a medical certificate to be exempt. That stumps my mum. We don't have a certificate. The last three doctors who looked at my eyes are dead. I suggest to my mum that the principal should see my eyes for himself. I'm only joking, but my mum freaks. She pulls out a cigarette and clamps her lips around the butt. If good sense didn't jump in at the last second, she would have been slapped with detention for smoking at school.

She shoves the cigarette back into the packet and changes the subject to specialist teachers. When she asks how they identify children with special needs, I understand the reason behind the school thing. My mum thinks a special-needs teacher can fix my affliction. Exasperated by my mum's slip into denial, I sighed so loud it sounds like the blast of a foghorn. That gets me sent outside so my mum can talk to the principal in private. When she finally emerges from the office, I'm not enrolled, but my mum has a phone number for a government-funded child psychologist. So now I have a shrink.

It was my shrink's suggestion to get a dog. He convinced my mum that a constant companion would help with my 'issues'. Mum was a tad over-enthusiastic. She bought me a huge, russet-colored, coarse-haired, twelve-year-old Wolfhound, with a chipped front fang from attacking his previous owner's prosthetic leg. She meant well with the age thing but forgot that most dogs die around the age of fifteen, which defeats the purpose if she expects us to grow up together. The dog's name is Bailey. I call him Bud. My shrink says Bud is short for Buddy and I nick-named him that because I want a buddy. My shrink is an idiot. I only called the dog Bud because the pet shop owner wouldn't stop grinning at me and three letters on the nametag were faster to engrave than six.

I'm not attached to Bud in the way some kids get attached to their pets but I think Bud and I understand each other. Bud knows that I don't need him. I don't need anyone. But Bud makes my mum feel safe, and that's what I care about. When she sees us together, throwing a ball or wrestling with a rope, she doesn't drink or bite her nails or smoke her cigarettes down to the butt. And Bud protects mum when people arrive at our house unannounced. Bud stands in front of mum, raises his hackles and bares his teeth. Most people snap out of their trance and retreat. The ones that don't get to face my mum's shotgun. She doesn't make my dad's mistake. She never opens the front door without it.

My shrink says I blame myself for my dad's death. Like I said, my shrink is an idiot. My dad died protecting me—as he was meant to. All I did was switch the circumstances so he didn't suffer a long-drawn-out death. But I'm not allowed to talk about that. It scares my mum. That's why she smokes so much. She says she's afraid of the control I appear to have over the way people die. It's not about control, but when I try to explain what it is about, she shuts down and says I'm not allowed to talk about that either.

I know how Bud will die. In his sleep, a week after he turns sixteen. I often think about switching his fate with one of mine so he'll live longer but I'm not sure if switching works with dogs. I've read everything in Greek mythology about the three Fates, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, but there's no mention of animals. I'm researching glitches now. But finding information about why one person was given all the fates—one hundred and thirty-one million, seven hundred and fifty-two, to be exact—that belongs to the people who should have been born in my year of birth is impossible. That information just doesn't exist.

My mum gets angry when I've been on the computer for too long and sends me outside to play. I don't mind. It lowers her stress levels when she sees me acting like a normal boy. And throwing a ball to Bud helps to settle my anger at the injustice of it all. It's not like I came with instructions. I don't even know if I'm allowed to switch people's fate. All I know is that some people don't deserve the fate they were born with, like my dad, and I have the power to change it.

My shrink says it's okay to get angry at something I have no control over. I tell him, too, that it's not about control. It's about accepting what can't be changed; hypocritical considering I tweaked my dad's fate. But what was I to do? It was my dad, the only person in the world who understood me. I knew he would die. So did he when he answered the knock on the front door and faced a man holding a gun. I tried to jump between them but my dad pushed me back

inside. Then he embraced me with a smile. I couldn't ignore it. But my dad didn't know the details of his fate. He wouldn't die for another three, painful weeks. I wouldn't wish his fate on anyone. So, I switched things around. His lunge at the gunman changed to a trip on the door tread and the bullet hit his head instead of his stomach. Death was instant; so was collecting his fate.

I tried to explain to my mum afterward that the reason the gunman came looking for me was because he didn't accept his fate and wanted me to change it. How he knew I could is as mysterious as my miraculous birth. I also told my mum that some people deserve their fate. The gunman was a selfish man, had been all his life. He didn't care who he killed to get what he wanted. My mum didn't understand until the police told her that the gunman had been diagnosed with terminal cancer a week earlier. She asked me if the cancer was my fault. I said it wasn't. She asked if he'd suffer. I said he would. For another two years. My mum then asked if I thought my dad had deserved his fate. I said he accepted his fate. It was me who didn't think he deserved it. That's why I did the switch thing. I also said that maybe it was fate for me to change how fast my dad died. She said nothing to that. She just lit another cigarette and walked from the room. I spent the night wondering if I did the right thing.

After my dad's funeral, my mum said that in the year before I was born, a meteor shower lit up the sky for a month. The news that I was the only baby born in the following year went viral, thus the 'miracle child' tag. My mum lit another cigarette and stopped talking, but I remember what happened next. People sought me out; because they accepted the fate they were born with and were ready for me to collect it, or because they were desperate to avoid the fate they were given. Collecting a fate, or switching one, is easy, like breathing air. When I'm embraced with a smile (I'm compelled to remove my sunglasses), it's like a muscle in my mind opens a doorway to 'the other side'. I don't know what people see when they look through that door—whatever it is, it's for them, not me. But they always die, in the way their fate was written.

Switching is different. The fates I was given float through my imagination like daydreams drifting on a gentle breeze. To make a switch, I focus on the fate I want, imagine giving it to the recipient, and blink. The exchange happens in a nanosecond.

Sometimes I wish I could reuse a fate but they expire upon death. That makes me wonder what will happen if I don't use up all the fates that were given to me. Maybe I'll die a million times over, which would suck. It's a scary thought but I don't have time to be scared. Since I started seeing the shrink, my mum has been acting weird.

He phones her after every session with a progress report. I don't know what he told her today but my mum hasn't talked to me all morning. Before we sit down for dinner, I ask her what's wrong. She says she doesn't know what will happen then twists her wedding band so hard it leaves a red mark on her finger. I say it doesn't matter what happens because there's no avoiding the inevitable. I should have kept my mouth shut. My mum's face turns white. Then she admits she's afraid of what I have planned for her. I tell her that I don't do the planning; I'm just the collection boy. Then I tell her that I won't switch her fate because she already has a good one, despite the number of cigarettes she smokes.

It was meant to reassure, but she slips back into denial. She says it was "a coincidence that people died" when they looked at me, and it's time to "stop obsessing over fate and start behaving like a normal boy". That raises my blood pressure. I say there's no such thing as a coincidence and that everything happens for a reason and she's just scared because she doesn't understand why. I thought it was a great explanation of how it all works but my mum burst into tears and sent me to my room. I don't like to see my mum cry. I wish there was a better way to explain how fate works. Maybe the reason I can't is that I'm not meant to.

My shrink thinks I'm delusional when I tell him I'm the reason people die after they look at my eyes (I think he's deluding himself because not once has he asked me to remove my glasses). He scribbles on his notepad and asks how that makes me feel. I tell him it makes me happy, like when the pet shop owner died. After grinning at me (I took off my glasses; I couldn't help it), and engraving Bud's name (I knew what was coming, thus the quick three-letter job), he left the shop to buy lunch and got hit by a bus while crossing the street. My shrink asks why a horrific accident makes me happy. I tell him that the pet shop owner's death made me happy because he embraced his fate instead of begging me to switch it. My shrink scribbled 'institution' with an exclamation mark. He doesn't get. Nobody can avoid their fate. That's what makes this glitch thing so stupid. If it's a universal law that we can't change fate, why can I?

After talking to the shrink about that session, my mum smoked half a packet of cigarettes and sent me to my room again. I wish my shrink would butt out. He's scaring my mum, and she's scared enough as it is. Maybe I should take Bud to my next session and have a chat with my shrink about doctor/patient confidentiality. Or maybe I should do something else.

I imagine a more suitable fate for my interfering shrink, but then my computer crashes. It's just a glitch in a program, an easy fix by installing an update. While I wait for the computer to reboot, I wonder about glitches and why they happen at random. And then a possibility hits me.

What if I'm not a glitch? What if I'm the repair patch to fix a glitch that occurred when fates were handed out? It would explain why some people think they've been dealt a bad fate, and why I was given so many fates to choose from. If I'm right about being an update, then it was okay to switch my dad's fate. I did the right thing because it's what I'm meant to do.

It's a relief to know my life purpose. Some people never figure it out. But I'll have to switch fates on the sly if I want to fix more of them. If my mum finds out, she'll tell my shrink. He's itching to pack me off to the nearest institution for disturbed boys. I can't help anyone if I'm locked in a padded cell.

I know how I'll do it. I'll start a YouTube channel. I'll call myself 'The Fate Fixer', or something like that. I need to wait until I'm thirteen (three months and four days) so that I don't need my mum's permission to open an account, but it's the perfect solution. People who want their fate changed could subscribe and I'll do the switch via video link. My mum never watches YouTube, so she won't find out. It will also solve the problem of people turning up at our house unannounced. If my mum gets suspicious, I'll tell her I'm doing school work, or talk about the latest computer games, and I'll make sure I pretend to be a normal boy so she thinks I'm over my 'obsession'.

She'll mention the change in my behavior to my shrink but I know how to handle him. If he interferes, or scares my mum again, or says anything about an institution, I'll take off my sunglasses so he can't avoid my eyes. But I won't switch his fate. I'll collect the one he was born with.

About the Author:

Pauline Yates likes to explore the world on the other side of the improbable through speculative fiction. Her growing list of publications includes short stories with Metaphorosis, Bete Noire, Aurealis, Sirens Call plus others. She lives in Australia.

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Customer Service | Tina Swain

"How much longer Mom?"

"Pet store closes in 20 minutes. You made a great choice!"

They cracked the windows while waiting in the parking lot. She focused on the cashier who helped them with the hamster, which was currently pinned between his thumb and forefinger, eyes bulging, mouth gaping. *That should hold his attention.*

She secured the tarp in the trunk and grabbed the tire iron as she made a few more mental notes for homeschool anatomy class, their favorite.

Passing on family values to her son brought warmth to her gut. No book anywhere teaches you about that.

About the Author:

Tina Swain is a resident of Houston, Texas and has been a lifelong lover of horror. When she is not writing or teaching, she makes movies with her friends.

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“Does the Accused have anything to say before sentence is passed?” asked the Lord Chief Justice from the raised judges’ bench at the head of the courtroom. Neither of the other two gowned and bewigged judges nor the lawyers and officials showed much interest. The verdict was a foregone conclusion, the only question was the severity of the sentence.

Standing in the dock of the Central Criminal Court of the Old Bailey, Dr. Martin Riley addressed the senior judge. “I wanted to help clean up the environment and save the planet. I always had the best of intentions.”

“To quote a well-known proverb, Dr. Riley,” said his Lordship, “The road to Hell is paved with good intentions. It’s just a shame you felt the need to completely resurface it. Take him down, the Court will pass sentence tomorrow.” There was an audible sigh from the public gallery. The clerks, lawyers and reporters began to shuffle their papers

“All rise,” called the Usher.

Two guards escorted Riley to his windowless cell in the block beneath the court room. He sat in the dim light of the gas lamp as it hissed and guttered in its bracket above him, and thought back to his laboratory at Cambridge. Was it only five years ago that the new strain of the bacterium had been isolated?

“How are the results, Peter?” Peter Abrahams was one of Riley’s postgraduate research assistants.

“We seem to have hit the jackpot with 17164D, Dr. Riley. It’s munching away at the polypropylene substrate like nobody’s business. The free carbon readings are off the scale. We should call it Ideonella sakaiensis maximus, maybe ISM for short.”

“Okay, Peter, you should try it on some other types of polymer, see how it does.”

Riley thought back to the early days of his trial and his first cross examination by the prosecuting barrister. “So, Dr. Riley, even in the early stages, you ignored the danger the bacterium posed?”

“We used standard isolation procedures, of course,” Riley said, “but ISM could only thrive in an acidic environment, it couldn’t breed in the outside world, only in our fermentation tanks. It all seemed perfectly safe, it had a short lifespan. I mean, the original bacterium was found in a Japanese recycling plant, decades ago, and never posed a threat.”

“Tell the court what happened after you formed your new technology company, Planet First Recycling, the one that made you a billionaire, Dr. Riley.”

“Well, sorting waste plastics was not a problem, the ISM bacteria digested all types, leaving water and a carbon residue that could be recycled. No smoke, no pollution, just water and carbon. It was the collection of waste items that was expensive. I invented the CleanBurn system that used the energy released by breaking down the plastic to generate electricity. We talked to various companies and Volkswagen came up with the original ‘TrashBot’ design. It was a spin off from their driverless car technology. The bots used some of the waste plastic to power themselves as they did their work. The bots crawled around at all hours, quietly cleaning up after us, collecting trash and taking it back to their depots for processing. Eventually, almost every city and municipality on the planet bought into the idea, and issued licenses to our First Planet Recycling franchisees.”

“The same bots that now litter the world like dead and rusting metal crabs, Dr. Riley?” Riley said nothing, his lawyer had warned him about digging himself further into holes during cross examinations.

“And the oceans, Dr. Riley, tell us how you proposed cleaning up the oceans.”

“It was a French company, Comannex, that put in the successful bid for the underwater waste collection system. They designed a swimming bot that gathered thousands of tons of plastic items and brought them back to their motherships for processing.”

The barrister adjusted his spectacles and glanced down at his notes. “So, nothing to worry about, Dr Riley, as the bacteria couldn’t breed outside your fermentation tanks, and it had a short life span, it was all perfectly safe?” asked the lawyer. “So, no risk of them escaping and ruining the whole world, then? No chance, they’d evolve and start breeding. No risk they’d digest all the plastic in the world and rapidly return us to the steam age?” His voice began to rise, “Wrong on all counts, Dr. Riley. Why, the little beggars even ate paint. Not only does our

technology no longer work, we are surrounded by a depressing world of brown, dead, rusting cars and brown, dead rusting infrastructure. Technologically speaking, we've returned to the Victorian age, a hundred and fifty years after the old Queen died. What have you got to say to that, Dr. Riley?" He was red-faced and shouting by this time. Riley said nothing.

His defence lawyer did her best, she tried to show that Riley couldn't have foreseen the damage the bacterium would do. She tried to remind the court of the benefits ISM had promised: how the whole world had, at the time, been obsessed with pollution by plastics; how Dr. Riley had tried to help. But current concerns were overwhelming, the fight for survival was paramount now; green issues were not a consideration. The population of the planet was only a tenth of its previous value, decimated by disease, starvation and despair. The magnitude of the crime called for the harshest possible sentence.

Riley stood in the wooden cart as the horse drew it slowly from the stinking cells at the Old Bailey. He'd been held there for the last few weeks. It rumbled along Chancery Lane and on to Oxford Street via High Holborn. The highways were littered with rusting cars. The shop windows were smashed, although some were still trading. The air smelled of wood smoke, sewage and rotting meat. Ill-clad crowds jeered and Riley used his tied hands to shield his face from the flying stones, rotten fruit, and worse. Tyburn came in sight and he saw that the three oaks that had been planted on the site of the original gallows had been lopped and new horizontals added to make a serviceable replica of the original 'three-legged mare'.

Guards pushed him up the ladder to join the other 'Enemies of the State' on the raised platform under one of the cross beams. He stood on a trapdoor, a hemp rope around his neck and glanced sideways just as a vile-smelling and filthy cotton bag was pulled over his head. It smelled of sweat and puke. His last sight was of Peter Abrams, and ten other members of the original Cambridge team, standing in line on trapdoors of their own.

He heard the King's Proctor calling the names of the Accused, proclaiming their crimes and ordering their sentence to be carried out. He heard the muttered recitations of the priest, the crying and whimpering of his colleagues. He felt the judder of the platform and heard the roar of the crowd as the levers were pulled and, one after another, the victims made their drop into oblivion. Finally, he heard the Proctor call his name and begin his proclamation.

"Though I walk through the valley of Death I shall fear no evil," began the Priest standing at his side.

He felt warm piss running down his leg and the boards under his feet shift slightly as the Executioner took hold of the lever.

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.

Author Page: [Roger Ley](#)

Author Blog: [Roger Ley](#)





Featured Artist | *Erin McGorry*

Erin McGorry is a photographer and social worker in New Jersey. Through the lens of architecture and landscapes, she explores themes of isolation, abandonment, and decay. She plays on mental illness as related through architecture and various landscapes. Through this lens of mental illness, she explores neglect, abandonment and forgotten history; every structure and scene in our surroundings tells a story, as seen through the perspective of the daily struggle of visions of the unseen and unknown. This series focuses on abandoned public spaces such as asylums, prisons, and dead malls and is connected through mental illness as it relates to abandonment and erasure of history.

You can find more of her work through Instagram at:
[@exposuretherapyphoto](https://www.instagram.com/exposuretherapyphoto)

You can also contact Erin through email for more info or commissioned pieces:
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The sky cracked above the lonely highway and the earth shook beneath it. Marie Slate glanced into the rearview mirror as chunks of gray rock and clouds of ash erupted into the sky. She stepped on the gas and the car surged forward.

The speedometer needle rose as Marie's breath grew ragged. Curves in the road forced her to stomp the brake and a glimpse of ocean beckoned beyond the cliff. It reflected colorless sky as she sped by.

The ash rained down, silent as snow, and her windshield grew muddy beneath the wipers. A different needle climbed as she continued down the highway. It entered the painted red of the danger zone as steam billowed from beneath the hood. Marie groaned as the car lost power and the speedometer needle dropped.

When the Pontiac coasted to a stop, she pulled the silk scarf from about her neck and tied it about her mouth and nose. She threw the door open and leaped out. The morning sky grew dark and a coat of gray covered the lush foliage around her.

The car continued to steam. She studied the misshapen fender on the driver's side. Blood stained the metal. A scrap of tapa cloth fluttered.

Shadows of the past appeared within her mind's eye. Moments of clarity flashed by like a dream.

The golden interior of a tiki bar rose before her. Several girls stood on the stage singing karaoke, their voices off-key. The cute bartender winked as he poured the third drink.

Words were whispered in her ear. A warning not to drink so much. A warning of a woman who walked the road at night. A woman with a name which hung at the tip of Marie's tongue and then vanished.

A blast of fresh air greeted her as she stepped outside. She stumbled on the way to the car and scraped her knee.

The glow of headlights on the road as she weaved across the center line. An old woman walked at the edge, dressed in the same flower print which now waved from the mangled metal. Her face twisted in a silent scream on impact.

Blackness and then the rim of a volcano and the flight down the mountain to wind up here.

The world rumbled around Marie. She fled.

An ice-cold hand gripped her heart as she ran. Something tugged at the edge of her consciousness, commanding her to turn. And, like Lot's wife, she did.

A pillar of ash filled the sky, stretching from the fractured volcanic cone to the heavens above. It swirled and danced, like the funnel of a tornado. Something flashed above, but it wasn't lightning.

Eyes.

Dark eyes filled with fury, filled with vengeance. They belonged to an old woman who had lived a scant few hours before, but no longer.

A huge hand, devoid of color, reached down toward Marie. She turned and ran as its massive shadow fell over her. Heat and ash choked her and before the sound of crunching bone filled her ears, she screamed the name her terror had found.

"Pele!"

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 *craving* pounded in his head and tingled down his limbs. It was a weight wrapped around his shoulders, pulling him down towards the dirty concrete sidewalk on which he shuffled along. Denny Morris was close to his destination. Close enough that he could taste it, a metallic saltiness on his tongue, like sucking on a bloody penny. He saw his goal, squatting at the end of the street. The place where the yoke of needs and desires lead him. *Florentine's Casino*.

To Denny, the red neon letters and dirty yellow light-bulbs of the sign were pure gold, burning through the haze that hung over his vision. The casino was a glowing temple where he sacrificed to the gods of chance and despair.

He wasn't aware of the gaps in the lights, where the bulbs were burnt out and had not been replaced. He didn't notice that the neon tubes for the apostrophe and 'S' were broken and had been for months. He didn't see the dirty walls. The posters advertising acts from years ago. The decaying decoration, carrion remains of a prosperous past. All he saw was the blaze of light. All he felt was the excited burning in his limbs, the hard ball of hope and fear in his gut.

The clatter of slot machines and cigarette smoke poured past him, carrying the stench of shallow dreams and tawdry vices offered within. He stepped through the doorway. He felt some of the weight lift from his shoulder, some of the aching drain from his limbs. He wove a path around the chiming, chattering slot machines, the howling drunks, the dead-eyed cocktail waitresses. He headed for his favourite machine. He could have made the trip if he were deaf and blind. His feet knew the path across the worn red carpet, past rows of people mechanically pressing the 'Play' button on their slot machines.

Denny's machine was special to no one except him. The artwork was of a cartoon cowboy riding a smiling horse. The glass face read *Ride The Range*. An electronic approximation of guitars playing a grating Western tune burst from the worn speakers. On the video screen, five columns of rectangles glowed with an inviting light. Each one displayed a horse, buffalo, six guns, sheriff's star, Stetson hat or Indian head dress. The recycled and repurposed cultural memories triggered something in him. He vaguely remembered playing cowboys and Indians as a child. He couldn't decide if it was really a memory or something he created as filler for an increasingly muddled past.

Denny didn't think of such things for long. He slipped his player's card into the slot and fed the machine a grimy twenty dollar bill. He let out a little sigh when the screen displayed his credits and asked him if he would like to make a bet.

"Yes, please," he muttered.

He played. With each push of the 'Bet Max,' 'Play 5 Line,' and 'Spin' buttons, he felt a soothing warmth wrap around his body, like the arms of his dead mother, like the arms of his ex-wife. The warmth wormed its way into his brain, hot tendrils digging deeply into his consciousness. After the first few plays, the other aspects of his life faded. He was nothing but lust for immediate gratification, feeding the machine with dreams of winning.

After playing for hours, he came to his last \$1 bill. It was heavy in his hands, the weight of his whole, wasted life.

Denny remembered. He remembered when he first sat down in front of the machine. When he first slipped a bill gently into its glowing slot. For fun, he would tell himself, just for fun. Then another. Another. An hour. A day. A week. Eventually, time stopped mattering. All that mattered was the machine, the warmth he felt, the dream of a win that would justify the hardships he had inflicted on himself.

His wife - he couldn't remember her name - had left when she found out that he had emptied their bank account and left his job. His children no longer called him 'dad.' That had bothered him at first. Not now. They were just ghosts that dimly obscured the future of bright golden light. The days when Denny felt bad about the old life were long gone, fed into the machine, one dollar at a time.

He slipped the greasy bill into the slot. The machine seemed to sigh with satisfaction. He pressed 'Play 5 Lines.' He pressed 'Bet Max.' He pressed 'Spin.' He watched as cowboys and Indians chased each other across the screen. He listened with dull focus to the tinkle of scratchy electronic chirps. He didn't think of winning. He didn't think of losing. He just waited.

Five cowboys in a row.

The machine exploded with a raucous series of electric whoops. The cowboys disappeared, replaced by the words 'Big Winner' in red, block letters. He leaned back in his maroon vinyl seat. "Big winner," he muttered, feeling each letter roll past his dry tongue and cracked lips.

Denny felt a hand on his shoulder. He flinched at the unexpected human contact. He looked up with watery eyes into a man's narrow, hard-lined face.

"It says I'm a big winner."

The man's words were like white hot worms in his ears. "And so you are. Congratulations, sir. If you'll come with me, I'll take care of your winnings."

Denny noticed that the people sitting around him were not looking at their machines for the first time that he could remember. They were looking at him. The masks of blank indifference they normally wore were cracked, letting envy and anger seep out. Someday, they all thought, that will be me.

Denny followed the man through a door marked 'Staff Only.' It led to a corridor with green pastel walls and a spotless beige carpet.

"We don't have many winners like you anymore, sir," the man said, "They are mostly drawn to the new casinos. You know how it is."

Denny didn't know how it was. He muttered, "Sure." He thought about how his 'big winnings' could change things. He thought about getting his old life back. He thought about his nameless wife and ghost children. He thought about the flickering lights, the smoke-thick air, the golden dream. He knew where his winnings would go. Into the machine.

The man led Denny down a flight of stairs.

"Almost there, sir."

The walls were dark grey and glistened in the harsh fluorescent light. The floor was sticky, the rough surface clinging to the thin soles of his worn shoes. The man led him to a door. The door was grey, like the floor and the walls.

"Where?" Denny asked.

"This is where dreams live," the man said. He let out a dry chuckle. It sounded like a hot, stale wind flowing across a midnight desert.

The man slipped a key into the lock. The door seemed to quiver. Denny thought he heard the sigh of his wife like when they would lay in bed together in the shadow past.

The door swung open and the man stepped aside.

"Your winnings," he said.

Denny felt that something was wrong, like he was being engulfed in a miasmic cloud from a fetid swamp. He wanted to run. He wanted to bury his head in the dirt and scream until his mouth was filled with moist earth. But the golden glow of his dreams beckoned him. He entered the room. The man stepped in after him and closed the door.

"She's been watching you," the man said, "she's been waiting until you were ripe."

The heart of the casino sat in the centre of the bare room, lit by feeble yellow light from caged bulbs in each corner.

Denny tried to scream. Nothing came out.

The pulsing mass of red and black tissue was larger than a man. It almost touching the ceiling. The gleaming flesh shuddered in anticipation. Thick tendrils ran from the heart, into the walls and out to each machine.

"She's hungry. Most of the people go to her children. She doesn't eat as often as she should. But we love her. Don't you love her?"

Denny saw a golden face emerge from the heaving mass of wet tissue. It was the face of his wife. His children. His past. His future. It glowed with the light of hope and possibility. Everything he wanted was waiting for him. His broken lips curled into a smile. He shuffled forward to embrace the heart.

Even as the tendrils wrapped around his numb limbs, he smiled. Even as they lazily bored into his body, he smiled. Even as the golden face split into a vertical gash lined with razor-sharp teeth, he smiled. Even as he slipped his head into the waiting maw, he smiled.

Even as the teeth sank into his flesh and he felt the warm blood pulsing across his face, he smiled.

And why shouldn't he?

He was finally a big winner.

About the Author:

Jeffrey Durkin is a writer living in Arlington, Virginia. After 14 years of Federal service as a computer engineer, Jeff transitioned to full-time writing in 2013. He has published short stories in the science fiction and horror genres and owns and operates a number of movie and pop culture sites. He published his first novel, *The Age of the Jackal*, in 2015.

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I am so hungry. It feels like the first day of a new diet except it doesn't go away. My therapist, Anna, says I must distract myself in order to assuage the hunger. I have an emergency number I can call and when she finally answers, she says, "Katherine, you know you have to control it. You cannot let it rule your life." Her voice is soothing and warm and it helps.

"Can I come over?" she hesitates.

"Now is not a good time."

"You're with someone aren't you?" Again, the millisecond pause and a sigh.

"Katherine, go for a run. Go to the gym. You know it will pass if you occupy yourself."

She's right, of course.

The run helped but I had to push myself a solid ten miles at sub eights. It didn't go away only became less intrusive. Less gnawing. There is truly only one way to satisfy the hunger and I can't allow that any more. Because I've pushed it down for so many years it merely lies dormant inside me—a bitter, restless wind.

Who can I blame for this curse? My father or mother? Both? He was typical of those like him. He slept around so we're not sure who Mom was. There were candidates but none claimed us as their own. Doesn't matter in the long term. Some aberrant gene encoded us with the hunger. When we were younger we indulged without understanding. We weren't evil or malicious. It was the way the world worked back then. You fit into the mold you were given without question. Of my sisters, Aglaope embraced it, relishing in the game until adulthood. It is easy to manipulate children as they seldom question. Our father assigned us our fates and we were dutiful daughters. As an adult Aglaope had no answer for the monster questions that reared up from the Sargasso of our memories. I must allow that is the reason she chose to end her own existence. Only Thelia and I remain and we both do our best to accept our identities, the ones that were given us, not of our own choosing.

Children of the old gods are not immortal. Our parents faded to dust eventually when humans stopped believing, leaving us to navigate our own way without guidance. Some clung to the old ways until science drove a stake into their hearts. An odd few of us adapted and so carry the weight of long years.

Therapy helps as do the mood elevating pharmaceuticals but the hunger remains. It can't be removed with surgery or talk. The techniques shovel layers of dirt on the ugly act and tamp down the frequency. It becomes something we manage.

Thelia sells upscale mansions along the coast though she can't bear the shores of Europe. Too many memories. I became a musician, not straying afar from my gifts. Or curse. It is my coast where I still lure them onto the deadly rocks with my song only now it is with the symphony. My cello sings to the sailors. We play at the University tonight and the hunger will be sated. I will speak with Angela, the therapist, in a few days when it is done. She will 'tsk, tsk' and ask if I really want to overcome this thing, if the therapy is ultimately helping or providing an easy salve for my conscious. She is bound by patient privilege, only half believing I am who I say, so that she does not report my transgressions. There are no bodies to find

The night was miserably wet. A typhoon of swelling waves crashed down on the campus washing thin rivers across the sidewalks. I've told Anna that I can cause the rains, not intentionally but with my moods. She always nods and scribbles in her notepad. She doesn't believe much of what I confess to her.

From behind the screened musicians prep area we watched the patrons streamed in. The privacy allowed us to access the air of the patrons—whether it would be a good performance or not.

Many are shivering as they enter through the double doors. The air hammered cold nails into every available opening in their clothes as they dashed from the cover of one building to another. Through the windows looking down on the campus walkways we watched as they gripped umbrellas tight and attempted to brace them against the downpour but the rain was my slithery, clever beast shifting directions to evade their efforts.

The staff just inside the door handed out plastic sleeves for umbrellas and I suspect the patrons viewed the bright hall as a warm tropical island in November. An old man in a bow tie pushed printed programs toward their hands at the door.

He entered alone, a young college student attending the concert for extra credit, by his appearance and demeanor. The limp paper dripped in his hand as he crossed into the concert hall.

He found a seat on one of the folding chairs in the third row back from the orchestra. Audience and musicians were on one level without a segregated stage. As with many of the schools the orchestra had played, the auditorium

was a re-purposed gym outfitted for shows and concerts by the cash strapped University. Acoustical tiles hung randomly from the steel beam ceiling while a thin worn carpet covered the old hardwood basketball floor.

We moved from behind the screen to our seats, a caterpillar undulating toward the embrace of our instruments. We tuned. A cacophony discordant notes shifted across the stage area as at first, the violins and violas tweaked their strings and the noise moved toward the horns. The tuning completed to silence and the Provost stepped to the front and introduced the conductor. He strode from behind the tall faux wood screen with regal measured steps. The audience greeted his stately pace with muted applause.

The women players wore black gowns or pants, our hair pulled back into rigid buns. The up-swept hair kept it from tangling in the instruments, especially the violins. The men wore dark suits all wrinkled from travel.

His eyes drifted across the others searching for familiar faces but found only a flotsam of older strangers. Was he the only one who needed extra credit? He set his umbrella in the bag on the floor just under his feet while the orchestra tuned.

He unfolded the program pamphlet and scrutinized the titles searching for something he might know while the maestro spoke about the music. A Beethoven piece was the main feature. Tonight's performance included the third symphony, a bit of Handel and finished with a mid-twentieth century second tier composer. He thought it was a shallow attempt at being avant garde. Risque for a state funded symphony.

Silence preceded the conductor raising his baton.

When I did that first drawn out note from the cello it caught him like a net, pulling him into its resonance, the sound melting his spine. A glance up from the music and I watched as he dodged behind the head in the rows in front of him, searching for the source of that wondrous string.

My hair was pulled back so that it was thinned at the sides and top in a nod to the popular style of a slicked backed metro-sexy males. It ended in a small tight knot up high on the back of my head.

The lighting from above made the skin of my face reflect light giving the appearance of chiseled marble or alabaster. It is smooth and cold to the touch as my blood pumps from a non-human heart. I willed him to not look away.

As I finished the intense piece, I brought the bow up high in a flourish at the end. My eyes radar locked to his and I allowed my lips to form a soft cloud fleeting smile. It floated, a lure and it toyed with his soul, there and not there so he couldn't be certain.

The conductor, ram rod straight in his tux, introduced each soloist and they stood for the audience approval. "And our cellist, Katherine Melpomene," he said into the microphone.

After the performance the Arts Society, a congregation of fluttering, gray haired ladies bustled about serving cookies, wine and tea from a paper cloth draped table. He watched as the musicians filed out through a side door to shift from gowns and tuxedos to more casual wear.

Two lame cookies rested on a small white napkin held in his hand. From the way he moved it was obvious. He didn't know anyone here. His gaze returned again to the musician's entrance. He hoped I would come out.

An indistinct murmur of words rising and falling waves lapping at the shore of hearing.

I'd unfastened the tight bun and allowed my hair to cascade in caramel waves to frame my face and shoulders. We are idealized sculptures with high cheekbones and luminescent skin. The optics of his brain took seconds to recognize me when I came into the room with arrogant poise of a great cat. My movement fired the proper synapses in his head. Others noticed, both men and women but he responded in rich pheromones.

I circulated as his tension rose. He needed to be near me but restrained himself not wanting to be too forward. I have danced this ritual for millennia, his thoughts played on his face. He guessed that I received compliments all the time. He feared I would think him a stalker but he had never experienced such an intense attraction before. When I returned to refill my plate of cookies he stepped in the queue close by. He placed another two, thin nondescript cookies on his plate.

"You were the cellist?" he asked. I inclined my head in acknowledgment. "Your performance was amazing," he laughed nervously. "I'm afraid I was smitten by your performance."

I could see into his soul and rewarded him with a delicate, almost-there, smile.

"Thank you. I do love Beethoven. The nuances in his compositions allow the cello to sing when the conductor understands the intricacies of Eroica. Do classical orchestrations appeal to you? I mean, is it something you listen to often?"

Reagan swallowed. She acted interested in his opinion.

They were dancers circumnavigating the crowd, moving to the outer reaches, into the spiral arms of the rotating galaxy never quite touching others. The din of the conversations softened. I massaged my voice to be a soft rustle of delicate fabric and stood close.

"Maestro introduced you as the guest cellist, Miss Melpomene. You're not part of the regular group?"

"I'm not. I tend to be rather independent but they allow for my peculiarities. I choose what I shall play. If a symphony suits my needs . . ." A breath drawn in and sustained like a long note. At times I relish the drawing in and yet I have a need of therapy. There is guilt.

"It would seem you must have other means," his words were awkward. "Money, I mean."

I turned away with a coy glance back toward the other musicians.

"Yes," my gift is in the timbre, the nuance of words carry a note of absent longing. "My family invested wisely many years past so that I may do as I please in my art."

"Your family name is unusual, I'm curious of your background."

"We are full blooded Greek. No mixes that we know of and my family has been around forever. We are truly ancient." I smiled, drawing him in. The meaning of the floating words didn't matter.

Standing close his muscles and tendons resonated to a low thrum as if stroked by an instruments bow, echoing in sympathetic vibration. He was unmoored from the ground. Her proximity gave him the sensation of plunging into a long dark well but still, he wanted to be with her. He tried to quiet his drumming heart, certain it was loud enough to be heard above conversation. He found it hard to breathe as if the air had become thick and heavy.

"Your perfume is rather intoxicating. I don't mean to be bold, but that scent, I feel like a drunken teen."

"It's called 'Sea Wind. I'll keep in mind that it induces drunkenness." Long slender, delicate spider fingers trailed across his arm, a lover's touch. Soft. Sensual.

"I should go, perhaps the rain has let up," I said. "Walk with me to my car,"

Startled, he asked. "You didn't travel with the rest on the bus?"

"I value my quiet time and I'm not a regular in the orchestra. They call me for certain pieces as my interpretation is often antithetic and I prefer to play what I feel which doesn't always meld well with others in a rigid orchestral setting." I lifted my shoulders in a slight shrug. "I'll get my coat and instrument. Meet me at the lower entrance."

Reagan retrieved his own coat and umbrella. *Where would this lead?* The night felt surreal as he shuffled dreamlike down to the exit. The downpour had waned to a wispy, warm drizzle though no stars pierced the clouds.

I stood alone waiting by the door, the cello case, eerily man-shaped of some dark solid material.

"Can I carry it for you?" he said with a nod to the case.

"It has wheels with quite good bearings. I am used to lugging it though we should take the elevator to the parking lot. Stairs can be an obstacle."

Inside the elevator, the lighting was subdued, afraid to illuminate the stark interior. He stabbed the button and I leaned into him as the doors slid into their niche. The world tilted when my lips pressed against his. His hands fluttered like a butterfly against a window glass. A small chime sounded as the elevator reached the floor.

They walked in silence to the far end of the lot. A dark SUV sat alone under the pines. Distilled voices floated from the bus near the building. The hatch opened with a hiss as they approached.

I leaned the case against the back of the vehicle, entwined my fingers behind his head and pulled him toward me. Needy lips pressed together, his and mine and his bones shivered. Vertigo swooped up from the well to lock strong arms around him and drag Reagan into the depths.

He would be awake now in a hopeless darkness, soft fleece folding around his body. He was in the instrument case where the muted soft sound of my siren song called to him from somewhere in the car.

About the Author:

R.Gene Turchin tries to write science fiction but apparently has a dark side so his stories tend to manifest as creepy horror. He reads or tells the stories to his wife of 48 years as a sounding board. Her response is usually a raised eyebrow followed by: Do I know you? In another life he taught Engineering Technology.

There are even worse things in the world
than serial killers...

A FEAST OF SORROWS



THAXSON PATTERSON II

Available Exclusively on Amazon for
Purchase or Borrow!

In the summer following my last days of college I decided to take some time off. I started a two month cross-country venture. I began my camping vacation in the Rocky Mountains and planned to end it somewhere on the east coast. I had been on the road for almost two months and found myself in a diner on the outskirts of Warrenton Missouri. I had stopped in for a light breakfast before I headed to my next camping spot. Through a small remark about the eggs being prepared wrong to the patron next to me, I ended up engaging in conversation with the man.

He was a local who had lived in the town for his whole life. Since he had retired the year before he had made it a custom to frequent the diner almost every day. In the good amount of time that we chatted, my vacation plans were eventually brought up. He seemed to take a genuine interest in my travels to the point of almost pressing me to give the details of the places I had camped. I remember a large smile on his face when he asked where I was planning to make camp next. When I told him the Reintlard Forested Park the smile immediately dropped from his face.

In a lowered voice he told me that going to that park would be a terrible mistake. I asked him what about the park had given him such an adamant disliking to the place. I could tell from his demeanor that he seemed to be afraid for my safety. He then proceeded to take a long sip from his coffee. I remember sitting there in silence, waiting, with a growing curiosity to hear what he had to say. My focus completely left all the customers around me, and in that moment the man was all I could see.

He began by giving a brief overview of the history of the park itself. The Reintlard Forested Park had started out as a four mile square patch of private land back in the late nineteenth century. Some semi-successful entrepreneur of the area had purchased the land hoping to make a profit in clay mining. Things had gone fairly well for the first decade or so. There were fairly large deposits of clay, and it was moderately easy to excavate it. This led to the businessman expanding the operation from just him and his family to almost twenty employees mining the land with him.

