

The Sirens Call



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TWISTED REALITIES OF MYTH AND MONSTROSITY



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"What fearfu' pranks ensue!"* *An Editorial by Nina D'Arcangela*

What's so special about October? Halloween! Who doesn't love Halloween? Other than the puritanical settlers of New England. You remember those guys – the first 'civilized' people to colonize, or rather get lost and happen to land, on the North American east coast claiming it as their own (a rather arrogant notion if you ask me given the fact that there were already people living there).

Anyway, when I think of Halloween, I don't only think of overpriced candy and store bought costumes; I remember the history surrounding this day of ghouls and treats. The Irish Samuin, the Celtic festival of Samhain, and the Christian observance of All Hallow's Eve (or *All-Hallows-Even* if you want to get technical about it). It's the one time of year when the veil between the worlds of the dead and the living is said to be at its thinnest. It's the eve that marked the end of the growing season. A time when those who have passed were once again welcome to visit the living. And the night preceding the two day festival that Christian doctrine has set aside for honoring their saints.

Over the last century, it has morphed into a fun-filled day of anticipation and treats for the young of age and spirit alike. Based on many old traditions, like hollowing out a gourd to be used as a lantern to guide wayward spirits on their journey, or 'guising' oneself as protection from evil 'bogies'; we carve pumpkins into Jack-O-Lanterns and dress in fun, funny, or scary costumes to let off a little steam and have a good time.

Dating back to the middle ages, children would go door-to-door performing a 'trick' in the form of song, dance or storytelling, and in return they would collect a 'treat' such as a small cake, fruit, or coin. Now a days, we simply wander up, ring the bell and say "trick-or-treat" on what usually turns out to be a somewhat chilly and shriek filled night of babies who want out of their strollers; kids who don't want to go up *those stairs*; and frustrated parents checking their watches, wanting nothing more than to get home after a long day at work. Not a cynical outlook, just realistic for those who don't relish the opportunity of being terrified, or understand the true joy of scaring the crap out of someone else.

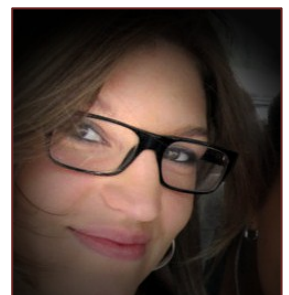
I genuinely love Halloween – it's my favorite holiday. It's a time to watch horror films until your eyes and ears bleed; eat so much candy and junk food that you ride the perpetual rollercoaster of 'I think I over-did-it'; and consume copious amounts of pumpkin flavored ale that force you to make promises to a deity or two that you will never keep. Or maybe you'll indulge in a quiet evening where you turn off all the lamps in the house, light one candle and listen silently to the Orson Wells broadcast of 'War of the Worlds' in its authentic, panic-inducing, non-digitally enhanced form (everyone should do this at least once in a lifetime – skipping it is like never watching the broadcast of the Hindenburg tragedy and wondering why we don't use hydrogen in its gaseous form for airship flight).

Halloween is a small period of grace where those of us who refuse to cap our imaginations have the opportunity to let our hair down, make other people's children (and a few adults) run away screaming in terror, and have some good old fashioned fun without going to jail for it!

And by the way, don't forget to follow at least one of the Horror Writing tours going on this season. There are some spectacular imaginings about to unfold in honor of the season. I'm writing for Coffin Hop on my blog. What are you reading? ~ Nina D.

*credited to Scottish poet John Mayne – 1780

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Nina D'Arcangela was the type of girl who, when given a doll as a child, would immediately pop its head off to see what was inside, then spend countless hours contemplating how so many fantastic and fantastical things could be in her own head while the doll's was so very vacant. Nina can be reached through Sirens Call Publications at Nina@SirensCallPublications.com; or darc.nina@gmail.com. Please visit her on her blog "Sotet Angyal: The Dark Angel" at sotetangyal.wordpress.com; or "Spreading the Writer's Word" at ninadarc.wordpress.com; and feel free to stalk her on Twitter as [@Sotet_Angyal](https://twitter.com/Sotet_Angyal).



Trick or Treat? *An Editorial by Kalla Monahan*

October is one of my favourite months of the year. Not only so I get to have Turkey and stuffing (I'm Canadian and my Thanksgiving happens in October where it should be...), but it's also the time for Halloween. I LOVE Halloween. As an author (admittedly I don't write in the horror genre as a rule, sticking mainly to mysterious thrillers), it's the time of year where all the things that go bump in the night flow from my brain to my nimble fingers. I love going into stores and gazing at the spooky displays of costumes and candy, wondering which little goblins and ghosties I will see at my door on the 31st.

As one of my favourite times of the year, I enjoy the palettes of orange, yellow, white and black. The decorations on the outsides of the houses and the almost ornate designs of the comically macabre that spread each year into my neighbour's yards. I love the smell of my first pumpkin and the crooked smile of my first Jack 'O Lantern. Each year I create at least three designs; from the simple to the ornate. Last year it was Ernie from *Sesame Street*, a puking pumpkin, and a scaredy cat arching its back. This year I have yet to make my choices, but I do have to get on to it since I need to go pumpkin hunting soon. That's the kind of nut I am. Heck, I even hold a costume party every year with prizes for the best costumes. My friends know to come dressed to impress and to put a lot of thought into it ahead of time.

It shouldn't come as a shock to any of you, given my love of Halloween that I'd choose it as a source of inspiration for this issue *The Sirens Call*.

Trick or treat anyone?

Let's start off with trick... Has anyone else noticed how steadily and stealthily Christmas has been encroaching into Halloween's turf? In the past, Christmas marketing started directly after October 31st – at least here in Canada. While the cashiers were busy with discount candy sales, the store clerks would be dressing the store with holly boughs and red bows galore. All in preparation for the next major holiday.

Now, I'm beginning to see Christmas decorations even now! It's the middle of October for crying out loud! I call foul and if I had my way, stores would be outlawed from advertising for Christmas before the 31st. Pretty soon, you won't have ghosts and ghoulies running around the neighbourhood on Halloween, you'll have Santa, elves and gingerbread people. Now there's a scary thought! We're being tricked I tell you...

Now it's time for a treat!

Just think it's only a few more days until Halloween! That means candy, costumes, and everything scary! Television channels are playing scary movie classics and soon it will be time for *It's The Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown* on CBC.

It's the hap-happiest time of the year! With a twist of gore and gallon of blood! Stay scared my friends...



ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Kalla is the quiet one at SCP but don't let that fool you; get her started on one of our projects and she will passionately talk your ear off. And as the Publicist of SCP, it's valuable to have someone that can both listen to the tides of the publishing world and sing your praises. Her literary loves include horror, science fiction and the bizarre. While she does have a weak spot for a good Zombie storyline and will greedily devour anything in the genre, she does get titillated by works in any genre that are well crafted and full of great characters.

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Little Lost Girl *David Revilla*

It was cold. The wind's unseen fingers caressed her porcelain skin, sending shivers down her spine. Rubbing her arms futilely for warmth, the girl's steps crunched loudly on the leaf-strewn ground. The forest was empty save for the wind. Trees swayed like drunkards unable to find their balance, their arms stripped bare. The incessant cry of the wind brought to mind the world breathing its last breath, the air sighing out of its lungs against the inevitable end. Death was in the air tonight. Even the moon, too frightened to show her face, pulled the cover of night over her head to hide. There were no stars. All light had left this world.