The venture continued to run smoothly until one fateful day in 1915. It seems that there had been a misplacement of one of the key support beams for a new tunnel that had been dug. As the men were hard at work the tunnel collapsed. Two of the workers were killed instantly while another five were trapped. It took the combined effort of the townsfolk and two whole days to finally get the trapped men out. All the workers were dehydrated and probably almost completely delirious, so no one really took what they said seriously. Yet, all five of the workers claimed they had seen a skinny, old man with slicked back white hair and a nice business suit standing at the entrance of the tunnel before it collapsed.

After the unfortunate accident, the businessman decided to leave the mining business. So he sold the land to the local government for a fraction of what it was worth and left the area. From there the land was held in a state of limbo for the next two decades. When the Great Depression was in full swing the government decided to create jobs by getting the local men to turn the area into a place for an official park. The men were hired to create campgrounds, paths, and trails that would be suitable for families to traverse.

The work project seemed to go smoothly and was completed two weeks ahead of schedule. It was only after the work had been completed that the worker's complaints were actually analyzed. There were well over a dozen complaints logged with supervisors on the project about an old man in a business suit wondering around in the woods. The men had seemed to be creeped out by this, but hadn't left because there was nowhere else to go for a paying job. It was also discovered that a few of the workers had gone missing just a few days after the project finished. Even though police put all their efforts into locating them, the men were never found.

The man didn't bother to tell me every detail of the history of the park since its opening over sixty years ago. He did however point at a constant to the park. No matter what decade it was, or who was in the park, people saw the man in the suit. There would be large periods of time where no one would see anything strange in the park. This didn't matter to the locals who knew to stay away as soon as people started to say they saw the old man. Whenever the old man would show, it seemed that misfortune was not that far behind. Destructive storms, violent wildlife attacks, and local disappearances all coincided around sightings of the old man in the suit.

After my new acquaintance had finished his story I thanked him for the information and headed out. Ultimately, as a young educated man, I didn't hold urban legends in that high of regard. So, I proceeded to head to Reintlard despite the warnings that had been given to me. I spent the rest of the day setting up my camp in a fairly secluded area of the park. It was a nice bit of flatland that sat right in front of a dense tree line. Around the time the sun was just starting to disappear for the night I was busy preparing my dinner. I was in the midst of stirring a helping of baked beans over the fire when I happened to look up and see him.

Now, from where I was seated I was still a good fifteen feet from the actual tree line. So at first I thought it was just a shadow. The second time I looked up my doubts on the matter were quickly dispelled. He stood there just barely poking out of the wooded area. His appearance perfectly matched the description the man from the diner had given. The old man just simply stared at me with a homely smile upon his face. His hand smoothed the breast pocket of a near immaculate suit. A feat that would not be possible for someone who had been walking through the woods. I was so startled by the old man that I ended up falling off my seat. By the time I pulled myself off the ground and looked back to where the old man had been he was gone.

Needless to say I did not camp there for the night. I found myself some rundown motel a few miles away and laid in bed with my eyes open until morning came. This was the experience that ended my vacation, and also took away a great amount of my enthusiasm for camping. Now, there is one more part of the story. It's something that I have been fearful to share until recently. I feel that now may finally be the time to divulge it. When I had made it back home several days after my encounter, I decided to look up the local news for the area around Reintlard Forested Park.

It seems that in the few days since I had fled the park there had been three children reported missing. After some further investigating I found that two of the children had visited the park less than a week before their disappearances. I've followed the cases for any encouraging updates, but in the decade since they went missing nothing new or significant has been found. It seems those children will stay missing forever. Just like the other unfortunate souls who found themselves in the Reintlard Forested Park at the wrong time. Those who were simply working or camping in the park and had the misfortune of meeting the old man in the suit.

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.



Among the Antiques | *Radar DeBoard*

Marsha's eyes caught sight of a wonderful set of antique china locked behind a display case. She leaned down to look Tommy, her son, in his bright blue eyes. "I'm going to go find an employee to open this display case so I can get something. Do you think you can be a good boy and stay here for a minute?" Tommy nodded his head to indicate yes. Marsha moved a lock of his blond hair that had fallen over his left eye. "That's my boy!" she said with a big smile. She stood up and walked away in search of the employee she had seen earlier.

Tommy turned his head to gaze at the intricate display of antique dolls near the end of the aisle. He had already forgotten his mother's words to stay put as he walked over to the large assortment of dolls. His eyes scanned over the collection, coming to a stop on a rather old clown doll in the front row. He walked directly in front of it, reaching out and touching one of the bells attached to the doll's clothes. He quickly moved to the next doll in the row, touching and prodding it. His hand becoming tangled in something stuck to it, finding it hard to get it off of him.

Marsha returned, after several minutes, to the locked case with an employee in tow. "I was just hoping to get a better look at those," she said pointing. "Of course," the employee said selecting the right key to unlock the display case. Marsha looked to see that Tommy had moved from where she had left him. Her eyes scanned the aisle, calling out his name when she couldn't find him. "I'll be right back", she said to the employee, "I just need to find my son real fast." She called his name again as she walked down the aisle. She walked by the assortment of dolls, too focused on finding Tommy to notice the almost invisible webbing just inches from her.

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.

"This house is haunted."

Of course Louis hadn't listened. It sounded silly at the time. He'd been too arrogant and the price had been too good.

"Excuse me?"

Now, it's too late. Ascending footsteps can be heard throughout the entire house. The sound of wet feet slapping the hard wood echoes down the hall to his bedroom. Louis can count the seconds by the steady *drip, drip, drip* of the thing approaching.

"Nothing is coming for me."

He says the words, but they are only a whisper and provide him no comfort. They sound false, even to his own ears. He cannot help but revisit in his mind the first conversation he'd had with the realtor about the place.

Her words had not surprised him half so much as the way she'd spoken them. She was so certain, so resolute, that he thought he must have misheard.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

She sighed. "I don't like to participate in the gossip surrounding the properties that I show, but I like you Mr. Black. You seem like such a nice young man, and I'd like to be upfront with you about this house."

Slap!

She paused at that point in her speech and Louis had just waited for her to continue. She seemed to be in a bigger hurry than he was.

Drip. Drip. Drip. Slap!

"There's a thing that lives inside."

The footsteps are at the top of the stairs.

"A thing?"

"A spirit, an entity. I don't know what you'd call it. I'll admit that I've never seen it myself — nor do I intend to. I only show this property midday, and I prefer to keep these appointments short."

Louis had noticed that his tour had seemed rather rushed, but had been able to overlook it easily. He'd been more wrapped up in his excitement about the excellent condition of the suspiciously low-priced building — which was now starting to make sense.

There was something about her sincerity on the subject that unnerved him, but he did his best to brush it aside. "With all due respect, I don't really believe in that sort of thing."

The footsteps stop.

"You will." She met his gaze and there was a look in her eyes that seemed to scream at him, though her voice remained flat as she spoke. "If you buy this house, you'll start believing. There's something in there that changes people. Good people."

Louis realizes that he's holding his breath without meaning to. He has been for a minute now, waiting for the footsteps to resume. He forces himself to inhale, and succeeds only with effort. His body is working against him. There's an uncomfortable tightness in his chest.

"This may not be the house for you."

Only it had been. He'd fallen in love with the architecture when he'd first seen the listing, and touring it in person had reaffirmed the notion that he had to have it. The place was perfect. It hit every point in his checklist.

Terror grips him. From the far end of the hallway he hears another drip. It sounds slightly louder than the one before. Closer.

The relative seclusion suited his tastes.

Drip.

The interior was spacious, but not entirely impractical.

Drip.

There was room on the property to expand into something truly impressive if his business were ever to truly take off.

Drip.

And it had been twice the size of anything else in his price range. Not to mention the land surrounding it.

"It's just that house has everything I'm looking for and then some. But you don't need to worry. I'm not easily spooked."

"You're someone who appreciates facts. I understand. SO here are the facts."

Drip.

"In the ten years that I've been selling homes in this area, I've sold this place more than a dozen times. That kind of turnaround is unheard of, especially out here."

Drip.

"None of the owners have inhabited the house more than a week, and all of them have been quick to sell — usually at a great personal, financial loss."

Drip.

"Everyone who has spent so much as a single night in that house has reported seeing things that simply cannot be explained away after."

"There isn't anything in that hall. I just let that silly ghost story get in my head," he says. His voice lacks the conviction he seeks.

"I did the research," he tries again. He wants his heart beat to slow back down. He wants his breathing to feel normal. He wants to quit being scared. "I did the research, and I couldn't find anything about this place."

Louis believes that records of anything suspicious can be found online if a person knows where to look. He always knows where to look. He has used the internet to dig up all kinds of information on just about everything. He has never bought something that he has not personally and thoroughly investigated through this method. Of course he researched the house.

It turned up clean. There are no horror stories online surrounding it. No bad ratings. No police reports. There's nothing but his realtor's words to warn him about the house that is now his.

Drip. Drip. Drip. Slap!

His heart stops at the sound of another footstep on the far side of the hall.

"It's not her."

Drip.

"There is no her."

Drip.

"Old buildings make all sorts of sounds, and they just seem a lot louder outside the noise of the city."

Drip.

"There's no such thing as ghosts."

Only he believes now what he didn't believe yesterday. He believes that there is such a thing. He believes this because he has no other way to rationalize the thing he saw in the bathroom mirror.

The dripping thing.

It is humanoid and dark. It has slender, almost feminine outlines. Its features are shrouded in darkness. It quivers at the edges, where it's most translucent. It drips constantly. There is an almost smokey stain in the tub downstairs. The thing left that stain with drops of transparent, black liquid that fall from and perhaps make up its body.

He believes that it was real. That he saw it there. He believes he hears her dripping in the hallway.

"I just let the realtor get into my head," he whispers into the darkness. It is so very dark in his room.

He has yet to fully settle into the new home. This first day has been moving boxes and dragging his mattress up the stairs by himself. His friends won't be able to make it out until Monday, and not a bit of furniture is properly assembled. It's only now he realizes how devoid his room currently is of the little electronic lights to which he is accustomed.

Drip.

The expensive desktop that he runs nearly 24/7 is across the hall, waiting to be set up in his office. It cannot offer the comforting glow of its screen.

Drip.

There is no alarm clock plugged in, with its red LED numbers.

Drip.

No charging light on his phone.

Slap!

No phone.

Fear seizes him as he reaches for his phone only to find it missing. Not only is the sound drawing nearer, but he doesn't even have the ability to reach out to someone at his fingertips. It's only rarely that he finds himself without a device of some sort. In his exhaustion though, he hasn't brought a single electronic to bed. Not even his phone.

"It must be downstairs," he says.

Past the ghost, he thinks.

He shakes his head, as if to disregard his own foolishness. It doesn't work. The icy pit in the bottom of his stomach will not go away.

He tries to blame the solitude of the location. The realtor. The utter darkness. Never in his life has Louis been so disconnected from everyone and everything.

That thought is enough to terrify him on its own.

Drip. Drip. Drip. Slap!

"This is ridiculous."

He will not cower, he decides. He is not some scared boy. He throws the blanket off himself and stumbles blindly toward the bedroom door. He is determined to settle the matter once and for all.

"It isn't like in the movies."

His hand clenches tightly around the doorknob, but does not turn it. He remembers more of their conversation against his will.

His realtor's voice was hollow once he'd signed the paperwork. Resigned. "It's not a gradual thing that will ease you in. One night is all it will take."

Yet here he stands, having moved in anyway after pouring everything cent he had into the place. His resolve wavers in much the same way the transparent, dripping, outline of the woman wavered earlier in his periphery. He wants to believe she wasn't there.

Drip.

He wants to believe she isn't standing there dripping on the other side of his door.

Drip.

He wants to swing it open and put his fears at ease. He wants to be greeted with an empty hallway.

Drip.

He lets go of the doorknob in defeat.

He isn't sure.

He doesn't know that the hallway will be empty. In fact, he doesn't think it will be. He especially doesn't know what he'll do if his entire belief system is, in a single night, proven to be false. The thought of this scares him away from the door and back to the warmth of his bed.

He's ashamed of his illogical thoughts and his cowardice alike. Still, he doesn't regret the decision. The stakes were simply too high to be tested. He is more comfortable in the cozy life of a skeptic. He does not wish to have his world view questioned. He likes having a life he understands.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

"Just a leaky faucet," he tells himself. He pulls the blanket tighter around his shoulders to cancel out the chill of his fear.

He does not believe that there's a leaky faucet.

He does believe that he's won. For tonight, at least. The house has not shown him anything that can change him beyond repair. He has not seen the thing inside it standing before him with much clarity. It can all still be explained away soundly. He feels right not to have turned the knob.

Click!

The door swings open.

The sound approaches.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

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.

Author Blog: [Cat Voleur](#)

Twitter: [@Cat_Voleur](#)



It's time to let the monsters out!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

He's quiet, sitting in the dark his gaze straight ahead. A beam of light cuts through a gap in the curtain and paints colour on the wardrobe door where a faded Tellytubby waves at the sun.

Michael's legs are crossed. His favourite toy, Simon the Lion, sits in his lap. Chubby fingers pet it, the mane pulled back, over and over again.

I knock on the door. It is open. It is always open now but we've learned to knock before we enter. It is best not to surprise Michael. He can be unpredictable.

"Lunchtime Michael." We try to say his name as much as possible, to remind him of who he is. Sometimes there's a flicker of recognition, but it's rare.

I ease into the room, moving fast but careful to avoid the assortment of objects scattered on the floor. I don't look at them. There are more every day. Plastercine idols, recreations of the one Michael found in Massachusetts.

There is a pattern, or so the experts tell me, within the chaos. One of them figured it out. They say he still hasn't stopped screaming.

Without moving his head, Michael turns his eyes towards me.

"I'm not hungry."

I stop in the centre of the room. It is noon and I have a few minutes to try once again. The things in the shadows are weakest now when the light is at its brightest.

"You should eat," My voice is cheery, cajoling. It sounds false in my ears and I'm sure Michael hears it as well. A bead of sweat trickles down my temple. The room is sweltering, 37.7 degrees Celsius, apparently. No one can tell us why it's so hot. The heating is off, the windows open. One of the experts took great pleasure in telling me it's the same temperature as a human womb and of some South Pacific island. I didn't find it comforting.

Michael shakes his head, a slow turn, right to left. Just once.

"I don't want to."

"It's tomato soup." He doesn't respond.

Something chitters behind me.

I close my eyes. The hair on the back of my neck bristles. It's coming from the right, by the cupboard. There's a space, no more than three inches, between the cupboard and the wall. Small, but enough for deep shadows.

Something moves there. Too many teeth clack together. I force myself to breath. In through the nose and out through the mouth. Quiet though. As quiet as I can.

Minutes pass. Everything I am focuses on that small gap. It snuffles and settles.

I risk opening my eyes. Everything is the same. Michael continues his vigil.

The light beam has shifted, illuminating the smiling face of Elmo. He has a toothbrush in a furry hand. A thread of night stays splayed across the sticker. It undulates, a tentacle of darkness. The room grows warmer, stifling like the hours before a summer storm breaks.

I can hear birds outside.

A Starling built a nest in the eaves of the house and the fledglings are almost ready to leave. Sometimes, when I cannot bear the silence anymore, I go outside and stand on the lawn, watching the chicks poke their heads out of the nest.

This morning one took the chance and jumped. Its wings beat against the air and it fluttered to the ground. It hopped across the stained flagstones and into the long grass of the lawn. I lost sight of it, its passage marked by a rustle through the yellow grass. It broke through to the burned patch and chirped up at the eaves, calling to its siblings.

It did not see the cat waiting on the fence.

"It'll be getting cold."

Michael looks at me. Shadows cling to his face, moving despite the static light.

"Not today, maybe soon."

He grimaces. A tendril jerks him back, pulling his face into the shadows.

Something snickers. There are whispers in the dark. Vines of cold night wrap around my legs. A shiver ripples down my spine. I try to move but they hold me fast.

Michael smiles. He nods. Just once.

The taut hold on his hair slips free. Swinging his legs down from the bed, Michael stands.

"We've changed my mind," He says. "Soup would be good."

He comes towards me, moving around the objects as if they were discarded toys. His small hand slips into mine, skin burning for a moment before cooling.

The shadows where he had sat boil, an ever shifting, watchful mass. I can feel it looking at me. I know it is smiling.

Cool tendrils stroke the nape of my neck. They whisper in my ear.

Michael pulls at my hand, an old familiar whine in his voice.

"Come on Daddy, its lunch time." He leads me towards the door.

I nod, just once.

About the Author:

Eóin Murphy has been writing since he wasn't allowed to go see *The Monster Squad* in the cinema so he wrote his own version. He lives in Northern Ireland with his wonderful wife and fantastic son. Eóin has previously been published in the *Incubator Journal*, *Phantasmagoria* and Haverhill House Publishing's *The Twisted Book of Shadows*.

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



Mixed Signals | John H. Dromey

In his capacity as the county's coroner, Dr. Cushing made a house call to a rundown Victorian mansion in a sparsely-populated rural area.

A disheveled parlor maid ushered him into the bowels of the decrepit dwelling to an ill-lit room where a pale-complexioned young woman was stretched out, motionless, on a four-poster bed.

"How long has she been like that?" the doctor asked.

"Who knows? Who cares?" his escort responded. "Just do your job. We need a death certificate so one of her living relatives can inherit the property and assume responsibility for its upkeep. Some repairs are long overdue."

Cushing bent over the body. He pulled out a handkerchief, looked for a comparatively clean area on it, then dabbed at a red spot on the reclining female's lips. He held the hankie up to his face and squinted. "This blood is fresh." He got out his stethoscope, placed the chest piece on the supine damsel's bosom and listened. "She's alive! I heard a heartbeat."

"Impossible, Doctor," the maid said, as she absentmindedly raised her hand and rubbed her fingertips over a pair of reddish welts on the side of her neck. "Madelaine's *undead*! What you heard was probably a burp."

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. He's had drabbles published in some previous issues of *The Sirens Call eZine*. His short fiction has appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Mystery Weekly Magazine*, *50-Word Stories* (Tim Sevenhuysen's website), *Thriller*, *Unfit Magazine*, and elsewhere.





Hope said she would meet me by the lantern she would leave in the coppiced part of the forest. I waited for what felt like a long time, but she didn't show. I pulled my scarf tighter around my neck, stretched my hat over my ears, and banged my feet on the ground to warm the blood in my toes. The thudding was dulled by the thick snow underfoot.

She must have been here. The candle is lit.

I had seen the light through the trees as I approached. I scanned the area around me, looking for any flicker of shadow or movement. She had told me she would come, that she felt brave enough to leave with me. I wanted to shout, but knew I could only whisper in case I was heard.

"Hope? Are you there?"

There was no answer. The sky was glowing orange and mauve. The snow fell heavier. The halo of candle light danced in the wind turning shadows into demons. I paced slowly, thinking of her with each step, trying not to panic. That was when I noticed the thick globules of something I took to be blood, dripping from above me. Its heat melted the snow. I looked upward, but could only see a large object wrapped in a tarpaulin, gently swaying in the branches. Something hung there, an animal maybe? A fresh kill?

In the silence, I instinctively knew I was being watched. Vigilant eyes observed me from the shadow line around the lantern. I tried not to panic and began to retreat slowly into the surrounding woods. I turned around quickly, my boots made the snow creak.

"Who's there?"

The lantern swung on the metal hook that speared the ground, the candle burned on.

"Hope? Is that you?"

I waited. I could feel the wetness of my breath on my scarf. I panted like a nervous dog. My chest hurt with the fresh air and fear. Our affair must have been discovered. Someone must have informed on us. Who then, lit the candle enticing me here?

I stepped backward again and again until I was out of the lantern's penumbra and stopped when my back hit a tree. I crouched down against it. Hopefully whoever had been watching me, was now searching for me. They would have to make themselves visible and I would see them in the glow of the lamp. Blood continued to slowly drip from the kill. The falling snow rested on my eyelashes, and melted on the part of my face not covered against the cold.

I heard a whispered voice, it sounded like Hope, but was not.

"Where's she gone? I can't see her."

"Over there...underneath the fresh meat."

"Shall we light another candle? We need more light."

I knew if they were to do that, then they would see me. I had to retreat further. We must have been discovered, Hope and I. The lamplight was nothing more than a trap. I crawled farther around the tree, trying to be quiet. I prayed that it was not Hope's corpse swinging in the tree. Someone approached and took the lantern from the hook. They pushed their hood back from their face to get a better look at the blood trail on the ground.

It was Hope!

She carried a dagger. A crossbow was strapped to her back, with poison tipped arrows in a quiver over her shoulder. She squinted, trying to see through the trees and snow.

"Well she was here a few seconds ago. She can't have got far. We can always follow her trail. We better take that one down soon and get it back to the house to be prepared, otherwise it'll freeze."

Another figure appeared behind her. They searched the woodline.

"Can she run? Was she fit?"

"Sure, she was fit. I wouldn't have picked her if she wasn't. They make for the tastiest meat."

They laughed while Hope slowly swung the lantern around her, checking the tree line. Her accomplice cupped a gloved hand to their mouth,

"You better get moving! We're coming to get you!"

They howled like a wolf. Hope laughed and joined in.

"It's been ages since we did some winter hunting. This is fun!"

I thought about what I could do. I couldn't fight both of them, they would overpower me, and I did not have a weapon! I was terrified and began to panic, so I acted on instinct. *I ran!* I ran so fast I thought my heart would burst from my chest. I heard arrows zoom past me, bullets exploded in the trees. I split my knee when I fell and ripped my face on low branches, but I did not stop. I could hear them, running behind me, laughing and yelping like wild dogs. I waited

for death, to be slaughtered for food, left hanging in a tree like game, but they did not catch me. I ran for what felt like most of the night and did not stop until I came to a town many miles away. I tried to explain what had happened to me, but each time I became aware of how mad I sounded. I left the area as soon as I could, before Hope and her friend could find me again. Sometimes I wake in the night, terrified. I cannot breathe and still feel that frozen pain in my chest. I fear I will always be trapped in that forest, running for my life.

About the Author:

Donna Cuttress is from Liverpool, U.K. Her work has been published by Crooked Cat, Firbolg, Flame Tree Publishing, Suicide House and Black Hare Press. Her work for The Patchwork Raven's 'Twelve Days' is available as an artbook. She has also been a speaker at the London Book Fair, and has previously been published by Sirens Call as part of Women in Horror Month.

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Frosting | *Sonora Taylor*

Theresa licked the frosting from her thumb. Vanilla: Scott's favorite. The cake beneath the frosting was her favorite: red velvet. Both together, just like she and Scott would be for the rest of their lives.

Three layers of cake sat beneath a vintage topper that Scott bought for them as a joke. "I just knew you'd love the Precious Moments vibe," he'd said with a smirk as Theresa groaned at the porcelain angel and her noble mare.

"Yeah," Theresa agreed. "Maybe Precious Moments from Hell."

Theresa smiled at both the memory and the sweetness of the sugar coating her teeth. She saw a bit of red upon the cake.

Her smile fell. "Scott!" she called.

Scott looked up from across the banquet hall. He held the maid of honor by her hair, her mouth and eyes already slack as blood spilled from her slit throat onto the dance floor.

"You got blood on the cake!" Theresa said. "Be careful!"

"I didn't get it all on the cake," Scott said as he dropped the maid of honor to the floor. He walked towards Theresa, careful to not slip on all the blood from their slaughtered guests. "It was just —"

"An accident. You've always been the messy one when we kill."

Scott pulled Theresa close to him and kissed her forehead. "But you kind of love the mess, don't you?"

Theresa smiled as she leaned her cheek against his chest. "No comment."

"Well, the guests are all taken care of. Let's have some cake."

"Yes. And champagne." Theresa and Scott each picked up a blood-soaked glass, then clinked them together over the cake. "To us."

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.

*Appalachian Mountains
The Virginia Coalfields
Summer 1905*

Wioletta's skin was milky white against the dark-green bed of moss upon which she slept. George propped himself up on one elbow and ran his fingertips along her arm up to her bare shoulder. He pushed her auburn hair away from her face and leaned close to kiss her. Her scent reminded him of wild mint, dark earth, and darker secrets.

Secrets. She was his. These past few months, he had wavered between states of delight and fear, terrified his wife would discover his betrayal but unable to resist Wioletta's beckoning smile. His legs grew weak when he caught sight of her hanging clothes in her yard as he and Brygita walked to Mass. George's heart threatened to break his ribs when he saw her picking mushrooms in the woods as he took his children fishing.

She opened her eyes—sometimes blue, sometimes violet—and smiled at him. "*Kocham Cię.*"

George kissed her shoulder. "I love you, too."

His English was improving, but his tongue still felt like a caterpillar in his mouth when he spoke it. He practiced as much as he could so he could communicate with the other coal miners. Poles like himself, Hungarians, Italians, Irish—they depended on each other to stay alive, so a common language was necessary.

"I have to go. If I don't bring any fish home, Brygita will get suspicious."

Wioletta watched as George pulled on his clothes. She made no move to do the same. Instead, the girl closed her eyes and smiled. She fingered her necklace, made up of tiny shells strung together with a thin strip of leather. Weeks ago, George had given her some freshwater mussels that he had found in the mud along the riverbanks.

He paused and said, "You should go, too. Your mother will be worried."

"She not worry unless I have chores. I done did all my work. I want to stay here and listen to *ptaki*. They sing so happy."

George tilted his head and closed his eyes, noticing for the first time the birdsong that floated down from the branches. He had spent so much time down in that dark hole that he forgot to appreciate the creatures of light. He smiled down at Wioletta, then he grabbed his fishing gear and tipped his hat to her. "*Do widzenia.*"

He spent the afternoon at the river, long enough to catch fish to feed his entire family: Brygita and his two children. As he carried the fish home in his pail, he remembered how close they had come to starving back in Poland. Some in their village had died for lack of food. Desperate to keep his own family alive, he had taken them from the countryside in Poland across many lands and over rough waters to America. Now they were here in the mountains of Virginia.

George worked in a coal mine. His job was undercutting, which meant he lay on his back and used a pick to chisel out sections of the earth for hours at a time. Coal mining was hard work, and more dangerous than farming, his occupation in Poland. Each day he came home covered in coal dust, so tired he could hardly keep his eyes open to eat.

The only time he had any energy was when he was around Wioletta. She was so different from Brygita. His wife had been lovely when they first married, but giving birth to three children—one had died the same day it was born—had taken its toll on her. She spent her days looking after the children and taking care of the household chores. Her mouth turned down in a permanent frown.

Even now, she looked angry when he walked into their tiny house with his catch. "Where has you been, Jerzy?"

"George! How many times I got to tell you? We are not in Poland no more." He handed her the bucket of fish.

Brygita grumbled under her breath as she dug the fish out of the pail. George ignored her and went to rest in the rocking chair by the window. He wondered when he would get to be with Wioletta again. They infrequently met in the wild places that surrounded the coal camp: thick woods, riverbanks, or high meadows. He closed his eyes and pictured her soft skin.

"*Dziecko?* A baby?" George backed away from Wioletta, shaking his head in disbelief.

"*Tak!*" She nodded and rubbed her stomach. For a moment, she looked like she was miming hunger, and George almost laughed. He had escaped hunger.

"*Nie.*" He shook his head again. "It is not mine."

"*Tak!*" Weeping, Wioletta reached for him, but he stepped even farther from her.

"*Odejść.* Go away!"

"*Blagam!*" She pleaded with him, but he turned away from her. He could not support her and a child in addition to his real family.

He shouldn't have let her turn his head. He walked away from her, scared that people would hear her cries bouncing off the trees.

Brygita cannot know this, he told himself.

That night he prayed for forgiveness. He slept little, and when he did, he dreamed of Wioletta's pleas.

The next day George ate his breakfast without tasting the greasy potatoes. All he could taste was the rye bread. Its sourness stayed with him all day, and he found himself smacking his mouth in hopes of making it go away. By the time he got home, his jaw ached as much as his back did. George laid his dinner bucket and carbide lamp on the porch, then called to Brygita to heat his bathwater. He waited on the porch while she did that so he wouldn't carry coal dust into the house.

When she had hot water ready in the tub, he stripped off his clothes and entered the house. The children played in the other room while he bathed in the kitchen. Brygita told him about her day while he washed. Most of her conversation concerned washing clothes, feeding chickens, and picking beans, but she did share some town gossip.

"Missus Bolinsky drop by today. Did you hear about that Wioletta?"

George pulled the soapy rag from his ear. "Who?"

"Wioletta. You know. Missus Perkowski's only *córka*."

He wrung out the rag, focusing his gaze on the black water that ran from it, afraid to look at his wife. "Her daughter? What about her?"

Brygita made a tsk-tsk sound. "Some man got her in trouble."

"Who?"

"She would not tell her mother."

George let out a breath of air.

His wife made another tsk-ing noise. "Poor child. *Samobójstwo*."

George dropped the rag into the water. "Suicide? She killed herself?"

Brygita kneeled next to the tub and fished around in the cooling water for the rag. "Yah. Threw herself in river. *Topić się*."

Drowned. George shifted in the tub and felt cold water rise around him.

George dragged his feet along the ground as he left the mine site. He slapped at his ragged pants and saw little black puffs of coal dust escape into the air. He shifted his lunch pail from hand to hand as he walked, trying to alleviate the ache between his shoulders.

His fellow miners Mikolas and Czesław waved to him as they turned down the dusty street. Mikolas operated a breast auger in the mine. The tool was almost as long as he was tall, and he had to lean into it with his whole body to crank it into the coal. He wondered how Mikolas could look so spry just coming off a shift. George was dead tired.

He turned aside and walked into the woods. He knew Brygita would have supper ready, but he couldn't face food right now. More than a month had passed since he had learned of Wioletta's suicide, but he still didn't have much of an appetite. Her body had never surfaced, and each time he thought of it, he felt sick. Guilt turned his stomach in on itself.

After emerging from the trees, he trudged through tall grass and came to the river. Setting aside his lunch pail and lamp, he crouched at the shallows and washed the coal dust from his face and hair and hands. He returned to the grass and plopped to the ground. George pulled his knees to his chest, leaned his elbows on his knees, and rested his chin in his hands. He closed his eyes.

He could hear the distant splash of a small waterfall as water branched off the river and ran into a tributary. A blue jay jeered at him from one of the trees behind him. The clicking call of a cicada rose from the grass and was met by a similar call farther away. A baby cried.

George opened his eyes and lifted his head to peer around him. He didn't see anyone alongside the river or coming from the woods. No one carrying a baby.

Shaking his head, he reclined on his back and stared up at the sky. The scudding clouds reminded him of a ribcage. He thought about how people's ribs stuck out when they went hungry. Animals, too. He could have counted every rib on the family's dog before it finally died. That was what spurred him to pack up and leave Poland. He couldn't stand the thought of his children starving to death.

A baby wailed. George jerked upright and tilted his head. *Dziecko*. Definitely a baby. He climbed to his feet and walked down the bank to the water's edge. He gazed into the distance to his right, then to his left. George couldn't see anyone walking or sitting near the river, but the baby's cries appeared to come from his left. Turning in that direction, he began to search for the source of the pitiful sound.

He reached a blind spot as the river curved around a thicket of willow trees. Passing beneath the trees, he felt the air grow cooler in their shade. Fluttering branches fingered his shoulders as he searched the shadows. When the baby's cries sounded again, he followed them around the trunk of a huge willow. Its thick roots overlapped each other as they reached into the river. Sitting amidst the knot of roots was a young woman. She was naked.

George gasped. Although her long auburn hair hung about her face in loose curls, he knew the woman immediately. When she lifted her head and smiled at him, her eyes changed from blue to violet.

"Wioletta." His voice was nothing more than a whisper.

"Jerzy." She held out her arms and beckoned him with her slender fingers.

He took one step forward, then froze. "You are dead. *Zmarły!*"

Shaking her head, Wioletta rose to her feet. Her pale skin gleamed in the shadows, almost pearlescent. Her fulsome breasts bobbed a bit when she motioned to him again.

"*Pocałuj mnie.*"

Kiss me.

Yes. Yes, George wanted to kiss her. Needed to kiss her.

George stumbled across the roots and into her embrace. Her skin was cold; her dank breath made him shiver when she touched her lips to his. Still kissing her, he ran his hands up her hips and around to the small of her back. His fingers encountered something hard and sharp. Pulling away, he stepped around her and screamed at what he saw.

Mussels covered her back. Irregularly shaped creatures. Multicolored. Ridged. Mussels of many types and sizes embedded in her skin. George clapped his hands over his eyes and tried to pray. "*O mój Jezu—*"

Wioletta interrupted his prayer by turning to him and pulling his hands from his eyes. He kept them squeezed shut. When she grasped his wrists, he was shocked at her strength. Try as he might, he could not break free, and he felt himself being dragged into the water. She drew him near and the current pulled her hair across his shoulders. Its ringlets wrapped around his neck. He felt his throat constrict.

When they sank beneath the surface of the water, her hair loosened and fanned out around them. She let go of his wrists. George tried to grasp her by the shoulders to push himself up, but her skin was slippery. He opened his eyes and found himself nose to nose with her. Wioletta's eyes were no longer violet, or even blue, but a dull white.

George screamed, opening his lungs to the cold water of the river.

About the Author:

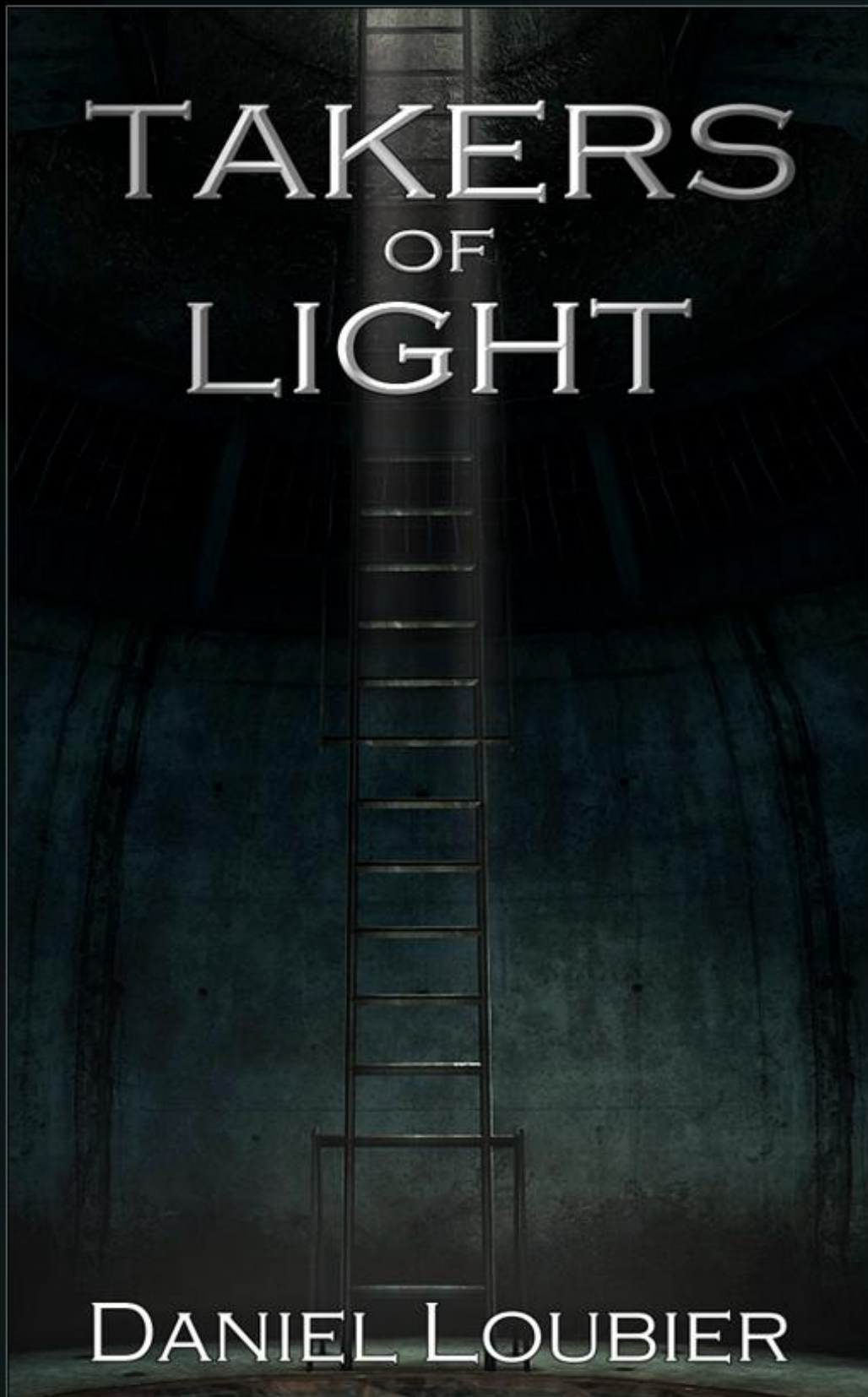
More than fifty of Neva Bryan's works appear in literary journals, online magazines, and anthologies. Publications include Weirdbook Magazine, Shotgun Honey, Eternal Haunted Summer, and Tough. She is the author of *Riverswept* and *St. Peter's Monsters*. Her illustrated children's book, *The Mysterious Monster of Oxbow Lake*, was published in 2019. She lives in the mountains of Virginia with her husband and two ancient dogs.

Author Blog: [News Random Thoughts](#)

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Waves crashed against Tom, pushing him below the surface of the midnight ocean. He tried to breathe, but his mouth filled with briny seawater instead. Coughing, flailing, kicking and screaming, Tom tried swimming to safety. But his efforts were too little, too late. Slowly his body sank into the frigid depths. His room steward had warned him not to sleep out on his balcony at night, but Tom had laughed at the older man's concern. Too bad, because that meant his ten-day Caribbean cruise was now officially...over.

'PLEASE! PLEASE! NOOO!' Hacked Tom, arms and legs slapping the sand. He'd never make it now! Wait, what? Tom's eyes flew open and he sat up for a better view. He was surrounded by warm, golden sand. Not another soul around, which was okay because his clothes were in shreds except for his shoes.

"Well this isn't so bad!" Tom smiled at the blue sky. But as he looked around, the severity of his situation sunk in. The island he'd washed up on was tiny, maybe 25 feet in diameter at its widest and had no trees to shade him from the sun. As it climbed in the sky, Tom could feel his skin burning mercilessly. Thirst itched at his throat, but there was no fresh water available. He could drink seawater, if he was interested in committing liquid suicide. Instead Tom opted for hoping that his absence had been discovered and rescue was not far off.

"Chikka-chikka-chik!"

"Ow! What the fuck, dude?" Tom was roused from his worries by a strange noise and something stinging his ankle. He looked down and saw a large black and red beetle digging itself out of the sand and peppering his tender skin. As if he didn't have enough to worry about! Tom kicked sand over the nightmarish creature and quickly moved away. After settling down in a clean, bug-free zone, he slowly drifted off to sleep.

"Chikka-chikka-chik!" Tom was roused from his doze by multiple beetles emerging from the sand and blasting his skin, which had lobstered while he slept. The pain made him leap to his feet and stare in horror at the increasing number of bugs. Suddenly, one of them scuttled up his thigh and tore a piece of skin off it with its large pincers. Tom screamed and tried dashing to the other side of the island, but the beetles followed him. More of them plucking and picking at his skin.

"Fuck, that hurts! Stop!" Tom slapped at the bolder beetles who were climbing higher and closer to his exposed personals. They responded by slicing deep into his fingers, making them bleed. The blood was eagerly sucked up by the beetles below while Tom stared at his fingers in disbelief. His pinkies were completely lopped off.

As he watched them fall Tom saw something he'd forgotten about. He could use his shoes as weapons against the evil bastards! Quickly, he yanked them off his feet and jammed his bleeding hands inside the sodden leather, crushing two of the beetles in midair.

"YEAH! How do you like me now you little shits?" Yelled Tom with as much force as he could muster. It made him happy to hear their shells crack and see greenish glop pour out. The smell was horrible and made him want to vomit, but there was no time for that. He had a LOT of bugs to kill! With each black and red beetle Tom took out, he felt better. Before long he'd have these little shitbirds under control. Then if he was real lucky, the Coast Guard would rescue him from this tiny terror of an island. But as he whirled around to start a fresh round of whack-a-bug, his arms dropped to his sides while his eyes stared.

"No...I must be hallucinating. This can't be happening" But it was real and the whole island was covered in bugs! Crawling, biting, flying, clicking BUGS! They removed the skin of his feet, making Tom dance in agony. He tried to hit the beetles with his shoes, but his coordination was off and soon the black and red devils ate through the leather, exposing his bleeding fingers once again. The swarm of beetles trilled excitedly and descended upon Tom's body like a cloud of piranhas. It was feeding time on Blood Island!

He was still screaming as his knees collapsed and he fell face down on the beach. But the beetles were moving fast, working their way inside his body through every possible orifice. Soon Tom's skin was blistering like a hog being roasted over a pit, each one opening to reveal a shiny pair of clicking mandibles. His screams became bubbly moans as the bugs sliced their way through his larynx, then ceased completely as they consumed his brain tissue.

Even though Tom was dead, his body continued to move on the sand as it was efficiently stripped of soft tissue. Each clean bone was carefully pushed into the ocean by the black and red beetles, until the beach was totally clean of remains. Then with a final triumphant trill, they disappeared below the sand once again, like nothing ever happened.

Hours later, Coast Guard cruiser *The Mary Jane* passed by the tiny island and its crew reported no signs of life. If they had looked a bit closer, they might have seen a single lonesome shoelace embedded in the sand, but they didn't. Chances of the idiot rich kid surviving that kind of fall were slim to none, anyway. So their efforts were more of a formality than a frantic rescue.

After getting definitive news of Tom's disappearance, the kindly porter made sure that all of Tom's personal items were boxed up and sent to his family. Well, except for five hundred of the seven hundred and fifty dollars in cash the kid had left carelessly on the dresser. It wasn't like he'd be coming back for it. Especially if the tales he'd heard about a strange place called Blood Island were true. Jacques, the ship's helicopter pilot said that he'd flown over during an attack and no traces were left behind. Those insects were quick and merciless! Tommy had laughed in his face when he'd tried to warn him, so a little compensation seemed acceptable. He wouldn't be needing any money where he was going.

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 *Trajectory* in 2014, Brian's work has appeared in multiple HellBound Books anthologies, *Hickory Stump*, *The Econoclash Review*, *Bards & Sages Quarterly*, and *Weird Mask Zine*.

Author Blog: [Damaged Skull Writer and Reviewer](#)
Twitter: [@skullsnflames76](#)



Pamela's Providence | *Tarvarus Goodwin*

I lick my lips to taste the blood. There's more there. I'm still alive. The blindfold is fastened tight around my head and across my eyes. I smell...something. It's a smell that calls to mind the concept of...falling away. Something once sweet now descending, spiraling toward decay. This smell is strong. It must be Wednesday.

My wrists are tied together; palms together like I'm posing a prayer. I haven't prayed today. After five...I mean eight...it doesn't...well, after so many weeks I think all the gods know I'm here by now. Wherever *here* is.

It's happening again. It's going on right now. The incision for today is across the small of my back, near the kidneys. It hurts so much but I can't scream at all. I just...wail. I do this like a wounded beast, unable to understand why I became hunted in the first place. My whole body is a scabrous grid now. Cut up into sections. I know my blood is staining the floor. I feel it flowing still. I must be still alive.

I feel his breath on my face. It is fetid, horribly wrong. When it slaps my face it just...stays there. The breath clings to my face and I know if I ever get out of here, on my face it will remain.

The tip of a tongue flutters on my earlobe. Is it of man or creature? I hope the latter, so it will eat me up and out of this world. While I still bleed with life, I think I'll make time to wonder what I've done to deserve this fate.

Tomorrow is Thursday.

Thursdays are worst of all.

About the Author:

Tarvarus Goodwin is from Tuscaloosa, Alabama. He is a graduate of The University of Alabama, with dedicated interests in film, fiction and art.



The space between the earth and the underworld held creatures ugly and beautiful, captivating and scary. They came in all shapes and sizes; some as big as giants, some as small as fairies. But they all had one thing in common; a need for the blood of the young.

Will and Susan stood before the forest looking up at the trees that were so tall they disappeared into the heavy clouds above. No sunlight shone through, making the old forest even more menacing than usual.

"Come on," said Susan, "we can't stand here all day. Mother needs those mushrooms for the pie." Will's gaze went from the tops of the trees to the darkness and gloom inside the forest. The musty odour that wafted out made him scrunch up his nose in disgust.

"But it smells bad in there, like something has died."

Susan hit him with her basket and grabbed his hand.

"You're such a scaredy cat. Let's go!" And she tugged so hard on his arm he nearly fell over. Stumbling forward, Will reluctantly began to walk on his own. His feet though, felt leaden.

Everything was dark in here; the leaves on the trees were dark-green, the tree trunks were dark-brown and the dirt beneath their feet was black. Even the air around them seemed dark. The only lightness were the mushrooms themselves, which made them easy to find at least. Will kept his eyes on the ground, he was eager to find as many mushrooms as he could, as quickly as possible so they could get out of the forest and be back home in front of the warm fire.

The only sounds were their footsteps on the dank earth, and Susan's annoying humming. It seemed to Will that even the birds and animals didn't like this forest. And who could blame them?

Will shivered, wrapping his arms around his body, trying to keep what little warmth he had inside him. He was cold, bone-chillingly cold, like he would never be warm again. His thin grey sweater did nothing to keep him warm. He wondered how Susan could be so happy, all she had on was her one and only summer dress. But she didn't seem to mind, swinging her basket, she skipped and hummed her way through the forest as if it was a sunny, flower-filled meadow and not this nightmarish, smelly, eerie place.

Susan had spotted a clump of mushrooms and was darting off to it yelling "Mine!", as if it was a competition and she'd found the treasure. Will searched the forest floor hoping the next find would be his. He saw Susan kneeling in the wet leaf litter under a tree, pulling at the mushrooms that were sprouting there.

Will looked ahead and saw a mushroom peeking through some fallen leaves at the base of the next tree. He ran past Susan and fell on his knees, scraping away the leaves covering the biggest mushroom he had ever seen. It was big enough to feed the whole family. Now, surely they could go home. Will put his hands around the mushroom and yanked as hard as he could.

He fell back, the mushroom in his hands. He sat up, proud of his prize. He wondered, though, why his mushroom had great hollow eyes filled with dirt, with worms crawling in and out of them. Will screamed and dropped the skull as if it had bitten him. He stood up, shaking and panting. He turned to find Susan, calling her name in a raspy whisper. Running on legs that were too wobbly to hold him up, he tripped on a twisted tree root and fell hitting his head hard on a rock. The forest disappeared and Will's world became black.

A chill wind coursed over Will's tiny body and he shivered as his eyes tried to focus.

Just ahead was Susan's basket, empty and unattended.

Then it reached his ears, the humming, soft at first, then louder, coming from where? All around? No, from beneath.

Will began desperately digging with his hands, his fingernails filling with dirt then ripping from his fingers. All the while calling his sister's name, his voice becoming hoarse.

Then, he feels it—her hand. He tugs at it. It tugs back, forcefully. His tears and words fall into the hole.

"Susan, help me get you out!"

But still his arm is pulled down into the black, dank earth.

The humming mixes with his screams in a macabre dance as he joins his sister in the space between.

About the Author:

Kim Hart lives in the Snowy Mountains region of southern NSW, Australia. She writes micro fiction, flash fiction, poetry, and is currently writing a junior fiction series. Kim is a wife, mother to two daughters and grandmother to one grandson. The other member of her family is a German Shephard cross, Kody who has made it to 15 years of age.

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The game they never should have played

THE ZOMBIE EFFECT



THERESA JACOBS

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The partygoers at Dicky Rindsmith's house comprised every kind of group, clique, and persuasion imaginable in a big Midwest city like Chicago, which was lurching toward another 700 homicides enabling it to vie with perennial favorite Detroit for the Murder Capital of America title. When word went out in social media this time about Dicky's upcoming bash, it traveled beyond Dicky's circle into the neighborhoods where the toughest of the hood rats occupied O Block, and anticipation for this party was like nothing before it.

One problem, however, remained: he had to hire a bartender and a DJ fast. His last one got so drunk and stole so much of his Meukow and Calvados he thought of calling the police on him. However, being no stranger to the cops and his house always on the verge of being red-listed as a 'nuisance house,' Dicky had second thoughts.

Then he remembered through the booze fog of last night's drinking session with a few friends. For Mack—or Mackerel Head, to give him the full name bestowed on him by Dicky's homies Ashanti and Anthony for his narrow head and bulbous eyes—to mention anyone as a 'freak' was noteworthy enough.

"What freaks?"

"The new owner," Mack replied. "The Bulls should sign him. Got these long-assed arms like Plastic Man."

"Plastic Man?"

The question came from the group's biggest stoner, Derrick. Right then, Derrick was absorbed in sucking smoke from a bong pipe the length of an Australian didgeridoo.

"You ain't heard of the Justice League?"

That sidetracked everyone hanging out in Dicky's living room into an intense discussion of Scarlett Johansson's hot body.

"Never mind, you clowns," Dicky said, still nursing a hangover, "I'll check this shit out myself."

It was still a shot-and-beer joint from the décor. Dick had been thrown out of the place 5 years ago by the previous owner, a tightfisted mean prick named Woźniak. Dicky hadn't been back since. He thought the bar mirror was distorting the bartender's image at first. Up close, no doubt about it, the bartender had incredibly long arms. Dicky introduced himself and told him he was looking for some catering help. The man said his name was Enos—something. Dicky didn't register the surname because he was thrown off by the odd look of the smiling bartender.

"I hear old Ed's a snowbird now, living in Florida full time," Dicky said just to make conversation.

"A snowbird," Enos repeated. His pained look said he didn't understand the word.

As if to distract from the unfamiliarity with a common Midwestern term every Chicagoan knew, Enos leaned across the bar causing Dicky to rear back on his stool as the man's narrow face was suddenly thrust inches from his own.

"You must have played a little basketball," Dicky said, staring at the man's arms, now folded across his chest.

The bartender looked at him as if he'd never heard of that term, either.

Dicky thought: *I have got to cut down on the meth and the cognac . . . this guy is creeping me out, no two ways about it.*

The bartender cocked his head, which only exacerbated Dicky's confusion.

Hot-damn, one freaky looking son of a bitch—

"I'm sorry, sir, did I say something to offend you?"

"Huh, uh no, man, I didn't say that—"

Did I say that or think it? I'm still high. That's it, Dicky vowed. *No booze or weed tonight—at least for a day.*

"Do you see those three fellows over there?"

Dicky looked where he pointed behind him at a booth in the corner. They were the only three other men in the place besides him and the bartender. "They are friends of mine," the bartender said. "We are a team and we do catering, play band music, and clean-up afterward."

"That so."

Dicky couldn't imagine four adult human beings less cool than this lot of homely middle-aged dudes. Dicky's house at the corner of the 4400 block of West Monroe was once working class, now firmly gang territory. Latin Kings graffiti was tagged over by Maniac Campbell Boys and theirs by P-Stones. Negotiating the streets was an art form that Dicky had mastered. His parties reflected his eclectic tastes, too: gangbangers mingled with rich frat types from Glencoe, goths jabbered about the satanic goat of Mendez or the 'Bra and Panties' song from Orange. J Weirdest of all were the juggalos and juggalettes, followers of Insane Clown Posse, gabbling about 'dark carnivals' Dicky slugged back his X.O. and smiled, moving on like a proud ringmaster of his own circus. Anything could happen at his wild parties.

Dicky wondered about the claim of playing 'band music,' too. *It sounded like Lawrence Welk or some ancient shit from before he was born.* Staring at the common features of the men staring back at him from the booth, Dicky thought they all looked alike. Maybe this bartender was the elder of a clan of hillbillies moved up from coal country. A girlfriend once told him she'd never have kids with him because they'd all come out with tails and the pinched features of fetal alcohol syndrome babies.

Dicky's limited funds for his upcoming gig held him back. He asked: "How much you charge? I mean for all four of you, like, a package deal?"

The bartender's face tightened in thought—another creepy moment. Dicky wondered if the words package deal weren't in the guy's vocabulary. *Got to be a foreigner,* Dicky thought. *If so, good, I'll screw him over big time . . .*

Dicky mentioned a price and almost blushed at the lowball figure he gave the bartender.

"That sounds generous," the bartender said.

Dicky ordered a bourbon and they sealed the deal with a handshake. The man's handshake was rough, awkward, the skin calloused.

Dicky was feeling a combination of blitzed and guilt for cheating the man.

"My friends are expert craftsmen as well as professional caterers. For a small fee, they'll provide you a portable bar and stools for serving your guests," the bartender said.

The bartender introduced each man and his skill, but Dicky couldn't recall a single name at this point. They sounded like Poles, his first guess, but not exactly like the Wychowskis and Symanskis, from his old neighborhood.

The fee was negotiated with more handshakes and drinks.

"One last thing," Dickie said. "Your DJ plays house music, nu disco, rap. Nothing else. Got me?"

"Understood."

That weirdo smile again.

I might as well be speaking Martian, Dicky thought.

Once he was out the door, back in the blinding sunlight of afternoon, Dicky had second thoughts. *What have I agreed to now?* He knew booze eroded your brain cells as well as destroyed the liver, but he was too young to be caving in like this.

There was nothing for it now, he realized. They whole damn team of those weirdos would be at his house in a couple of hours before the first of the party people arrived.

A thought, sharp as the glare off the shop windows, bounced around in his brain: *I never told them where I lived—or did I? I must have. They wouldn't let me walk off without asking for an address or directions . . .*

Dicky gave up trying to figure out what he did or didn't say. The whole time in that darkened bar was mystifying in the blinding light of day. Dicky renewed his vow to go easy on the booze until things settled down and started to look normal again.

Dicky was sound asleep when a steady rapping at the door woke him up. He was muzzy-headed from too much drink and too little food. He felt weak, his legs wobbly.

He opened the door to the bartender standing there, even taller than he remembered; his three barroom buddies, almost a stall, were standing shoulder to shoulder on the porch just behind him. All of them with those weird smiles on their narrow faces.

Where had he seen that type of face before? He knew it from somewhere—

"Let us in," not "can we come in?" But Dicky was too stunned to resist or say anything.

They trooped past him, ducking under the lintel over the doorway. Each was carrying a small tool kit, no bigger than a tackle box.

When the answer to Dicky's question arrived, it hit him like a punch to the solar plexus: praying mantis. That insect had that narrow face and cocked its head like the bartender.

"We'll take care of everything, sir," Enos said. "Don't worry about a thing."

Dicky headed upstairs at a drunken trot. He shut the bedroom door and moved the tallboy in front of it. He did it without thinking why he felt he needed to do that. They'd hear the scrape of the legs across the floor from downstairs. Dicky no longer cared. He felt as if the blood was being drained from his body by invisible syringes. He needs sleep, hours of it. Maybe this would all work out, he thought, after some good sleep. He was in no shape to party—no big deal.

Dicky's sleep was fretful, full of dark things coming at him. He twisted the sheets around him and the booze sweat from his pores made everything damp. The bartender was in his dream, too. He was thrusting that ugly face into Dicky's and this time his mouth opened wide to show a double row of razor-sharp teeth in both the upper law and

extending all the way back to the lower mandibles. Dicky woke himself with the beginnings of a scream just as the bartender's greedy mouth clamped down on his head.

Lordy, what-all's wrong with me?

Dicky went down the hall to shower. He doused himself with needle-hot spray until he couldn't tolerate it and then blasted his body with icy water. This was one part of his hangover cure and the other was downstairs in the fridge: a tall glass of tomato juice.

Dicky was halfway down the steps when he realized he had not heard any cars driving up to his house or heard anyone banging on the door to be let in. That was strange.

At the bottom of the steps, he stopped dead in his tracks, one hand still holding on to the wooden dowel cap.

"I want to thank you for letting us in, Dicky," the bartender said from behind him.

"What—what do you want?"

"Watch and see," the bartender said. "Call me—Henosis, why don't you?"

Dicky heard something like 'Enos,' a weird name but nothing as weird as the man himself. Dicky once sold an Enos Slaughter baseball card to a teenaged collector for five hundred dollars—except that the card was a fake, a Xerox pasted to a thin slice of cardboard.

Dicky took a seat on his own sofa and watched as the three men went back and forth with their tiny toolkits. Enos the bartender stood with his long, angular limbs that he folded about his torso. It was like one of those time-lapsed nature shows. He was static, trapped in slo-mo time, imprisoned by his own couch while these strange men with their triangular heads and bulging eyes flew from one corner of the house to the other—except for Enos, or whatever he called himself, who stood in front of Dicky. He was exactly like that DC Comics Plastic Man whose elongated limbs stretched like taffy!

Dicky knew he was in big trouble. Alarm bells in his head were clanging now. Neural damage from the drugs he ingested since his hard partying days and nights had started. This Enos—this *freak*—he just couldn't be physically doing what he seemed to be doing and his so-called friends—what the hell were they up to with their soundless hammering and sawing? It looked to Dicky as if they were destroying and rebuilding his house from the ground up in time that sped up and made him dizzy to watch. He noticed his windows and doors were gone.

Dicky's head lolled on his neck. He couldn't focus his eyes. He felt drugged yet he had taken nothing since coming home from the bar that afternoon. Dicky couldn't fathom what was happening to him or to his house.

Must think . . . must think . . . must thinkthinkthinkDickyboyoboyoboy—

Just blips and sparks from synaptic discharges misfiring in his confused brain. Then he heard Enos speaking in his odd chirpy voice:

"—your amygdala, Dicky, the pecan-shaped . . . brain hemispheres. It's helping. . . Let it help you now . . . last gift . . . secretes an enzyme . . . ease the pain . . . death."

Death, what death? Whose death? What was this crazy lunatic jabbering about?

Dicky tried to get up, tried to run from this lunatic and his psycho friends but he was stuck fast to the couch. Someone had woven sticky gauze around him while he was dazed.

That's it. No more drugs for me—

Enos extended his long fingers into Dicky's mouth and pulled his lower mandible apart with a loud crack. He rammed his own mouth into the gaping aperture of Dicky's broken mouth and vomited a hideous smelling, thick brown drool down his throat in one agonizing regurgitation. It burned like pure grain alcohol. His stomach became a burning ball of gaseous fluid. Dicky's eyes clouded over from the pain and the nausea. He wanted to scream but nothing came out but a bubbled regurgitation from his clotted throat.

"I could tell you were unhappy with your false friends," Enos continued, ignoring the spectacle. "Now you have a purpose to your useless life."

Pur-pose? Dicky's mind absorbed the words and the trailing sense in slo-mo time.

"As one of our many useful egg sacs, you see."

Dicky was too paralyzed by now to move or speak even if he could have managed it. His brain, however, had one last moment of clarity. He remembered it now: some nature program about insects, but it wasn't the praying mantis Enos first reminded him of as a cascade of images from his neocortex flooded his brain: the spider wasp. It stings its victim with enough toxin to keep it paralyzed and secured in a safe place so that its larvae will hatch and eat the spider for nourishment.

"These babies will live because of you," Enos said almost tenderly.

“Sssaafe,” Dicky’s flickering consciousness repeated dully; then, fighting it reflexively, ricocheting with horror at the realization of his destiny.

All masculine features melted away, or so it seemed to Dicky through the tears springing from his eyes, she—the thing that had called itself Enos a moment ago—cocked its triangular head a final time at him before a fiery black curtain overwhelmed his senses, all except the final one: he heard his own useless jaws flap in a silent scream.

About the Author:

Robb White was born, raised, and still lives in Northeastern Ohio. He has published novels in the Thomas Haftmann series, a pair of noir novels, and 3 collections of short stories of crime, mystery, and horror. White has been nominated for a Derringer award. “Inside Man,” a heist story, was selected for *Best American Mystery Stories 2019*. A recent novel is *The Russian Heist*.

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One Mississippi, Two Mississippi | *Karen Schaubert*

She hears the storm brewing from inside the windowless room. Her skin clammy and slack. She has not seen the light of day for weeks. Desperate for a glimpse, a taste, salt of the Salish sea, lick of raindrop, she stays tuned to the slightest of indicators.

It comes quickly. Her eyelids flicker as the lightning cracks, and she counts, ‘one Mississippi, two Mississippi... waiting for the thunder to boom. It is close. Curling into a fetal position, she is comforted by its predictability. Its imposing presence signals she is not alone. It is the silence she dreads; deafening and cruel.

Intrusive thoughts return to haunt her, as a little girl, her parents would leave her locked in her room while they went down on the Strip. She was their burden, and they would let her know in no uncertain terms. It is not them that she conjures now in her hour of desperation, it is Ruby, tiny and bubble-eyed, who kept her trust during those punishing, lonely times. Two eyes bobbling, upward-pointing, the goldfish bowl her communion.

She is shaken from her stupor when lightening thwacks again. No Mississippis this time. It is followed instead by the hollow thud of the basement door. He is back. There is shuffling, and muffled human sounds; whimpering and intermittent pleading. She cranes her neck as far as the chains will permit. Chaffing has left her skin raw. Her lips purse tight as she winces and pulls against the steel prong collar.

She has hoped there wouldn’t be someone else.

She knows the routine, the forced strip, pinned to the rack, the retching, and passing out.

It begins again. The lightning strikes, and she counts, one Mississippi, two Mississippi...

About the Author:

Schauber’s work appears in 40 international literary magazines and anthologies, including *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Bending Genres*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *Fiction Southeast*, and *New Flash Fiction Review*. *The Group of Seven Reimagined: Contemporary Stories Inspired by Historic Canadian Paintings* (2019), is her first editorial/curatorial flash fiction anthology. Schaubert runs ‘Vancouver Flash Fiction’, a flash fiction Resource Hub and Critique Circle, and in her spare time, is a seasoned Family Therapist.

Facebook: [VancouverFlashFiction](#)



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POETRY

Painting Lost Melodies | *Shawn D. Standfast*

Lying in bed, darkness begins to close in
Street sounds filter through windowpanes
Muffled voices, excited with angry babble
Cars rev and speed by, horns echo voices

Pain pulsates as sweat runs and pools
Eyes closed tightly shut, mind races
Morphine courses through synapses
Skin riddled with ants scratching

Moments of reflection, of loneliness
Lights flicker on ceiling, lingering
Sleep escapes into cracks of time
Ticking clocks mark its passing

Exhaustion releases stifled anxiety
A blank canvas dulling the senses
Stretched ever so tightly and thinly
Fevered dreams painting lost melodies

A momentary status quo from reality
Medicated stillness seeps silently away
Wearied darkness once again awakens
Searching for an oblivion free of torment

Heightened sensations pulsate in rhythm
Choreographed desolation reaches forth
Holy choirs muted by lost redemption
Surrounded by fears feeding on despair

About the Author:

Shawn D. Standfast was born on an island in Northern Ontario, Canada. His early years were spent without running water, indoor plumbing, and electricity. Shawn began reading to pass the long summer days and cold winter nights. A high school English class sparked his interest in poetry. Inspired, Shawn began writing. In 2005 Shawn relocated to the United Kingdom. His first collection of poetry *Dark Passages: Moments of Transition*, is now out through Sirens Call Publications.

Twitter: [@BooksR4Life](https://twitter.com/BooksR4Life)

The Echo of a Rising Star | *Shawn D. Standfast*

In the silence of tranquillity
Searching for reflective slumber
Exploring vaults of consequence
With hallowed heart visions burn

Along roads of restless wandering
Mired in midnight fear and sorrow
Moving in a déjà vu of static response
Spectres sing a refrain of neglect

Dreams wash through emptiness
As rain envelops the darkness
Feeding moss-covered memories
Shackled by this cacophonous roar

Tinged with madness, shadows move
Out of a void of remorse and reflection
Hoping for glorified metamorphosis
In the candlelit echo of a rising star

Restless Longing | *Shawn D. Standfast*

Living in a dream world of your creation
Searching for shadows in the darkness
Forming memories from stardust
Casting runes into an abyss of sensations

Standing in a place far from home
Never knowing where moments lead
Sailing in a boat of restless longing
Lost upon the sea of your salvation

Drowning in the choices you once had
Hiding away to live for another tomorrow
Remembering times that have past by
Searching the horizon through faded lenses

Capturing images battered by time
Allowing moments to live once again
Writing in a fevered attempt to recover
Fragmentary pieces of forgotten emotion

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The Monster | *Michael S. Walker*

The monster comes
Every day now
He lays waste to
Villages you thought had been flattened
He stomps on villagers
You thought were long dead
Don't know what
He is searching for
But he is searching for something
A long extinct mate perhaps
A sweeter form of atomic waste
Bombs that might finally do the trick
Anyway
He comes every day now
He towers
Over everything
He doesn't go away.

About the Author:

Michael walker is a writer living in Newark, Ohio. He is the author of two published books: 7-22, a YA fantasy novel and The Vampire Henry, a "literary" horror novel. He has also seen his stories and poems published in various magazines including Weirdbook, Adelaide Literary Magazine, and PIF.

Facebook: [Michael S. Walker](#)
Blog: [Fiction and Poetry - Michael S. Walker](#)



The Soapbox Car Incident | *Mathias Jansson*

My uncle, the famous ghost hunter
travelled around the world
in search for haunted places
he visited old cemeteries
abandoned castles
and ghostly mansions

In his dark cellar
shelf after shelf
with glass jars
a horrifying collection
of ghosts and poltergeists
lost souls and demons
evil spirits from Amityville
Salem and Silent Hill

The day it happened
I was building a soapbox car
and was missing a stick
to make a steering wheel
I had searched the yard
and the tool shed
when I remembered
that I had seen
a perfect stick leaning
against a shelf in the cellar

I knew it was a forbidden area
but my uncle was away
so I snuck down anyway
and quickly snatched the stick and ran up the stairs
when a strange noise reached my ears
I looked back terrified
the shelves fell like dominoes
and the glass jars
shattered against the floor

I heard the terrifying screaming
behind the closed cellar door
I don't know how
I will tell my uncle
that his cellar
is a terrible messy sight
and he had to work late tonight
because I accidentally
opened all the gates to Hell.

About the Author:

Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines as The Horror Zine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock and The Sirens Call. He has also contributed to over 100 different horror anthologies from publishers as Horrified Press, James Ward Kirk Fiction, Source Point Press, Thirteen Press etc.

Author Blog: [Mathias Jansson](#)



The House on Black Creek Road | Judge Santiago Burdon

Is someone living in that vacant house
At the end of Black Creek Road?
You know the one I'm talking about.
The old Crowley farm that was for sale but never sold
I was driving by there on my way home tonight
And swear I saw a light
And the silhouette of someone
Walking around inside
I'm sure it wasn't my headlights reflection
Shining off the windows.
I stopped and got out to take a look
but the curtains had all been closed
No one answered when I knocked on the door
I could hear footsteps and voices inside
So I yelled "hey is there anyone home"
No one not even the Devil replied
There must be someone living there
That vacant house on Black Creek Road
If there is they have no idea
Of what happened there years ago
Evil is the only thing that lives there
That vacant house on Black Creek Road
They should have destroyed that place
Burned it down
Along with the memories that it holds
Someone should investigate
we have a right to know

Maybe the monster that lived there
has returned back home
He never was convicted
for those heinous crimes
All those children that disappeared
they were never able to find
Wonder what became of him
Is he in a hospital for the Criminally Insane
What do they do with Psychopaths
Just lock 'em up and throw the key away
I think someone is living there
that vacant house on Black Creek Road
That place scares the hell out of me.
It's as though it's trying to steal my soul
It feels like something's watching me
when I drive down that road
Maybe it's the ghosts of his victims
maybe it's him alone
Sometimes you can hear screams in the wind
rushing through the trees
Echoing down the hollow
Spreading like a disease
Is someone living in that vacant house
The one on Black Creek Road
Don't let the children go near that place
Don't let them walk to school that way
What do you mean the children still haven't come home?
And you haven't seen them all day?

About the Author:

On a cool July morning Judge Santiago Burdon was born in Chicago. He attended Universities in the U.S., London and Paris studying Victorian novels and authors. His short stories and poems have been featured in numerous Magazines and Literary Journals. His first book "*Stray Dogs and Deuces Wild*" was published this January. Judge turned 66 last July and lives modestly in Costa.



Here with Me You Will Stay | Judge Santiago Burdon

I lie next to you in the partial darkness
Lit only by a single bulb hanging from a cable
I watch you sleep in a permanent slumber
Your body cold with a rigid disdain
No longer a raging rhythm
pounding in your heart with cruel intention
Silenced are the words
You shouted to bedamn me
Leaving you breathless
never to voice again.
Conceit reflected in your beauty
Now fading with each ticking moment
The weight of time we spent together
measured in ounces
Never equated to a pound of love
Your threats of abandonment
Leaving me alone without regret
will never be realized
Made certain by the keen edged blade of my knife
When I slit your delicate throat.

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Pine Box | Timothy Hosey

His spine crushed on impact,
The incinerator flames shot out of the jets with fury,
The merciless flames ignited in
separate pilots of the incinerator in a domino effect.
Severing his spinal chord to the brain.
Every muscle in his body snapped like guitar strings one by one,
The old man was merely a puppet with its strings cut.
Any facial features diminished,
grotesquely contorted to a rubber mask.
Every iota of skin charred burnt rubber.
Flames licked around his lifeless body,
Scorching and singing every remnant of his false suit.
The chemicals and dyes of the clothes a char,
Filling the Pine Box with black toxic smoke.
The Pine Box exploded into splinters.
At least he was in no suffering anymore.
The dead don't feel anything.
The jets ceased and the incinerator shut down,
Discharging his ashes in a metal tray below.
No jewelry but cufflinks deposited,
Charred with soot.
There was no more Pine Box or the old man.
The ashes will be kept in an Urn,
until his ashes be skewered over the Chesapeake Bay Bridge.
Ashes to ashes,
Dust to dust.

About the Author:

Timothy Hosey is a poet of the macabre. Whenever he's not writing, he thinks about the human condition. He plays his guitar and listens to heavy metal as a muse for future pieces of literature.

Facebook: [Timothy Hosey](#)

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Little Boy | *Rachael Clarke*

Mischief and mayhem, I cause all sorts of chaos.
But none of it leaves me the slightest bit cute.
I'm the king of confusion, and slick with collusion.
I have assets, but that point remains vexingly moot.

I've got the balls and the gall to deface the halls.
If you dare look in my closet, you'll find paint.
Nothing implies me, still the Principal eyes me.
As for my parents, well, they dream I'm a saint.

I'm far from a saint, but I'm 'their little boy'.
They're so desperate to straighten my path.
In whispering tones, they think I don't hear,
Those words stab through my unruly back.

What impudence to say that I need to change.
They stroll about clueless to what lies inside.
Our great name's at stake, yet the shroud is a fake.
Would I be different, if they'd bothered to try?

Evil schemes, to enforce my very worst fear.
To cast me off in a school meant for boys.
All they've managed to do is insult my I.Q.
I've no remorse for my scrupulous plays.

They're nervous to share, it's so easy to see.
I await the reveal of this abhorrent truth.
Slathered in lies to shroud exile as perk.
What beautiful havoc that they will let loose.

I'll scream and I'll yell. Make them feel like hell.
By sheer cruelty, they're forcing my hand.
But I'll get in the car, and be Dad's 'little star'.
Make them think they succeeded as planned.

Their delight will fly high, to be finally free.
Carrying on, with no black stain to scrub...
Then surprise they will find, which I left behind.
A precarious package they won't want to nudge.

An innocuous little bundle, go ahead, toss it out.
It's amazing what a savvy young chemist can make.
Like a painstaking brew with ingredients that flare,
When exposed to the air from the tiniest shake.

They'll regret they conspired, lungs burning like fire.
A fitting demise for my dear mom and dad.
I'm a misfit they made, and then left to degrade.
Quite a shame, but I don't think I'll feel bad.

About the Author:

Rachael Clarke is a former police officer living in Portage la Prairie, MB. Between juggling two busy boys, a sportaholic husband, and two bizarrely ill-behaved dogs, she manages to maintain a semblance of sanity by guzzling coffee and savouring copious amounts of chocolate. Rachael lives for fulfilling dreams, and seeking out new inspirations. She is currently writing a novel and writing/illustrating her first picture book.

Author Blog: [Rachael Clarke Author](#)

Twitter: [@rachaelclarkea1](#)



A tense psychological thriller that will keep you guessing



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The Night | *Ivanka Fear*

I only go out at night
under cover of darkness
so no one sees, no one knows,
dragging your body out with me,
on lonely streets searching
for that which can't be found.

Every night I walk these streets,
all roads closed, exits blocked
a maze with dead ends,
a map with no legend,
a city with brick walls,
glass dome over it all.
No escape.

Deja Vu.
Every night.
This is my recurring nightmare.
This is my penance.

I only go out at night
hidden by my own shadow
so no one sees, no one knows,
digging up the past,
burying the present,
down the back street,
streetlights emitting a soft glow
over vacant lots,
dragging your body out with me,
out to where the sidewalk ends and back again,
dragging your body out with me.

Searching for you
in this town where we loved,
in this town where we died,
digging up the dead,
burying the living.

And when the mist settles in around me,
I quicken my pace and don't look back
just in case
what I've dug up and what I've buried
follows.

I only go out at night
on the graveyard shift,
on lonely streets searching
for that which can't be found,
terrified it will find me.

What I Don't Know | *Ivanka Fear*

Seagulls airborne, willy nilly
flapping, searching
Lone dove sitting, unmoving
waiting, fluttering upwards
Hummingbird hovering, sensing
zooming skyward
Hawks circling above, round and round
taking off, in formation
What do they know I don't?
Their bird's eye view capturing
the larger picture,
Ground level obscuring my vision
of surrounding dangers.

Squirrel scurrying, freezing
halfway across the lawn
Rabbit hesitating, motionless
up on haunches, all ears
Cat tail twitching, back arching
stopped in its tracks
Deer wide-eyed, standing still
captured in headlights.
What do they know I don't?
Instinct on high alert, aware
and ever ready,
Logic tampering with my senses,
totally oblivious.

Sun retreating slowly, hiding
cowardly from sight
Wind, whistling quietly, then howling
intensifying its warning
Clouds, dark, menacing
quickly moving in, taking over
Thunder booming, roaring
then fire lighting up the sky.
What do they know I don't?
Nature shouting out, an omen —
something wicked this way comes,
I, mere mortal, watch unheeding,
unaware of what lurks near.

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 second novel.



Quiet Monsters | *Mary Parker*

Quiet monsters sleep under my bed,
Swimming in the dark sea beneath my sheets.
Their claws slash my pillows.
They are so polite, they are so quiet
As they wait to attack.
I flutter on my shredded wings –
The chunks of blue and white gossamer wrecked by brute force –
I get no air, I flutter about,
A sputtering sprite, my lofty spirit grounded.
The dark creeps,
Its shadow fingers extend into
A pool of ghostly regret –
The dark comes to me on silent wings
And whispers in my ear:
“Relieve the pressure. Go on, you’ll feel better.”
Quiet monsters did this to me.
They broke into my bedroom,
Snuck into my dreams on arthritic feet
And used their talons to snatch my wings,
The cobweb threads of my heart snapped and broken
Like brittle wires.
I am quiet now, just waiting
For a moment to make my escape.
I lie in bed, broken.
I know that this cot in my tomb.
Soon, very soon, I will grow still
And dissolve into the covers,
Slip underneath into the darkness,
And use my manners.
I will lie in wait.
Quiet, oh so quiet, ready to find my target.
My teeth ache, ready for gnashing.

About the Author:

Mary Parker is a horror author and journalist from Southern Illinois. A collection of short stories, “Predilection,” was published in 2009. Her short stories and poetry have appeared in multiple anthologies and eZines. She is a regular poetry contributor to Autism Parenting Magazine – her incredible daughter has nonverbal autism. She is a proud supporter of Women in Horror Month.

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



Spiderwebs clutch the tops of cardboard boxes
The strange sweet stink of decay fills the air
inside a place that should be pristine
But the power's been turned off
Trapping us in a madwoman's
hoard filled shack of shame
Headless dolls loll sadly
on a section of the kitchen counter
The owner says they'll be repaired
Unfortunately, I know the real answer
This is the home of all the dead things
and has been now for many a year
Windows and doors are barricaded
with moldering boxes that hide
the craziness held deep inside
and keep me from escaping
In the living room, a fireplace vomits
ash onto a once clean carpet of dirt
that's now a hatchery for dust demons
and bugs that scuttle blindly in the gloom
A gnarled parrot growls with menace
when I approach the queen of all she sees
holding a broken bust of Elvis, with a leer obscene
"Don't you touch my treasures!" She shrieks
as I move about slowly while pouring gasoline
I do not plan to stay here in this house of decay
My face is scarred by parrot bites
and there's scarcely room to move
But I flick the matches alight, flinging them
here and there to make sure of our doom
The bedroom is the first to catch
and it does so with a boom
Next up is where her highness sits
She will not leave, no matter how I try
That damn parrot takes a final bite
before I fling it to the flames
My how those flames can sing!
I must get out of here before I die
Smoke envelops everything in a haze
Almost out, but my shirt gets caught...

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 *Trajectory* in 2014, Brian's work has appeared in multiple HellBound Books anthologies, *Hickory Stump*, *The Econoclash Review*, *Bards & Sages Quarterly*, and *Weird Mask Zine*. Brian's site damagedskullwriterandreviewer.com posts news and reviews.

Author Blog: <http://damagedskullwriterandreviewer.com>

Twitter: [@skullsnflames76](https://twitter.com/skullsnflames76)

To be Haunted | *Brian Rosenberger*

A door opens without being opened.
The same door closes without being shut.

Loved ones topple over banisters,
Trip fatally down staircases,
Hang from chandeliers like puppets.
Pushed or not pushed.
No witnesses. Never a witness.
Accidents. Gravity proves itself.
Broken bones. Broken necks.
Blame the Wind. Blame Ghosts.
Blame the open door.

The Dead wait, anxiously.
Waiting to be beckoned, summoned, or called.
Via Ouija board, prayer, blood sacrifice, or text message.
They have anything better to do than rot and regret.
So similar to the Living.

You stare into the mirror.
The reflection betrays you.
Truth told as the skeleton smiles.

You can be Haunted or be Dead.
Pity, it's not your choice to make

View from the Cabin | *Brian Rosenberger*

The moon, full and bright.
The moon, a witness without judgment.

Already drunk - Praise Lucifer, Praise Evan Williams, Praise Pepsi Cola.
He watches as they gather, right on schedule.
Satanists. Say what you will, as a whole, punctual to a fault.
A wall of ebony robes, shadows in the moonlight, swaying scarecrows.
As they dance, the robes discarded.
He gets an eyeful, breaks out the binoculars for a closer look.