So it was that a lone soul wandered through this end of life. She wore a skirt, which only added to her misery. Her legs had grown so numb that walking had become an involuntary action. *Left...right...left...right*—they continued to move without her consent, taking her deeper into a place she did not want to be. It almost became like an out-of-body experience where she was watching the legs of some other girl, some other victim of the night, making her way through the forest. What had brought her here? Why could she not find an exit? The girl had no answers. Each stride was slower than the last. The wind embraced her. Soon it would hold onto her forever.

The girl wore a school uniform bearing the coat of arms of her faith. This coat of arms was meant to serve as a shield against all things dark. As of now all it did was cling to her school sweater. The locks of her dark hair flapped wildly like leaves about to be stripped from their nesting place among the boughs. She closed her eyes, squinting, trying to ignore the pained sounds that escaped her lips. She was dying, she knew. It was all she did know for nothing else mattered. Could she go back the way she came? No. There was no going back there. She did not even know where *there* was. Where was *here*? Why was she *here*?

Her breath fogged up before her, the final vestiges of warmth escaping her body. Her heart and lungs would be among the last things to shut down after hypothermia settled in. It was the body's way of preserving the more vital organs while the outer extremities froze over and died. She wished her brain would shut down; anything to escape this maddening cold and feeling of loss.

Seconds seemed like minutes. Minutes felt like hours. The girl had lost all track of time. Life before this moment did not exist anymore. There was no past or future, only the present. Anyone who said that the present was a gift obviously forgot the idiom about the Trojan horse, where a gift can have disastrous outcomes. A present was meaningless without a past to reflect upon or a future to look forward to. It was empty, just like this moment in time.

I'm dying.

The voice was loud. She soon realized that it had been her own, inside her head. Her spirit was ready to leave and she'd gladly let it flee if it would agree to take her with it. An illusion at first, she spotted what appeared to be a stone bench. Not questioning its presence, for she was far beyond questions, her legs began to move toward it. For once her mind and legs had come to an agreement: it was time to die. Finding her way to the bench, the girl sat down. Then she did the only thing she could to ease her suffering before the end and curled her body into a ball. Hugging her knees to her chest, she tried to ignore the chattering of her own teeth.

Please be soon.

She was scared, of that there was no doubt, but the promise of everlasting peace was there as well. It's strange, she thought as she felt the wind snuggle against her like a provocative lover, but this was first time she had known true peace in a long time. Maybe death wasn't so bad after all. Maybe when it was over she could finally stop caring... stop caring about anything and everything. The sweet touch of oblivion and it would all be over. No more concerns. No more suffering. She would know no more and that was the sweetest knowledge of all.

But wait...

She wasn't alone. How could she have not sensed that presence before? It was there. It was always there. It had always been there. The presence, this primal force, had been waiting for her all this time. How long had it been kept waiting? Surely it would not be mad at her for getting lost along the way. She had always been lost.

But now I am found.

It came...he came...surely as if she had been expected. Standing over her, his figure as black as the night, hood pulled over his head so that nothing but his chin protruded from beneath the cowl, the presence leaned in close. He could feel the girl's energy leaving her, like the dying embers from a fire. The light would soon be gone —but not yet...there was business to conclude.

"Have you decided?" The presence asked her. His voice, like two whispers speaking as one, had silenced the wind as surely as if he were the one generating it. When all was silent, when nothing else mattered, the girl peeled back the lids of her eyes to glimpse at the most handsome man she had ever seen, the hood pulled back just enough so that she could see his face.

She tried to smile but her face felt frozen. It hurt to even blink, but blink she did, for the tears started to fall. They were tears of sadness. They were tears of joy. They were tears of resignation.

It is time.

"Yes," her voice was barely a whisper but to the presence, whose ears were attuned to the smallest noise, they were as clear as a bell.

"And are you ready?" He knew her answer. She had to speak the words, though. Her final words would bind them in their pact...forever.

She raised her head. For the girl, just on the verge of death, it was the most physically demanding task she had ever performed. "Yes." Her strength gone, the girl's head slumped to the surface, her last breath hissing from her mouth like a serpent finally released from its cage.

With a nod and a smile, a gesture both beautiful and horrible, the presence looked up into the sky. Peeking from underneath the covers, the moon glimpsed from a place of safety. The terms accepted, the presence gently placed his arms underneath the dead girl. Taking her into his arms the way a groom would his bride, he spread his wings. Dark robes spread from his form, molding into obsidian feathers. Wider than he was tall, a single flap of his wings sent them skyward to become one with the night.

Left alone, the bench remained in its solitary station, forever rooted to the ground. A single gem remained from where the girl had passed on, a small piece of her left to commemorate her existence. A teardrop, frozen solid, immeasurably beautiful, sat there on the bench...waiting for its mistress to come home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - David Revilla is a recent college graduate of Pace University's Publishing Program who has dreamed of becoming a professional writer since the third grade. A New York City native, born and raised in Queens, whose love of reading began with R.L. Stine's young horror series *Goosebumps*. David wrote his first book by hand when he was still in 4th grade, though it's probably gathering dust somewhere and he'd be hard-pressed to find it now. David's favorite genres include science-fiction, fantasy and horror and only recently has he discovered the joys, and horrors, of reading Stephen King's short story anthologies. His favorite author is Robert Anthony Salvatore, creator of such epics as the *Legend of Drizzt* and the *Demonwars* saga of novels. Contact David directly at drevilla119@yahoo.com or follow him on Twitter at @DavidRevilla1.



Buried *Julianne Snow*

I awoke to find myself clawing through dirt. My breathing was restricted, a heavy weight pressed against my chest, seemingly constricting my efforts further each time I expelled precious air from my lungs. Pure and unadulterated terror warred with common sense inside my brain. Losing it now was not going to help me, but I was so close to the brink. Closer than I had ever been before. Closer than I could ever remember.

I remember being held under the water as a child. My family had gone on vacation to Florida and we'd spent many lazy days on the beach, sunning ourselves and swimming. The ocean is an amazingly scary thing, especially if you've never seen the power contained within each wave before.

It was in that rolling continuum of azure that I had my first brush with death. As I frolicked in the shallows, someone grabbed my ankles and roughly pulled me under. I fought my attacker then, hoping a kick would free me. But the hold on my ankles was solid; too solid, and there was no way I would have been able to simply kick myself free.

The only thing that saved me that day was my father. He had seen the spot where I had disappeared under the surface and run to make sure I was okay. From the story he told the authorities later in the day, he was certain that something had grabbed me. Thinking it was a shark, he'd splashed through the water to save me, only to find that once he pulled me free, I had no bite marks marring my young flesh.

The uncontrollable blathering of a young and frightened child added nothing to the investigation, so the police chalked my accident up to a strong, but isolated undertow. I knew different, however. In a moment of incalculable fear, I had seen its face.

Grotesque is not even a word that can adequately describe what I saw under the water that day. It was a face made only for nightmares and to be honest, it certainly haunted mine. With a deep understanding, I knew it would be back to collect me.

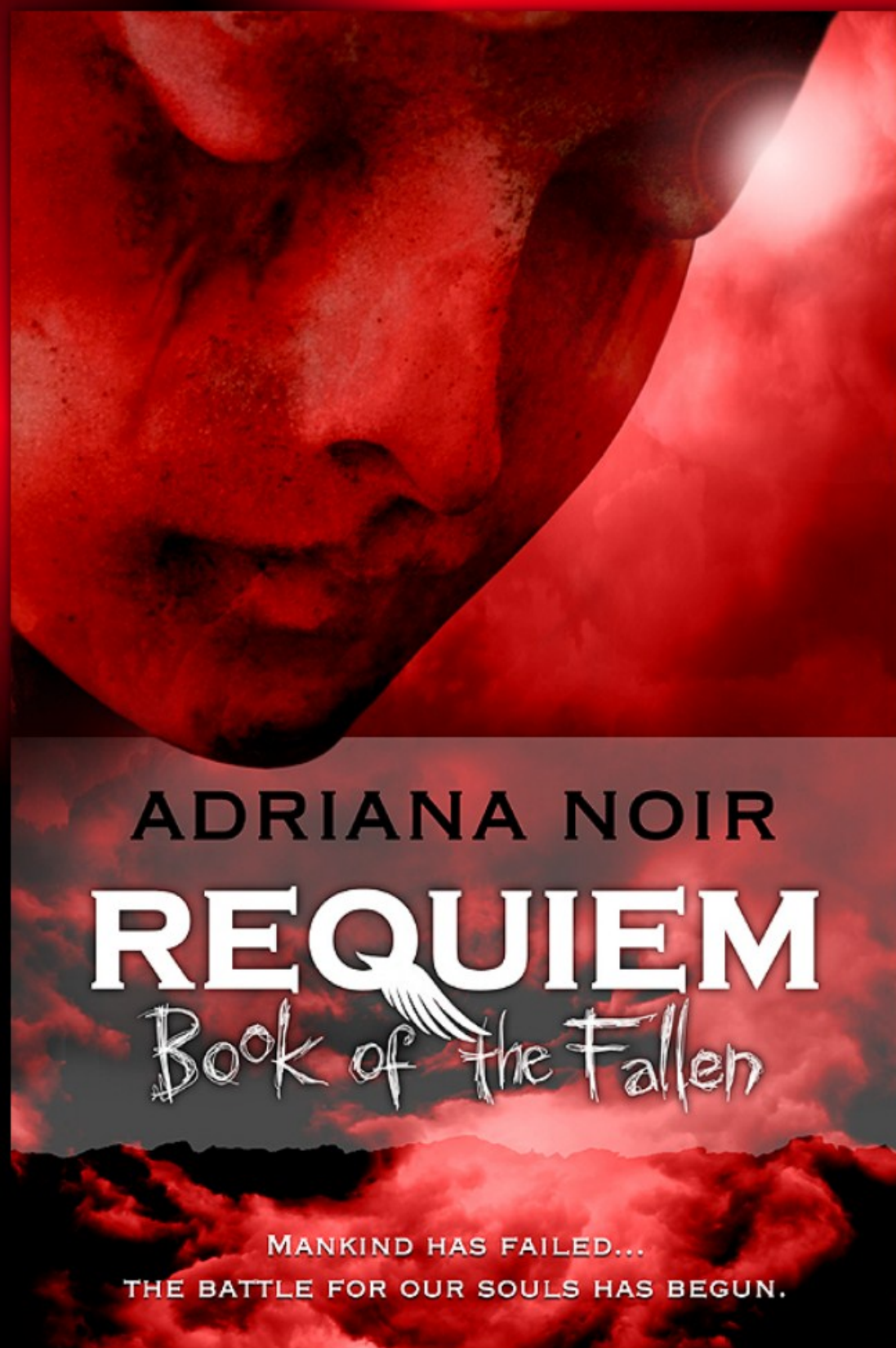
The time had come and as I clawed my way in the direction I prayed was up, I could feel the fear that was born the moment its hands had clamped around my ankles rise again into my throat. I had been so careful. Always locking my doors, never going in the water, always checking my backseat; still he had gotten to me.

My fingers rasped painfully against something rough, wooden. Tearing out fingernails, I ripped at the boards, trying to break through them any way that I could. Splinters of wood pierced my torn hands until I was at last triumphant. My hand pushed through the layer of wood and further into air. My body reacted, hungrily sucking in lungful after lungful. As I pushed my way into the space, I realized where I truly was. My coffin.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR -It was while watching Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* at the tender age of 6 that solidified Julianne's respect of the Undead. Since that day, she has been preparing herself for the (inevitable) Zombie Apocalypse. While classically trained in all of the ways to defend herself, she took up writing in order to process the desire she now covets; to bestow a second and final death upon the Undead. As the only girl growing up in a family with four children in the Canadian countryside, Julianne needed some form of escape. Her choice was the imaginations of others which only fostered the vibrancy of her own.

Days with the Undead: Book One is her first full-length book, the basis of which can be found in her popular web serial of the same name. You can find Julianne's *The Living Dead of Penderghast Manor* in the anthology *Women of the Living Dead* and stories in Sirens Call Publications anthologies *Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed* along with *Twisted Realities: Of Myth and Monstrosity*. She has also published some of her short fiction in the online literary magazine *The Sirens Call*.

When survival is all that matters, which side would you choose?



ADRIANA NOIR

REQUIEM

Book of the Fallen

MANKIND HAS FAILED...

THE BATTLE FOR OUR SOULS HAS BEGUN.

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

The Clock Tower *Alex Chase*

Some have speculated that the manner in which one dies correlates to the treatment one is given in the afterlife- that those who die in the most strange or terrible ways are offered the most amenities and status. If this is the case, then my death will have me revered as a king.

I have been allowed to pass this one message back to the human world so that they may be granted a glimpse of what I learned before I passed.

The earliest thing I can remember was falling. It's strange, but at this point I feel as though whatever I had done before, whoever I was and any memories I might have had, are irrelevant. I do not know how I arrived in this place, but I found myself falling through a massive tower.

When I began my descent, I fell in a slow, soft manner, as if I were sinking into slumber. I remember the top of the structure was adorned with all manner of stained glass. Despite the beauty of the windows themselves, their images were monstrous. They depicted one being of a distinct variety of creatures that was wholly focused on controlling or consuming human life. In all my years, I had heard of no such beast, yet somehow it was familiar to me. I felt that my fall was slowed for the purpose of showing me such images, though I do not know what the purpose of doing so could be.

Once I had passed these depictions, I found myself speeding downward, faster and faster. The further down I fell, the more the smooth granite and stained glass was replaced by machinery and crumbling brickwork. I fell down, past winding gears and humming bits of metal until, at a speed that should have killed me, my body slammed into the groove between two cogs.

The cogs snagged, attempting to crush me in their teeth. They were not successful. I felt an agony in my chest and was sure my ribs had broken, but I couldn't be sure. All I knew is that I was trapped. The machinery was not strong enough to kill me, but too strong to let me go.