Some are familiar, faces at the supermarket, at the bank, at the DMV.
Others are strangers. The curious. The We-will-sacrifice-you-later.
One and all, they pass the goblet, black as their robes, drinking deep.
Their lips and faces, their breasts and chests,
Stained a deep red. He remembers the taste,
Coppery, like licking a Nickel.

When they break out the knife, he's seen enough.
As a former member, he knows what's next.
It was a fun group but the dues got too high.
Two tombstones in the local cemetery bear his name.

He puts the binoculars away,
Overflows his glass with whiskey,
Turns up the volume on the TV.
Some game show. Any game show.
Just noise.

It almost drowns out the screams.

About the Author:

Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of *As the Worm Turns* and three poetry collections - *Poems That Go Splat*, *And For My Next Trick...*, and *Scream for Me*. He is also a featured contributor to the must-read Pro-Wrestling literary collection, *Three-Way Dance*, available from Gimmick Press.



Not Necessarily Troubled | *Radar DeBoard*

Roland didn't know where he went wrong with his son. At first it was little things, like him throwing his food on the floor at dinner. His wife would just say, 'He's an excitable boy.'

Then came the suspensions for fighting. Not just Regular fighting, but for biting people during the fights. His wife would keep reiterating, 'He's just an excitable boy.'

But Roland couldn't ignore it anymore. Not the Strange behavior, and especially not the rotting smell that grew stronger as he approached his son's room. His wife's words cutting through the decaying flesh smell, 'Just an excitable boy.'

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 his writing enough to share it with others.



Human | *Theresa Jacobs*

Under the cover of night, I hunt
From shade to shadow I taunt
Tracking my prey on whispered wing
Nary a trace of my presence shall bring
A glance or whiff or thought
Of the terror I have wrought
My evil soul is never sated
Though by society I am hated
The taste of sweet innocent flesh
I yearn for most in my quest
To find the soul inside
Of these bag-of-bones that we reside
For my prayers go asunder
When I query why I'm a monster
Until the heavens bring me down
I'll wreak havoc on this town
For man can not defy
What a mother's womb did not deny

About the Author:

Theresa Jacobs has taken the indie world by storm. In four short years she's written two novels, four novellas, many short stories, and scripts for television. Currently, she has a film on the indie movie circuit. While she is making a name for herself, she also continues to help others reach their goals and is a cheerleader to all things creative.

Author Blog: [Theresa Jacobs](#)

Facebook: [Writer Theresa J](#)

ZERO PERSPECTIVE



Lee Andrew Forman

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

this flower has a temper | *Linda M. Crate*

wicked and wanton
are these desires,
but this time i am done
repressing them;

you wanted a monster
here i am—
fangs gleaming whiter than the moon,
whose red eyes scream of one

desire: blood;
you may have been an energy vampire
sucking the life from me,
but i will take your very life;

and when you cannot rise
perhaps you will see
you weren't the deadliest monster
in this battle—

told you once not to provoke my temper
you told me that it didn't exist,
so you can tell that to your flowers as they
wither and fade into the same death kiss.

with your blood as my wine | *Linda M. Crate*

you wandered into the wrong kingdom,
here you are just the jester;
you won't make it out alive

the queen will find you
her fangs will pierce your throat
laying you to a slumber

from which you'll never wake—

a murder of crows will sing above
your corpse as wolves and foxes
carry off your organs,

and i will watch as your bones are carried off;
when you ask me to make it stop i will ignore
your ghost as i readjust my crown

walking away leaving you bereft of answers

the very same way you betrayed me to the
darkest of days i will surrender you
to the darkest afterlife—

i know your true love is death,
and now you can be her husband and she your bride;
i will even perform the ceremony for you with your blood as my wine.

About the Author:

Linda M. Crate's poetry, short stories, articles, and reviews have been published in a myriad of magazines both online and in print. She has six published chapbooks, two full-length poetry collections, and one micro-chapbook. She is also the author of the novel *Phoenix Tears* (Czykmate Books, June 2018).



this ravenous beast | *Linda M. Crate*

the sailor was trapped
somewhere
humans were not meant to be

some ill stroke of luck
he survived what ought to have
slaughtered him

only to find the skeletons of other
men scattered around this
dark and desolate cave,

as his heart beat increased;
he asked himself what
could have done such a horrible dead?

"me," came a cold voice,
the sailor turned to see a beast that
looked like a merman but with sharper

teeth;
something he didn't know the name of
"a triton"—

blinking the sailor was numb to
everything until suddenly the pain of dying
broke through, and the screams

erupted from him
but there was no one to save
him from the clutches of this ravenous beast.

slaying the darkest nightmare | *Linda M. Crate*

you used to say
my eyes were the color
of coffee, but i am
not someone you can swallow;
i am a daughter of the
moon
breaking the rib of every
adam who thinks
i am his eve—
you made a mistake showing
me darkness
now i know how to defeat the nightmare
of you,
and i am not afraid;
go ahead howl at the moon
she will not save you no matter how desperate
your plea—
werewolf,
you'll be left in the dark
where you placed me;
and you'll find yourself in my woods you are not safe
i am the queen that holds a grudge
had to break a lot of wood and ground to escape
the coffin you gave me—
what was meant to kill me only made me stronger,
and now the dampyr will bite harder than you ever could;
i won't stop until every last ruby is mine and i'll let you drop hard
as an anchor as the animals carry off what is left of you
because even the darkest nightmare must perish
to leave behind a sweet dream.

About the Author:

Linda M. Crate's poetry, short stories, articles, and reviews have been published in a myriad of magazines both online and in print. She has six published chapbooks, two full-length poetry collections, and one micro-chapbook. She is also the author of the novel *Phoenix Tears* (Czykmate Books, June 2018).



The Scent of Pine Cones | Kane Salzer

Saturday evening, the hens night come out to party.
Swirling, cascading showers of pink feather boas, glitter and Prosecco. Joyous, excited laughter.
They descended on the bar in a wave of cheap perfume and joke 'L' plates.
Midsummer. Hot, sweaty.
Cocktails first. Then champagne and finally wine. Always wine to finish.
The bartender was young and beautiful. They all flirted with him, harmless fun.
He wore leopard print and his cologne smelled of pine cones.
Wine flowed. Inhibitions lowered.
Wild, glorious music announced a well built man dressed in very little. An offering to them.
Surprised screams, all faux modesty and genuine arousal.
Eyes too bright with desire, following his every erotic gyration.
One licked his chiselled abdomen, tasting sweat and passion.
Red painted nails grazed gently down his muscular arm.
Panting, crotch wet from rubbing against his strong thigh, a lascivious whisper, an earlobe sucked.
At the bar, the beautiful wild eyed host just laughed and poured more wine.
Breasts bare now, clothes are too hot, too restricting. Naked skin glistening with perspiration and spilled wine.
Lust, sex... HUNGER.
Toned, athletic flesh tearing, giving way under strong white teeth. Screaming. Pain. FEAR.
Screams of ecstasy. Drunken giggles. Animal howls.
Red tides of fresh blood mixing with rivers of dark crimson wine.
The Maenades gorged, a primal orgy of the carnal and the carnivorous. And always, more wine.
Dawn found them far from home, wandering strange hills amid wild grapevines. Singing ancient songs of worship to their wild, unfettered god.

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 in his first novel and an anthology of feminist horror micro fiction.



We Should Have Seen It Coming | Lynn White

To begin with the dark parts were small
tiny black squares in the brightness,
we should have seen it growing
recognised its full potential
noticed the blurred edges
allowing it to creep
outwards
imperceptibly
almost invisibly.
And now
there's hardly a space between the black parts
and little space for brightness around them.
Even the red no longer looks dangerous
however vibrantly it tries to intervene
the darkness is winning
slowly but
exponentially
covering it all.
We should have seen it coming.
How did we not see it?
I think it's too late
to halt it
now.

A Private Affair | Lynn White

She chose the quilt colour carefully,
bright red
blood red
so when she lay down
no one would see
her bleed out
emotionally
drained
empty
of the bright sunshine
that had filled her
full of joy.
It was always a private affair
so no one should see
and no one would see
as finally
she put it to bed.

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.

Author Blog: [Lynn White Poetry](#)

Facebook: [Lynn White Poetry](#)



Beyond | *Lori R. Lopez*

What do you know of the places below,
the crawlspaces and crevices wherein
cold nocturnals curl to sleep more,
grrrrrowing gently whilst they snore?

Between most strands of spidery thrall,
so deep and syrupy, pooled ethereal,
tucked in rows of viiiiiiiiiinish decay,
the Midnight Terrors wait to play . . .

In nether-reaches past a chasmous yawn
where lies the opening cosmic eyelet
of Sunset's dawn; crouched nefariously for
a tardy awakening furtive outpour.

From shadow and corner they'll creep!
Out of the depths in a Grand Mal Pageant,
any manner of cretins prance and foray,
festooned with moldy green and gray.

To the off-beat of the Moon's tambourine,
the howl of an angry Twilight Loon;
peeping with a thousand-or-so-eyed stare
at the skittish gait of a reluctant Night Mare.

Far past the fringes of Never More,
beyond the borders of Nobody's Land;
on demonic feet wearing threadbare socks,
these darlings of dusk sneak out of the box.

Teeming up cracks to greet Day's demise,
they stamp countless tracks like little lost sheep.
Sprung from bed with the least of care,
Evil Dreads feast on hearts and souls laid bare.

Rollicking madcaps they scurry, Devil-may-care,
though not in a hurry the beasties of Noir.
Capering, tapering, picking stout locks,
these nasties are awfully unorthodox.

Then burrow again neath handcrafted quilts
as the Hourglass measures its up-and-down tilts . . .
ere the Sun spoil their eldritch eeriest fun —
all the leeriest conniptions they reap on the run.

Abiding beyond till the fireball succumbs
in a gloaming sky from which shadiness comes,
disrupting their slumber to maraud once again:
the darklings, the dingies, and their closest kin.

Dismal | *Lori R. Lopez*

Out of wet murk thick as black velvet oil
Slides a hag, darker of heart than pitch
So morose in nature and substance is she
That her name would make you itch

Ears may bleed at the awful sound
And the rest of your life be accursed
She only appears on the deepest Midnights
When lights, even stars have all burst

And everything positive's been upended
Or buried down a shallow unremarkable grave
Where it won't be found till arrives the mourning
To salvage what shards can Dawn save

An abysmal and lachrymose state of affairs
Whenever this crone should crack her eyes
How we shiver and moan on such terrible Eves
Yet most of our days could not realize

The true cause of our dreads, our unnamed fears
In the hours when pulses throb or skip
For it's such quiet turns of horrendous throes
That lead stable senses and minds to slip!

Her presence is nothing but a candle's wax
Melting away, then forming anew
On each dismal dusk that becomes too dense
Sure to bring havoc from a witch's stew

You had best not resist . . . yield to the frights
Or suffer the damage of shudders and quakes
Like a ship the commotion could break you apart
A body can die in the thrall of her shakes.

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 Ill Wind Blows*, *The Witchhunt*, three volumes of her *Poetic Reflections Series*, and *Darkverse: The Shadow Hours* (nominated for an Elgin Award).

Twitter: [LoriRLopez](https://twitter.com/LoriRLopez)



The Miserables | *Lori R. Lopez*

They're a clan devoid of couth or common traits,
not to mention being especially bizarre.
Their behavior is extravagantly peculiar,
and a little bit essentially Bête Noire.

The Miserables are not the best of neighbors,
for they haven't learned the meaning of Polite —
each morning making racket much too early,
then arguing like mumps and grumps all night.

The world could not embrace so dismal natures,
the lawlessness exuding from their cores,
a morbid flair of undebonairy awfultry . . .
'Tis ill-advised to let them lick your floors.

Never, in case you glance by chance upon them,
for a glaringly rotten misbegotten curse,
would the risk or need arise to raise your gaze
and meet a sorrily-orbed stare in the reverse.

They might be Second Cousins of the Kraken,
and twice removed from Sharks with arms and legs.
The cretins waltz and minuet Piratically,
balancing on sea-limbs and wood pegs.

Revolutionary, evolutionary, born of madness,
they are not the nicest creeps to be around . . .
The crumps and lumps are likeliest to send an invite
for a bite from which you'll nevermore be found.

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 Ill Wind Blows*, *The Witchhunt*, three volumes of her *Poetic Reflections Series*, and *Darkverse: The Shadow Hours* (nominated for an Elgin Award).

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On the Edge of Night | *Lori R. Lopez*

Way out there on the fringes of the nightscape
where stirs the soup of grimmer-than-dark treacheries
that skim the surface of bloodpuddles and woe
lie untold creopen morasses, the goop of unsettled dreams
bottomless bogs of sylvan fog, wretched surprises,
of screeches that curdle the spine's fluid to ghost-mists
that dance between Pines and a Willow's Weep
like rivers of regretful undone endeavors that can never
be retrieved or returned, from the depths of tribulation
lodged in the bellies of dead Whales flopped on a beach
like the songs of Greek Tragedies and nautical tunes
crooned by mariners at the foot of an ocean's sleep

Out there turbulous entities scramble and scrawl underfeet
unable to touch ground, floating in the netherpools of
spectacular eddies and oddities, for that is the zone of
No Return, the edge of a twilight gloaming unawakening brink
where Day's End shattered heavily to scattered bits
and who can tell where it terminates or begins
where it drops off into a gulf of deplorable horrible mayhem
the dingiest fathoms that harbor unimaginable beasts
children of the Tide's worst nightmares and lost screams
silent as the Universe without an atmospheric bubble
or breath of relief, without a coastline or limit
sharp as a blade . . . it will make your skin bleed.

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 Ill Wind Blows, The Witchhunt, three volumes of her Poetic Reflections Series, and Darkverse: The Shadow Hours (nominated for an Elgin Award).

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





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Kevin Lansing's blood ran crimson in the snow. He watched each drop as it fell to its earthly canvas, painting his own gory Jackson Pollack.

"The dinosaur boy bleeds like the rest of us," Maze Williams giggled.

Maze's sinister giggle was enough to shatter Kevin's day dream; the pool of red slowly spreading on the ground wasn't a thing of beauty, it was a symbol of the senseless acts of brutality he had just endured every day. As he looked down into the puddle of his own blood, he felt like the entire sixth grade was watching him, had been watching as Maze punched him, and was now laughing with the bully. Kevin hated them all and wished that he could kill them for laughing at him, but he knew he couldn't do that. The good book taught him not to harm others, and he always followed the good book.

The entire sixth grade hadn't been watching the fight. Maze Williams was a common enough bully, the type that is generally hated by everyone for some reason or another. However, Maze had been able to cling to three other emotionally twisted youths: Buck, Billy Joe, and Forest, who were continually in his company. They were the only witnesses.

"Leave me alone," Kevin moaned.

"Screw you!" Maze hissed and slapped Kevin across the face.

Kevin had expected the blow but still it sent him tumbling to the ground and added new blood to the abstract designs in the snow. As he sunk into the snow, he felt the cold against his skin; it burned, burned like the hottest fire he had ever known.

"Even a bitch slap knocks your ass down," Maze laughed.

"Why don't you bring out your dinosaur friends?" The four taunted.

They were all laughing. Kevin hated their laughter; he wanted it stopped, so he said a silent prayer for it to stop and instantly knew that he had made a mistake.

"Leave! Leave quick or..." Kevin screamed.

"Or what?" Maze interrupted.

"Yeah, or what?" Maze's idiot friends added.

"Just leave," Kevin screamed.

"Will your dinosaur friends come for us?" Maze mocked as he kicked Kevin's arms out from under him.

"No it's not—There are no dinosaurs," Kevin cried.

Of course, what he was saying was true. He'd known there were no dinosaurs for over three years, but the kids at school had never let him forget his childhood fascination. They never would. However, now wasn't the time to worry about dinosaurs and the ridicule of his classmates. He had called on divine aid and his mother had told him he could never do such a thing, not with his bloodline.

Maze was still kicking him and screaming, "Then, what is it you little fart bag?"

Maze's foot hit Kevin square between the eyes and sent the world spinning. Maze and his buddies were laughing; Kevin heard it through the walls of distortion in his mind. The laughter went billowing through him ripping at his very soul; maybe he hadn't been wrong when he said that prayer. Then, he heard the sound. It was innocent enough, nothing more than a rustling in the bushes, but Kevin knew what lurked there 'and he was terrified.

"No, please..." he started.

Maze kicked him in the face again. "Shut..."

"No..." Kevin began as he spiraled down into the blackness.

"Up," Maze finished

Kevin had shut up.

"You knocked him out," Buck laughed.

The others laughed as well.

"Damn right! Little dweeb's lucky I didn't smash his skull," Maze bragged.

"Damn, luck..." Forest began as the hiss rose up from the bushes.

By the time the boys heard it, they had no chance.

"What the....."

"Let's get out of here," Maze screamed and began to run. He barely noticed when the claws closed around his throat.

Kevin awoke to the stench of standing water and foul sewage, the aroma of decay, the perfume of the putrid Wood River. Even in winter, the river stank but today the odor was so thick it seemed more like the middle of July than the beginning of January. His vision wasn't clear yet; things were still spinning. However, he could make out several black shapes dotted with crimson. He screamed because he knew what those shapes were even if he could no longer make out their features.

It was his fault that Maze and his friends were dead, so he had to do something about it. He couldn't leave the thing that he'd released to its own devices, or it would run rampant through Whitegarden world and probably all of Nebraska before the military came to stop it. He remembered that the good book had told him to turn the other cheek but this time he couldn't. After all, it was his fault. Plus the good book also said an eye for an eye, and that was what he'd have, a life for a life.

"Mother forgive me," he whispered and let go of his human form.

He'd never changed before and hadn't expected so much pain, so the river valley filled with screams as his flesh parted. The bones of his jaw broke and reformed multiple times stretching the flesh of his face to reptilian proportions, as his skin was shed and replaced by a series of green scales. His hands underwent a similar change, the bones breaking and changing, as fingers grew together and extended into sharp pincher-like claws. As his appearance changed, his senses also adjusted; his vision was clear and the smell of the river was overpoweringly arousing to him. It took him back to the primordial ooze from which his kind came. And there was something else in the air, the smell of another of his kind. Noting the location of the smell, he turned away from the river and toward his brother.

From the Whitegarden Clipper, January 12th, 1996

The Whitegarden Police Department made a horrible discovery on Monday. The bodies of six local children were found by the Wood River, all of them horribly mutilated. The boys were identified as Forest Hamilton (12), Buck Henderson (12), Billy Joe Jackson (13), Maze Williams (13), and Kevin and Lyle Lansing (both 12). Perhaps the strangest thing is that Lyle Lansing, the twin brother of Kevin, had been hidden from the community since birth. The boy's mother Abigail Lansing told authorities that Lyle was possessed by evil forces that caused him to turn into some kind of alligator man, so God had commanded her to keep him hidden. Police Chief Dickens is looking into accusations of ritual abuse against Mrs. Lansing.

Chief Dickens said that the police have no leads on the deaths. He said, "It appears that they were attacked by some kind of large animal, possibly a cougar." However, the Department of Natural Resources confirms that there hasn't been a confirmed cougar sighting in the area for over seventy years.

About the Author:

Joshua E. Borgmann holds degrees from Drake University, Iowa State University, and the University of South Carolina. He toils away his days as an English instructor at a community college and dreams of being able to escape to a world of fantasy and terror where there are no student papers to grade. He resides in a nameless rural Iowa town surrounded by terrible cornfields.

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



...Forced to survive the night alone in the desert with an
aberration of nature...



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I awoke with a start to find my throat burning.

As I sauntered to the kitchen for some water, I saw in my fugue state of mind, my grandmother scribbling something on a piece of paper by the moonlight. She looked up and smiled at me.

"At least turn on the lights, Grandma!" I grumbled, groping around for the switch.

I found it, flicked it on, and opened the fridge. Pouring myself a glass of cold water, I wondered what Grandma was writing at this hour. I was too drowsy to ask.

The first few drops of the icy water hit my brain like lightening, freeing my head of slumber. And then I froze: Grandma had passed away three years ago.

A sudden draft of cold wind made me shiver. I looked back, trembling, to find the kitchen empty. The curtains fluttered in the wind, laughing at my foolery.

'Just my mind playing tricks,' I told myself. Yesterday had been a crazy day at school. I just needed to get back into those sheets. A good night's sleep solves all problems. I couldn't help but smile at the irony; it was the advice Granny used to dole out all the time.

My head groggy with the sudden spike in my adrenaline levels, I made a beeline for my bedroom.

The floorboards made loud thumping noises under my weight. It was a good thing Mum and Pops were away for the weekend. They'd have made a fool of me for causing all this fuss for nothing.

My mind wandered back in time to the scene of the accident. With a shudder, I remembered the horrific scene. There Granny had been, lying lifeless, her face slashed by broken glass, neck almost separated from the body. Some drunken maniac had crashed into her Honda. As Fate would have it, he went on to live while my poor Grandma bode us an early farewell. The scene had been etched out on my brain, would probably remain there for all eternity. Her eyes open wide in violent surprise, the stream of blood running down her mouth, and especially the strange position her palms had been in. It was as if her parting gift to us had been her blessings.

Locking these disturbing memories in a dusty corner of my memory, I opened the door to my bedroom. It gave a loud creak and as soon as I stepped inside, I had the feeling someone was watching me. I tiptoed to my bed, almost afraid that I would make too much noise, attract unwanted attention.

Before I could hop into bed, I felt a tap on my shoulder. The touch was freezing cold. I gave a loud shriek and turned, praying desperately to a God I didn't believe in. Granny's arm was insistently clawing at me.

In her other arm, was her head.

I started to tremble. The... thing... raised its arm and snapped Grandma's head back onto its neck. There was a sickening *crunch* of bone against bone. I felt bile rise up my throat, wondering why I couldn't peel my eyes away.

Grandma's eyes opened and she gave me a ghastly sweet smile.

I felt warm liquid seeping down my thighs. The air, now suffocative with the smell of ammonia, was starting to thin. I kicked around and gasped as Granny cocked her head to one side and studied me, contemplating what she could do with her little granddaughter. Then, she opened her mouth to reveal fangs that were dripping with a gooey revolting substance. I tried to scream but the sound would not escape my lips. The last thing I remembered was my Grandma biting into my neck. Then, I passed out from the pain.

The next morning, I woke up to find sunshine streaking through my window.

'It was just a dream, Swamini,' I muttered under my breath. I still felt unusually cold, and my head was still swimming. With much effort, I slithered out of bed, made myself a strong cup of coffee. The kitchen clock ticked ominously, its noise incongruous with the cheerful morning. Cup in hand, I walked over to my living room and opened the day's newspaper.

The headline read:

Unusual occurrences at the cemetery.

I squinted to read the news further, but I couldn't. The alphabets began crawling all over the page. My eyes began watering. A fever crept up my body like vines gripping a tree. There was an itch on my neck in the same place Granny... the monster ... had bitten me in my nightmare. Scratching my neck, I felt something sticky on my fingers. It was blood. Fear washed over me, bringing with it a sense of foreboding. I wished Pops was here by my side, comforting me with just a warm smile. But my parents were miles away, I was utterly alone. Taking shallow, hurried breaths, I bolted to my bathroom and splashed water on my face.

You're still asleep. It's all a bad dream. Any moment now, you're going to wake up.

A glance at the mirror revealed a note stuck on the glass surface. On it, the words:

'I miss you, sweet pie.'

No one called me that but her. My hands shook so much I dropped the note. I looked in the mirror to find Grandma breathing down my neck. She hugged me from behind, hands tightening around my waist. Her fingers were like talons as she pressed down against my stomach.

"Come, darling," she whispered softly. "I'll make you your favorite pudding."

About the Author:

Archit Joshi is an author who loves writing character-driven stories. He also works as a content writer, and is eager to add several writing styles to his arsenal. His fiction has been published in many reputable anthologies and magazines, with forms including short stories, drabbles, and 10-word micro-fiction.

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Handmaiden of Blood | *Greg Francis*

It was I who put the idea into her head. I, Anna Darvulia, who initiated my mistress into the secret rites, who spoke into her noble ear the mysteries of blood. They call her Blood Countess, Countess Dracula, spill oceans of ink to her legacy, while mine is a name lost to history.

My mistress was vanity incarnate, the devil's favorite sin, and her cruelty knew no bounds. How she loved to show her slaves the lash! To chill them with icy waters as they shivered in the morning snows. I served her well, and never better than when I promised the eternal youth that could be had by bathing in their virgin blood. I served her well, and I loved her in my way.

I hid the bodies beneath the Romanian snows, but snows always melt, and the questions came that could not be explained. When they bricked her up alive in the castle walls with only her screams for company, I had already made my well-planned escape with saddlebags of gold and jewels.

I crossed rivers of blood and seas of time, keeping my secrets, hallowing new altars, and everywhere the screams were the same, and everywhere the screams were different. I remember her fondly, my Erzsébet, and laugh when I read of her or see her portrayed on stage or screen, for I knew her best.

It was I who put the idea into her head, centuries ago, who now walks the streets of London, New York, Los Angeles, wherever there are unfortunates who won't be missed. It was I who shared the secret of blood, long years ago.

Who are these lemmings gathering in Times Square, freezing in sub-zero temperatures to usher in the New Year with strangers? There are millions of them. And tonight, there will be one less. For I am Anna Darvulia, and the secret of blood is mine.

About the Author:

Greg Francis' chapbook, 'Myth & Mystery', won Honorable Mention in Moonstone Arts Center's First Annual chapbook competition. Additional works have appeared in 'Mad Poets Review', 'Eldritch Tales', and various Moonstone Press publications among others. More poems and stories appear in the anthologies 'Buried', 'Blood and Ashes', 'Dark Transitions' and forthcoming collections by Thirteen O'Clock Press. Greg was named Best Poet in the 2018 Critters Annual Preditors & Editors Readers Poll.

When I was sixteen, everyone in my village thought that I was possessed by a demon. Except for Dr. Vodnik. We were lucky to have him. Thanks to Dr. Vodnik, my neighbors did not turn on each other like a pack of wolves every time something bizarre happened in our village.

But the main reason the people in my village listened to him was not because he was knowledgeable, but because they were truly afraid of him. Not the way they were afraid of the two witches they drowned last summer in the river, but the way one is afraid of a very powerful creature one could do nothing about. On the top of that, there was something creepy about Dr. Vodnik, but nobody could pinpoint exactly what. Maybe it was the frog-like mouth, or the slightly greenish hair, or the faint smell of fish radiating from his body.

So, when I fell ill, he was the first to assure my fellow villagers that a demon did not possess me but that something had gone wrong in my brain instead.

As knowledgeable as Dr. Vodnik was, he did not know everything. He did not know how I got sick, and when I told him, he just laughed, his frog-like mouth twisting more than usual, and said, "Nonsense!" Dr. Vodnik didn't believe that Hala was real. Neither did I. Until the day I met her.

That day, I was coming home from our gardens down by the river when it started to pour. Cold winds joined in out of nowhere. Not a moment later, freezing rain was hitting my body from all directions. I was shaking. I could hardly make my way back on the muddy path. Then I felt a sharp gust of wind. I looked up, and an ominous sense of dread came upon me. I felt icy breath penetrating my body. Whatever it was, I tried to fight it off, but all I could do was fall on the muddy ground. A flash of lightning blinded me, and that was the last thing I remembered.

When I came to my senses, Nana Tarina was standing beside me. She was an old lady who had always been very fond of me.

"Marco," she said, "I saw everything! It was Hala that attacked you!"

"Who?"

"The black shapeshifter who was circling above you!"

"What are you saying, Nana Tarina?" I grabbed her hand, afraid she would leave me with no explanation.

"Don't you remember the stories I told you when you were little?" she said. "When the demon Hala's breath joins yours, you become like her. You become a *halovit*! From now on, when a storm approaches, you will feel sick and fall. Then your soul will leave your body and soar high in the sky. You will command the winds and the rain, but when the storm is over, your soul will return to your body and everything will be back to normal until the next storm."

Weeks passed, and I had forgotten about the incident, but one day I heard distant thunder. I ran to my room and got to my bed just in time for my soul to slip out of my body and dash towards the skies. I had a full view of my village, the hills it was built on, and the river which separated the lower side from the higher. I could even see Dr. Vodnik's house—the biggest one around. I nudged a couple of heavy black clouds to drop a wall of hail on the side of the village I liked less. I chased the winds, and the winds chased me. And then it all came to an end as abruptly as it had started.

As I expected, eventually I got caught. After one such storm had subsided and I had come to my senses, I saw my parents and Dr. Vodnik standing around my bed. Mother was on the verge of panic, tears streaming down her face. Dr. Vodnik said, "Don't worry. He is not possessed by a demon. This is just epilepsy. He might outgrow it, but there is nothing I can do."

At the end of the visit, the doctor pulled me aside and said, "Marco, my daughter has been longing for a friend. Why don't you join her during one of her afternoon strolls by the river?"

Dr. Vodnik's daughter, Vela, was our village's greatest mystery. She was nothing like Dr. Vodnik, nor like any of us. Rumors flew that she was not the doctor's real daughter, but instead was kidnapped as a baby and sold to him. She must have been born in a far-away exotic land because her skin was lighter than ours, her eyes were the deep blue of the ocean that the doctor had told us about but none of us had seen, and her hair was a bright gold. Her beauty made people so uncomfortable that nobody dared to talk to her. No wonder that she needed a friend. But why me?

It took me a few days to gather enough courage to meet Vela. The afternoon of summer solstice seemed to be as good time as any, so I left the house and didn't tell Mother where I was going. I went straight to the river and took the narrow path that ran alongside it. After a couple of miles, I reached tall, narrow falls. Vela was known to frequent this part of the river. I stopped. I must have stared at the water falling from the steep rocks above for quite some time, for when I saw Vela getting out of the water, I jumped. I was sure that I had been looking at the water for longer than she could have held her breath, but this river was known to mesmerize people, making them lose track of time.

"Father told me about you," said Vela as she walked towards me, water dripping from her long dress. I couldn't believe my luck, and yet I felt overwhelmed by her presence. I wanted to run, but my legs felt too heavy and my heart was pounding frantically. Suddenly, the forest became quiet. "Let's walk," I managed to whisper.

"Silly boy," she laughed, "I have to dry first."

"Here," she said, pulling a big wooden comb out of her pocket. "Help me comb my hair. My arms are tired."

Vela sat down on one of the big boulders at the edge of the river.

"It will be easier if you start from the ends," she said, sensing my hesitation.

I slowly ran my fingers through her hair. I thought she said something, but it was probably noise from the waterfall splashing a few feet from us. But then she stood up abruptly and turned around. Her face was so close to mine that I instinctively looked away towards the river just in time to see bubbles appearing on the water surface. This didn't happen in our river! And it was never this quiet in our forest in the summer. Something was very wrong.

I was about to pull her away from the river, but it was too late. A faster, stronger hand covered with green algae grabbed her ankle and dragged her under the water. She didn't scream. I jumped in the water immediately, but there was no trace of her. She was gone, and moments later I felt something dragging me towards the bottom.

The first thing I noticed when I regained consciousness was that I was still in the water but didn't have to breathe. This was very alarming by itself but was nothing in comparison to the realization that I was confined in a glass container. As I started looking around, I noticed something quite big floating not too far away from my confinement. It looked like a giant log or some unknown animal. But as I was trying to guess, the mass shifted, and I came face to face with my own giant body. I screamed and fell backwards on the glass wall. It did not hurt at all because, apparently, I was tiny and didn't have a body anymore.

This made me calm down, as the only explanation I could fathom was that I was experiencing another epileptic attack, but this one was different and much more unpleasant. Whatever it was, it would be over soon.

I don't remember the storm this time, my memory interrupted my thoughts. Look around. Look at your own face bumping into this glass jar you were put in. Look at the shackles tying your feet to a big stone on the bottom of the river.

Look at Dr. Vodnik staring at you.

This time my scream was much louder. Dr. Vodnik was indeed staring at me. His smile was genuine. He wasn't trying to free me up or get my body to the surface. He was different. Naked. Covered with green algae. He nodded with great self-satisfaction and moved on to a jar next to me, which I had just noticed. The only thing I could see in the jar was a tiny feeble light. The light started to move quickly, like a firefly trying to escape. But I knew it wasn't a firefly. We were all caught by the doctor, who had somehow extracted our souls and imprisoned them. Now I started to remember the stories that Nana Tarina had told me about a menacing water creature who would go to great lengths to lure you into his waters, then would collect your soul and leave it in a glass jar to adorn his underwater dwelling forever.

I hurled myself at the walls of my confinement. But my attempts did nothing except to attract the attention of Dr. Vodnik, who laughed harder and harder until his face was just one giant frog-like mouth.

"There is always a way, Marco," Nana Tarina used to say to me when things went wrong. But, still trapped in the jar, I had started to lose hope. Then, a few days later I felt bad weather coming. I was anxious and worried that I had lost my *halovit* abilities and could no longer join stormy winds and heavy downpours. But I was wrong. As soon as the storm started, the glass jar shuddered and cracked, and I catapulted straight up, out of the river, higher and higher into the dark skies.

I was so angry at my imprisonment that I commanded the largest and darkest clouds to blanket our village. When the torrential rain started, I directed the heaviest downpour onto the edge of the village where Dr. Vodnik's house stood. I gave the winds free rein to destroy everything in their path, especially in that part of the village. The unusual severity and location of the storm finally drew the doctor out of his house. He stood outside for a moment and when he looked up, a curious idea must have struck him because he started walking hastily towards the river.

When the storm subsided, I woke up in my body. I knew where the doctor kept the key to my shackles, as I had been observing his every move. The rock it was buried beneath was within my reach. I freed myself, collected all the glass jars in my shirt, and frantically swam to the surface. I smashed them one by one and watched every tiny firefly-soul escape.

I ran all the way home and by the time I got to my house, I was out of breath. My mother was sitting on a chair sewing, her face gaunt. The tiny lines around her mouth were now more prominent. She had black circles under her eyes. As I rushed into the room, she jumped, but when she saw me, she cried out, threw her arms around me, and

sobbed. My father, having heard the commotion, ran into the room. When he saw me, he fell to his knees, thanking the heavens for my safe return. Not a moment later, Nana Tarina ran into our house.

"I saw you from my window, Marco. Oh, I am so glad you are home!" she said, hugging me tightly, "But where have you been?"

"It was Dr. Vodnik! He and his daughter lured me to the river and drowned me, and he locked my soul in a glass jar. The only thing that saved me was that I am a halovit, and I was able to escape from the jar during the heavy storm this morning."

"What are you talking about, Marco?" Mother asked as though wondering if I had lost my mind.

But before I could explain any further, there were three heavy knocks on the door. Dr. Vodnik entered the house. The moment Nana Tarina saw him, she disappeared into the kitchen.

"Well, well, well," said Dr. Vodnik, "am I glad to see you again, Marco! I am sure you have quite an adventure to tell us about!"

"Dr. Vodnik, Dr. Vodnik," yelled Nana Tarina, hurrying back into the room, holding a glass of wine for the doctor and a tray with four more glasses for the rest of us. "Let us all drink to Marco's health! Drink, doctor, drink, as it is such a joyful occasion!"

We all drained our glasses.

"Now," said the doctor, smacking his lips, "I have come to make sure your disappearance has not taken a toll on your health. You look sickly!"

"I am fine, sir," I muttered.

"Oh my! It's worse than I thought," said the doctor as he kept staring at me. "The swollen limbs, the bluish hue of your skin, the animal bites—this is a very rare condition! And very dangerous! You have become undead! This may be contagious! I have to notify the village at once!"

"Oh, please, doctor, don't do this!" cried Mother as she fell at his feet. "Please don't do this!" She wept uncontrollably as Nana Tarina pulled her away from the doctor.

We all watched as Dr. Vodnik walked slowly down the small hill in front of my house. Suddenly, he stopped, turned around, and a terrified grimace distorted his face. Not a moment later, he collapsed on the ground.

Nana Tarina ran towards the doctor and screamed to attract the attention of our neighbors, "Help! Help! Dr. Vodnik's heart gave out! Help! Help!"

As more and more people kept coming, she explained to them how the doctor had paid me a visit to make sure I was in good health. Satisfied, he had left my house, but moments later his heart gave out.

I pulled her aside.

"Nana Tarina, was it really his heart?"

"Marco, at the end, it's always the heart, isn't it? Would you be a darling and put this back in your mother's kitchen before she finds it missing?" She placed a tiny bottle of cyanide in my palm. Then she hurried back and disappeared into the small crowd gathered around the dead Dr. Vodnik.

About the Author:

Milkana N. Mingels grew up in Bulgaria—ancient land reigned by feuding Slavic gods and home of quirky mythical creatures. She is the author of the *Tales from the Mountain of Perun* Duology as well as short stories, inspired by the magic of her native land. She is a graduate of Bridgewater State University and currently lives in Massachusetts.

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Sitting in the crowded restaurant Lana looked at the dating app on her phone for the tenth time in five minutes. His message had said to meet ten minutes ago. She looked at his profile picture and scanned the crowd for his face. She knew he seemed too perfect to be true. She locked her phone and sighed picking up her drink. She took a big sip and investigated the mirrored wall above the bottles on the bar.

She took in her reflection and scowled. It had taken her what felt like forever to get ready tonight. Her pale skin glowed with the shimmering musky scented skin mist she had sprayed on. Blue eyes were accentuated with smoky eyeshadow and cats' eye eyeliner. She was wearing a burgundy scoop neck mid shirt that showed a little too much cleavage and a pair of curve hugging blue jeans. She ground her teeth in disappointment and swirled her drink with a straw.

A masculine voice sounded behind her. Looking up into the mirror she saw the face from the profile picture over her shoulder. "I'm sorry I'm late Lana. I ran into traffic. You look amazing." He gave her a sheepish smile and offered his hand. She grinned got up off of her stool and shook his hand before wrapping her arms around his waist. Looking up at him as his arms settled around her shoulders, she stated matter of factly, "I'm a hugger."

They spent the next three hours talking and laughing. It was 11pm before either of them looked at their phones. Lana was shocked to see that the time had passed so quickly. He smiled at her from across the table. "I'm not ready for tonight to be over. How would you like to come back to my place, and we can watch something on TV and cuddle?"

Lana laughed and flushed, "Are you really asking if I'd like to Netflix and chill?"

He nodded, "I guess I am."

Lana took a moment to think before answering, "Sure. Why not?" She stood up and followed him outside to his car. The drive to his apartment was tense and filled with sexual energy. They teased each other with caresses. She trailed her fingernails along his thigh while he drove. By the time they got to his apartment they were both burning up with the need to touch each other.

Once inside they took hours to explore each other's bodies and when they were done, they both sported more than a couple bruises and scratch marks. As they lay on his bed afterwards, both panting, Lana looked at the torn sheet under his head and giggled, "Looks like I owe you a set of sheets. I need liquid refreshment; do you want me to get you anything?" She stood up naked and unabashed. He rolled over on his stomach, "I just want you to come back as soon as you can."

Lana grinned, "Give a girl a little help and tell me where your kitchen is?"

He motioned to the door, "Kitchen is on the other side of the apartment. Go out the bedroom door, you can't miss it." She walked to the kitchen swaying her hips as she walked through his apartment. The kitchen was a bit more furnished than the rest of the apartment, with large industrial looking appliances.

She smiled and called out, "Hey! Which cabinet are your glasses in?"

He moved around in his bedroom. "Above the sink."