I attempted to pry myself free, but I was unsuccessful. I pushed and pulled at my captors; I kicked, I writhed, I prayed, but nothing worked. Eventually, I gave up and waited. No salvation, not even the grim specter himself, came to free me.

Looking around, I had been whisked away into what appeared to be a clock tower. At no point did I see a top or bottom. I have no idea how large it was, but it was bigger than anything I've heard of.

Above me, I could see some of the mechanisms I'd fallen past. They had all stopped as well; a pendulum hung frozen at a thirty degree angle, gears of all shapes and sizes had come to a standstill and, from what I could tell, the entire tower had ceased to function.

Craning my neck, I looked below me, only to see more of the same.

I saw the same thing while looking in opposite directions. I saw brick walls dripping with befouled oil. I saw a plethora of machine parts, intertwining pipes and clockwork. I suspected something within this structure controlled more than a simple clock face. I saw an infinite blackness beyond the parts that caused my heart to race.

Once, when I was a boy, I went hiking with a neighborhood friend in a forested area. I slipped and fell into a hole that I had not seen while walking behind my friend and wound up striking my head, passing into unconsciousness. I woke alone, in the dark, with no way out. I screamed for hours, sure that I was going to die, before someone found me.

That isolation, that helplessness, was nothing compared to this. At least, when I was young, I believed the God would watch over me in death. I have since lost my faith. If any god was watching over me, I suspect it would not be acting in my best interests- if it cared enough to regard my meager existence.

I trembled with the near-certainty that I would never escape and took to counting the seconds in order to maintain my sanity, since there was little else I could do. After glancing at my watch- an antique with a gothic-styled analogue face that I inherited from my grandfather- I shut my eyes, ticking the

seconds off one by one.

It was an utterly mind-numbing process, but that was precisely what I needed. I clung to each number that I counted off, keeping my attention strictly devoted to this singular process. It was a desperate, miserable action that I could not avoid. Eventually, as I neared the one thousandth second, I looked at my watch again to be sure I was counting accurately.

It had not moved. I shook my head, sure that I'd misread it, but it had stopped.

I had looked at my watch, very briefly, while falling. Though I looked for only a second, I was sure it had been moving before.

Logically, one could assume that my watch had stopped. I could not recall having worked with watches, but upon looking at my watch, I felt as though I were intimately familiar with the small device. The face was not cracked and the metal didn't show the slightest hint of gouging or scuffing, as one would expect from a collision. Despite my closest scrutiny, I could not find any injury that might have prevented its functioning.

A thought crossed my mind. I shook my head, attempting to dismiss it, but it grew stronger and more persistent until I could not deny it: By some impossible means, my collision with the cogs of this tower- and my having stopped their movements- had halted the flow of time itself.

I laughed silently at myself, sure that I must have been trapped for far longer than I thought if I'd been able to imagine such nonsense!

Despite my attempts to deny it, my extended stay only confirmed what my addled mind had concocted. Though I could not know the length of time for which I was trapped, it must have been days, if not weeks. I didn't feel hunger or pain or the need to sleep. All sensation, all emotion aside from my desperate wish for freedom, had been reduced to nothing.

Then I heard something above me. It was the cry of someone who was experiencing absolute terror and absolute elation at the same time. Looking up, I saw a shape hurtling through the darkness. It was another man!

He plummeted past and crashed onto a horizontal gear beneath me, landing flat on its surface. I bent my body and looked, sure that I'd find his head splattered against the metal, but he survived, as I had! I was sure now that time had stopped because this man had not died- if time did not flow, then I could not imagine the cycle of life and death had continued either. The man looked up at me and smiled, saying, "So it was you!"

"Me?" I inquired, keeping my voice. My instincts told me that remaining quiet was an imperative task, so I uttered, as soft as I could manage, "What was it that I did?"

"You're the one who stopped time!" He said it so plainly and with such certainty that I did not doubt him for a moment.

"So I was right," I said quietly. He heard me nonetheless.

"You were right? Indeed you were!" His voice echoed across the walls, loud and unabated. "All signs of aging have stopped! The Earth yet spins, but the aged and lame do not die, nor do babies age or women lose their youthful charm," he chuckled. I heard something scuffling. I could not identify its source. "What's more, there are no consequences! Men who drink do not fall ill; disease no longer runs its course. There is no sickness, pain, or death in our world!"

I wondered at this last sentence. Though I could not be certain whether or not I had friends and family beyond these walls, something told me that he had not been sent by accident. I tried to grasp at why I felt this way, but could not, as though the truth was hidden in the banks of a dense mental fog.

He had started to laugh, but his face suddenly drooped. He had heard the scuffling too. Before he could respond, a creature came fumbling from the darkness.

I saw it below me and gaped in abject terror. It was the size of a small automobile with no shape at all. It was a bloated, shifting, rotund thing with ten arms. Each ended with a hand that consisted of twelve talons. These appendages grabbed on to the machinery, using the gears as handholds to propel itself through the tower.

Between each arm flapped folds of skin; as it drew closer, I could see these were mouths, opening and closing in an attempt to sate an endless hunger.

When the man below saw it, he screamed. He screamed so loud that I was sure no creature, living or dead, could have failed to hear it.

The beast wrapped a hand around the man's torso, like an angry child grabs a toy, and then released its grips on the clockwork. It plunged back into darkness as the man continued to scream.

A moment later, the screaming changed. It was no longer the cries of a grown man afraid for his life, but the shrill wail of one who knows his life is being taken. A terrible ripping sound echoed from below. His screaming stopped. My very soul knew, beyond any doubt, that this beast could kill regardless of the passage of time.

I clamped a hand over my mouth, terrified at the thought of the thing returning. I remained silent for a long time as tears rolled down my face.

As time passed, more people joined me in my damnation. I heard some land far above me, some far below, but they all met the same end. The clock tower beast would clamber up through the mesh of pipes and pendulums only to ensnare a victim and fall to the bottom. I assumed, somewhere far beyond the blackness, the creature had some sort of den. As this continued to happen, I began to smell the awful fumes of raw, shredded human flesh.

Because time had stopped, I was doomed to smell the remains of my fallen brothers and sisters for all eternity. Their corpses would never rot and never fade; my only hope was that the beast would grow hungry and feast on what was left.

With each life taken, I drew closer to realizing the truth. Though I tried to ignore it, the thought possessed my being, bit by bit, until I could no longer ignore it.

These people were coming here to rescue me. They needed time because they needed death. Without death, they couldn't think of a reason to continue existing. They were suffering in the stagnation of a life without limits.

And yet, there I was, suffering the most of all for granting mankind immortality!

I do not know why, but I began to laugh. It was a tickle that started in my chest and worked its way to my throat. At first, I only chuckled. I tried to suppress it for fear that the beast would find and kill me.

The more I thought about the beast, about my temporarily immortal race, about the agony of freedom, the harder I began to laugh. It was the most singularly terrifying moment of my life; I had lost control of my senses, yet not so much so that I was unaware of having lost them.

The sound of my own laughter reverberated through the tower, deafening me, yet I still heard the beast's approach from below.

The harder I was forced to laugh, the more my mind disobeyed me and began to succumb. My terror was slowly changed into a beguiled sense of liberation. It was the full understanding of what my situation truly meant. Freedom brought people misery, so what must my entrapment bring me?

This is the thought that came to rule me. Death no longer scared me; my destiny had always been to make others appreciate what they have. My end would return the blessing of death to mankind; with death, happiness would return to them.

To know death and limitation is to know the effort and skill required to accomplish something- and the act of defying death is what gives people the drive to act. To think of all the people who exercised

to prolong their life- but you cannot prolong a life that will not end! Writing a novel was once considered an impressive feat, yet if a person has one thousand years in which to do it, it isn't nearly so. Religion would crumble- who fears a creator that they will never have to face? Who would fear a decade in jail when one has millennia to serve the sentence?

The sound of my own madness filled my ears; that is when I saw the beast. It was coming for me. I smiled, laughed in the face of death itself, and welcomed it with open arms.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Alex Chase is a self-published author writing under a pseudonym. He has had two short stories accepted by Sirens Call Publications in the past which are Heartbreaker and The Curse of the Devil's Tree. Alex currently serve as a co-editor on his college newspaper and has received the award of 'Outstanding Copy Editor' for his efforts. He is also a writing tutor.

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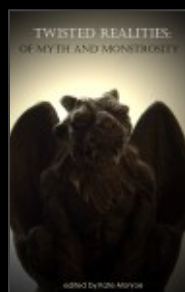
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The Cold House *Paul Buckel*

I walked up the narrow, brick road to the Nelson house and knocked on the door. The November air already had my nose dripping and I had known that a cold was coming for several days now.

I heard no shuffling of feet, so I knocked again, louder this time. I was careful not to cut myself on the peeling paint and the splinters sticking out. The door was solid and likely made out of wooden boards pegged together.

I heard the squeaking and the thud of boot heels and the cracking and yielding of a weak floor, took my hands out of my coat, and anticipated the warmth inside.

A blast of icy wind hit my face as soon as the door opened. I threw an arm out in front of me. It was ten seconds – or maybe ten minutes – before the air died down and I saw Mr. Nelson standing there.

He had a thick fur scarf wrapped around his face and only tiny holes for his eyes. He was wearing buckskin gloves and aside from his long coat, he had at least three plaid blankets wrapped around his chest and held there with a piece of frayed twine.

He gestured that I should come in.

His house was impossibly cold and when he closed the door behind us, it was even colder. The walls were dingy and undressed, as usual. The wallpaper was peeling. The fireplace held a single splint of dwindling wood. One tip glowed and the rest was black. I moved towards it and from my very movement, the tip glowed brighter and finally faded. I looked at Mr. Nelson, incredulous, shivering.

He pulled off his fur mask and said:

“It’s very, very cold.”

I let his words hang in the air, and on the tips of his grey, bristled beard and mustache. I saw the years in his sunken brown eyes and high cheekbones; his widow’s peak and his quiet, rough voice. He had said it with such gravity that I waited a moment to speak.

“No shit.”

He bowed his head.

“What are you doing? You’re going to freeze to death” I said. “Just swallow your pride, walk down the hill, and knock on someone’s door if you’re out of firewood.”

“I’m not out of firewood.”

He looked off into space for a while. He might have been looking out the dirty window to the valley, or down the road. It occurred to me later that he was looking at where the garage used to be.

“I’m out of fire.”

“You mean matches” I said, reaching for my own tiny box. You could never be sure with Mr. Nelson. “Here, take mine.”

“Strike one yourself and see” he said.

I slid the box open with numb fingers and managed to strike a match, clumsily. Once the initial burst of the lit match was over, I felt a chill come over me. I cannot describe what I felt next. All I knew was that the room had grown cold. Colder than it was, of course. And the temperature fell with every passing second, as if some core, some epicenter of winter was approaching me. I was trembling, shivering, trapped in my own fear. And I felt it, like cold hands on my neck and face and body, chilling my skin even through my three shirts. The match went out with a hiss and the smoke trailed in a thin line, and there was a flash of cold. My fingers were white and pained in their numbness as they gripped the tiny match.

“What are we without fire, Samuel?”

I looked at the match in my hand, not burned beyond its phosphorous tip, and the frostbitten flesh of my fingertips.

“Only firewood, Mr. Nelson” I said

“Any idea what that was?” he asked.

"Get me some warm water. I'll take a stab at it later."

Whatever it was, it hated fire. It loathed the flame and anything producing it. I was a little too thankful for the hot water to ask why the stove range was still working. Mr. Nelson didn't seem willing to put forth a hypothesis either.

"I say we get two candles and stand at opposite ends of the house. Let's light them at the same time and see what happens."

"What will this tell us, Samuel?"

"It will let us know if the whole house is doing this or what."

"You know what?"

"What?"

"Anyone else would have left by now."

"So?" I said. It was kind of a moot point. I was not leaving until I found out what happened. Even if it cost me a few fingers to frostbite. I would stop short of my whole hand. I am on a budget.

"Never mind."

Mr. Nelson went to the kitchen and took two long white candles out of the cupboard. I handed a match to Mr. Nelson. He handed me a candle. I walked to the wall. He walked into the other room.

"We light them on three. One, two, three" I said.

We struck our matches and lit the candles. I held mine away from me in the hope that when the fire was put out, it would only affect my hand at most. It was still cold but I could swear I felt a breeze. It was slow and hard to pinpoint, but it was there.

"It's out" Mr. Nelson said.

I waited. It wasn't five seconds before I began to feel the same coldness. It seemed more directed this time, as if it was coming straight for me. It came in pulses. Every second, I would grow colder and then warmer. My heart was pounding and I could hardly breathe. But I had a theory and while I held the candle in my left hand, I prepared my right. The flame wavered. I swept my hand through the air and met flesh. I squeezed and caught a thin, bony wrist.

I felt a pain in my neck, like a cramp, and fell to the floor. I caught sight of my blackened right palm just before I cracked my head and drifted into unconsciousness.

"Samuel...Samuel...Samuel"

"Yeah what?" I asked, a little more harshly than I had intended to.

My head felt like a brick had smashed it.

"I think you have a concussion, you need to stay awake" Mr. Nelson said.

"Did you catch that thing?" I asked.

"What thing?"

"I had the bastard. I caught it by the wrist. Froze my hand and hit me on the neck" I said.

He squinted at me.

"I'm serious. I had it. It wants us both dead. It's angry."

"Your hand is just a little cold" Mr. Nelson said.

"It was frostbitten" I said. "It was black."

"It's fine" he said.

"Why is it wrapped up?"

"To keep it warm" Nelson said.

"Well damn it I want to see it" I said.

"You probably have a concussion, just calm down."

"Calm down hell" I said. "I had the son of a bitch and-"

"You're raving" Nelson said. "Listen to yourself."

What was wrong with him? Couldn't he see that there was something incredibly wrong with this place? I had been attracted to it before but not now. Not after what I had just felt. It was evil. It was so cold. I could still feel it. It was right next to us. It was standing over my shoulder, or his. I looked quickly both ways and my head felt heavy.