She got out a small glass tumbler and filled it with water from the tap. After taking a gulp she set glass down. Her stomach gave a small hungry gurgle and she looked at the refrigerator. She pulled on the handle and opened the fridge, what she saw made her gasp. On the refrigerator's shelves were various containers with different body parts inside. A hand rested in a purple lidded container and a foot lay in a container with a red lid. She felt her heart racing as she looked at the organized carnage in the refrigerator.

A dry chuckle sounded behind her and he walked to her with a gleaming butcher knife in his hand. He smiled and motioned to the open door. "I planned to have some more fun with you before we got to the main event."

Lana stepped back until her bare bottom rested against the cold front of the sink. Frank advanced as she cowered trying to swallow around the emotion stuck in her throat. He tsked as he got closer to her when he saw her eyes filling with tears, "No crying. We had a great evening together. I made sure your needs were met, and you met mine without a doubt, until now. I need you to suffer. Scream for me Lana."

Shaking her head, she looked at him with wide eyes and panted, "I can't give you what you want. But I can give you what you need...and speaking of needs. You didn't satisfy mine, yet."

He backed up a step as she stood up taller. The shiny look to her eyes remained but not from impending tears. She smiled, her lips spreading in an inhuman grin. Her body lengthened and twisted its shape, sharp claws sprouted where her nails had been. After convulsing a final time, she stood 7 feet tall, and laughed. He shuddered, "What are you?"

Lana hissed at him and he jumped. She pointed staring hungrily, "You have the balls to ask what I am? You hide what you are every day. We are both monsters." She advanced on him while he wet himself and shook in his spot. He didn't defend himself as her jaw unhinged and rows of sharp teeth snapped over his head. A couple of hours later Lana smiled and wiped the fog from the bathroom mirror. Serial killers were her favorite dinner dates. She hoped the next one would be as tasty.

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.



Winds of Fate | G. Allen Wilbanks

The winds gusted intermittently, tugging at Gerald's clothing as if trying to urge him away from the cliff's edge. Briefly, he considered taking the hint. Coming here may not have been the smartest thing he had ever done. Yet he knew it also wasn't the stupidest. Not by a long shot. Holding his ground, he gazed down at the narrow river, lazily meandering along the canyon floor over a thousand feet down. It would be quite a fall if he wasn't careful.

Gerald sidled forward a few more inches until he was able to stare straight down without any obstruction to his view. The local legends, as he understood them, had specified he must be as close to the edge as possible.

Breathing deeply, he closed his eyes and tried to calm himself. His heart continued to race in his chest, refusing to be soothed. Maybe it knew something that he didn't. Fear was supposed to tell you what to avoid, right? He wondered if he should get back into his car and drive away; just pretend he had never been here at all. His life wasn't perfect, but it certainly wasn't so bad he needed to risk falling off a cliff for divine guidance. He could have simply paid a hundred bucks and visited a fortune teller. It probably would have yielded the same outcome.

But, no. As soon as the bartender had mentioned this place to him, he knew he would be up here sooner or later. It was inevitable. Drunk and lonely was no way to go through life.

"You're hitting that stuff pretty hard," the barman had told him the previous Friday. "Something in particular bothering you?"

Gerald shook his head as he accepted his third Jack Daniels on ice. "Nothing new. Just enjoying the disaster that is my life. I don't seem to be able to catch a break no matter what I try. So, maybe it's time to just stop trying all together."

The bartender eyed him for a long moment. He glanced around quickly as if making sure no one was close enough to overhear their conversation, then leaned closer to Gerald, bracing his elbows on the bar between them.

"Maybe I shouldn't be telling you this, but what do you know about Anog Ite?"

Gerald wrinkled his brow in confusion. "Anog what? Never hear of it."

"Not it," the bartender clarified. "She. Anog Ite. The mother of the Four Winds. The Lakota worshipped her as a goddess. Most people think she's a myth, but around here the folk know she's very real. You just gotta know how to get her attention."

The whiskey had started to cloud his mind a bit, and Gerald was having a difficult time deciding if the man in front of him was sincere or pulling a gag on the stranger in his bar. "So this Anog, um... Ite? She's a goddess of winds or something? And why would I want to get her attention?"

"You said you can't catch a break. Maybe you haven't tried the right thing yet. Maybe you need a complete change in direction. Anog Ite can put you on the right path."

Gerald nodded at the suggestion. He could certainly use some guidance. "Let's just say for a moment I believe you about this mother of winds. How do I get her attention?"

He had pretended to be casually interested in the bartender's story, then laughed it off as a fairy tale. Yet, a week later, here he was.

Gerald reached a hand into the right pocket of his jacket and pulled out a stack of twenty-eight, blue, index cards. On each card, he had written in bold black marker a potential aspiration. He thumbed through a couple of the cards on top.

QUIT JOB

VISIT SPAIN

CALL LYDIA

Lydia had been his high school sweetheart. Although they had not spoken to one another in years, he almost hoped this one would be the card selected. As the bartender had directed, he spoke the ritual words. Though he felt a little silly, he called out the request loud and clear. There was no one around at the moment. If he was acting ridiculous, so what? Nobody would see it.

"I am seeking my true soulmate," he chanted. "Guide me onward, Winds of Fate."

With his index finger along the edge of the cards, he cast the entire stack out into the canyon like a child trying to skip a rock across water. The cards came apart in a flurry of blue paper, fluttering and darting in all directions. A gust of wind rose from the canyon, catching the cards in its vortex and lifting them up to spin crazily in front of Gerald's face. He watched in fascination for a moment, then extended a hand into the maelstrom.

Before he could catch one of the cards, the wind died, and the blue papers fell away out of reach. He snatched at the card closest to him, but it evaded his effort teasingly and dropped with its companions to seek the canyon floor.

Gerald's jaw tightened in frustration as he watched the cards flutter away like damaged, blue butterflies. He had been right. This was a complete waste of time.

The wind kicked up again, swirling around him and pulling playfully at his hair. The chill air made him shudder. As he jammed his hands into his jacket pockets for warmth, his right hand brushed up against something thin and flexible still in his pocket. He grasped the item and pulled it free. It was one of his index cards. He must have missed it earlier when he removed the others.

The card read:

DIE ALONE

He remembered writing this one. Still very drunk and in a bleak temperament, it was the first card he had made. Gerald reflexively tossed it away. That was not the card he wished to be holding right now.

A hard gust of wind blew out of the canyon, immediately thrusting the card back and plastering it to his chest.

He grabbed the index card in a panic, crushing it in his fist so the wind could not carry it again, and threw it away a second time. This time, it obediently disappeared into the abyss. Gerald leaned forward precariously to watch the crumpled blue ball fall, making certain it did not attempt a return.

The wind shifted direction.

Gerald felt the change like an open palm in the middle of his back, pushing him toward his fate.

About the Author:

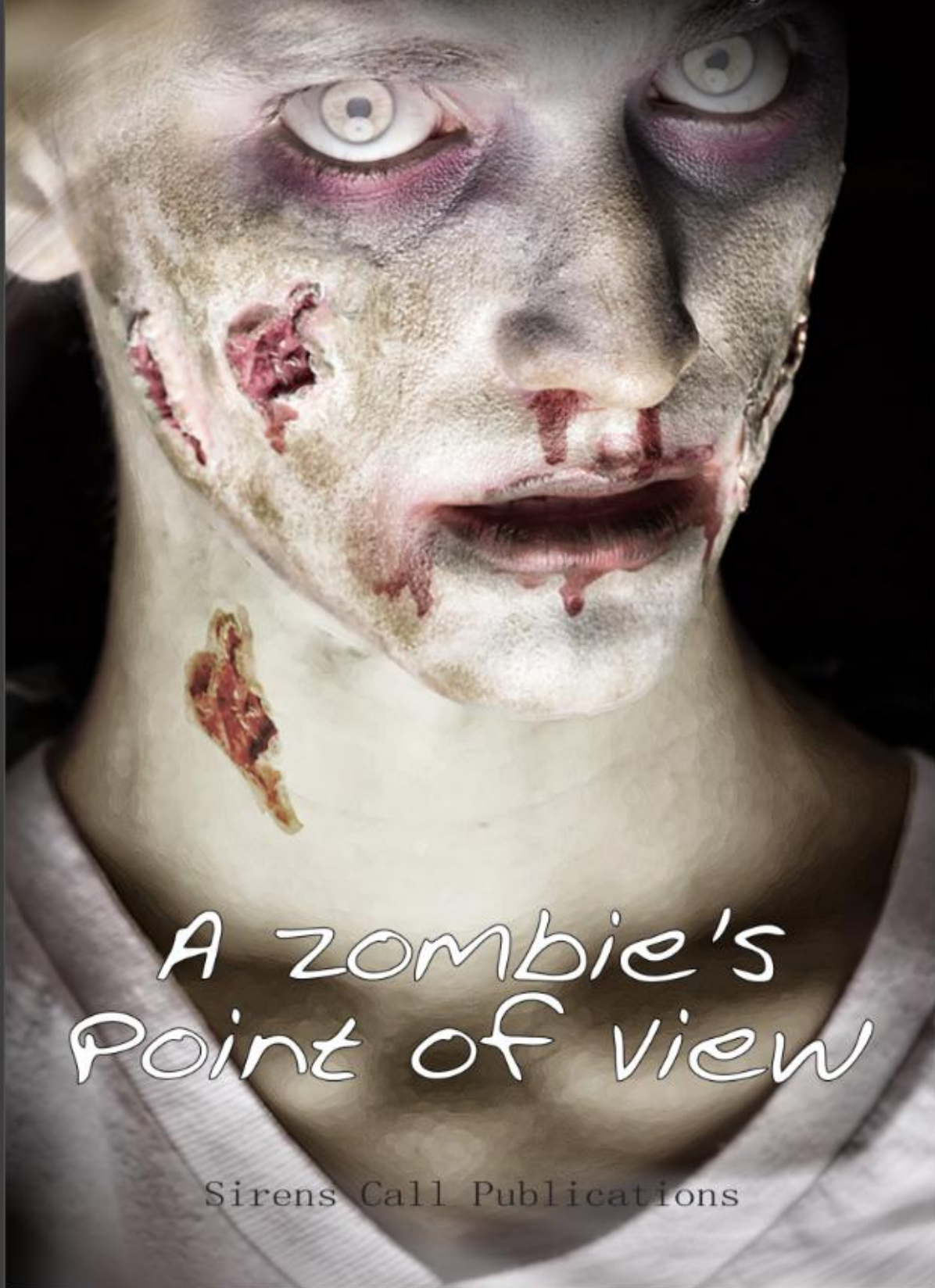
G. Allen Wilbanks is a retired police officer living in Northern California. He is a member of the Horror Writers Association (HWA) and has published over 100 short stories in Daily Science Fiction, Deep Magic, and many other magazines, anthologies, and online venues. He has published two short story collections of his own, and the novel, When Darkness Comes.

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Through Clouded Eyes



A zombie's
Point of view

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He left home under a cloud, a stupid row. He packed up his few possessions and stormed out of the house, swearing never to return. Months passed and his mood changed. He was still upset and hurt, but he knew he couldn't cut his parents out of his life forever. He eventually phoned home, glad when his mother answered. After that, he made a point of phoning her regularly. Every time she asked the same question, when was he coming home?

"I'll come home in the fall" he told her, but before he could book the tickets he was invited to backpack across the foothills of the Himalayas.

She asked the same thing the next year.

"I'll come home in the fall," he told her, but then he was offered a once in a lifetime opportunity to lifeguard on Bondi Beach.

And so it continued. The years passed, every time he phoned he made the same promise to return to his family, to visit his aging parents and see his nieces who were growing older and more distant with every passing year. But every year something got in the way, some adventure or opportunity he couldn't refuse.

For every year he failed to return home his guilt increased. The row had really been about nothing and he knew he would have to return to face his father at some point. But no matter how heavy the burden of the guilt, no matter how pressing the need to reconcile with his father was, the thrill of a new adventure outweighed those emotions. Every year there was another excuse made, until one night in late summer when he got the phone call.

"Your father is in the hospital. He's ill. He's near the end. He's asking for you. It's been ten years, you know."

He felt his heart sink.

"I'll come home, I promise."

"You promise?" his mother asked in a plaintive voice.

"Yes, I really do this time." Finally, the dam holding his guilt broke and his emotions were overcome. His voice cracked.

"I promise, Mom."

The night he was due to return, his mother sat next to the bed in the silent ward of the hospital where her husband lay. Would he come, she wondered. He had promised, but he had promised before. Surely he would come this time; it wasn't just a birthday or family occasion this time, this was probably the last opportunity for him to see his own father.

There was a slight cough from the hallway and she looked up. It was him. He looked pale.

"You came."

"Yes."

The visit was brief, his father was close to death, but he revived at the sound of his son's voice, smiled and spoke a few words to him. That was enough. She turned to him.

"How long are you staying for?"

"I have to go."

"You won't even stay the night? Visit your father again in the morning?"

"No. I must go. I must leave."

She watched him as he walked out of the hospital ward, leaving her in the company of the dying.

When she got back home there was a phone call. It was the police. The officer spoke, but she only heard some of the words. Accident, car, crash, dead. She nodded numbly, tears flowing. Her son had died that afternoon, hours before he had visited the hospital. Her tears were tears of joy. He had finally kept his promise.

About the Author:

R. J. Meldrum is an author and academic. Born in Scotland, he moved to Ontario, Canada in 2010. He has had stories published by Sirens Call Publications, Horrified Press, The Infernal Clock, Trembling with Fear, Darkhouse Books, Smoking Pen Press and James Ward Kirk Fiction. He is an Affiliate Member of the Horror Writers Association.

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Rachel remained trapped by the echoes of Jason's life. The pitched pulses of the medical monitor and the droning whirl of the IV feeders screeched in the desolate sterility of the ICU room. Isolated by a glass wall, she waited out each passing second bonded together in life or death waiting for one to let go and continue alone.

Drifting from the far corner, the lead doctor discussed the treatment results with her parents. "It went well, now we'll monitor tests up until the next treatment. It's simply a waiting game now."

She gently tapped the window, knowingly that under sedation, Jason shouldn't hear it. But Rachel believed he did. It was one of the last things she did believe in. A glance at the digital clock reminded her of an appointment.

"Rachel, why you are leaving?" The bright lights caught her mother's lissome silhouette amongst the collage of her father and doctors.

"Mother, I need to decompress for a while." She pleaded, the months worn thin on her. Her brother's illness stole from everyone. Now she had a chance to do something about it.

Leaving the front entrance of the medical center, Rachel tightened her lavender coat against the chill of early March night. Philadelphia's brilliance struck against the gloom of the heavy fog. She stepped into the crosswalk, forever immersed into the surreal reality that was drowning her. The blinking traffic lights welcomed her as she marched forward towards the Penn Museum.

It took several minutes to reach the side emergency exit, hidden by a row of decorative trees lightly burdened with fresh leaves. A petite punk girl with purple hair held the door open.

There was no exchange of pleasantries, just a simple acknowledgment as the girl guided her into the labyrinth of the museum's lower floors. The endless storehouse of eternally, Professor Kennedy described during her first visit. Rachel noted among the Punk's jewelry a simple silver ankh and very ornate colorful piece of a female figure with a cat's head flanked by two small cats.

She wondered how the girl discovered her faith. Was it similar to what happened to her? Using the stairs, they descended to level three. The dryness of the air heightened its ambient warmth. All part of the climate-controlled necessities to protect the past locked away in their sectional vaults. In an obscure corner, awaited the Professor, and perhaps everything.

As they entered, the Professor cloaked in Victorian finery, greeted Rachel, "Ms. Farley, are you ready?"

"No." She answered as this moment being honest towards the truth became paramount. She had fasted, made certain arrangements fulfilling his requirements of this ritual. Yet, she questioned the reality of it. "But I'm ready to begin."

The punk girl pushed Rachel towards the next room, a rather small space packed with a shower stall, a gleaming fixed examination table, and cabinets packed along the wall. A tall husky black man attired entirely in a dark gray suit with a high white collar. He wore a silver necklace with a polished light green stone shaped into a square, embossed with a relief of a dog-headed man holding scales.

He unbuttoned Rachel's blouse, slipping it away to the Punk Girl. The ritual was going as the professor described. He left the room momentary, returning with a large folio of papers as they removed the last of her clothes.

The pair escorted her to the shower, but they didn't use the showerhead. Instead, they washed her with special, ritualistic sponges and linen cloth while the Professor read aloud the spell. Rachel didn't need to understand the language. He proved that magic existed as a force, or whatever, three times for her. He kept his reasons to help her quiet, as long as it helped Jason.

After being dried, they perfumed Rachel, and when finished they took her to the table. They eased her onto it face down, with a white linen sheet shielding her skin from the cold metal. Wet bristles skated across her skin, as she listened to the Professor, now speaking in English.

"Rachel, before Osiris you petition his boon. Anubis shall judge its worth. Sekhmet grants you her blessing."

Short dashes began as they inscribed her body. Rachel kept still, wondering if this would truly work or did she escape into someone's delusion? Lost in her thoughts, time went quickly as they were ready to do the rest. Carefully turning her, Rachel watched as the pair painted her skin in a white base paint. Swiftly, they applied the layer, taking care not to spill any into Rachel's mouth or eyes. A glance of the partly-finished work, her body appeared a blank mannequin.

The Professor came around to stand before her feet. His assistants brought forth stencils which they molded over the dried canvassed skin. They painted black hieroglyphics using airbrushes over the stencils. Runes and spells for the ritual.

Rachel watched deliberately, wondering if this would work. A long shot at best, a foolish fantasy at worse, yet wasn't it the same with Jason? An experimental treatment literally on the cutting edge of medical science that is just as magical for her to believe in.

Late towards morning, Rachel gazed at the finished work on her flesh, a surreal glaze of porcelain body art. Now, they prepared to finish the ritual.

"Rachel, may Osiris protect and guide you." The Professor slipped a necklace around her neck, the gold amulet of the god resting on her chest.

The punk girl, Heidi, took Rachel's right hand, putting a silver braid knot into the palm, "Rachel, may Isis protect and counsel you."

Then, Jeb, the final one, placed an object the size and shape of an old dollar coin into her left palm, "Rachel, may Anubis protect and judge you fairly."

They proceeded to wrap her hands in tight linen strips. Finished, they began to mummify her, without the messy parts. This wasn't the typical funerary rite explained by the Professor, but something else he discovered. As they began the final part, wrapping her head, the Professor touched her forehead, "May you be successful with your journey, may your heart prove worthy of what is required, and may you find peace."

They took her into darkness, closing off the light, but Rachel didn't give in to fear. They moved her to the resting place. A grinding sound echoed followed by a sudden thud of a drop. Alone, she waited to begin the journey.

Rachel found herself walking, how she had no recollection. She simply started to move forward in the darkness that faded with each step. Her eyes adjusted to the shadowy landscape, centered on a long stretch of trees that lined a road of rich textured grass. It felt like she walked into twilight, someplace in between. The Professor informed her what the Underworld could be like. Was this truly the afterlife, or some dream on her part?

How would she know? Rachel looked herself over, the mummy wrappings vanished leaving her dressed in a single piece of white linen cloth barely called a dress. Her skin gleamed white with the symbols still readable. Rachel could read the hieroglyphics and understand their purpose to protect her. The amulets disappeared, but their imprints remained on her hands and chest.

"Keep moving forward." Rachel said aloud to break the silence. The Professor advised her never to go backward but keep moving forward. So she did.

After a while, Rachel noticed that some of the trees had recognizable human features. Carefully, remembering Dante, she closely looked one over. Imbedded into the trunk was a man whose body twisted seemingly naturally along with the tree. Was this a form of punishment? She couldn't tell by his expression. She didn't want to linger on to find out.

Turning away, she stumbled on a mound. As Rachel righted herself, she touched the object and felt it flitch. She jumped away, realizing it was a translucent cocoon. Within the figure of a woman thrashed like a dying fish on land against the sack. Rachel moved away, recalling the Professor had said that distractions were dangerous. So, she continued forward, noticing that the ground was littered with more cocoons.

Pressing onward, the avenue of trees ended at the base of a massive square temple lined with huge columns inscribed with more hieroglyphics. She knew that they waited for her, so she began ascending the steps. The strongest warning the Professor gave was to be careful around these primal beings.

She counted forty-two steps to the raised level. A huge fire blazed in the center, but there was no other ornamentation. Rachel took in a deep breath and released her petition, "My name is Rachel, and I humbly ask for help for my brother, Jason."

The crackle of the fire softly echoed in the chamber as Rachel waited. How long would it be until some appeared? Would she have to find a place to stay? How would she get food?

"You challenge what is," A melodic voice surprised Rachel. She turned around to face a woman two heads taller, dressed in only a white wrap-around skirt. The bare-chested woman's golden skin shimmered in the firelight as her arms spread wide revealing wings of blue-white feathers. A single head-band with a white feather-covered her black hair. Her stern face scrutinized Rachel. "You know who I am?"

"She doesn't know us, an unbeliever." Answered a towering man with a dog's head and robust naked figure of jet black skin "Throw her to Ammit and be done."

A third figure appeared from the shadows, twice as tall as the rest, buried in white robes trimmed in gold that highlighted his bright green skin tone. He held a crook and a flail. A white crown with two large feathers stuck out from the sides. "If she knows us, we'll hear her."

The Professor gave Rachel an extensive reading list to prepare, "You're Osiris, Anubis, and Maat, to whom I plead in my brother's name. He is dying from a terrible disease."

The trio exchanged silent glances, communicating beyond Rachel's ability to understand. The woman, Maat, approached close to touch Rachel's chin briefly, "You came so far to exchange your life for his?"

"Yes."

The goddess stepped back, "You're foolish."

"I'll do anything to save him." Rachel freaked out, rising her voice to them.

Anubis circled the pair, "Have you considered that Jason will succumb?"

"He can't die." She defended.

"Can it be simply avoided with a trade? He will die. You will die." Osiris leaned forward, looking down at her. "What is the difference? One now or one later?"

She struggled not to break down, not to show her emotions to them. "He's my brother, always there for me. Supported me. Protected me. You don't understand what Jason means to me?"

"Do you think we are blind?" Maat scowled, her sharp dark eyes bared down at Rachel. "Your love for him is heavy, but it has no value. Or do you believe that yours is greater than another facing the same situation?"

Rachel felt despair closing in, she screwed up, "I'm sorry. It's all I have."

Osiris waved his right hand holding the crook, "Is it now? Look!"

As the rod swung wide leaving a trail of white vapor throughout the temple. Images appeared like projections without a light source. All of her, but not quite. One showed her dressed in a surgeon's gown. Another she wore a white jacket with plastic glasses while studying a computer screen. In one more, dressed in a business suit she stood at the head of a conference table addressing the seated people.

"What is this?" She fell onto the marble floor.

"Your life, it's potential. You're still young, undecided how to go forward so many fates are waiting. A physician who will come to heal many, or a scientist whose discoveries change the world for the better, or perhaps you become involved in business whose success will enrich many. So many rivers to choose, all stemming from Jason's death."

She whispered, "What of Jason?"

Maat knelt down, gently lifted Rachel up to see the blank whiteness. "All things you are destined to achieve, all those you will help, are you willing to swap for Jason's uncertain future?"

Rachel touched the goddess's hand, risking breaking some taboo, "I believe he will do better."

Maat patted Rachel's cheek before backing away, "So be it. Rachel, you will be judged against the balance of Maat. If your life outweighs the value of your brother Jason, he shall die. Jason will live if his life outweighs yours. Regardless of the outcome, your death is the price."

The dark god Anubis seized Rachel by one hand, holding her firmly as his free hand below her chest to clasp her heart. His talon hand plucked it out from her. Still standing, Rachel watched as a golden scale materialized between the gods. Anubis dropped her beating heart onto the place causing it to plunge downward. Maat approached the scale, pulling out the feather from her headdress to hold over the raised plate.

"This is Jason's Maat." She released the feather, it slowly drifted downward.

Jason managed to sit up slightly, a small but major achievement during his treatment. The darkened room echoed with the steady tempo of the medical monitors. He rested against the pillow noticing the time, thirty-three minutes after three in the morning. In the forty days after the first treatment, he remained in isolation until his immune system recovered. Yet he felt that someone was with him.

"Hello?" He thought it was one of the nurses.

"Hi, big brother," Rachel's soft voice shocked him. She shouldn't be in the room and she had been missing over a month. But there she was, dressed in black.

"Rachel, where have you been? You disappeared."

She smiled, "How are you? The treatment seems to be working."

"It's in remission. The doctors are optimistic that I could make a full recovery." A dark fog enshrouded the room behind her and the sound of flowing water came from it. "You shouldn't be here. What happened to you?"

"I've been given some leeway. A little time with you before...." She paused for a second or two, maybe more, "I love you, and you're the greatest brother ever. Make me a forever promise."

Confused, Jason managed to sit up against the weight of pain, "like when we were kids?"

She giggled like a thirteen-year-old, "Yes. Forever promise, make a good life for yourself and remember me always."

Terrified, Jason tried to get up, but the pain held him back, "Rachel!"

The darkness eased off revealing that Rachel stood in the center of a boat. At the end stood a foreboding figure with the head of a jackal. "I've to go. Please, do good with your life. Forever promise."

The boat faded away, Jason whispered, "Forever promise."

About the Author:

Gregory L. Steighner is an enthusiastic writer and photographer who draws inspiration from the Western Pennsylvania region. He resides outside of Pittsburgh with his wife Nikki, mother-in-law, three cats, and a host of stories to tell.

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Two Seconds | Katie Fiedler

She's crying again. I close the nursery door, my chest feels full of iron, no space for breath.

The kitchen's a mess and I blast the tap. Plunging my shaking hands into the scorching water I see them scald, skin bursting to shiny red. It's the closest I've come to bathing in days.

Her cries become a high-pitched scream, an alarm I fail at deactivating. Even through the walls there's no escape. It's as if the sound is coming from me, made by me.

In a way it is.

I try to swallow but saliva has congealed at the back of my tongue and I'm dammed, choking.

He'll be home soon. I'll watch as he lifts her from her crib, love overflowing from his pores while bile oozes from mine because she'll instantly settle.

He possesses a talent—a way with her— that I do not.

I chip crusted porridge from a small bowl with my nails, fingertips occasionally sliding across the blade of a paring knife beneath. Its sleekness is conspicuous in the water beside Mother Goose spoons; taunting, promising.

She's shrieking now.

It would be quick.

My fingers wrap around the blade.

Two seconds. It would all be over.

I squeeze my hand into a fist. The water erupts with a rush of crimson and the wailing is everywhere, hers, mine, both.

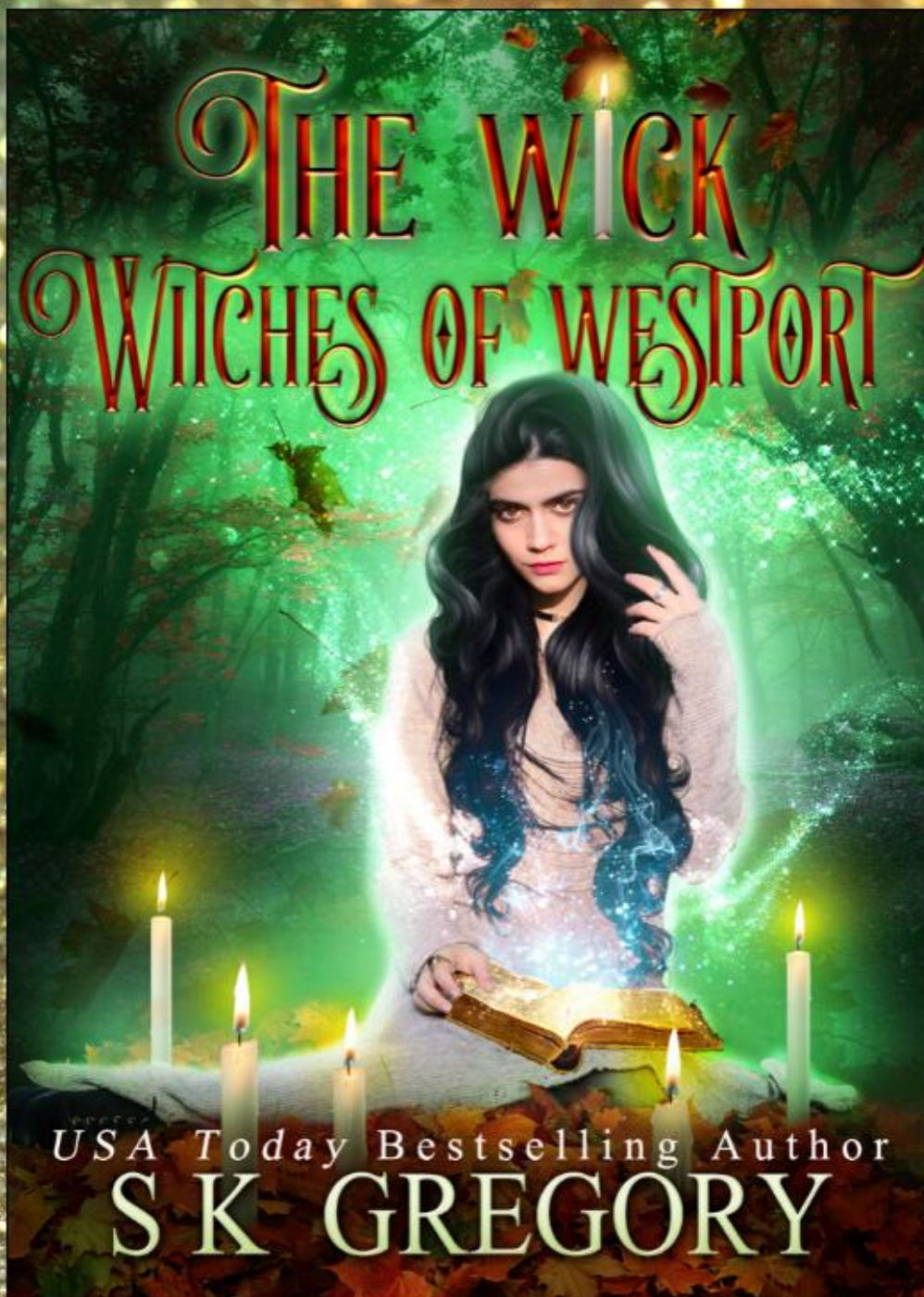
I lift the knife from the sink.

Water, detergent and blood drip through my fingers, a trail across the carpet, towards the closed door.

About the Author:

Katie Fiedler is a writer of tiny tales. She lives in New Zealand where she owns a wonderfully quirky backpacker hostel and has hosted over 80,000 travellers. Many of them have inspired characters in her stories. (Not this one though, don't worry.) When not writing, Katie can be found baking cupcakes with too much frosting, strumming her ukulele, Daisy Uke, or laughing at terrible puns.





When I was seventeen, I killed my mother. To be fair, she tried to kill me first...

Available on Amazon

The barista turned the television up louder so it could be heard over the sounds of the machines and the overly caffeinated customers conversations. Jocelyn stood impatiently waiting to redirect the baristas attention back to her and her debilitating need for a sugar free soy pumpkin latte with skim milk and a separate double shot of espresso. The usual chaos of the popular coffee house lessened as everyone grew quiet and focused on the flat screen mounted on the wall.

A well-groomed news anchor fidgeted behind his desk smiling widely as he focused on the camera. "Craig Croft here. We apologize for interrupting your regularly scheduled programming, we are happy to announce breaking news that will change the course of human history. Live at the scene we go to our medical correspondent Leanne Wright!"

The screen split and showed a small brunette wearing a lap coat smiled. "Thank you, Craig. I'm standing here in the countries leading medical research facility with some unbelievable news. After decades of research and exhaustive dead ends, they finally did it. We have a fully functioning cure for Cancer...and not just that. This vaccine cures everything! With one inoculation a patient will be cured and immune to every disease known to man!"

All around Jocelyn people erupted in shouts of joy. By the time the barista noticed Jocelyn, her stomach recoiled in revulsion. She sneered and walked out without ordering and hurried to get to her SUV.

The rest of Jocelyn's day didn't get any better. Everywhere she turned people were celebrating the new medical miracle. By the time she arrived home at 4:30 in the afternoon she was ready to blow. Pulling into her garage she let out a frustrated sigh and thanked God she had the good sense to not marry one of those bleating 'sheeple.'

Her husband, Lenard, was plating up her favorite food and smiling. As he scooped quinoa stuffed mushrooms onto plates, he nudged a wine glass towards her with his elbow, "The wine is from that couple we grow share the melon with."

Jocelyn nodded her approval and walked into the dining room where their son Stacey sat waiting. After placing a kiss on the top of his head, she sat down and took a healthy drink of her wine.

The adults eagerly dug into their meals while Stacey toyed with his gloomily. Jocelyn frowned and held out her now empty glass for Lenard to fill. Looking at her son she said. "What's wrong Stacey?"

Stacey set his fork down and looked at his mother, "Billy said there's a new medicine and that I'm going to have to get a shot. They are going to come to the school and make us all get it. I don't wanna get a shot!"

Jocelyn glared at Lenard, "See!! This is why he never should have stopped being home schooled Lenard. They are demanding we inject poison into our child's body!"

Lenard rubbed the bridge of his nose, "I'm sure they can't force anyone to get a vaccination without parental consent. We can pull him out if anything happens. He needs the socialization."

5 Months Later

When Jocelyn got home, Lenard was sitting with Stacey at the table finishing their reading lesson. He had begun home schooling three months prior and was starting to fall behind in several academic areas.

Jocelyn frowned as she walked into the dining room. No dinner smells enticed her, no organic wine was chilled and ready. Stacey sniffled as he read his workbook intensely. Lenard looked up at Jocelyn and held his hands up in surrender. "I have a delivery coming from the Vietnamese grocer. Stacey has been a bit off today."

With a look of annoyance Jocelyn walked over to Stacey and put a hand on his forehead. She pulled it back and tilted his face up. His eyes had a faraway glazed look to them, and he was flushed with a runny nose. She glared at Lenard, "He has a fever. Did you remember his vitamins this morning? Did you give him a preventative milk bath? Did you do ANYTHING?"

Lenard gave her a tense look, "Yes I did everything we normally do. He started to act unwell after the Organic News Kiddie Group Reading Session." Stacey usually went to the group reading sessions on weekends, they were for the socialization of children of antivaxxer parents in the community. Extra sessions were added for socialization. He closed Stacey's workbook and told him he could go play until dinner arrived.

After Stacey walked away Lenard went to the counter and uncorked a bottle of wine and poured them both a glass. "Warm wine is better than no wine, right? Anyway...I heard at group today that there is a new virus going around. Only people who didn't get the vaccine are getting it. It starts out like a cold and then it gets worse."

Jocelyn scoffed as she drank her wine, "Sure there is. It's a scare tactic Lenard. Are you really that gullible? They just want to be able to control everyone."

Putting his untouched glass of wine on the counter he pointed the remote at the small kitchen TV and turned on the news. "Watch what's happening Jocelyn."

The news anchor talked in a hurried tone as he recounted the newest statistics regarding the effects of the new virus sweeping the nation. Symptoms started like a normal cold and steadily progressed. Those afflicted would eventually need to be hospitalized where doctors were working around the clock to discover the cause and treatment for the virulent strain. People were encouraged to come to recently established vaccination centers and get their inoculation. Those who refused were encouraged to stay away from others who hadn't been vaccinated. Jocelyn snorted in disgust and rolled her eyes.

The next morning Jocelyn called into work. Even though Lenard was a stay at home dad, she felt that he just couldn't give Stacey the care he needed. Stacey's fever had spiked in the night and they had both been awake with him. Yawning she drank some French Press coffee while Stacey laid on the couch, eyes unfocused in the direction of the television while an oil diffuser sprayed eucalyptus at him. Along the bottom of the television screen warnings whizzed by reminding viewers to go to their local vaccination center as soon as possible.

Jocelyn tapped her slipper covered toe on the kitchen tile. Lenard had gone to get groceries over two hours ago. She had called all the mothers from the reading group, thinking if Stacey could play with one of his friends, he would feel better. Once the mothers heard Stacey was sick there was no way anyone would allow their children to come play with him.

She was positively fuming when Lenard walked in carrying a single cloth reusable shopping bag. Setting the bag down on the counter Lenard tried to smile, "All of our usual stores are closed. I had to go to a chain grocery store and their organic section was almost bare. This is the best I could do. How's Stacey? Any better?" He turned away from his wife's scornful gaze and knelt in front of their son. Stacey whimpered and coughed. Lenard brushed a hand over Stacey's forehead and drew back in alarm, "He's burning up Jocelyn! Why didn't you call and let me know? We need to get him to the hospital...NOW!"

Jocelyn gnashed her teeth together and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "I'm doing everything I know to do. He's just fighting off a cold. This is all because of that vaccine! I bet this sickness is some airborne side effect to that shot. I called the other mothers from the group and they refused to have a play date. Most of them are actually poisoning themselves and their children now, thanks to all the fear mongering news broadcasts."

Lenard ignored her tirade collecting a few books and toys and stuffed them into Stacey's old backpack. As he lifted the pack to put it on his shoulder, he caught it on his shirt sleeve and pulled it up, revealing a piece of cotton and medical tape on his bicep. Jocelyn stopped talking and stormed over ripping the tape off his arm to reveal the tell-tale mark of a recent injection.

She dropped the cotton on the floor and looked at him in horror, "Lenard, how could you? I've told you repeatedly about the chemicals in the vaccine..."

Lenard snarled at her and grabbed both of her upper arms in a vice like grip, "I've had enough Jocelyn. People are getting sick; our own son is sick. Here you are being a pretentious self-righteous bitch, while our son gets sicker and sicker. Either shut up and come with us to the hospital where he will be vaccinated or stay here. Make your choice."

Letting go of her with a look of disdain he picked up their limp child and rushed to his car without looking back. Jocelyn was in the car sitting silently, waves of anger rolling off her before Lenard had Stacey buckled into the car.

When they got to the hospital the waiting room was packed. Lenard stood swaying in place holding Stacey while Jocelyn sullenly filled out the required paperwork. A nurse checking on people came over to offer them a couple of masks. When she saw Stacey's condition, she ran to get a doctor. Minutes later they were in a room in ICU and Lenard held Jocelyn back as they administered the injection. After five hours in the ICU a very tired Lenard and angry Jocelyn took Stacey home and were advised to return with him the moment, he got worse. His discharge was done against medical advice after Jocelyn refused to receive the vaccination herself.

Jocelyn and Lenard tucked Stacey into bed and watched as he shuddered and moaned in his sleep. They stayed with him until he was more or less calm, and Lenard hooked up their old video baby monitor before halfway shutting his bedroom door.

Jocelyn went to the kitchen to try to find a bottle of wine while Lenard went to their bedroom. A half an hour later Lenard came into the living room with a small duffel bag on his shoulder. He stood in front of her and she laughed into her glass, "So you're going to leave while the leavings good huh? Typical, things get hard and you run away with your tail between your legs."

Grunting in resignation he took off his wedding ring and set it on the coffee table. "You did this to our son. You wouldn't let him get the vaccine, even after the virus outbreak started. All you do is make yourself sound stupid and

stuck up. I dealt with it because I love our son, but I can't forgive you for this. I need time to think. I'll keep checking the monitor app while I'm gone. The doctors said he should be stable all night. Call me if anything changes with our son." He turned to go to his car and stopped to look back at her sadly, "If you want to get the injection tomorrow I'll stay with Stacey. It really is for your safety..." She glared at his back as he walked out of the house.

Once he was gone Jocelyn finished off the last three bottles of wine in the house. She didn't dare turn on the television for fear of the constant news broadcasts and felt the same about the radio. After checking to make sure Stacey was sleeping on the monitor app she fell into a drunken slumber on the couch.