I saw the movement out of the corner of my eye.

"It's there!" I rolled off the couch and to my feet and my right hand crunched when it hit the floor. I ran after the shape, saw its thin shadow on the wall, and chased it up the stairs, slipped again. I threw up. I pulled myself up with my hands, my fingernails digging into the carpet. The cloth unwrapped from my right hand, revealing my bent, black fingers. I was in a rage. I saw it go into the room. The door closed. I ran into it with all my might and threw it off its hinges.

I fell to my knees. That empty room looked back at me and I saw eyes hanging in space. They were no more than black slits. I heard Nelson running up the stairs after me. I wiped my mouth on my sleeve.

"What are you?" I said.

Mr. Nelson came in behind me.

"Samuel" he said. "You need to calm down."

"Look at the eyes Nelson" I said. "Hanging there. Watching us. It's here and I have it cornered. You're crazy if you think I'll stop now."

"You're delusional" he said. "There's nothing there."

"Explain my hand" I said.

"You can't explain it, can you? It's frozen. It's frostbitten. They'll have to amputate it. It's gone. It's dead."

Mr. Nelson just looked on.

"That thing, whatever it is, did this. I'm going to kill it and save us from it. Lock the door."

"You broke it off its hinges."

"Then block it with your body" I said.

"There's nothing there" he said. "Get your head together."

I snarled and lunged straight at the thing. We met in a tangle of limbs and I caught it by the throat and dug my fingers in. I slashed at it with the broken fingernails of my frozen hand. I felt for its eyes even as it started slicing into the flesh of my arm with razor talons that I couldn't see.

I jabbed my fingers into its face again and again looking for eyes and it screamed and threw me off. My hands were losing strength. Mr. Nelson was holding my arms back. I tore free.

"Are you on its side you bastard?"

"You're going to kill yourself!" he shouted. "If you hit your head one more time-"

The thing slashed my face. I screamed and grabbed my cheek. My blood was already sticky from the cold. Mr. Nelson ducked out from behind me and slammed it onto the floor. I leapt on it and started plowing my left fist and my right hand into its face. It was almost senseless. I had almost won. My hands were bloody and my arm was bleeding and my face was running and as my blood poured on it, I could start to see its face. I closed my eyes in horror. There were no features. There was nothing. I caught its throat and squeezed with all the might of my left hand.

It scratched at my own throat and I leapt off. It could still kill me. We could see it now – my own blood made sure of that. It was a patch of torso and a wrinkled, featureless face.

"Can you see it now, Nelson?"

"I can see it" he said.

"Help me kill it" I said.

"No" he said.

"What? Did you see what it did?"

"CALM DOWN" he shouted. "You're sick. You have a concussion. You've had hypothermia since you got here. You're hallucinating. If you get shaken around even a bit more you're going to get another concussion and die. The ambulance cannot make it up that hill in winter and I know that I cannot carry you."

The thing was slipping away. It slid out the door, probably to go lick its wounds and kill me in the dark.

"Where is its den?" I said. "I know you know more about that thing than you're telling."

"I'm not telling you" he said. "If I wanted to kill it, I could have done so a long time ago."

"What the hell is it?"

"It's our last natural predator" Nelson said. "They don't mention it in any of the books because it's too old for anyone to remember. It started hunting us the minute we created our first sparks. There were more of them then."

"If it's our last predator, why don't we kill it?" I demanded. It was too much. He knew what this thing was and didn't tell me.

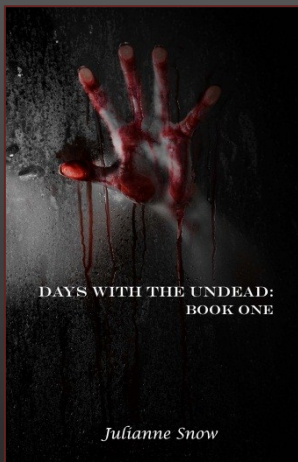
"I tried to show you" he said.

Shit, was I thinking out loud?

"I'm calling the ambulance now. Just sit down" he said.

I ran for it. I followed the trail of blood down the stairs and into the living room. It had left through the door and gone out into the yard. I ran outside after it. The tracks were so strange, like nothing I had ever seen. Like hooves with claws. I fell face first into the snow and I caught my last glimpse of the tall phantom striding into the woods.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Paul Buckel is a recent graduate of the Pennsylvania State University's materials science and engineering program. That aside, he was writing since he was twelve and always obsessed with science fiction and fantasy. He spends his days searching for employment, working on houses with his dad, hanging out with his girlfriend, and writing.



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White

Three Dead Cats *Christofer Nigro*

One bright sunny morning, a young boy named Enrico was casually strolling down the street when he happened to notice the bodies of three cats lying dead on the road in front of him. The trio of cadaverous felines were clearly the victims of rush hour drivers, and of a sufficiently advanced state of decay that they could have been reduced to road kill a few days prior. But this little technical matter was hardly of major relevance to Enrico. The main thoughts coruscating through his mind at the time were fixated on how he had always wanted a cat, and if it must be a dead one, he figured that would be better than having no cat at all. However, since his home was only big enough to support a single cat, he could only bring home *one* of the three mutilated feline corpses which lay rotting in the road before him. So what was a boy to do? How would he make the selection of one out of these three fine candidates? Enrico now realized that he had a conundrum, but like all bright and inquisitive boys, he pondered the situation until he came up with a few possible solutions. And the first of these solutions to come to mind was to examine the three emaciated heaps of fetid flesh to determine which of them came closest to the pet he always dreamed of having.

Upon making the inspection, Enrico could see that all three were in putrid physical condition, but he didn't notice a whole lot of difference between them, especially since they each had lost all of their fur, thus depriving them of any distinction based on coat markings and color. The number of maggots infesting each of them appeared to be roughly equal, and all of them had skin that resembled the texture of burnt rubber. So Enrico decided that further inspection was necessary, one carcass at a time. When he picked the first one up, its head promptly detached from its body, landing on the ground with a dull thud. When he picked up the second one, its head also detached, rolling away and being crushed with a loud crunching sound by a passing car.

When he picked up the third one, however, the legs fell off instead, clattering on the asphalt like twigs. But the head remained firmly attached. Just then, Enrico realized with a smile that he had found the cat he wanted most of all, because it was different from the other two, and therefore special. Also, Enrico was always told that a good head on your shoulders was important to get ahead in life. The smiling young boy then proceeded to walk home holding the rotting feline carcass proudly in his arms, his heart filled with a surfeit of pride that made him feel truly alive, a state of being very much in contrast to that of his new pet.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Christofer Nigro is a published author who is a lifelong fan of the horror/sci-fi/fantasy/suspense/noir/pulp fiction genres of popular fiction, as well as the various connected sub-genres of each. He is likewise a lifelong fan of comic books, particularly the super-hero genre often featured within the medium, and he also works as a freelance editor and website administrator. He has had short stories published in the following anthologies (some soon to be published towards the end of 2012 at this writing): *TALES OF THE SHADOWMEN 8: AGENTS PROVOCATEURS* by Black Coat Press; *NIGHT OF THE NYCTALOPE* by Black Coat Press; *ALIENS AMONG US* by Pulp Empire/Metahuman Press; *CARNAGE: AFTER THE END* by Sirens Call Publications; *RIGOROUS MORTIS: A MORTICIAN'S TALES* by Scarlett River Press; *NO PLACE LIKE HOME: TALES FROM A FRACTURED FUTURE* by Angelic Knight Press; *TALES OF THE SHADOWMEN 9: LA VIE EN NOIR* by Black Coat Press. *BELLOWS OF THE BONE BOX: A STEAMPUNK ANTHOLOGY* by Sirens Call Publications. He is currently feverishly at work on a novel for Metahuman Press.



Lake Lurkers *Jon Olson*

Martin Maddox wiped the sweat off of his forehead with the back of his left hand and resumed hacking away at a particularly thick tree branch with the hatchet in his right. He was halfway up his ladder preparing the large black spruce tree in front of his one level home on Lake McCready for the coming storm. There had been a few branches that were touching the side and roof of his house that he needed to trim so they wouldn't cause any damage during the high winds and rain of the impending hurricane. With a final swing, the hatchet powered through and the branch toppled to the ground. The muscles in his right arm ached and were screaming for a break but he knew that time was of the essence. As a proud bachelor, he only had himself to depend on to complete the hurricane proofing.

"Just a few branches more," he encouraged himself. He climbed up two more rungs and began hacking away at another branch.

Hurricane Hazel had stormed its way up the eastern seaboard and was barreling toward Nova Scotia. It was expected to make landfall later that evening as a Category Two hurricane. Meteorologists estimated that it would hit the southwestern shore near the town of Westwood, only ten kilometers south of Lake McCready. Unless it made a sudden and drastic turn, Martin knew that he would be hit straight on.

When he finished chopping the last branch, he climbed down and started to pull the ladder away from the tree when something caught his eye. He noticed that the roots were breaking through the soil. He applied a little pressure to the ladder and the root rose a bit, splitting more ground. Martin's heart sank a bit in frustration at this new development. Trimming the branches wouldn't do any good if the root system was weak. The strong winds and rain would no doubt pull them out of the ground causing the tree to fall wherever the elements desired.

He looked at his watch and it seemed time was against him too. It was nearly five-thirty and he still had yet to board up the windows. He would have to roll the dice and hope that the roots held. Shaking his head, he pulled the ladder away from the tree, grabbed the branches off of the ground and stored them in his small shed near the edge of the lake. He took out large planks of wood he had purchased earlier in the year and carried them up the slight slope of the backyard to the house. Setting them down he turned to retrieve his hammer and nails when he found himself staring at the edge of the lake. The calm before the storm triggered a memory he had buried deep for a very long time- since he was six years old in fact. The threat of the hurricane had him dreaming snippets of it recently, but now it came back in full and left him just as terrified as he had been so many years ago.

He was in the same house, although it was a cottage back then, and it was during the only other hurricane he had experienced. Sitting by the living room window he watched the lake's surface turn violent in the strong winds of Hurricane Gladys. Over the wind and rain he heard barking and as he turned his head he saw the neighbor's German Sheppard, Hank, at the edge of the lake. Martin's first thought was why the dog was left outside during the storm but before he could think of a possible answer, something emerged from the water followed by six more like creatures.

Initially, Martin thought they were fish until he noticed their large hind legs and smaller front arms, all clawed, with their mouths salivating at the prospective meal before them. Hank tried to jump away but they were on him quick. High pitched barks and squeals of pain pierced through the thunder and heavy rain; sounds Martin would always remember and never stop trying to forget. Hardly blinking, he watched as the dog was torn apart in mere seconds. Stumbling back from the window in absolute shock, he fell onto his butt with a hard thud. Quickly climbing to his feet, he looked outside but the creatures were gone. The rain was already washing away the blood that remained on the ground. Leaving nothing to corroborate his story if he told. Not wanting to be accused of lying, he chose never to tell a soul.

Martin shook his head, pushing the memory back. He was losing precious time and so moved quickly to retrieve the hammer and nails from the shed. His right arm screamed as he began to nail the planks of wood over the windows. The job went relatively quick compared to the trimming of the tree.

He looked up and saw that the sky was already overcast. He stole a quick glance out to the lake and saw that the water was turning choppy as the wind started to pick up. Martin returned his hammer and nails to the shed and secured the door with a large lock. He made his way towards the house and realized that he had left the hatchet out front by the tree. Cursing, he went around and picked it up. He didn't have the key to the lock on him he took the hatchet into the house with him.

He entered the house through the front screen door, that slammed shut on its spring and then he closed and locked the solid oak inner door in the kitchen. He pulled his boots off and set them just to the side of the door. The kitchen held a new Kenmore fridge with an older Maytag stove beside it. A brown counter started where the stove left off and formed an L-shape around the corner of the kitchen. There was usually a round table with four chairs as well but Martin had pulled that into the living room as he expected to spend most of his time riding out the storm in there.

The house was built with an open concept, with no real division between the kitchen and living room and there were even beige and green tiles covering the floor of both rooms. Two couches were set up to face the unplugged television sitting on the floor and on the walls hung a couple of paintings on the walls; one pictured fishing boats tied to a dock and the other, a lonely lighthouse standing guard over an unknown coast.

The table was set up between the couches and Martin dropped the hatchet onto it. It also held three four liter jugs of water, some cold cut sandwiches he had made up earlier in the day, a first aid kit, a Coleman lantern and a single speaker battery powered radio. Underneath was a Styrofoam cooler with frozen two-liter pop bottles inside it, just in case the power went out and he needed to store perishables.

He could hear the wind gusting outside and the house seemed to shiver as he sat down at the table and turned the radio on. He adjusted the tuner with his thumb until he found the local station WOSK.

"... Hurricane Hazel has made landfall three kilometers outside of Westwood. No reports of extensive damage have been made but emergency crews are standing by and preparing for the worst. The Westwood Police Department as well as the RCMP have asked that people remain in their homes and stay off of the roads as well as-

A loud burst of static cut through just as the power flickered and went out. Martin attempted to find another station but he only found more static and white noise.

He could see lightning flash between the boards on the windows followed by booming claps of thunder. The rain was pounding against the siding and the roof like golf balls were hitting the house. Martin turned the Coleman lantern on and reached for a sandwich. Biting into the sandwich he let out a heavy sigh that quickly turned into a gasp when he heard a loud high-pitched shriek within the wind. He waited another few seconds but didn't hear it again. Shaking his head he returned to his sandwich.

After another crash of thunder Martin started hearing scratching noises. They were quiet at first and he initially thought they were tree branches scraping against the house. The scratching however seemed to be coming from different parts of the house and sounded like sharp objects were making them.

"What the hell is-" he began saying but stopped himself when a wet thumping knock sounded at the door.

He stood up and took a step towards the door when another knock came from one of the windows. And then another. And another. They got loud enough that they almost seemed to drown out the rain

and wind. Martin couldn't help but think back to what he had witnessed when he was six, picturing the mysterious, carnivorous little bodies slamming into the windows and doors trying to find a way in.