Just before sunrise, while Jocelyn slept, Stacey took a great shuttering breath and then went completely still. Roughly five minutes later the child sat up and slowly got out of bed. With shuffling feet Stacey wandered down the hallway to the living room where his mother slept sprawled out on the couch. He walked up to her and stood by her head, swaying slightly on his feet. Jocelyn moaned and threw out an arm while rolling over to face where he stood. As her hand hit his pajama front, she sat up with a strangled shriek, "Stacey! Don't sneak up on me like that!"

After taking a moment to calm herself down she looked at her son. His skin was grey and waxy, she put a hand on his forehead and recoiled as she felt the damp cold of his flesh. She licked her lips nervously and noticed his eyes were clouded over with a yellow film. Shrinking back into the couch cushions she was surprised to find herself scared of her child. She slowly moved so she was sitting on her knees while smiling reassuringly at her child. Darting her eyes around the room she saw her cell phone on the floor between his bare feet. Stealing herself she shot forward to grab it and screamed as her son moved his head and bit into her neck. Instinct took over and she shoved him away as she bolted off of the couch, clutching the gushing hole in her neck.

Stumbling and sobbing Jocelyn ran to her sons' room and shut the door behind her. She could hear Stacey walking along groaning hungrily. She pushed his dresser in front of the door and cursed herself for having bought the lightweight echo friendly furniture as the door began to open slowly, the dresser gliding easily along the floor.

Jocelyn backed up until her knees gave way and she found herself sitting on his bed. She stared at the monitor screen woozily and turned taking a bloody finger and used it to write on Stacey's white headboard. By the time she was done Stacey had come into the room and was jerkily walking to her. She opened her arms to him and uttered a gurgling cry as he ripped into the rest of her throat. His teeth chewing as he greedily ate her flesh.

Hours later, barricaded in his parents' home Lenard watched in horror as he replayed what happened that morning. At first, he thought Jocelyn was just drunk, but then he saw the blood. He watched sickened as she sloppily finger painted the words "I'm Sorry" on their sons headboard and then with open arms allowed their child to kill her. Lenard watched in misery as their child sat on the bed, apparently momentarily satisfied. After a couple of minutes Jocelyn sat up jerkily, her head hanging at an odd angle with most of the connective tissue having been eaten away. Her face held the same vacant gaze their sons did. When Stacey stood up and walked out of the room, she followed him and for once in his life she let him lead her.

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.





Malvi shivered, then smiled when her beater of a car started on the first try. She just needed to get home. Tomorrow she would get her new used truck and finally be able to go to university. She had wanted to be an ophthalmologist ever since her grandma lost her sight at six years of age. Granny's family couldn't afford a specialist, so Malvi was determined to help others unable to afford basic eye care.

Malvi had worked hard all through high school to save for college. She didn't buy the latest fashions, shoes, or makeup like her classmates; she saved it all. Her granddad even left her a little money when he died so she could fulfill her dream.

She waved at Donna who waited in her car at the end of the diner's driveway. Donna always made sure that Malvi's car started before they both turned out into the street. Malvi's ride home wasn't a long one and she could walk the distance if the car decided to stop for any number of reasons because it was old. But the temperatures were dropping fast and a walk home would not be a good one.

The car died. Halfway home on the side of the road next to the town cemetery.

"Now? Seriously? You stop on the first cold day."

Malvi heaved a sigh for everyone who just wanted to get home after a long hard day on the job but something always came up to prevent it. Malvi looked over to the cemetery. With very few clouds and the moon not quite full, the gravesite looked pretty and peaceful. She wasn't afraid of the final resting place of many; she walked by or through it everyday and sometimes at night, like several times when the car didn't want to start on her way to work. The cemetery held her grandparents and she was told that there were other family members buried there. Those who were good and a few unsavory ones, too. She smiled, thinking that maybe she had a pirate back down the familial line.

Malvi tried the ignition again. Nothing. No weird sounds, no clicks, no coughs or sputters. Malvi got her purse, pulled out a scarf and wrapped it around her neck, then yanked a knitted hat onto her head. Of course this would be one of the coldest nights before winter was official. She checked her bag for her cell phone. Gone. She couldn't believe she'd forgotten to check for it before she left the house. How many times had she told her niece not to play with her phone because she never put it back where it belonged. Malvi couldn't wait to get on campus.

Malvi got out of the car, slammed the door and started up the road. She was glad she had worn her hiking boots. She hugged herself as she started a little jog. She should be home in no time.

"You've got to be kidding me! Snow too? Ugh."

Big fluffy flakes fell steadily. Malvi picked up the pace knowing she would most definitely cut through the cemetery. Malvi saw headlights from behind her. She turned slightly, raising her hand up to shield her eyes as the vehicle got closer. A truck rolled to a stop beside her. The passenger window rolled down.

"Hey Malvi, you want a ride?"

Malvi looked at the driver and made out Orrin Trent.

"No, thanks Orrin, I'm good."

Malvi didn't like Orrin. He gave her the creeps. It wasn't that he was simply awkward around females; rather, he was off around females. He had no social etiquette, no filters for proper things to say, and as a result the young girls or ladies she knew steered clear of him. He was a lot *off*.

"Temps are droppin' and it's snowin'. I wouldn't want you to freeze to death."

"I don't have far to go. Thanks." Malvi continued her walk. She heard the truck door creak open and then slam. She heard footsteps behind her.

"I told you to get in the truck."

Malvi turned around and Orrin slapped her. She stumbled and tried to run. He grabbed her. Dragged and threw her against the side of his truck, pinning her. She stomped on top of his foot. He howled and let her go. She ran towards the cemetery and disappeared. Malvi knew the layout of the cemetery. She knew every headstone above and flush to the ground. The ones she could hide behind. She had to be careful of the markers that were high enough to jump over because now the new snow would make the grass slippery.

Malvi was almost to one of the few roads in the cemetery that would lead her to the main gate when she was slammed into a large headstone. Malvi went down with Orrin on top of her. He punched her this time and worked at ripping her coat open.

"I don't know why you all run into the cemetery."

Malvi started screaming, punching, and kicking at Orrin.

"Oh, you wanna play, huh?"

Malvi reached up to scratch his eyes and felt something hard on his face. *Goggles*, she thought. *Night vision goggles*. That's how he found her so fast. She wrenched them off his head and hit him in the face. He fell to the side. She got up, swung again, making another good connection to his head. She kicked him in the groin for good measure and took off again.

"You bitch," Orrin grunted.

It had stopped snowing, the moon came from behind some clouds. Malvi was on the main road in the cemetery. She held back tears when she heard heavy steps on the gravel behind her. Orrin caught up to her and tackled her. They both rolled on the hard ground and slammed into a small raised crypt. Malvi screamed.

"Ain't nobody gonna hear you. You shouldn't have put me off when I asked you out."

Malvi stopped struggling and looked past Orrin.

"Grandpa," Malvi said.

Orrin turned around, while still on his knees.

"Orrin. Is that you? You were always a dull boy. And now you're even a duller man. Attacking young women in a place where the dead are trying to rest. You best let the young lady go."

"Piss off old man. You're dead."

"Boy, that's no kind of language to use around a lady. You got one more second to put that little piece of manhood away and get off my granddaughter."

More ghostly figures appeared. A Confederate soldier, two Union soldiers, a Vietnam vet, a couple of fishermen, and some farmers with nasty looking farming implements, and a heavy set woman with a rolling pin.

"Let the young lady go."

"This ain't real," Orrin said.

"It's real. You should have left town when you first thought about it. After the last young lady you took from Malvi's world."

A ghost came from behind a headstone, followed by several more from nearby stones. They grabbed Orrin by his arms and pulled him to a nearby mausoleum. He struggled as best he could. The doors swung open then quickly closed, muffling Orrin's screams.

"Who are they?"

"Relatives. Our family goes way back," Grandpa said. "We're very proud of you."

Grandpa helped Malvi to her feet.

"How is it that I can touch you?"

"Love. Plain good love. You keep doing you. And if anyone else bothers you, bring them by the cemetery."

"Thanks Grandpa," Malvi said before hearing a blood curdling scream coming from the crypt Orrin was taken to.

"Don't you worry your head about him. Authorities will find him and know of the bad things he's done."

"Will they kill him?"

"No. But he'll pay for a very long time. The mind can be a strange maze. Sometimes you can go in and come out, other times you just hang around and there's no getting out. Go on home, now."

"I love you Grandpa."

"We love you too, sweetheart."

About the Author:

Wendy L. Barber is a designer of collector dolls, specializing in things a bit creepy and whimsical at the same time. She is also a writer who has decided it was time to share some of her stories with the world. She lives in Michigan and longs to live in Scotland, or at least visit.



To Win the Dough | *Michael D. Davis*

It was the last round of the National Cookie Challenge. It was down to two losers and me. I sailed through all the challenges with flying colors. There is no doubt of my winning now. They simply have to crown me champion and give me my prize. The last taste test is just a formality to show that everyone had a fair chance, but we all know who won. As a judge bites into my cookie, his face lights up. He asks me for my secret. I tell how I mixed fresh sliced human skin into the dough and frosting.

The Pink Clouds | *Michael D. Davis*

They were everywhere. They looked like gnats only they weren't, they were bright pink and formed cloud-like swarms. The swarms moved like smoke, silent and quick. If there was one, there were thousands lurking behind. They move in towards the face, entering the body through the nostrils, ears, even eating in through the eyes.

Most people locked themselves away, armed with bug spray, covered in plastic. We were some of those people. That was until we had the fight. My anger grew and I cut my son's suit and kicked him outside then watched as the pink cloud devoured him.

The Devil's Deal with the Duck | *Michael D. Davis*

It was one of the strangest deals the devil ever made. Horace Haywood wanted to kill with impunity, the devil said, "You shall, but only if you agree to become a duck. This way no one will suspect, and it will give you challenge." Horace tried and failed to change the devil's mind, then agreed.

It took him time to adapt, but soon Horace was enjoying himself. He slit the throat of an elderly lady in the park and stabbed a man to death on the street before just waddling away. The unsuspected greatest living serial killer Horace Haywood... duck.

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.



Revelation | *Nina D'Arcangela*

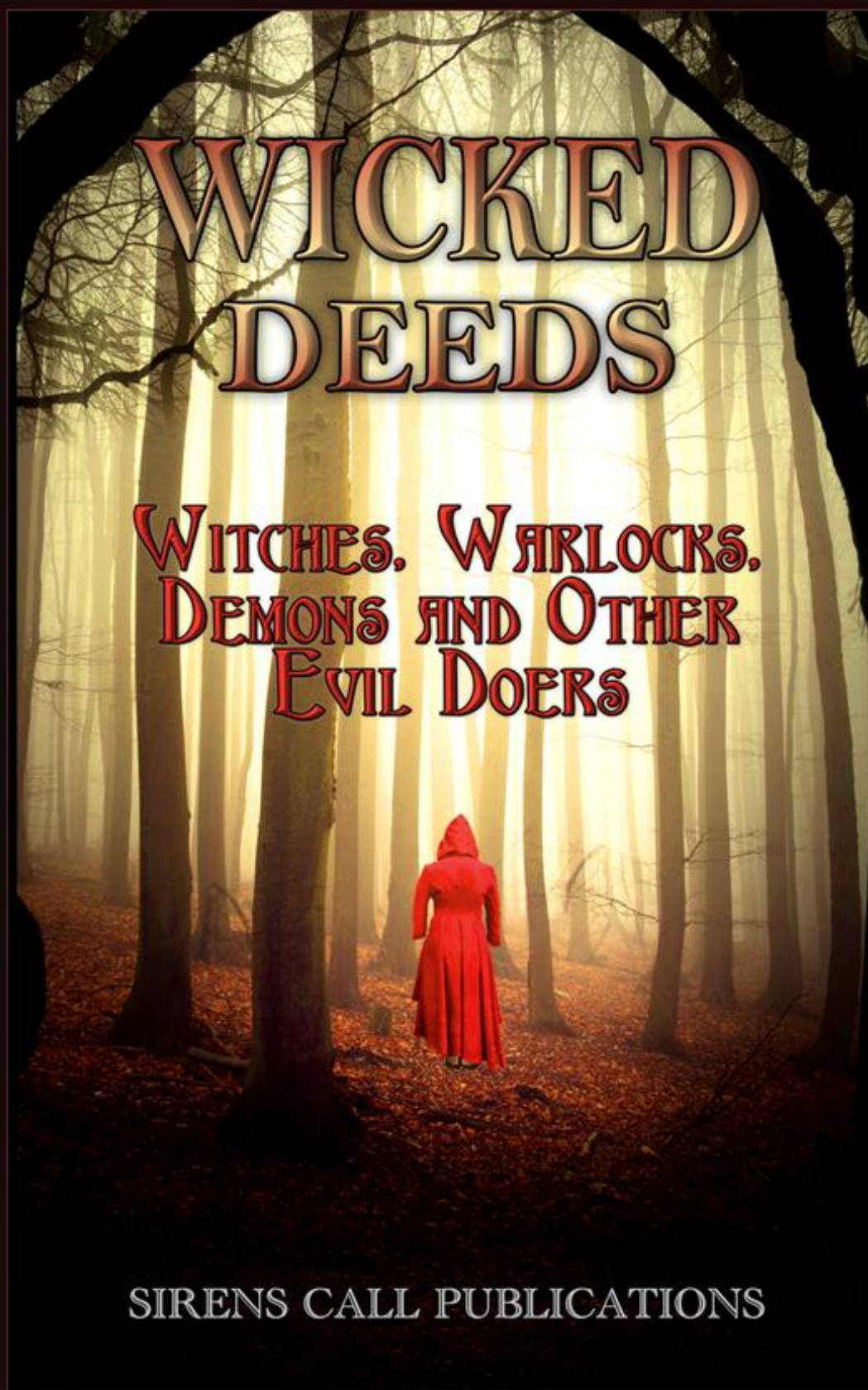
Like the maelstrom that swept in her tide, she swirled with a tempest of fate. Those before her attempted to flee; begged forgiveness for their evils. Misunderstood lives, unappreciated deeds, this lot unaware the veil had thinned solely to allow their pardon. Gleaming ebony skin that smoldered of embers left to flame, she bore down upon them with brutality unknown to these worthy heathens. Necks twisted most unnatural, bodies rent of their companion cog and spokes, these children of misdirection now granted reward for actions unprovoked yet savored by that which waits. As claws struck and teeth ripped, screams wailed the song of souls unburdened. Mother to the immoral, sister of the dishonest, beacon for the misguided, she stilled as the slop of her task struck a final note. More would come, born of those who kneel in perverse fealty. In the interim, the void of silence stirred her home.

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 the co-owner of *Sirens Call Publications*, the co-founder of the horror writing group *Pen of the Damned*, and the owner and resident anarchist of *Dark Angel Photography*.

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Sometimes wicked people do wicked things...



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

The little man darted from a stand of weeds beside the roadside, swatting with insane, flailing arms at a bird determined to snare him in its talons. It was like a hallucination.

Felker recognized the bird as a hawk almost at the same instant he realized it was roughly the same size as the man. Reddish feathered wings flapped at a tremendous wing span, and the little man cried out.

"Begone! Begone!"

The hawk didn't heed the suggestion but hammered at him with its thick black beak.

Felker stomped the brake in the next heartbeat, unleashing a squeal from the tires. His Escalade skidded, and he gripped the wheel, trying to steady the course as smoke rose from the black rubber stripes he was painting on the roadway.

For a second, he thought he'd managed a save, but the little figure dodged the attacking bird in the wrong direction, and the SUV's grill slammed into him, tossing him into the air.

Felker felt his mouth gape as the body sailed into an unfortunate arc that sent it plummeting onto the road's shoulder. It landed with a thud, a bounce and a crunch in the gravel. Then the little man was still.

"Oh, my God."

"What's wrong?"

Felker had forgotten he had his partner, Brett Sims, on speaker.

"This little guy just ran in front of my car," Felker said. "Really little."

Their discussion of the dollar's current strength and impact on interest rates would have to wait. He shoved the gearshift into park and jumped out the door for a trot to the little man's side. Blood had begun to seep into the gravel. The little man moved his head just a fraction.

Felker dropped to his knees and touched the forehead. Crap, he had left his cell on the console. He'd have to go back, wasting time.

"Can you hear me?"

Eyes opened a fraction, and he could see the green-brown irises. The pupils were wide, like two black pools, too wide and not reacting to the light. A concussion, best case.

Something rattled in the little throat, an attempt to form words but nothing intelligible passed the lips, and a shudder wracked his form.

"Hold on," Felker said. "Hold on." He jogged back to the car and dialed 911. He was in the middle of nowhere, somewhere amid the rolling fields and thick forests Amy had wanted as a barrier between them and the city. After giving the operator an idea of the location, he rushed back to the roadside.

The breaths were becoming raspy now, labored, and the eyes were closed.

"Who are you?" Felker asked. *Weren't you supposed to keep people with head trauma talking?*

The lips parted, but no words came. Felker leaned back, taking the little man in. He looked like he was from another time, dressed in breeches, a brown tunic and low boots that wrapped and tied on the side. A stocking cap had popped off his head.

Felker found that and tucked it into a pocket, trying to run possibilities through his head. *Gypsies? Re-enactors of some kind? Was a Renaissance fair in the area? Nothing quite added up.*

He rested a hand on the man's shoulder for a while, trying to comfort since he saw no other real aid he could render.

"Is there any word you need me to get to anyone?" he asked, when the ambulance still had not arrived after several minutes. Hope seemed to wing away like the hawk had.

The head lifted slightly, and the eyelids peeled open just a bit.

"Kilian is gone. Tell them Kilian is gone," the man said.

Then a last breath rattled in his lungs, and he moved no more.

When the cops arrived along with the ambulance, Felker explained what had happened. It sounded odd, no doubt, but taking in the look of the little man and the name of firm on Felker's business card, they nodded and asked that he come by the state police headquarters tomorrow for a formal statement. If there'd been any whiff on his breath they'd missed or ignored it. No breathalyzer, even though he sounded like a madman, and he hadn't even had to threaten a lawyer call, though he should be in legal limits.

"He's pretty banged up, but these rips on this outer garment do look like bird claws," said one of the officers.

"Weird thing," an ambulance attendant said.

They thanked Felker for staying by the man's side and sent him on his way.

He decided not to call Amy from the road. He'd fill her in when he got home. He hadn't been distracted by the phone call, but his nerves were jarred enough now that he just wanted to let the remainder of his drive calm him.

He and Amy had bought the old country house last year, not long after his break with Marian. The plan was to update the place inside while preserving the exterior's character. The place was 100 years old, or at least that's what the realtor had said, built by a wealthy family moving from Europe.

Felker had always managed to make the drive time a soothing experience, even when he conducted business going and coming. His blood pressure had improved since they'd been nestled on woodside acres.

The inner trembling had stopped by the time he pulled off the road and followed the winding driveway home, through an arched tunnel trees that cast a soothing mosaic of shadows downward.

"That you?" Amy asked when he came in the side door.

She walked barefoot into the room wearing a black dress that loved her waist and the curve of her slim hips. Her golden hair had been pulled into a chignon. She gave him a quick peck then kept moving.

He'd forgotten. A party tonight at the country club, something for one society or another that they were supporting. For all the talking of getting away from it and the talk of remodeling, Amy devoted a good bit of time to keeping up connections and moving in circles that befitted a wealthy man's spouse.

She had gone through a lot of samples, and met with a lot of contractors, mulling cherry wood to replace the rough hewn cabinets in the kitchen and contemporary tiles for the bathrooms. She'd also been contemplating new track lighting to brighten things up around here to chase black shadows from the corners while preserving exposed beams and mantles. So far little change had occurred.

He tugged his tie from around his collar and found the Scotch decanter, splashing a couple of fingers over ice. He needed a bracer.

"Have you seen my gold earrings?" she asked. "I was going to wear them tonight, and I thought I left them in the ring holder on my dresser.

He'd bought that for her just after the wedding, a little sterling silver scoop to keep her engagement rock from getting lost, and she tended to drop other things in as well, like earrings worth almost as much as her diamond. He wished she wouldn't be quite so casual and kept better track of her things.

"Do we need to start searching Claire again before she leaves?" he asked, glancing at her hand to make sure the rings weren't missing as well. Loss of that many carats might give him indigestion.

"I don't think she's taking things or ever was. What's wrong with you? Another bad day at the currency market? The dollar not performing like it should against the mark?"

"Not exactly. Work's OK."

He sat at the table in the breakfast nook, drew a deep breath, swallowed amber and told her what had happened as the burn sliced down his esophagus.

"My god. Were you wrapped up in business talk with Brett?"

"No, I swear no. I had him on the SUV's speaker, and I wasn't distracted. The poor little guy just ran out in front of me. The bird had *him* distracted. It was trying to eat him alive. Must've thought he was a, I don't know, what do hawks eat?"

"You're not drunk?"

"No."

"You weren't drunk?"

"No."

"You're sure it was like you describe and not just a short man?"

"It's like I said it was."

"The cops were OK?"

"I told them the truth, and they could see with their own eyes that he looked like he was from a coffee table book."

"You weren't hurt?"

Now? Now concern about him kicked in? Marian would've had a cold compress on his skull by this point.

"Didn't even do much damage to the car."

His hand dropped to his leg, and he felt the man's cap still in his pocket.

"I should have sent this with him," he said. "Forgot I picked it up."

He dropped it onto the table.

"He didn't say anything? Tell you his name?"

"He was pretty banged up. He just managed to say something like 'Kilian is gone.' I'm not sure if that was supposed to be his name or not."

At the mention of Kilian, an anguished cry came from somewhere across the room.

"What was that?"

"What?"

"Did you say something?"

He looked toward Amy first, but she stood near the kitchen counter, silent.

He spun and saw a flurry of movement in the shadows near the living room, what looked like the flutter of gray fabric, but the lights weren't on in there. As his eyes focused in the gloom, he caught what he thought was the shape of a small woman scurrying. Not Claire. She was short but not that short.

"What the hell was that?" he asked.

"I didn't see anything."

"I could swear there was a woman. This little woman."

"Like the man? How much did you just slurp down? Are you sure...?"

"Dammit I'm fine, and I was sober on the road."

"I thought the level in that Scotch decanter had been dipping pretty fast again."

"I haven't been binging."

"We were supposed to be taking things a lot easier out here."

A thumping sound echoed from somewhere beyond the living room, interrupting her. She couldn't deny that one.

They turned that way, and a shadowy outline stood in the doorway, a little male figure with a bristle of black whiskers and a pointed hat with a gold buckle.

"So Kilian is gone," he said.

"Who are you?" Felker asked, pushing himself back from the table and grabbing a tall Peugeot pepper grinder, the closest thing to a weapon.

"Andreas," he said. "If Kilian is gone, then I'm the new king."

A sound, then movement on the top of the cabinets drew Felker's attention, and in an instant a fetid odor struck his nostrils.

Things had come from somewhere to crouch atop them now in the shadows, things about the size of the little men but less human looking. He picked up hints of pointed ears and...fangs.

A bit of a gleam danced off one of Amy's earrings that now dangled from a long, crooked nose. Gangly, unnatural elbows edged from shadows.

Near the sink, yellow eyes with slits for pupils peered up over a shelf edge, and the pantry door creaked open, moved by greenish fingers with long, dirty brown nails.

There had always been the random sounds since they'd moved here, attributed to the old house settling. There'd always been things like the earrings and the Scotch missing and odd little things like bed linens tousled after Claire claimed she'd finished her work. On some dark nights, they'd both thought they dreamed and felt a cold clammy touch in the night. Sometimes shadows here or there moved as they shouldn't. Amy attributed his observations of strangeness to stress or alcohol and denied her own because she loved the house.

"As my first act as king," Andreas said, "I order that the old Kilian be avenged."

Amy moved to Felker's side, and he put a protective arm around her as the figures around them began to rattle blades.

About the Author:

Sidney Williams is the author of 12 novels including recent releases: *Disciples of the Serpent*, *Dark Hours* and *Midnight Eyes* from Crossroad Press. *He is a book hoarder with a large collection of musty paperbacks.* Sidney's short work has appeared in *Cemetery Dance*, and recent anthologies including *Quoth the Raven*, *Deranged* and *Love Among the Thorns*.

Author Blog: [Sidney Williams](#)

Twitter: [@Sidney_Williams](#)

Jingle, jangle, clickity, click...

Robert's hefty ring of keys jostled as he walked the polished floors of Brightford Mall. The place was deserted. No late-night managers or janitors wandered about by this hour. At four in the morning, the mall contained nothing but peace and quiet. "Last night shift, baby!" Robert shouted down the hall with a grin, hearing his voice echo. He just had to get through tonight, then he'd officially be on holiday *Cuba, here I come...*

Robert whistled cheerfully as he returned to the security desk for a break. Reaching into his backpack, he extracted a package of jerky and a small parcel that had come in today's mail. He'd held back from opening it earlier, thinking it would be a welcome distraction to break the monotony of his shift. An early secret Santa gift from a co-worker? Or something else...

Ripping into the shiny wrap, he opened the box to reveal a small figurine. A little boy curled into a ball, with legs to chest, and face buried in his arms. It had pale skin with black hair, save for a single white stripe. He picked it up for closer inspection. It was light, the surface smooth, made of intricately detailed glass.

Robert scratched his head. No note. No return address.

Okay... Something else, I guess.

There was only one person he could think of who might send a creepy gift like this. "Must be from the witch," he muttered. Robert's sister, Lisa sent him weird shit every Christmas. She was still angry at him for saying she drank cat's blood back in high school. She'd been into Wicca and all kinds of weird stuff back then. He remembered feeling embarrassed of her, being an obnoxious teen, and obsessed with his own popularity... He never thought of Lisa's feelings. Unfortunately, the rumor stuck, and her oddness escalated into crazy.

Several years after high school ended, Robert came to realize what a prick he'd been and regretted his actions. It had been ages since he'd seen or spoken to his sister. He tried to reach out to her. Calling proved futile, as Lisa hung up immediately, then changed her phone number. He'd visited once, but she refused to open the door. Robert even sent her an apology note with a small present. But it was returned to sender, unopened. He gave up after that.

Ever since then, however, he'd been receiving these strange gifts each holiday season. Dolls or dead flowers, bizarre necklaces, or containers with unknown ingredients inside. All presumably from her.

Robert put the figurine down, shaking his head. Grabbing his Maglite off the desk, he shoved another piece of jerky into his mouth before resuming his nightly rounds. Back to work.

Jingle, jangle, clickity, click...

All seemed quiet as Robert checked each storefront's security grill. He walked through the food court, then quickly scanned the women's bathroom—empty. The men's room appeared clear too, until he opened the last stall. He stilled.

Wedged between the toilet and the wall, was a little boy. His knees were tucked up into his chest, face buried in his arms. Maybe six years old. The boy had pale skin, and black hair... with a white stripe, just like the figurine. *That's a little odd.*

"H-hey there. Kid, are you okay?" The boy looked up. His grey eyes were striking, both irises patterned by thin black pigmented lines, akin to shattered glass. "You wanna come out?" Robert smiled kindly. "Where are your parents?"

The boy quietly accepted Robert's outstretched hand. Slowly, he unfurled his slender body from the confined hiding place. Every motion appeared stiff, as if his joints needed oil.

"What's your name?" Still no answer. Just a somber face. "Okay well, come with me lil' dude. I'll help you out." The two left the bathroom hand-in-hand.

Jingle, jangle, clickity, click...

Back at the security desk, Robert smiled and offered the kid a snack. He called the police and discussed this bizarre situation, while the child stood still eating some beef jerky. Thankfully, an officer would be attending shortly with social services. He hung up. "Alright kiddo, help is on the way." Robert smiled, reaching to ruffle the kid's hair, but the boy shied away.

Lowering his hand, Robert noticed from the corner of his eye that the figurine had changed positions. He did a double-take. It was standing on the desk now, looking at him with eyes like shattered glass. "What the...?" He gasped, recoiling. Squaring his body to face it, Robert eyed the trinket.

He felt a firm tug on his pant leg, and glanced down. The lost boy held an envelope up to him. "Take it," the child ordered. His lips moved abruptly; his face expressionless.

Robert took it, moving a few steps away. With brows furrowed, he opened the letter.

It's time you paid for ruining my life. Watch out, he bites. Merry Christmas, xo Lisa.

A chill ran the length of his body.

On the desk, the little statue began moving, stiff, as if his joints needed oil. Just like the lost boy. Its face contorted to reveal jagged rows of fish-bone teeth, its body poised like a cat ready to pounce. A pair of sizzling eyes burned into his, glowing a fiery red.

Goosebumps raised the hair on Robert's arms.

Hesitantly, Robert glanced back to the child. The boy was leaning forward now, his head cocked sharply to the side like a curious puppy. Arching his back, he presented a terrifying set of gleaming teeth. The juvenile's shattered eyes glowed like hot embers, a near-perfect mirror of his tiny twin.

Oh God...

Robert bolted, the soles of his shoes scrambling to find purchase against the tiled floor. The hollow *tink, tink, tink* of glass feet chased after him, the deceptively delicate sounds growing in intensity with each passing second. His heart raced as the lonely hallways of Brightford Mall swallowed his cries for help.

The last image Robert had of his sister flashed through his mind. He envisioned Lisa writing that note, chanting some kind of curse, and laughing as she wrapped the parcel.

The heavy ring of keys clattered against his thigh as he ran. Robert grasped at them, fumbling for salvation, searching for the key that would unlock the security office.

He was almost there. He could make it.

A weight crashed onto his back, a glassy arm snaking around his throat. Robert's knees buckled; his head reeled backward. The figurine crawled up his arm and bit into his flesh. Growling, Robert tried to fling the tiny twin off, but it clung tighter. Razor-like teeth gnawed voraciously, as dark red blood bubbled from the deepening wound.

The arm around his neck tightened like a noose. Glancing over his shoulder, Robert came face to face with the much larger set of teeth, jaws open wide. No, he couldn't make it.

Clickity, clickity, CLACK...



Rewind | Rachael Clarke

"Do we have to sit outside again? It's already freaking hot out here." Susan fanned herself with her hand and adjusted the brim of her hat.

"Of course, it's hot. What would you expect?" Neil laid back on his forearms and closed his eyes, making a big show about sunbathing. "You're the one who wanted to come to Costa Rica."

"It just seems to be getting hotter every day," she whined. Her skin felt scorched, but it remained pale. "Don't you think?"

Neil just shrugged, ignoring her.

Susan frowned. The last few years of marriage hadn't been easy. Their spark had gone out, and she'd hoped this trip would rekindle the romance. The vacation started out so perfectly. The promise of exotic adventure, the lure of pristine sandy beaches, and a private cabana they had all to themselves for a whole week... it was a true all-play-no-work paradise.

But it didn't last, and now the days stretched on. She ran a hand over her leg, knowing the carnage she would see there later.

Susan stared out into the rolling waves as they lapped at the shoreline. Sunlight glinted off the ripples, leaving spots in the pigments of her eyes. The horizon stretched endlessly. She had loved the ocean once.

"It's nearly time to go to the boat." Susan was beginning to feel that familiar pulling sensation again, like she was made of metal and a magnet had come into range, attracting her to it. She had tried to fight it many times before, uselessly. The reality was, they had to follow the same daily routine whether they wanted to or not. "Maybe we should go early today?"

"What's the point?" He shrugged again, which infuriated her. "Going early or late makes no difference."

"Don't you even care anymore?"

"We've tried everything Susan." Neil sat up, a tired and slightly irritated look on his face.

"We're obviously missing something! There has to be a way."

"There's no coming back from this," he said sternly. "You need to accept that we're-"

"Don't say it."

Neil growled and flopped back to the sand. "Fine, live with your own delusions."

A bitter silence lingered between them for quite some time. The magnetism pulled harder.

Susan caught sight of a slender silhouette approaching, her willowy form casting a long shadow in the morning light. Blinking against the sun's glare, Susan swore under her breath. "Not again..."

"What?" Neil's eyes popped open, sitting up with anticipation. Susan quietly seethed. She had to be with him right now, but she didn't have to like it.

The woman stopped at a beach chair nearby. Her red fingernails contrasted sharply against the white see-through beach dress she wore. Neil's hungry eyes raked over her, as he stood to get a better look. The harlot removed her threadbare cover, practically naked, and not the least bit ashamed.

The succubus laid down on the same chair she occupied every damn day, stuck in their loop somehow, and Neil's eyes didn't falter in their admiration.

"Enjoying the view?" Susan turned away from her lecherous husband, sick of seeing him drool.

Susan recalled how shocked and uncomfortable they both were, when the nearly nude sunbather first appeared 162 days ago. Neil had respectfully averted his eyes, saying reassuringly that he didn't need to look anywhere else. She had felt love for him back then... but, that love had been bitten off in chunks each day, slowly eaten up.

"Well, since you killed us, it's been my only joy." Neil's words dripped resentment.

"Ah, the blame game again, is it? You could've been the one to cut your leg just as easily."

"But I didn't."

Susan bit her tongue, deciding to ignore him. Instead she pondered what might have been. What if they hadn't ventured off on their own during the dive? What if the boat had been there when they resurfaced, like it was supposed to? What if she hadn't cut her leg on that coral, chumming the waters?

The magnet was tugging so hard now, that her body leaned against her will. Both Susan and Neil would snap to the dock soon, to relive their deaths all over again.

"I guess it's that time," Neil sighed. The scuba diving excursion always left at 11 in the morning, without fail. They'd gear up alongside the other excited couples and head out to the remote location to explore the exotic fish and underwater landscapes.

Susan absent-mindedly looked down at her thigh again, envisioning the blood seeping from her impending wound. Her heart fell, knowing she would soon feel the sting of countless razor-sharp teeth, her cries mingling with Neil's as frenzied sharks dragged them under. Everything would go dark.

Then suddenly, they would snap here again, sitting on this cursed beach that steadily grew hotter with every single rewind.

"Maybe you're right. We are in hell." A tear rolled down her cheek. Susan had never said it out loud before, still stubbornly clinging to the hope that it was all just a torturous dream she couldn't wake from.

Neil looked at her with raised brows. "Welcome to reality." His gaze returned to the sunbather with a smile. "Hell ain't so bad."

Susan felt her mind shift, as the bright sunshine surrounding her darkened to a fiery red. The last vestige of hope she clung to crumbled. The magnet tightened its grip.

Snap.

About the Author:

Rachael Clarke is a former police officer living in Portage la Prairie, MB. Between juggling two busy boys, a sportaholic husband, and two bizarrely ill-behaved dogs, she manages to maintain a semblance of sanity by guzzling coffee and savouring copious amounts of chocolate. Rachael lives for fulfilling dreams, and seeking out new inspirations. She is currently writing a novel and writing/illustrating her first picture book.

Author Blog: [Rachael Clarke Author](#)

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Our medieval ancestors established the tradition of making seraphic death masks. Their fine white faces lined the walls of our family crypt like so many cheap Pierrot souvenirs in a Venetian street market.

People died at home then, my father said, so there was always a sculptor at hand to capture the essence of the departed. But when the two mass killers of wars and hospitals arose, the art of creating the delicate casts was lost.

I wished that my ancestors had left it at that. I thought the hollow-eyed death masks were eerie and unnecessary. Weren't the old bones interred in the crypt enough of a memorial?

My father is a tycoon, wedded to the family business and to its long history. He told me that back in the 1850s the family had started making clay plaques embossed with the handprints of the dead and dying. They were robust and much easier to transport home from distant battlefields.

I remember visiting the crypt at my grandfather's funeral. The handprints hung in succession next to the white faces. The crypt candles created strange shadows in the casts and lent a feverish glow to the ancient death masks. I remember feeling breathless as I imagined the desperation of the people trapped in these effigies at the moment of their deaths. Tears blurred my vision as my grandfather was laid to rest in the hideous place. I wanted to rush out, but my father stopped me. He pointed out that there were no tiny baby casts, or cute progressions from infant to adult, just one set of handprints for each person. He said that it had become more meaningful to take a cast of each family member's hands on their 21st birthday. If you didn't reach the age of majority then you did not count in my family's history of empire and acquisition.

I was sixteen then, but now it is my 21st birthday. Father leads me to the crypt, where he intends to hang my plaque next to his, although neither of us is dead.

My father lifts the clay tablet embossed with my handprints and walks around the crypt. He seems to be introducing me to its other residents. He nods gravely, then lifts a yellowed cast from its hook.

"You have the hands of Augustus, butcher-surgeon of the Crimean War, who saved many souls, if not many lives."

"Oh..." I say. I am an artist, pacific and introverted. I feel no kinship with my bloody-handed relative.

"You are not impressed," says my father, taking my hands, "but the resemblance is remarkable."

He presses my hands into Augustus' cast; they fit perfectly. The clay becomes warm. I try to lift my hands, but they are stuck fast to the ancient mould. I feel Augustus' soul flow into my body. Driven by arrogance, his desire to live is overwhelming.

His voice moves my tongue to thank my father. His will moves my hands from his cast to mine. My soul is drawn into the virginal clay.

"Will he have long to wait?" my father asks, placing my plaque on the wall.

"When this family has need of peace and beauty no doubt a successor will present himself." Augustus replies.

As they leave, making plans for conquest and greatness, I know that my wait will be eternal.

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!"

Author Blog: [Ideal Reader](#)

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Field Report: "This report concerns the excavation of the crypt at Northbrook Church, Worcestershire and the adjacent burial ground for the purpose of collecting together and cataloguing human remains that might prove to be of medico-legal and historical significance.

"The church had been deconsecrated and then sold by the diocese with a view to future commercial development.

"Mortuary archaeologists reported the crypt cleared on August 17th. Work then proceeded to excavate the burial ground. 652 sets of remains were catalogued and removed from the site before an unusual internment was uncovered by developers working outside of the actual boundary of the churchyard. Initial assessment suggested that this was likely a burial from the late seventeenth century."

Archivist's Report: *"There is evidence that this land adjunct to the graveyard was actually unconsecrated ground used for the burial of non-conformists and others. There is even a singular account (1698) of a witch burial here."*

Field Report: "Because of subsequent developments the circumstances surrounding the excavation of this particular internment will be made in more detail. These are as follows. A rough stone marker indicated the spot directly above the coffin, which was intact and of soldered lead. Notwithstanding the high standard of workmanship, it had no breastplate or any other identifying marker. After preliminary assessment this coffin was raised and removed to the crypt for further examination.

"Dr. Stimpson led the team that opened the coffin and undertook forensic examination of the remains."

Dr. Stimpson's Forensic Report: *"There are no surviving grave goods or floral tributes. The corpse itself was in a remarkable state of preservation. The body is that of a female aged approximately between 30 and 40 years. The face was uncovered [no funerary veil] and was waxy white. The body overall retained a significant degree of suppleness: limbs and extremities could be moved without effort. Unusually the body was dressed in what is likely to be the deceased's everyday wear. A frayed blouse and skirt, both discoloured and damp to the touch with what appeared to be limited traces of fire damage and soot. There was a distinctive aroma of wood tar (a sample of the viscous residue was taken). In respect of the actual body, however, there were no smallpox lesions or, indeed, any external evidence of disease or trauma.*

"Immediately when the body was exposed to air the left eye, which until that point had been open and quite clear, glazed over and then disintegrated completely.

"This particular exhumation has left a distinct impression on all those present."

Field Report: "Chemical tests on the residue were positive for hydrocarbons (wood tar). The presence of other culturally and period appropriate signs suggestive of a witch burial, together with archival evidence for a 1698 internment, suggests that this case might be of historical significance. Further archival research has been requested. The media office has been informed.

"Dr. Stimpson reported ill this morning with suspected conjunctivitis."

Archivist's Report: "The following account from court records is reproduced in full for inclusion in the Field Report: *"Myrtle Outhwaite made no utterance at all even when evidence of her guilt was laid, to wit: that she wickedly wished Mr. Lambert drop dead to which charge there were divers witnesses, and that he did indeed expire the very next day (so it was at first thought) from an apoplexy. Even divers encouragements to make a full confession (and thereby at least to save her soul) made her speak not. The Assize judges sent her to be burnt for a witch."*

There is circumstantial evidence that the burial uncovered at Northbrook churchyard must be that of Myrtle Outhwaite. However, there are unexplained aspects (the expensive lead soldered coffin) which justify further inquiries being made."

Field Report: "It has been deduced that the 'rough stone marker' that lay directly above the burial was in fact a sandstone post in the form of a stake inscribed 'M.O. 98.' When *in situ* this was positioned directly above where the chest would have been.

"The team are concerned to learn that Dr. Stimpson has now developed blisters and swellings to his hands and arms, similar to those encountered in a case of severe burning. He also has difficulty breathing. Medical experts are investigating any recent contact he might have had with caustic substances."

Archivist's Report: "Attached is an account from a contemporary news sheet of the burning of Myrtle Outhwaite, and the subsequent disposal of her remains: *"She remained stubborn silent even until the tar was lit and the faggots - which were piled high to obscure her from the God-fearing (who should not have to behold such a sight) - began to burn. Then, as the flames began to take hold, there was from her an invocation from the Book of Job: "If someone dies, will they live again? All the days of my hard service I will wait for my renewal to come." When it came time to rake the embers, the witch Outhwaite was found to be whole and intact, untouched by the flames, a mighty wondrous and terrible sight for those that beheld it. They took her and sealed her in a leaden coffin (so that she might not escape), which they buried at Northbrook and marked the site thereof with a stake."*

Final Field Report: “An assessment of all the available evidence leads to the definitive conclusion that the burial at Northbrook is in fact that of Myrtle Outhwaite, burnt in 1698 for witchcraft. Following completion of extensive forensic examinations, and in accordance with public health protocols, the coffin has been soldered shut and re-interred. After over 300 years the remains of Myrtle Outhwaite have been given Christian burial.

“It is reported that Dr. Stimpson has begun to make a full recovery from his burn injuries. The lesions have begun to clear leaving no trace. The causal agent has not as yet been identified.

“Unfortunately the sight in his left eye has been permanently lost.”

About the Author:

Robbie Porter is a lecturer and charity worker from Worcester, England. He was born in Hawick, Scotland and studied English and History at the University of Sunderland. His short story *Mannerley* was published in the 2018 supernatural horror anthology *Cathartic Screams*, and *The Unquiet Visitor* will be published in the Soteira Press anthology *What Monsters Do For Love* in Spring 2020.



The After is Waiting | Patrick J Wynn

Phil wobbled a little as a wave of dizziness washed over him, he reached down and steadied himself grabbing at the bench he sat on. As the dizziness passed and he felt a little better it suddenly hit him he had no idea how he got here, he wasn't even sure where here was. He pushed himself off the bench and looked around. He seemed to be in some kind of park but he didn't recognize anything. Sitting back down he tried to make sense of his surroundings and what was going on, but before he could begin putting things together a loud screech came from behind him. Phil spun around on the bench toward the sound and froze. Not ten feet behind him stood five figures, they were about half Phil's size, naked and covered in deep red skin. Their fingers were topped by long black talons that extended toward Phil as they began approaching. As they closed in Phil could see long sharp teeth filled their wide misshapen mouths. All five screeched again and shook Phil out of his frozen state and he turned to run. The five screeched loudly and gave chase as Phil ran. Phil ran for all he was worth but they caught him before he made six or seven steps. The things pulled him down and began biting, scratching and ripping into him. The pain was unbearable and Phil screamed, but stopped as they suddenly stopped their attack and began dragging him through the grass. Moaning in pain Phil looked up to see where they were dragging him, as he watched a doorway suddenly appeared from nowhere and a loud booming voice called to him.

“PHIL JAMESON YOU HAVE BEEN JUDGED” The voice laughed.

Phil could just make out a face in the darkness of the doorway. The face was an abomination, a horror of pain, agony and evil and it grinned at Phil.

Heat, despair, terror and misery washed over him the closer to the doorway he got. He struggled and fought but the closer they dragged him to the doorway the feeling of emptiness, hopelessness and sorrow filled him and the need to let go enveloped his being. Out of nowhere a loud beep sounded, then another and another. Thunder echoed in the distance and a deep groan came through the doorway just as a bright white light consumed Phil.

“We'll be waiting” The deep voice laughed.

Phil suddenly found himself lying on the ground with a paramedic leaning over him holding shock paddles.

“We got a pulse now.” Came a voice from someone Phil couldn't see.

“Wow we lost him for a few minutes there.” The paramedic smiled down at Phil.

A sudden flare of pain rolled through Phil's chest and down his arm.

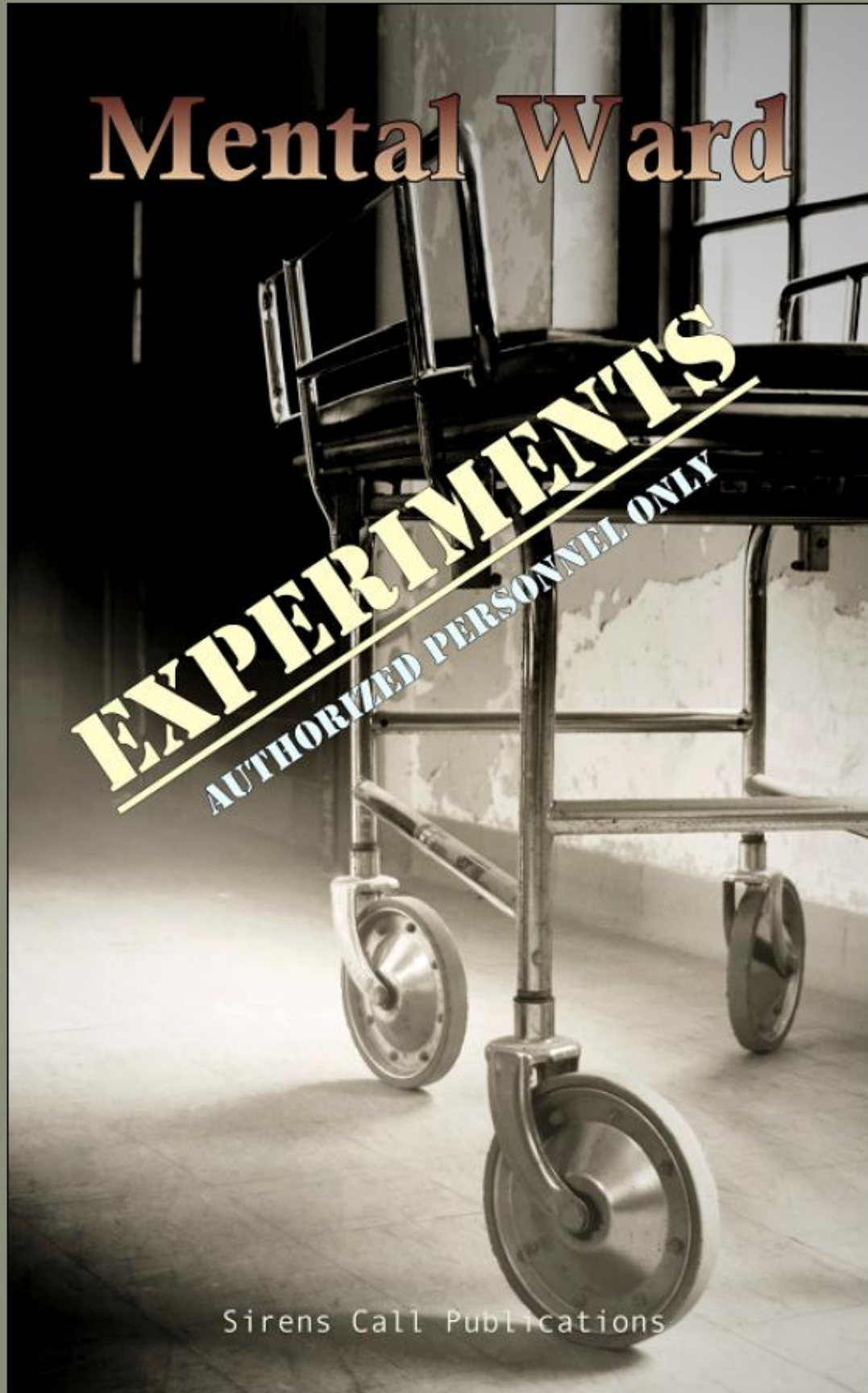
“We're losing him.” The paramedic yelled.

Phil screamed as the world around him faded but it was nothing compared to the wails of pain and anguish he would let go for eternity.

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.

Step into a world where sanity is left behind,
and horror is what the doctor ordered!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Sully Ferrero came to, face down in a pile of trash. *Right where you belong*, he thought to himself. Lately he'd been making his living running drugs for the local mob boss, Franco Morelli. According to Morelli's collectors, last night's delivery was a little short, five thousand dollars' worth of short, the gentlemen had explained while kicking his ribs into his spine. Sully lifted his aching head and saw the words, YOU HAVE UNTIL MIDNIGHT, written in blood on a piece of paper.

His right hand throbbed and ached. He looked down and saw three severed stumps where his fingers used to be and reality set in. He shot up, ripped the hem of his shirt and hastily tied it around his wrist to slow the bleeding. Trembling he picked up a dirty rag, wrapped his hand, then stumbled out of the alley into the street. He made it three blocks before the rag he'd wrapped his hand in, had soaked through and began leaving a blood trail on the sidewalk. His peripheral vision distorted made the buildings appear to bend and wave as he walked along dismal city streets toward his apartment. He passed through crowds of vagrants and junkies that paid him no mind for which he was grateful, the last thing he wanted to do was draw attention. His building was only two blocks away. *Just get there before someone calls the police*, he told himself as he maneuvered around an overturned trash bin.

Ten minutes later he reached his door and fumbled, left-handed with the keys until it unlocked. He all but fell into his apartment when the door swung open against his weight, slamming into the wall behind it. He kicked the door shut and flipped the light switch on. The overhead bulb flashed and burned out. Cursing, he crossed the room, arm out, feeling his way to the lamp on the other side.

The sensation that someone had ran up behind him sent him flailing for the light, nearly knocking it off the table. He righted the lamp and fumbled with the knob until light flooded the room. He spun around, shielding his face as if a fatal blow was coming, but there was no one there. Morelli's men had not come to finish the job before his time was up.

A movement from the corner of his eye caught his attention. Across the room, in the corner, a shadow figure stood staring at him. Its edges shimmered and waved, but it maintained the shape of a man. Sully stared back at it in disbelief. The stumps on his right hand throbbed, but he didn't dare move.

"I'm so cold," its voice rang out.

Sully shook off the chill that ran down his spine.

"What did you say?"

A steady thump, thump, thump, sound caught Sully's attention. He looked down at the blood dripping from the rag, splattering on the floor. "I'm hallucinating from blood loss, this isn't real." He pulled his right arm to his chest and staggered to the kitchen, leaving the figment of his imagination in the corner.

He opened the refrigerator and pulled a bottle of cheap Scotch from the shelf. Clenching the cap between his teeth he twisted the bottle open, spit the cap on the floor and took a big swig. With his good hand he yanked an ice tray from the freezer and attempted to break the cubes free. When they wouldn't budge he slammed the tray down sending them sprawling across the table. He scooped up the cubes and dumped them into a bowl, then carefully pulled the makeshift bandage from his wounded hand. He cringed at the memory of Morelli's men laughing when the dull, electric knife chopped and sliced its way through his fingers.

Come on Sully you can do this, he told himself and took a deep breath, then shoved his hand into the ice. Burning pain shot to his elbow and he stifled a scream. His head went light and the room started to spin. He sat down, closed his eyes, and prayed.

After a few minutes the ice had slowed the bleeding and his hand went numb. "I have to seal the wound." In a daze he walked room to room, turning on lights and watching them burn out one at a time.

The hair prickled on the back of his neck and he sensed a constant presence behind him. In the corner of his bedroom he saw his iron and board he'd left that morning. Maniacal laughter burst from him as he pictured what he was about to do.

"What do you think ghost? "Do I have the balls to do it?" He shouted.

He picked up the iron, cradling it under his arm and went back to the kitchen.

Piles of dirty dishes blocked the electrical outlet. With a sweep of his arm he cleared them from the counter. The mess crashed to the floor and dozens of roaches scattered from beneath the broken glass. Minutes later the iron hissed a puff of steam.

He took a gulp of scotch and without hesitation, picked up the steaming iron, flattened what was left of his right hand on the counter, and smashed the hot iron on the stumps. Fiery pain shot through his hand and up his arm. He took a breath and screamed until his lungs were empty. The overwhelming pain and smell of burnt flesh was too much for

him. Still holding the hot iron on his hand, he turned his head and vomited. His knees gave out and the iron crashed into the sink as he slumped to the floor in the mess of broken dishes and roaches.

Sometime later he woke up to moonlight beaming through the grimy window. He pulled his phone from his pocket and checked the time. *It's 8pm, that gives me four hours to come up with five grand or I'm a dead man*, he thought. His mouth was dry and the throbbing pain in his hand was unbearable. He grabbed the edge of the counter and pulled himself up from the floor. Blood, vomit, and bits of burnt skin lay next to the iron in the bottom of the sink. He turned on the water and ducked his head under the faucet.

His right hand pulsed waves of pain with every heartbeat and he raised it to the dim light for a better look. His index finger and thumb were still intact, but the other three were nothing more than one inch long stumps. The iron had cauterized his skin and stopped the bleeding but white puss had already begun seeping from the wounds.

He picked up the bottle of Scotch, took a big gulp, and then dialed Tony's number. Tony was small fries compared to Morelli when it came to mobsters but he was hoping he would lend him the money. After six rings he hung up, he figured Tony had already heard about his situation and wasn't going to get involved.

On his own and facing death he paced the apartment. He still had four hours to come up with something and he wasn't above begging at this point. The next call he made was to Candy, a hooker that he frequented. She had some connections and might be able to get him the money.

"This is Candy."

"Candy, it's me, Sully."

The line went dead.

He threw the phone against the wall and plopped down on the couch. Defeated, he swore he would never steal money from the mob again if someone could just get him out of this mess. For a long while he sat on the stained couch, emptying the bottle of scotch to numb the pain radiating through his hand. It was just after eleven when he tipped the bottle the last time, "Fuck," he screamed then smashed the empty bottle against the wall.

The neighbor screamed muffled obscenities at him through the wall.

"Fuck you!" he shouted back at her.

He slumped into the couch, hung his head and wept.

"God, I swear if you get me out of this I promise I'll be a changed man. No more drinking, no more gambling, just please help me."

"God wants nothing to do with you Sully, but I do." A voice rang out.

A breeze ruffled his hair and Sully raised his head "Who said that?" he shouted.

He looked up at the Shadow Man hovering above him on the ceiling. Sully shot to his feet, the sudden movement caused a head rush and he smashed face first into the floor, snapping the cartilage in his nose. The room spun out of control but he was too weak to move. The temperature dropped and the silence became pin pricks of ice on his already cold skin. With one eye barely open, he saw the Shadow Man standing over him.

A strong hand pulled him to his feet and steadied him. He was close enough to feel cold breath on his face but he couldn't make out what the Shadow Man was saying. Sully held his breath and listened closely as misunderstood whispers filled his head. A warming sensation engulfed his body, soothing away the aches, and then a sudden, intense heat ran through his veins and dropped him to his knees. A choked cry forced itself up from his throat as tears, blood, and sweat ran down his face. He gasped for air but there was only heat. Panic induced sweat dripped from every pore and his eyes began to burn. There was a shift within him, a tugging sensation that pulled on his insides. The heat that was ravaging him disappeared, replaced by a deep coldness like the winter wind had settled within him. His heart, seconds ago pounded in his chest had fallen silent. Finally free from the Shadow Man's grip, Sully crawled to the bathroom.

Shivering, he flipped the light switch and the explosion of light blinded him. He covered his eyes and dropped to the floor. After a few breathless moments the pain in his head subsided. Keeping his eyes covered he reached up, turned the light off, and pulled himself up to the mirror. A faceless shadow stared back at him. Sully waved his hand and the figure in the mirror mimicked the motion.

A floor board creaked outside the bathroom door and he turned in time to see his body pass by. In disbelief, Sully watched his body walk to the front door.

"Hey, Stop!" He yelled, his voice was cracked and ragged.

It stopped and spun toward him. His once blue eyes were now void of color and his face held an inhumanly large grin. Horrified, Sully stepped back into the bathroom. The entity that had stolen his body had distorted his features into an unrecognizable monster.

"Stay out of the light," it said, and stepped into the hallway.

He tried to give chase but the light forced him back into the apartment. He slammed the door and listened to heavy footsteps as his body strolled down the hall, whistling, without him in it.

Sully ran to the front window; a black Cadillac sat idling in the street below. The clock on the wall chimed twelve times and he laughed as Morelli's men dragged his body into the ally. A shadow figure scurried out, crawling on four legs that twisted and bent as the creature defied gravity and clung to the side of the building.

Moments later a gunshot rang out. The creature looked up at Sully and hissed, then disappeared into the shadows.

It was never a man, He thought to himself.

The car drove away and Sully sunk into the shadows shivering, waiting. Soon there would be someone coming to clean out the apartment and he would walk in the warm light again.

About the Author:

Jamie R. Wargo is an aspiring horror author from North East Ohio. She was previously published in Sanitarium Magazine issues twenty-seven and fifty, as well as issue forty-three of Sirens Call Ezine, Women in Horror Month. She once won a horror star contest and was murdered, (on paper) by John F.D. Taff in his most recent series titled The Fearing. She has a full-time career in financing, but her passion has always been writing.

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Vows | Theresa Jacobs

"Ugh, my stomach's been hurting."

"Here," Gwen handed her husband his tumbler. "I've added kale to your smoothie. Maybe that'll help."

He took big gulp. "I'm off the gym and then work. I have a big project; I won't be home till late."

"Yes, you've been sure enough to make note of it lately."

The afternoon was cloudy and warm, a perfect day to garden. Images of Jim's new secretary with her pert boobs and flawless legs rolled through Gwen's thoughts. Dandelions and bindweed went into the recycle bag, and the deadly nightshade went into the pouch around her waist.

About the Author:

Theresa Jacobs has taken the indie world by storm. In four short years she's written two novels, four novellas, many short stories, and scripts for television. Currently, she has a film on the indie movie circuit. While she is making a name for herself, she also continues to help others reach their goals and is a cheerleader to all things creative.

Author Blog: [Theresa Jacobs](#)

Facebook: [Writer Theresa J](#)



A young woman walked through the old house, slightly bored by the sights around her. Ghastly faces pressing through the walls. Blood dripping from the ceiling. Doors and windows slamming open and shut behind her and all throughout the house. She'd seen worse. Much worse. She chuckled as a large shadow figure materialized in front of her, blocking her way. She had a soft spot for shadow figures. They reminded her of her first experience on the force. The dark entity dissolved quickly when it realized she wasn't going to stop.

After rounding another corner and checking a couple more empty rooms, she found what she had come for. The twelve year old boy was huddled in the far corner, whimpering softly.

"Are you ready to go?" she asked.

He jumped at the sound of her voice, and his own voice shook as he asked, "Are you another ghost?"

"Do I look like a ghost?"

He cocked his head as he looked at her cargo jeans and leather jacket, then shook his head and reached up to grasp her outstretched hand.

"My name's Jess," she said as she helped him to his feet. "Your friends said they lost you when they ran out of here."

The boy stared at the ground and muttered, "That's not what the ghosts said."

Jess knelt down, putting a hand on the boy's shoulder. "They were lying to you. They do that. Your friends are really worried, and they called for help right away. Just stay close to me, and we'll be out of here in no time. Nothing is going to hurt you."

She was grateful the words were true this time. The spirits and other entities she'd seen in this house were all benign, as the loud, rambunctious ones tended to be. Still, she would have said the same thing even if they were dangerous.

Jess had been on the Supernatural Rescue Force for about five years, and had learned quickly that the people who needed rescuing couldn't handle the truth. They needed reassurance, or they'd stay frozen in panic.

She looked back at the boy and wondered what it was like before the entities had become so powerful, before kids like him needed people like her. Her grandfather had told her that when he was young, a door slamming or a whispered voice would be considered an impressive experience—impressive enough to make it on T.V. But that was before the gap opened up. Everyone was so focused on arguing about whether or not drilling was safe for the environment that they never considered the possibility of other dangers lurking beneath the layers of rock and soil. They didn't consider the hard formations of granite might have been there for a reason.

It was fun at first, or so she heard, with so many new paranormal sightings. The ghost hunting business exploded and haunted houses, real ones, became as popular as zoos. But then the entities got too strong, and ghost hunts became literal hunts.

Of course, that didn't stop kids from breaking in to haunted places on dares or from boredom. They always had to learn for themselves. Jess supposed she should be grateful. There were very few government positions with more job security than hers.

"Um, Miss Jess?" the boy asked timidly. "Could we go downstairs really quick? I dropped my dad's video camera, and he'll kill me if I don't bring it back."

Jess sighed. This happened on almost every extraction. The target is terrified when they're alone, but the second someone who isn't afraid comes along, they're fine. She wasn't supposed to let them talk her into walking around the affected area. Her job was to get in and out as efficiently as possible.

"Please?"

"Fine," she groaned. "Do you know where it is?"

The boy nodded. "Yeah, I know right where it is. It will be really quick, I promise."

Jess smiled. She remembered what it was like to be more afraid of a punishment than monsters. They headed down the rickety wooden stairs into the basement, and she saw the camera lying on the floor toward the middle of the room. At least, she thought it was the middle. The edges of the basement were shrouded in darkness, impossible to see with just her flashlight and the light from upstairs barely seeping halfway down the stairs. It was quiet here. Silent. She couldn't even hear her own footsteps as she walked over to the camera and

picked it up. It took too long to reach it. Not by much. It was only a few extra seconds, but it was enough for her trained senses to perceive that something wasn't right. Still, she didn't want to scare the boy. She picked up the camera and turned to hand it to him, making every effort to keep her voice light, just as she'd been taught. "Check it out. It's not even scratched."

But the boy wasn't there. She looked up and saw him sitting at the top of the stairs, which seemed farther away than they had been. It was too dark to see his face, but it felt like he was smiling.

"I fooled you," he said, giggling. "I wasn't stuck in here. But now *you* are."

The hairs along her arms stood on end when she realized the voice didn't belong to a young boy. It didn't belong to anything living.

"Shit." She dashed up the stairs.

The thing in a boy's body giggled again, and its eyes glowed red, just for a moment. Then, in a movement too fast for her eyes to fully perceive, it stood up and slammed the door.

She heard a latch grind into place when she was just two steps away from the top. She pounded on the door and yanked on the knob, but it wouldn't budge.

"Bye-bye, Miss Jess. It was fun playing with you."

She ignored the thing on the other side of the door and sat down, hoping her eyes could adjust to the dark.

"Oh yeah, and I lied," the voice on the other side of the door taunted. "It won't be really quick. It won't be quick at all."

Jess took a deep breath and walked slowly down the stairs, then shuffled across the pitch black basement, her flashlight barely any help at all.

If there's another way out, I have to find it fast.

Then she heard it. It wasn't quite the sound of panting. It was too slow, too quiet. It was more like the sound of lungs that had no body, yet continued to function. Wet. Wheezing. The air grew heavy and acrid around her as it moved closer, but she forced herself to breathe slowly, evenly, despite her racing pulse. Sometimes it sounded like it was coming from in front of her, sometimes behind. She drew a long dagger from a hidden pocket inside her jacket. It was made of hardened salt mixed with iron, but the edge was sharp as any steel blade. It would kill nearly any supernatural entity it penetrated, assuming she could see the thing to make the cut.

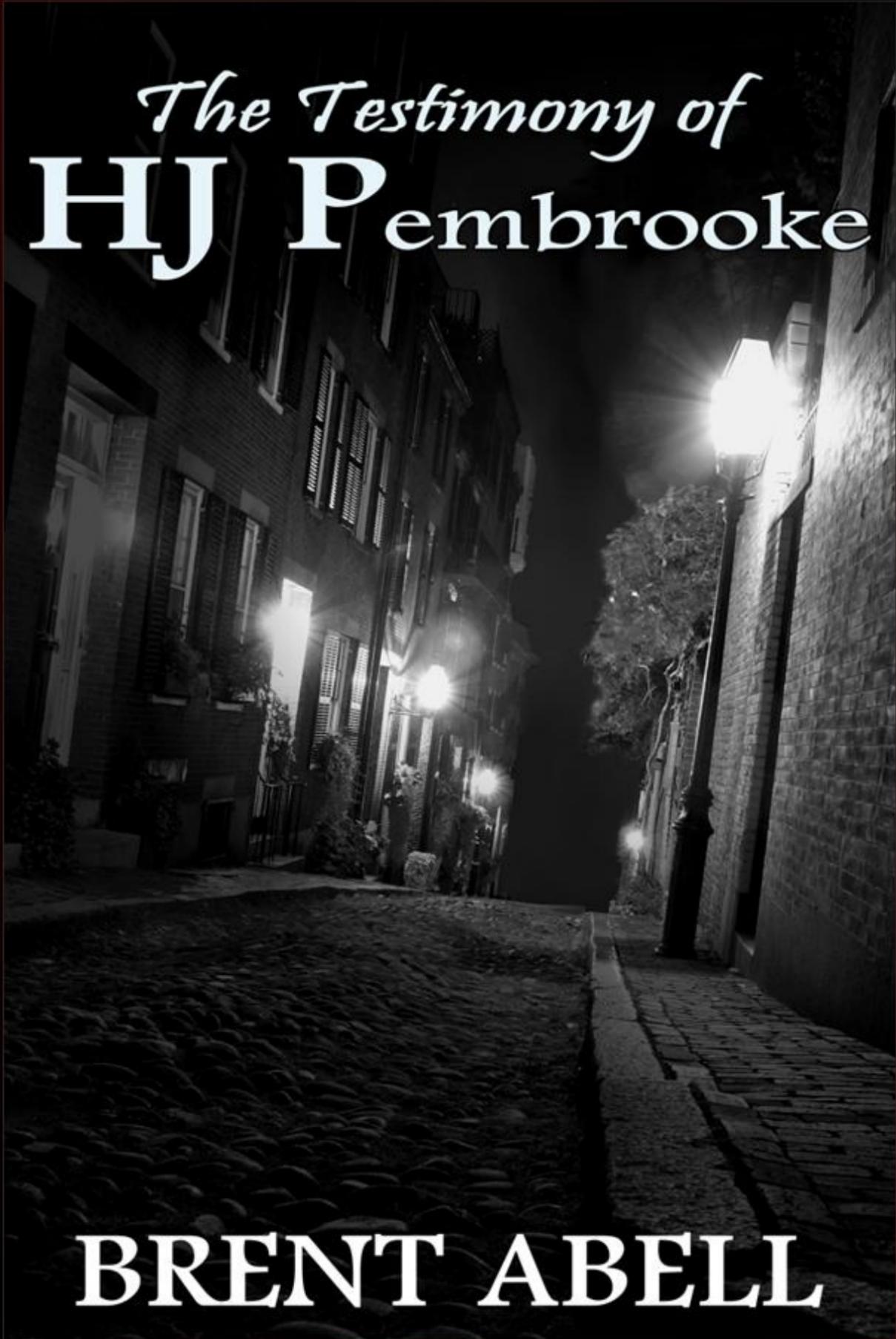
But she couldn't see a thing.

About the Author:

Veronica Schultz is a writer of primarily speculative, horror, and other supernatural fiction, and loves all things strange and spooky. When her parents asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, she said, "Elvira." Unfortunately, that job is already taken, so she writes instead. She will also hug any animal that lets her, whether it's an adorable kitten, or a slithery snake.

Author Blog: [Veronica Schultz](#)
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The Testimony of
HJ Pembroke

BRENT ABELL

AVAILABLE TO PURCHASE OR BORROW ON
AMAZON

Who the hell is that! Mat thought as he reached over to grab his phone. The brightly lit screen was almost unbearable to look at. *Unknown Caller.*

He answered. Nothing: no static, no electronic tone, no automated voice telling him he'd been in some accident that he had no recollection of, no heavy breathing. Just silence.

"Hello," he said. The silence continued.

He checked the screen again. *Call In Progress.*

"Hello!"

He ended the call and checked the time: 10:30 a.m. – an hour since he'd got into bed. Last night's shift had been hell and tonight probably wouldn't be much better. He needed sleep.

As he drifted happily between hazy wakefulness and fragile sleep Mat realised, with some irritation, that one of the kids was in the bed, stroking his hair. Ellie's usual habit. That Leanne had allowed it to continue was one of many things they'd argued over before splitting up six months. They'd agreed to share custody of their two daughters in an alternating bi-weekly pattern, and although this should have been his turn Leanne had agreed to have them this weekend, because of the night shifts he'd picked up at short notice, which meant, of course...

There shouldn't be anyone else in the house.

He tried to move but couldn't. He tried to shout, but no sound would pass his dry lips. All he could do was stare helplessly at the wall, trying to subdue the terror as it swelled with each barely controlled breath.

The stroking stopped, but he could still feel the weight of someone lying next to him. He tried to move again, this time managing to dart forward. He spun round; his body ready to face the intruder even if his mind wasn't.

The bed was empty, perhaps they were hiding round the other side.

An alert from his phone broke the eerie quiet: the screen momentarily providing illumination. He walked tentatively around the room.

He'd often fantasized about which household item he would weaponise should he need to defend himself from an intruder. Now it was actually happening he hadn't thought to grab anything, and so he peered, unarmed, over the side of the bed. Nothing.

Fear turned to confusion and embarrassed amusement. What must he look like, stalking round the room in nothing but his boxer shorts, looking for some imagined intruder with no plan of what he would actually do should he find one.

He remembered his phone and saw that that he had a multimedia message waiting for him. He tapped the icon and a status bar began to stutter as it tried, and failed, to retrieve the message. It can wait, he thought as his head sunk back into the pillow. *I've gotta be up in a few hours.*

The next shift was even worse than the last, and when he finally got home again he sat in the front room staring vacantly at the television, feeling listless and numb. He allowed his eyelids to drop. *Just for a minute. Then I'll go to bed.* He was asleep in less than a minute.

The vibration of his phone, which was still in his trouser pocket, thumped intrusively against his leg. He opened his eyes, stretched his neck (which produced an audible and satisfying crack) and eased the phone from his pocket, feeling a swell of anger as he saw the words, *Unknown Caller.*

"Who is this?" he barked. There was no reply. "Look, I don't know what you want, but if you don't mind, would you kindly *Fuck Off!*"

Getting angry wouldn't help. If it was a prank caller, then he'd just given them exactly what they wanted and if it was some automated marketing system it would be indifferent to his outburst anyway. He jabbed the phone to end the call before noticing a tapping sound coming from upstairs.

He followed it into the bathroom where the cold tap was dripping. A gentle half-turn stopped it instantly.

He braved a quick glance in the mirror to see a face with bloodshot eyes and pallid grey skin staring back; he really needed some sleep. No point in going back down stairs now. Next stop: the bedroom.

He turned away from the mirror and froze. Someone was standing in Rosie's room, looking directly at him. He couldn't quite make the figure out, even though the sun shone brightly through the window. Its arms looked unnaturally long and dangled passively, and he could see a thin, faceless head, cocked slightly to one side.

It was like a shadow liberated from the confines of its ethereal prison, ill-defined but fully formed and three dimensional.

He could feel his heart thumping heavily, his throat constricting with each pounding beat. Instinct took over.

He ran down the stairs. His legs were moving but he wasn't in control. As he opened the front door he was dimly aware of his phone, still in the front room, alerting him to an incoming message.

His legs, which were still doing most of the thinking for him, took him five doors down the street, to long-time friends, Jenny and Phil's.

Jenny opened the door and her welcoming smile quickly mutated into a look that managed to express both shock and concern. The inviting smell of Sunday dinner seemed so at odds with what had just happened, so jarring, that it caused Mat to regain some level of control.

"Can I come in, Jen?" he gasped as he stood there, skin all clammy and breathing too heavily for the short distance he'd just run.

"Urm, sure, of course. Is everything okay?" She still looked concerned but the initial shock was receding.

"Everything's fine," he said before a brief pause. "Well actually, it isn't. Erm... I'm not really sure, I probably shouldn't have come." He was beginning to ramble. Not knowing what else to do, he stood awkwardly in the doorway.

"I think you'd better come in, Mat." They'd been friends for over twenty years and she'd never seen him like this. 'Where are the girls?'

"They're with Leanne. She's got them this weekend." Mat said as he shuffled into the house.

"Hi," said Phil, who was stood in the kitchen, cooking the Sunday roast.

Mat sat down at the small breakfast table. "There's someone in my house."

"What! Who's in your house?" Phil asked, scrunching his face up.

"I don't know..." Mat said. "I was in the bathroom and saw someone in Rosie's room." The tremble in his voice was beginning to subside. "I didn't know what to do, I didn't think, really. I just came straight here."

Jenny immediately phoned the police before they all walked up to Mat's house together. The front door was still open, but nobody was there, and nothing appeared to be stolen. The police didn't find anything of much use either.

"You should join us for dinner," Phil said, after the police had taken statements and left. "There's no point in you sitting in the house on your own."

"Don't worry about me, I'll be fine. You've helped my plenty already."

"We insist," Jenny said. "I'm sure you could do with a glass of vino? I know I could".

"Well, when you put it like that. Just wait a sec while I grab my phone".

It was flashing anxiously, trying to alert him to the message it had received as he was running from the house. He decided to look back at Jenny's place, he didn't want to keep them waiting.

MMS - Unknown Caller. He tapped the screen with one hand while taking a large gulp of red wine with the other. *Unable to Access Message, Please Try Again Later.* Frustrating, but at least it provided an opportunity to explain what had happened in a bit more detail; as foolish as he felt, and as much as he doubted that anyone had been in his house at all, Mat needed to unload.

The general consensus, once dinner had been finished and two bottles of Rioja had been gleefully consumed, was that exhaustion from the night shifts had caused him to experience particularly vivid and unpleasant 'day' terrors. The nuisance calls were probably just a coincidence.

"Once they have your number, cold-callers can be irritatingly persistent," Phil said, helpfully stating the obvious.

With the main subject well and truly dissected the discussion moved on to the kind that usually occurs when old friends get together. Stories got retold, embellished and debated. Memory and myth, melancholy and joy became entwined in the intoxicating branches of nostalgia.

"Okay. It's late and I'm beat." Mat said finally. "I'll get out of your hair. Thanks for everything, it's really helped."

He gave them each a warm hug and walked away, with the lazy half-stagger of someone who, while not exactly drunk, isn't entirely sober either. He turned and gave a final wave. Nobody ever saw Mathew Holden again.

As soon as Leanne opened the door, the girls ran in ahead calling out excitedly, but there was no reply. They went up to Mat's bedroom and found a pile of worn clothes discarded carelessly on the floor and an unmade, empty bed – not like him at all!

When they'd lived together he'd always been the 'tidy' one. Leanne also noticed that he'd left his phone, and although it was locked she could see that he had a missed call from an unknown caller and three unopened MMS messages.

If he'd gone anywhere in a hurry it would have been to Jen's.

'He left here late last night, but we haven't heard from him since' Jenny said, having explained everything that had happened the previous night. 'I'll be right over'.

The police came to search the house for second time but found no evidence of a break-in, although they did take Mat's phone.

It was four days since Mat had gone missing and still there was no news. The young detective who was stood in Leanne's living room advised her to take a seat before he produced a series of printouts which had been taken from Mat's phone.

The first document was a list of calls made and received over the period leading up to, and including, his disappearance. Three events had been circled with a blue biro that all said the same thing: *Unknown Caller*.

What was odd, the officers explained, was that this number really was untraceable. Neither the police technicians nor the mobile company had been able to extract any useful information. This, however, wasn't the strangest thing.

They had managed to retrieve the unopened multimedia messages, which turned out to be a series of photographs. Each one had been sent shortly after the *Unknown* calls. What they depicted was difficult to explain and so the police suggested that Leanne look at them before discussing what might have happened.

The first picture had been taken from Mat's bedroom door. It was dark, but there was enough light around the blinds to show some detail. Leanne could see Mat's bed, with two figures lying in it. One was difficult to make out. The covers were raised, showing the form of a body; a head was just visible behind Mat's shoulder. It appeared to be looking towards the camera, although with no identifiable features this was difficult to confirm.

Mat was on the near side of the bed, also facing the camera. His eyes were wide and his mouth was hanging open in a distorted, fearful, expression.

The second image was taken from Rosie's bedroom, looking across the landing and into the bathroom where Mat was stood gazing towards the camera. His face was twisted in the same way as before. The thought of him being so frightened was heart breaking; Leanne felt like throwing the pictures to the floor. She just wanted to find him: for his sake, for their daughters, and for hers too. Although they'd separated, she still loved him. There was no desire from either to get back together, but they maintained a remarkably close relationship.

Reluctantly, she took a closer look at the image. In the mirror, immediately behind Mat's head, Leanne could just make out the reflection of someone standing in Rosie's bedroom.

Feeling increasingly nauseous, she forced herself to look at the final document. She settled her eyes on the grainy image and let out a small, dry gasp. It looked like it had been taken from Mat's bedroom window, which overlooked the street. Mat was standing in the middle of the road, dressed in nothing but boxer shorts and a T-shirt, staring straight ahead. His expression in this shot seemed different to the others. Not twisted, just blank, although there was something about his eyes. They looked desperate, like he was pleading.

Standing immediately behind him was the same figure as in the previous photos. Again, most of its body was obscured and its features couldn't be seen, even though they were stood beneath a bright street light. All that was really visible was its head, which seemed to be facing the photographer, and a hand – which was placed gently on the side of Mat's head.

Leanne couldn't take any more. She dropped the pictures on the coffee table and closed her eyes. The two visitors tried, first to comfort her and then to find out if she could think of anything that could be of use. She couldn't. Probably sensing that they weren't getting anywhere, the detective and the constable got up from their chairs, took the documents and the phone, encouraged her to call if she thought of anything else, and left.

No further evidence was ever found.

Several months later, after a degree of normality had finally returned, Leanne was dozing in bed when the phone rang. She picked it up, saw the words *Unknown Caller*, and put the phone down without answering.

This happened every night, and every night Leanne left well alone. The police said there wasn't much she could do apart from changing her number and her phone; both of which she did, to no effect. Eventually she decided to just turn it off whenever she went to bed, which worked a treat. At least it did, right up to the night she forgot.

Leanne had returned from a rare but very enjoyable night out with friends and, feeling a little worse for wear, had gone straight to bed.

At some point the phone had rang.

Barely awake from her drunken slumber she rolled over, picked it up and, without thinking or looking at the screen, answered. Silence.

Suddenly becoming sickeningly alert, realising what she had done, Leanne knew what the screen would say: *Unknown Caller*. She also had a good idea what would happen next.

About the Author:

R. P. Serin was born in 1981. In 2018 he graduated from the Open University with a 1st class Honours Degree in History. Since then he has started to write short stories and is currently in the process of completing his first novel. He has also worked in the NHS as an Operating Department Practitioner for over 15 years. He lives in the UK with his wife and two children.

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Satanic Tattoo | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

I entered the neon-lit, skin-art parlor to have Satan's image tattooed on my chest, horns to show within my T-shirt's V-neck. I told the scribe-artist, with faux-finished forearms, "Make him look mean as hell. Don't worry about the devilish, hot-needle pain; I'm bound for Hades anyway, where they say it *really* hurts!"

Being actually a wimp, I yelled "Stop!" before he etched-in the horns—leaving just an ugly face over my heart.

"Not finishing can spell trouble," he warned.

I laughed it off.

During the night, Rhino-like keratin-horns grew from the angrily raw 'chest-head,' stabbing my carotids as I awoke.

Last Pickup | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

I'm walking the highway-edge.

A pretty girl pulls over in a convertible, asks, "Want a ride?"

"No, but thanks."

"I've seen you here before. It's a long walk, get in."

"Okay, if it's no bother."

"None a'tall, glad to finally find you again."

Car-door secured, she accelerates till the turnpike becomes a blue-stream turning gold, then blurred yellow-lights diffusing in darkness.

"Hey, slow down!"

"No worries," screeching to a stop, "we've arrived."

"Wait, I recognize this place—this—graveyard."

"You should! This is where you left me—where—I died. That's my tombstone, there. Yours waits, already labeled, right beside."

About the Author:

Will H. Blackwell, Jr., is an emeritus professor (botany), Miami University (Ohio), presently living in Alabama, where he continues research on water-borne, parasitic fungi. His fiction has been published in: *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, *Disturbed Digest*, *FrostFire Worlds*, *Outposts of Beyond*, *Raven Cage Zine*, *The Drabble*, *365 Tomorrows*, and *Trembling With Fear*.

I squinted into the light of the train as it came at me full speed. The ground vibrated under my eleven-year-old ass, and my heart sped up with anticipation.

WHAH! WHAH!

The street was about fifty feet away, and there was a loud 'ding-ding-ding-ding-ding-ding' where the gates descended to keep vehicles from driving over the tracks. Even if there had been cars stopped, nobody would have seen me. It was pitch dark out and the portion of tracks I was sitting on disappeared into a patch of woods. After the train drove over me, it would cross Hoag Road and then a bridge that reached out of the Skagit River.

I took a deep breath, let it out slowly, watching it turn to fog. It lit up wonderfully in the beam of light coming from the front of the train. I liked trains.

WHAH! WHAH!

I mean, it wasn't an obsession or anything. I didn't have a mini set running around my floor, or locomotive wallpaper. But still, I thought they were pretty cool. When I was a kid, I used to love it when one of my parents would get caught at an intersection waiting for one to pass. I would sit in the backseat counting boxcars. Sometimes they seemed to go on forever.

I wasn't a kid anymore though. I was eleven now. I couldn't even count that many years on my fingers, which was okay, because I stopped using my fingers to count in the third grade.

On both sides of me, metal rails went on forever. The noise seemed to be coming out of them. From my bedroom, it always sounded meek: *tik-a-tik-a-tik-a-tik-a-tik-a-tik-a*. But up close, it was a humbling, thunderous roar.

Steven Miller had said not to touch them, that they had some sort of electricity running through them.

"It's okay to touch 'em when there's no train," he'd said. To demonstrate the point, he had learned down and placed the palm of his meaty hand flat on the track. "But be careful when there's a train comin', Danny. They'll zap the livin' shit outta ya."

That had been two days ago. Frankly, I found it hard to believe there was electricity running through the tracks. Why would there be? But my neighbor was a year and a half older than me and had more experience with this sort of thing.

He said he had even lain on his back before and let the train pass over him, said it was the best experience of his life. That, I did believe. I had heard of other kids doing it. Never seen one, even though we had lived in The Meadows as long as I could remember, and I had spent most of my days playing around the tracks. The closest anybody ever got when I was around was the bottom of the hill that they ran along. A dozen feet at least. I had been told that if you're not careful, being that close, the train would spit rocks at you.

"Seen that too," Steven Miller had said. "Kid used to live right here in The Meadows. Lost his whole eye."

The train was a big part of storytelling in my neighborhood. Some kids claimed to have jumped on and ridden for miles. Others said they caused derailments by laying loose spikes on the beams. (All a long, long time ago, of course.)

Mostly, I just left pennies and came back later to find them flattened like pancakes. But I wanted a story, which was why I snuck out tonight. Why my bedroom window stood open on the other side of the fence, and I sat in my plaid red pyjamas on the damp wooden planks, staring into the light of an oncoming train. My body trembled as cold, humid air brushed against the exposed skin of my face.

My only regret, was that I hadn't brought anybody to witness what I was about to do. But it was well past midnight and nobody would be out this late. Even I shouldn't have been, really. My dad would have welted my backside if he knew. The thunder radiating from the tracks grew louder and the earth began to shake more violently. The train was getting close. I needed to lay down.

WHAH! WHAH!

My heart beat like a snare drum. I felt tiny needles trying to poke their way out from under my skin as I reclined and looked up into the foggy sky. No stars were visible, but the moon peeked curiously around a thin grey cloud—my only witness. Every muscle in my body tensed. I clenched my jaw so tight that I thought I chipped a tooth in the back of my mouth.

WHAAAAAAH!!!!

I closed my eyes, holding my breath, my hands balled into fists. This was it.

Only then did it occur to me that this might really be *it*. What if the stories were all bologna? What if I died? But how? The wheels were far enough apart that I could have fit three of me between them. And I had seen parked trains. They were high. I could have crawled on my hands and knees and they still would have been able to pass over me. But what if there were pieces that hung down? Chains?

The thought of getting whacked in the gonads with a dangling chain didn't sit well with me. Nor the idea of anything dragging across my face. Suddenly, being under that train didn't seem like such a hot idea. And it was close. How close?

The air around me grew somehow colder. I needed to move. I opened my eyes, ready to jump, to roll, to get off the tracks as fast as I could. But instead I froze, stiff as a popsicle stick. Every hair on my body seemed to reach for the sky. Until then, I had never seen death, or experienced the dirty, dirty tingling brought on by its reality as it stares down at you. I could die content if I never know that feeling again.

I gazed up, into the caved-in face of a dark-haired boy, who appeared to be about my age. Only one eye was visible. The other disappeared where half of his skull had collapsed. His jaw hung so far, he could have fit both fists into his mouth. His head rested on one shoulder, as if it had somehow popped off of his neck bone. Blood decorated his white T-shirt in horrible streaks and splotches. With his one good eye, he looked down into mine and blinked.

I screamed. I sat up abruptly and my head hit his, causing it to roll off of his shoulder and dangle from the skin of his neck. The train was right behind him. I didn't have time to get up and I knew it. I screamed again, and was somehow able to take note over the deafening noise that I sounded like a girl. I didn't care though. Funny what does and doesn't matter when you know you're about to die.

The boy grabbed me by my shoulders, shoved me back to the ground, pinning me against the wooden beams. My head collided with a rock, and a sharp pain which shot through my body told me that this wasn't a nightmare.

WHAAAAAAH!!!!

Then the music of hell erupted around me as the train passed over. I closed my eyes as tight as I could, but tears somehow managed to seep through the slits. I'm sure the ground was shaking more violently than ever under my back, but I didn't notice. Fear filled every cell of my body, causing it to vibrate like a jackhammer.

I reopened my eyes and he was still there. Somehow his head was back resting on his shoulder, and he was laying on top of me, holding me down. He wasn't strong, I was paralyzed. Something about his touch seemed to drain the life out of me. Though I didn't try, I knew I wouldn't have been able to look away from his hideous face.

The worst part, though, was the way he stared at me, with his head tilted and that lonely eye trained on me like a hunter's scope. He was emotionless. Cold. His jaw, which I now saw was completely detached from his skull, hung from cheeks, stretching them and resting on my lips.

The train was a blur as it passed above him. Even though the light mounted on the front of the locomotive had long passed, and the night was darker underneath, I somehow saw every horrible detail. I tried to form words, but all that came out of my mouth was a shaky, "Nnnaaagghhh!!!"

I felt a warm spot spread over my crotch. It contrasted with the cold of the night, telling me that I had pissed myself. What could I do? There wasn't a doubt in my mind what the boy was.

I closed my eyes again and thought about what came next. I would die like he had. He probably died the same way, laying under the train. He probably had a neighbor like Steven Miller—with some bologna story about laying on the tracks—who talked him into it.

I didn't want to die. At that moment, that's all I knew. I looked back up into the one eye of the ghost, begging him to read my mind.

Please, I thought. I don't wanna die. Protect me, please.

He just continued to stare. The moment seemed to go on forever, and I thought about everything that mattered to me. For the first time in my eleven years, I understood that life is a privilege, not a right.

Somewhere in the wreckage of what was once the face of a young boy like me, the cold gaze began to make sense. It wasn't cold at all. It was just broken. For the longest second of my life, I felt what he felt. My fear

didn't just evaporate, but it was gone nonetheless, changed into sorrow. It was bigger and more horrible than the tons of steel passing over me. Not because the boy was dead, but because he was lost and always would be.

Then the cloudy sky appeared behind him, and the noise faded out. I looked up and saw the caboose disappear over the bridge, then back at the dead boy. My tears had stopped at some point, I was still shaking though.

"Thanks." I didn't think about it, it just spilled out of me.

He didn't answer, just stood up and began to walk away. I saw then that his back was broken like his neck, and the top half leaned over to one side. He walked with a terrible limp.

I think I expected him to slowly fade out, but that's not what happened. He kept walking until he was so far away that I couldn't see him anymore through the fog. Suddenly, I knew that he hadn't died laying under the train. He had been hit, walking on the tracks.

I went home that night and crawled back in through my window without anybody ever knowing I was gone. I decided not to tell my story to Steven Miller, or any of the other neighborhood kids.

I'm now in my thirties, and telling it for the first time. I never saw the boy again. Every time I see some train tracks, I look for him, but I imagine he's far away by now. Still, I never forget to whisper a "thank you" in the direction that he was walking.

About the Author:

Michael J Moore lives with his wife, author Cait Moore, in Seattle, Washington. His books include *Highway Twenty* and the bestselling novel, *After the Change*, which is used as curriculum at the University of Washington. His work has won awards, has appeared in various magazines and anthologies and has been adapted for theater produced in Seattle.

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Turmoil | Ximena Escobar

The inner tide swells, tangles of weed asphyxiate me. His fist closes in my hair, my face keeps hitting the water. Coldness strips me. My soul sways, splashing against the walls of my ribs, stirring the mud, lashing, scratching. Searching for sins like stones sinking me, but I can't see them, nor the light I am sad to lose; just feel the roughness of his sandpaper jaw. My hair sticks like eels to my eyes, a blob like a hand to my mouth, drowning my scream. Buried in a killer's conscience, I only hear time pounding away in heavy boots.

About the Author:

Ximena Escobar is writing short stories and poetry. Originally from Chile she's lived in the UK for 14 years, where she's been busy raising three wonderfully crazy children, teaching Spanish, and storytelling in schools and festivals. In 2018 she began to write in English, and has since published her work internationally in various anthologies on print and online. She has a degree in Communication Science.

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Here I am on the padded floor lying on my side wide-awake. The chattering mice above me are enjoying their meal of found scrapes within these walls. I think back to the time when I was a young carefree girl, running through an open yard with my long blonde hair trailing behind me. The sun was warmer back then, why has it grown so cold? Is it the actual sun losing its warmth or is it I so consumed with hate and ignorance? Oh, I wish that the world did not change so much.

Everything I once loved dearly is gone my husband and my two little girls. Just thinking about their lifeless eyes staring at me makes me shiver. They were lying on the ground with their innocent blood pooling through their chestnut hair. I heard a scream in the room was that in my head or was that me? To this day I still do not know who screamed. The floor beneath me spun as I walked down the hallway towards our bedroom. 'Ours' how stupid of me it was never 'ours'. He stood there with a magnificent smile on his face. Oh those lips, how I miss the way they taste. He was trying to soothe me by saying how glad he was that this was all over and it could be just us again. I tried to see him through my puffy eyes from all the tears I shed from the act I just committed. I was still in shock from killing my two beautiful babies.

I stabbed them... I just stabbed them repeatedly. Yet during the act, my mind became blank and someone else took over. The way the carving knife felt in my hand it was as if I was supposed to commit myself to this act. It just contoured to my hand and it wielded so beautifully. My girls were so engrossed in their morning cartoons that they did not see the knife hidden behind my back, as I walked towards them. The thoughts that were flying through my mind making me second-guess myself. Put away the knife, walk away my mind was screaming. Yet my determination was so set on having my husband back. His voice crooning in my ear kept me going forward with this plan. He said he'll stop if he could have me to himself again, and the only way was to get rid of the girls. So I did it, I did it for him; I killed my little girls for him.

Now we can't even be together. It's entirely his fault! He promised me no more of his secret life. The booze and the one night stand with the rented lovers that he had hidden for so long. Was that his plan for me to commit this horrible crime so he could throw me away just as he threw our shared memories of our happy life to continue his greedy ways? No, no that cannot be true. He loves me or was that love in past tense?

My cheeks feel wet; I guess have been shedding my tears of hate and sorrow without knowing. I am sorry for my blubbering, but you are the only one I can speak to without feeling judged. You give me the feeling of safety within these walls, with the intent of a good listener. I just needed to let myself lose the pain that I have been carrying for months on end without any interruptions.

After months of sitting in these same walls, my world has completely changed. My husband is nowhere; I wonder where he is now. Probably with his whores of the night feeling nothing because he drank himself into a stupor. On the other hand, maybe he is out there waiting for me. I hope he chose to wait for me. My darling girls laying to rest knowing that their mommy is safe and can't hurt herself or anyone else anymore.

My arms are stiff from being in this position for so long. Do you mind if you help me with this jacket? It is too tight across the shoulders. No? That is okay, I think I can fall asleep now due to the long cry of grief off my chest. Good night, my dear friend; with that she closed her eyes to her only companion. The padded wall.

About the Author:

Breanne Lowe lives in a small community outside of Port Perry Ontario with her loving husband two beautiful children and crazy dog Loki. When life is not busy being best the mom in the world she is creating positive influence mirrors. Or you can catch her reading and writing, anything and everything thing that has to do with horror.

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SIRENS CALL PUBLICATIONS

WHAT DWELLS BELOW



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The Curator hastened to his tasks: the various mise en scenes in The Hall of Hatred. It was his duty and his pride to make sure that every exhibit, every tableau was fixed and accurate, that all was in readiness and primed for the hall's visitors

As usual, the Curator made his way to the central illustration in the hall: The Siege of Baghdad. (Where ninety-thousand had died in one day.) Such a beautiful elemental thing it was. The Curator stood back and stared at it, as he did almost every day. He marveled at the waters of the Tigris River in the foreground, the waters clotted with both ink and blood. He marveled at the broods of Mongols in the background, hustling at sword point the doomed toward said river, their heretical feet shod in the leather covers of books that had not already been burnt or flung into the Tigris with the corpses of the dead.

"Yes..." the Curator said, standing back and squinting at the beautiful chaos. At the mosques and palaces eternally on fire.

At the dead and the dying...

"Yes...oh yes," The Curator repeated. He hastened forward to adjust now—a deel here, a sword there, the arc of blood spurting from some Muslim mathematician's carotid artery.

Until all was perfection...

The Curator now moved on to another display in his Hall. Here, on the banks of yet another great river, young men, their strange uniforms caked in mud, grappled with each other, tried to stab each other, tried to bludgeon each other, tried to KILL, using whatever was at their disposal. Bayonets affixed to guns. Knives. Axes...In one charming scenario, one of the combatants had an old cast iron skillet raised high above his head and was poised to bring it down upon the unfortunate enemy, who was down in the earth, his thin arms raised in a weak defense. Rain fell from the gray sky, creating countless rivulets of mud and blood. These ran off toward the great river: The River Somme. Like small veins leading back to some great artery.

In the center of this display, a heavy armored vehicle appeared to be climbing up from one of the banks of the river, like some strange amphibian monster. This metal beast had an unusual rhomboidal shape and caterpillar tracks that allowed it to move forward and crush whatever stood in its path. Fences. Houses. Men. It was quite a contrast to the diminutive Stone Men who surrounded it. It was like some strange God they were trying to appease. Offering it only violence. And more violence.

"Yes," The Curator said, taking a few steps back to revel in this dream of hate. Always so fulfilling to look at. So...beautiful.

The Curator now walked on through the hall, to a smaller exhibit to the left of the Somme display. Not as ostentatious as the battle tableaux, perhaps. But just as powerful in its own intimate way. Just as...fulfilling.

On a raised platform under the arch, three young men in long white coats were clustered around a wooden table. On the table, there was a fourth man, naked, his thin, emaciated body contorted in agony. Blood was streaming from his mouth and nose and his fingers and toes were dead and black. The other three did nothing to aid the stricken man on the table, but stood and observed him coolly, dispassionately, as if he were some new species of insect captured in a jar. (Which The Curator knew was indeed the mindset of these ersatz scientists.) One of the men held a clipboard in his hands, a yellow pencil poised inches from its surface. Another held a hypodermic needle in one claw like hand.

"Unit 731," The Curator said, his voice coming out in a whisper of awe and respect. Throughout the Hall of Hatred there were other small displays like this one. Small performances, like something taken from the Grand Guignol. Really not even imagined by the Grand Guignol of this planet, this epicenter of HATE called Earth. Ostensible doctors operating, *vivisecting*, without any anesthesia. Injecting lethal diseases (such as in this performance) to coolly study the torture of slow death by bacillus. Under one such proscenium arch, in another wing of the dim hall, a screaming subject was being pinned down by four so-called Men of Science. They had just amputated his right arm (with much blood and viscera) and were in the process of trying to sew the severed limb to the man's left leg. For no purpose but the horror of it. Yes. The horror of that was like some rare delicacy. Visitors to The Hall of Hatred often stood before that for hours, basking in the grizzly operation as if it were some rare art treasure.

Somewhere in the hall the opening gong sounded. The Curator's gray tendrils quivered with satisfaction. All was in readiness for another successful day. All the displays were fixed, poised, ready to unfold. As they had for a very long time. It was a curious note that so many of the displays in the hall came from this one particular place in the universe, this one infinitesimal, watery rock called Earth. So curious, also, that the species there hadn't blown themselves to pieces early in their existence...

But what a treasure. What a boon...

The Curator now glided on gray, spindly legs toward the entrance doors of The Hall of Hate, his compound eyes making one last-minute inspection. Yes. Everything was ready. The Battle of Gettysburg. The Meuse-Argonne offensive. The Battle of Stalingrad.

Everything...

The Curator let out a shrill whistle and the hall, as it did every day, came alive with the sounds of cannons and rifles. Shouts and screams. Came alive with smoke and fireworks. He let it all wash over his gray body. He warmed himself in the intoxicating brew, in the fever dream called HATE.

Then, he hastened to open the doors.

About the Author:

Michael Walker is a writer living in Newark, Ohio. He is the author of two published books: 7-22, a YA fantasy novel and The Vampire Henry, a "literary" horror novel. He has also seen his stories and poems published in various magazines including Weirdbook, Adelaide Literary Magazine, and PIF.

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Disenchantment | C.A. Yates

The princess would not look at the prince a moment longer. She had dreamed of this day for so long and now... Her long hair trailed through the puddle of blood as she turned from his butchered body, the knife in her hand banging gently against her leg as she walked, stepping over the bodies of her other 'suitors'. During the long days of her imprisonment she had been taught to fear her fate but, in the end, it had all been such a disappointment. Men. The princess sighed and wondered how one went about preparing human flesh for dinner.

We All Have Teeth | C.A. Yates

We all have teeth, dear... and oh! Such teeth we have! All the better to eat you with, wouldn't you say? Wouldn't you like that dear? To be useful, to be part of things? It's a ritual, nothing fancy, just a little something to bring about the End of the World, dear. You look like you're tasty, like you take care of yourself, like you eat well. Do you smoke, dear? I didn't think so. Your teeth are far too white, healthy looking. You don't smell of it either and that's good because around here we make our own marinade.

About the Author:

C.A. Yates has written lots of odd stories. Her most recent appeared in Kristell Ink's anthology *Hanging on by Our Fingertips* and in BFS Award-winning press Fox Spirit Book's *The Jackal Who Came in From the Cold*. She narrates for podcasts such as *Pseudopod*, *Cast of Wonders*, and *Star Ship Sofa*.

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Two years ago we bought a holiday house in Aberdour, a village on the East coast of Scotland. Our house was the second nearest to the railway station and the Aberdour castle (which according to a local leaflet, was one of the two oldest castles in Scotland), and the first house which was occupied, at least from time to time. We never saw the next-door neighbours to our right and on our left was a bakery. One day I told Alex jokingly that if somebody was running away from the castle or the station looking for help, we would be the first who they'd approach. This is exactly what happened, albeit not in reality, but in my dream which I had one of these wintery nights between Christmas and New Year, which I spent with Alex in Aberdour, while my husband was travelling for work in England.

It was also a wintery night in my dream. In it I was about to go to bed when I heard knocking on our door. When I opened it, I saw a woman of an undefined age. She looked strange, because she was dressed only in a long creamy-coloured dress and had wooden clogs on her bare feet, and long blond shiny hair which were moving even though there was no wind. She was very pale and she didn't say a word, only pointed to her mouth, so I guessed she was hungry. I sat her at the kitchen table and prepared for her some sandwiches and a cup of tea with milk, to which she nodded approvingly and put her hand on her heart, to show her gratitude. When she was eating, I noticed that not only she was pale, but her body was practically transparent - I could see bones under her skin. Moreover, she was eating in an unusual way, as she didn't bite from the slice of bread, but tore out a piece and put it in her mouth, as I saw on some films, showing the life of Russian peasants in pre-Revolutionary times. Yet, although she ate this way and was thin, pale and haggard, she didn't look like a peasant. On the contrary, there was something regal about her, as if she was used to giving orders.

When she finished, she asked me for a pen and a piece of paper, on which she drew Aberdour castle, but not as it looked now, mostly in ruins, but when it was in its full glory in the medieval times. The castle on her picture had a cellar where there was a dungeon and she drew there a woman with long hair and two children, a boy and a girl. I guessed the woman was herself and the kids were her offspring. She also drew a king or possibly an earl, given that the castle was not a royal castle, but only the home of some Scottish aristocrats. There was a woman next to him and then she put a crown on the head of the mother and crossed it and then drew it on the head of the woman standing next to the king. I thus gathered that she was a queen or a princess abandoned by her husband for another woman and that her (ex)husband imprisoned her. The story seemed very medieval to me, which made sense, given her look and the way she acted.

I made a sad face when she finished, to express my sympathy. There was no point to tell her anything, as she was obviously deaf and I didn't want to wake up Alex whose bedroom was next to the kitchen. She put her hand on her heart again to thank me, but also took my hand and moved my finger from her kids and herself to the place occupied by the king and the new queen. I realised that she wanted me to help her overcome her predicament. I sighed as helping people was something which used to tire me immensely in my middle age. I took another piece of paper and with much less skill than her drew a railway station and the train, and Alex and myself, and like her, put a finger on us to move us to the train, to show her that we were about to leave. She asked when and I replied the day after tomorrow. It was a lie, as we were meant to spend four more days in Aberdour, and also a mistake - I should have told her that we would be leaving the same day. This is because one day in a dream lasts much longer than one day in reality - one can build a fortress during a dream of this length. Not surprisingly, the Mute Lady was happy and made a sign which I interpreted as 'plenty of time'. In this case it was plenty of time to take her to a better place from which she could fight back for her lawful inheritance. She was happy to inscribe my entire family into this plan, even though I told her that we were rather apolitical and my husband was not particularly welcoming to strangers.

Then she ordered me to make more sandwiches and go with her, and she took me to the castle and stopped near the cellar-cum-dungeon. There was nothing inside - an empty hole, like a socket without an eye. There was some wood, tools and rubbish scattered around it, a sign of on-going excavation and restoration of the castle. But this is not how the Mute Lady saw it. She descended into the cellar twice and climbed back, each time with an invisible child, as suggested by the position of her arm and the fact that she was kissing the air where the head of the child was meant to be. Then she took me to the dovecote, which served her as a storage area - she kept her some kitchen utensils, clothes and trunk with golden coins and other valuables. It occurred to me that it would be more practical to live in a dovecote and keep things in a cellar, but there was no time to ask such questions.

I realised that she entrusted me with the mission of saving her entire family and punishing the unfaithful earl. I thought that it was a relief that all these royalties were phantoms; otherwise I could end up in this dungeon myself for supporting the wrong branch of the royal family and even be tortured. At the same time I knew that they were

phantoms only in this layer of reality; if I fell asleep, they became visible and tangible. This was because the deeper I fell asleep, the more dead people I encountered and the more I lost from those who were real to me in the world of my consciousness. On this occasion I dreaded that I would lose Alex, who would be trapped in this layer of reality between the material world and a dream within a dream. Hence, I couldn't fall asleep. Luckily there was plenty of coffee in the kitchen.

The Mute Lady left me at the entrance to the dungeon and told me that she would return the next day with her kids and their belongings. Before she left I asked her to give me her name and she said 'Johanna' or 'Joanna'. She didn't ask about mine, which I attributed to her regal ways – the royals do not have time to learn their subjects' names. By the time we parted, I was proficient in sign language – the advantage of dreaming in both senses (sleeping and wishing for something) is that one learns things much faster than in reality. It also occurred to me that it was a blessing that we used drawings and sign language to communicate, because if she spoke in Middle English, most likely I wouldn't understand her.

I returned home and made myself a large pot of coffee in order not to fall asleep till I wake up from this dream. But after a couple of hours I gave into tiredness and went to bed. Luckily, when I wake up, I was still in the same dream as before and Alex was sleeping in his bed, next door to the kitchen. I decided to go out to do some shopping, as after Johanna's visit we were low on bread, cheese and other essentials. While out, I noticed a small gathering in front of the railway station. I went closer to find out what it was about and it turned out that it concerned the renovation of the castle. Two older women, one short, one tall, with loud speakers, were leading a meeting and they said that the renovation was dragging on, especially given that the castle was not exactly the Notre Dame.

'The work ethic of the labourers leaves a lot to be desired, there is no proper signage and the tourists don't know which part of the castle they are allowed to visit and which is off-limits. Somebody made a hole in the wall and some tourists have taken advantage of that, visiting the castle without buying tickets. Most importantly, the cellar is a safety hazard – a visitor can easily slip and break a limb,' complained the taller of the two women.

'The castle garden looks more like an abandoned picnic than a historical monument,' continued the shorter one. 'Also, it looks like some homeless people or, worse, hippies, started to occupy the dovecote and the cellar, as at night the residents from the neighbouring houses hear moaning and crying coming from these places. Council workers have also found pieces of cloth, covered in faeces and blood and even soiled nappies made of some strange material, like wool. There's also been knocking on some doors at night, but when people opened the door, there was nobody there. We must ensure that the work on the castle is completed in a timely manner and that the intruders are banished from our community.'

'For this purpose, we've set up a committee, demanding that Historic Scotland patch up the hole in the wall surrounding the castle, lock the door to the dovecote and cover up the cellar, so that nobody can get in there. We prepared a petition which we would like each adult inhabitant of Aberdour to sign,' concluded the tall woman, before approaching the people surrounding them with a piece of paper. Soon she gave it to me to sign.

'What exactly do you want to be done with the cellar?' I asked her.

'To fill it with concrete, as it was before. If the people who are in charge don't do it, we'll do it ourselves. Do you have anything against it?' she asked me, clearly unhappy that I expected her to repeat such information.

'No, of course not,' I said, signing and thinking that I have to warn Johanna about these plans.

'Thank you,' said the petition-holder, moving to my neighbour when the other woman announced: 'Our petition will also be available online. Make sure your neighbours sign it, if they haven't done so already.'

Back at home Alex was already awake and asked me what the people were doing practically in front of our house. I explained to him that it was to do with the noise and disruption during the castle's renovation. I was on the verge of telling him about Johanna whom I promised to take with us to our home in Lancashire, but something prevented me, most likely the concern that he wouldn't believe me. So I didn't say anything.

A couple of hours later Alex discovered that his iPad stopped working that night and started to nag me to return home, where we had a spare one. To his surprise, I agreed. We packed our stuff and decided to take an early afternoon train to Edinburgh. When we were on our way to the station, I noticed some activity by the castle. I left Alex with our suitcases to check what was going on there and noticed that the workers had put metal bars on the entrance to the cellar. There was some noise coming from below.

'Somebody is crying in there,' I said to the workmen.

'Nobody's there; it's an echo,' replied one of them. 'The cellar has been built in a way which attracts the smallest noise and amplifies it. This is the reason the cellar was filled in, when it stopped being used as a dungeon. This is what this whole protest is about – the echo.'

'I see,' I said and left in order not to miss the train.

Before we boarded the train, I woke up – it was the postman who woke me up or so I thought, as somebody put something through the letterbox. I went down and found an invitation to a lecture by some historian from Edinburgh titled 'The Mute Lady of Aberdour: Facts and Myths'. I opened the door to see who'd brought it, but there was nobody there.

About the Author:

Ewa Mazierska is historian of film and popular music, who writes short stories in her spare time. In 2019 she published her first collection of short stories, 'Neighbours and Tourists' (Adelaide Books), which won Grand Prize in Eyelands Book Award competition. Ewa is also a Pushcart nominee. She was born in Poland, but lives in Lancashire, UK.

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The Glooms | C.A. Yates

Shadows fall across the already dark city. The bitterness they bring makes babes cry out in their sleep, the old and young alike become restless in their dreaming. Cats and dogs creep from their hiding places, hackles raised, ears flat to their heads. The Glooms have come and the Glooms will have their way. They bring anger and despair, they feed from the discord they wreak. In the morning, the city will wake with angst heavy in every citizen's heart. They will not know why, but their blood will roar and war will come. The Glooms always have their way.

For Mercy has a Human Heart | C.A. Yates

Mercy stared at the still pulsing muscle in her hand. She wasn't entirely sure what she should do with it. Honestly? She hadn't thought much beyond getting her revenge and she had definitely got that. Jim's eviscerated body was more than proof of it. She looked down at him and frowned as she saw how much blood had stained her brand new hi-tops. They. Were. Brand. New. Furious, she bared her teeth and, with a screech of rage, she ripped into the heart. She tore a piece from it, her jaw cracking as she chewed. Temporomandibular syndrome is a bitch.

About the Author:

C.A. Yates has written lots of odd stories. Her most recent appeared in Kristell Ink's anthology *Hanging on by Our Fingertips* and in BFS Award-winning press Fox Spirit Book's *The Jackal Who Came in From the Cold*. She narrates for podcasts such as *Pseudopod*, *Cast of Wonders*, and *Star Ship Sofa*.

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Out Of Phase



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NOBLE, KOBO, AND ITUNES**

Inspiration and Issues in *Visions and Nightmares*

In my latest book, *Visions and Nightmares*, a collection of horror fantasy stories, all the protagonists are female and each story is an exploration of tragedy and human emotion, with some taking a look at deeper issues specific to women. I try to examine the scars left behind by abuse, obsession, loss and betrayal, through the filter and fiction of horror fantasy.

Of course, my characters do very bad things, and confront situations none of us will ever face, but it is the underlying motivation which drives them to their breaking points, which I believe gives depth to the book. For my character Alice, it is madness and a realization that touches on self-harm, delusion, and manipulation by others. Dr. Killbride descends into madness as well, but from obsession and betrayal. She becomes the ultimate stalker looking for love.

For Zenna, Elenora, Ida, and Isobel, their tragedy is tied to who they are and the restrictive roles society attempts to force on them. Zenna's story especially shows the way culture and belief can conform a person until their life is nothing but a prison. Elenora has a similar storyline, with marriage and gender roles being paralleled to the fantasy circumstances in her tale. For Ida and Isobel, family dynamics are explored and how loved ones can become enemies, and expectations, weapons. Domestic abuse and childhood neglect in particular are two issues that surface and explode into disturbing events. Certain aspects of self worth and beauty are also dealt with in Ida's story, and the idea that love and favouritism can be tied to physical appearance.

For my Djinn and Aeryi, their stories bloom from the betrayal of loved ones, and a loss of trust. One woman molds herself into a cynical survivor and the other turns to lies and revenge. Both showcase the darker side of survival.

Olivia's and Annalisa's tale are softer, more subtle, full of insecurity and loss. Both delve into the theme of sudden disaster and death, but also self-doubt and guilt. I think they are the saddest tales in the book.

Overall, the inspiration for the book came from the human condition and what makes us all tick, but especially the issues of gender and the consequences of repression, abuse, and neglect.



About the Author:

A steadfast and proud sci-fi and fantasy geek, A. F. Stewart was born and raised in Nova Scotia, Canada and still calls it home. The youngest in a family of seven children, she always had an overly creative mind and an active imagination. She favours the dark and deadly when writing—her genres of choice being fantasy and horror—but she has been known to venture into the light on occasion. As an indie author she's published novels, novellas and story collections, with a few side trips into poetry.

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VISIONS AND NIGHTMARES

Ten Stories of
Dark Fantasy
and Horror

Revenge
Death
Fate

A. F. Stewart

Courser

Aeryi huddled against the brick wall, pressed into a dim and dingy corner of a backstreet alley. Danger stalked the hours after the twelfth bell chimed. Creatures—beasts both otherworldly *and* mortal—emerged from shadowed streets to hunt. She shivered, the echo of her dead father’s voice ringing in her head.

“Never be a victim, child. Never.”

Footsteps echoed from the front of the alley where it met the street. A husky voice sang a shanty song off-key, and a burly drunken sailor stumbled down towards Aeryi. From her hiding place, she smelled his sweat and the stink of fish mixed with cheap liquor.

“Hey. Is someone back there?” The man stopped, swaying on his feet, and peered into the shadows.

Damn, he’s spotted me. Not the best timing, but it will have to do.

Aeryi smiled, a cold, lifeless salute, and leapt from her hiding place in a diving roll. She slashed her knife with practised ease. Her prey, the poor drunkard, screamed and fell on the cobblestones, his calf half-severed and bleeding. In one swift motion she sprang to her feet, staring down at the injured man. His blood dripped from her knife onto the stony ground.

“Come and feed,” she whispered, and the alley swirled with black pulsing mist.

She watched the air solidify as pale hunched-over creatures cloaked in ebon smoke and incorporeal substance shuffled from the dark night. She watched as the unnatural things gravitated to the groaning man, who wriggled on the stones, still unaware of his fate. Her father’s voice again whispered in her ear.

“Sometimes a devil’s bargain is all you have.”

Some part of her wanted to look away, but she kept her gaze straight ahead on the unfolding scene. The beings swarmed the poor unfortunate soul with gnashing teeth and slicing claws.

“What are you? Get away! Stay away! No, no, please, no!”

The drunk’s shrieks filled the alley as his death surrounded him. They paid no heed to his screams and pleas for mercy; they thought only of their meal. In sloppy gulps and licking tongues their razor teeth devoured flesh and bone, drank of bile and blood, until not a scrap of body remained.

One turned to Aeryi then, a ragged-toothed smile peeking from an eternal black emptiness with red eyes that swirled in unknown emotion. “Good hound.” A raspy semblance of a voice addressed her. “Find good meat.” It raised its facsimile of a limb and patted her head with blood-stained claws. Only experience and practice prevented Aeryi from shuddering. “Now find more. Still hungry.”

“Yes, master. As you command.” She gave a slight bow. “Another kill tonight. I’ll find you someone.”

Another smile and the thing and its fellows melted back into the shadows. Aeryi headed into the street to find another victim for the beasts that controlled her. The echo of her father’s voice followed her as she stalked the town, her mind full of the words he spoke the day he bound her body and soul to the creatures.

“One day you’ll understand. One day you’ll thank me. This way you’ll be safe. This way you’ll be strong. Better to be predator than prey.”

Whispers caught her attention. A man and a woman under a shaded awning beside an alley. She smiled.

Fresh meat.

She slithered forward to find a concealed vantage point, hiding in the night’s embrace, waiting, watching. Her gaze followed the man’s hands as they moved over the woman’s body, studied their lips as they pressed together in a kiss. Memories stirred of the first boy she kissed. She had enjoyed the moment, but not what came after. No, she did not enjoy seeing her father’s knife cut the boy’s throat. She remembered screaming, being held by her father, made to watch her friend bleed out and die.

Most of all she remembered the whispers in her ear. “Emotion will kill you. Love will weaken you. It will make you vulnerable.”

Is that how you felt about Mother?

The almost forgotten memory of a face surfaced—a warm smile and kind eyes. Aeryi remembered being happy then. Her father laughed when her mother lived with them.

Did he love her then? Did she love him? It couldn't have lasted. Not at the end.

Aeryi watched the lovers on the street, playing the questions over in her head along with the images of her mother's last days. The look of betrayal, her screams as men dragged her from the house. She never saw her again.

Traded to pay Father's gambling debts. Sold off without a second thought. That was the day he changed. The day the obsession started.

The couple's laughter brought her back to the now. They moved deeper into the alley, out of her line of sight. She uncoiled from her crouching position and went on the move, silently crossing the street to skulk behind a wooden barrel and view her targets. She paused, senses alert, but the couple were too busy with each other to notice anything else.

She settled in, enjoying her voyeuristic view of the couple's amorous pursuits, the flash of skin, their moans and cries of pleasure. She could have moved in and taken them down, but it didn't seem right to end their lives before they were through with each other.

Let them have one last moment of happiness before the end.

Inwardly she sighed, her gut twisting in regret and sorrow.

I could walk away. Find someone else.

Her father's disapproving face flickered in her mind and she heard his words, one of the many lessons he drilled into her head: *"Never let sentiment stop you. To survive, you must be stronger than the rest of the world. You must be ruthless. The weak succumb to temptation. The weak betray. The weak die. Never be weak."*

I'm not. I'll never be weak. Not like he was. He wasn't even strong enough to bind himself to my masters. He thought using me instead would protect him. That I would be his shield, keep him safe.

Aeryi clenched her jaw and readied her knife. There would be no reprieve for the pair in the alley. She waited until they finished, until they were fixing their clothing, before she darted forward along the shadows, knife ready to strike.

They never saw her coming.

Two slashes with the blade and it was over. The woman shrieked, her abdomen sliced open, blood gushing over skirts. She slid along the wall and collapsed. Aeryi cut deeper with the man, twisting the blade as she pulled it along his flesh. He fell to his knees trying to hold his guts inside his body.

She shouted, "Come and feed."

Aeryi stood there, waiting for the shadows to swirl, her thoughts again dwelling on her father, about his words. About the one thing he made her learn.

Always better to be predator than prey.

He was right about that one thing. He made her the perfect predator. Aeryi stepped back as she watched her masters descend on the couple, the pair nothing more than prey.

That is what it comes down to, doesn't it, Father? Survival. What you taught me. Whatever it takes. Betray anyone to survive.

Her memories flickered, and thoughts of her father's last moments surfaced. She savoured the memory of cutting him, of calling her masters to feed on him.

Her father's dying screams were his best lesson.

To read more from [Visions and Nightmares](#), please visit [Amazon](#)!



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*Visions and Nightmares:
Ten Stories of Dark Fantasy and Horror*

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