Stop it, he thought. He began to wonder if he had stored the tree branches properly and maybe those were slamming against the house but he was sure that he had put those in the shed. A shriek from outside the door got his heart pumping faster.

"Just the wind." he said, trying his best to convince himself of just that.

His heart leaped into his throat when a shriek from a window at the other end of the house seemed to answer it. There were more shrieks and more thumping knocks. He could see their little teeth trying to chew through the wood-

"Stop it!" he yelled at himself putting his hands over his ears. "It's just a fucking hurricane. You're going to freak yourself out."

A strong gust of wind shook the house violently and he heard a tired moan coming from outside. The knocks and shrieks stopped suddenly as if frightened off by the moan, which also seemed to creak as if under a tremendous amount of strain. A tearing sound began to accompany the creaks and moans.

"What in the..." Martin said.

Oh shit! The tree!

A heavy thud hit the roof causing Martin to squat lower to the ground and the house to shake. A brief second passed as he wondered if the roof would actually hold but the ceiling gave way just as he finished that thought and the black spruce crashed through amidst a blizzard of debris.

Martin dove out of the way but a branch struck him in the head knocking him to the floor severely dazed. The tree landed just a few feet from him crashing through the table and sending all of the emergency supplies flying. Rain flooded into his house as he stared up through the large hole in his roof and a flash of lightning illuminated not only thick clouds but also seven little bodies clambering over the jagged edges and into his house. Stunned but coherent, Martin rolled between one of his couches and the wall.

The little creatures were the size of small dogs with grey and green scales covering their entire bodies. They resembled raptors with larger powerful hind legs with four clawed toes and six clawed fingers on smaller arms. They each had a tail that was longer than their bodies but had what look-like fins on the top and bottom, similar to the tail of a not yet fully developed frog that still had its tadpole tail. Their faces were flat with large mouths full of teeth in rows uncountable. They had large black eyes but seemed to be relying more on their sense of smell as they all sniffed out his sandwiches and began rummaging through what remained

Martin saw the hatchet laying just a few feet from him and stretched his hand out to grasp it. Something warm was running down the side of his face and as it dripped onto the floor he could tell it was blood. He grabbed a hold of the hatchet and pulled it towards him just as one of the little creatures began sniffing the air. It let out a short but deliberate shriek and the remaining six also began sniffing the air. Their heads turned toward him in unison and Martin began crawling backwards, trying to put as much distance as possible between him and them.

Just then, they all shrieked simultaneously and it was deafening. Martin struggled to his feet and held the hatchet in a defensive position. His mind kept replaying the image of Hank getting torn apart as the seven creatures cautiously approached him, mouths agape with white foam collecting at the corners.

One of the creatures began edging closer feeling braver than the others. Martin decided to focus his attention on that one. If he could kill one decisively and swiftly it may intimidate the others and make them back off. This idea clashed with the images of Hank's last few seconds when the creature started running and lunged at him.

Martin let out a loud cry and swung that hatchet as hard and as precisely as possible. The blade struck the creature in the ribs and forced its way through its body, severing its spine. It let out a short shriek as it flew and splattered against the wall. It was still alive but crippled and its mouth snapped in the air at nothing. Martin brought the flat edge of the hatchet down onto its skull, crushing it. He quickly turned his attention to the others ones who stared at him, almost in a state of shock.

Maybe it worked, he thought. Maybe they-

The six remaining creatures all sprinted towards him and leapt into the air. Martin swung that hatchet wildly, connecting once but not doing any real damage. He felt teeth and claws tear into his skin. The blood rushing out quickly washed away in the rain. He struggled to throw them off of him but he felt his body increasingly growing weak. One of the creatures bit through his Achilles tendon and Martin sprawled onto the floor. With their prey down, the creatures went berserk and ferociously began ripping into him.

With his eyes growing heavy, Martin suddenly remembered a poem kids used to recite when he was six:

*"The creatures lurk beneath the lake,
Leaving carnage in their wake.
Swimming hard and baring teeth,
Ravenous for a piece of meat.
Coming onto land they stalk their prey,
With deadly intentions they strike and slay.
The feeding frenzy is a terrible sight,
No one can escape with all of their might.
It is a nightmare that from which one cannot wake,
Those creatures lurking beneath the lake."*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jon works as a Pre Board Screening Checkpoint Coordinator at Robert L Stanfield International Airport. When he is not working or writing, he can be found at his home in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia with his wife and their four cats. Find him on Twitter @jonolsonauthor and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/authorjonolson.

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Plunging *Nina D'Arcangela*

Plunging, scooping, the sound of dirt sliding off each shovel with a shoosh as it's tossed to the side. Another plunge, another scoop, more shoosh – the pile grows larger, the hole surrounding their boots grows deeper, the men grow more weary. The scent of dry dirt giving way to the earthier aroma of moist, dark soil.

Removing his cap and scratching his head, he asks, "Ere, guv, don't you think this looks more than a bit odd?"

The other spits, digs, then replies, "Blood well is, son."

Digging deeper, the dirt turning firmer, becoming more dense. Each shovel still plunging, a foot braced on the back lending force to the spade as it slides into hardened ground. Loose dirt scooped upon the belly of the trowel tossed above, to the side with a shoosh as it slips off the metal edge – the hole growing with each effort.

Removing his cap and wiping sweat from his brow, he says "Take a butcher's. Tell me that ain't too wide."

The other spits, digs, then replies, "Blood well is, son."

Tree roots tangle and snag, yet dig further they are told, so they do. No longer plunging, only scraping a hardened surface painted putrid with residue – ground now removed, the scent is strong, almost fetid, a pungent odor.

Removing his cap and squinting in the dim light, he says, "Weird innit? Strange that there ain't nothin' but wooden planks, eh, guv?"

The other spits, swings, then replies, "Blood well is, son."

Hefting the crimson coated shovel over his shoulder, he glances at the body lying near his feet, takes in the breadth of the pit they've dug, then turns to the man standing above.

The other spits, stares, then says, "Ain't fill in' 'er in."

One pistol shot fired. "No, I believe not."

Hide 'N Seek *Kalla Monahan*

If I stay just one move ahead of it, it can't get me. Nope. Not me. Can't get me.

It's so fast though as it arcs across the dirt. But I'm faster. Yep. Faster. That's me.

It's like a game. A demented little game of hide and seek. It's the only true fun I really have. I hate when it finally finds me. The light. At some point it always chases me into the same corner and at some point you think I would learn but nope. Not me. I'm too stupid to learn. At least that's what they tell me.

One day, maybe, I won't be too stupid but I am. I never went to school. Probably wouldn't have learned anything anyway.

Maybe if I had been allowed to go to school, I would have been able to win at least once against the light.

I crouch in the darkness, ready to make my next shift. I need to stay ahead of it, especially today. Today is the day they come; I know that from the number of times the light and I play our never-ending game.

Its inched closer to me as I dozed. I'm so tired, especially on the days they come that I wonder if they put things into my food. But I know what happens if I stop eating – their meagre offerings stop coming.

Food keeps me human. It keeps me alive so that I can play the game.

Today I'm going to win. I have a feeling it will be the day.

As the light crawls forward, I make my move. I've miscalculated though and now I'm in the brightness it radiates.

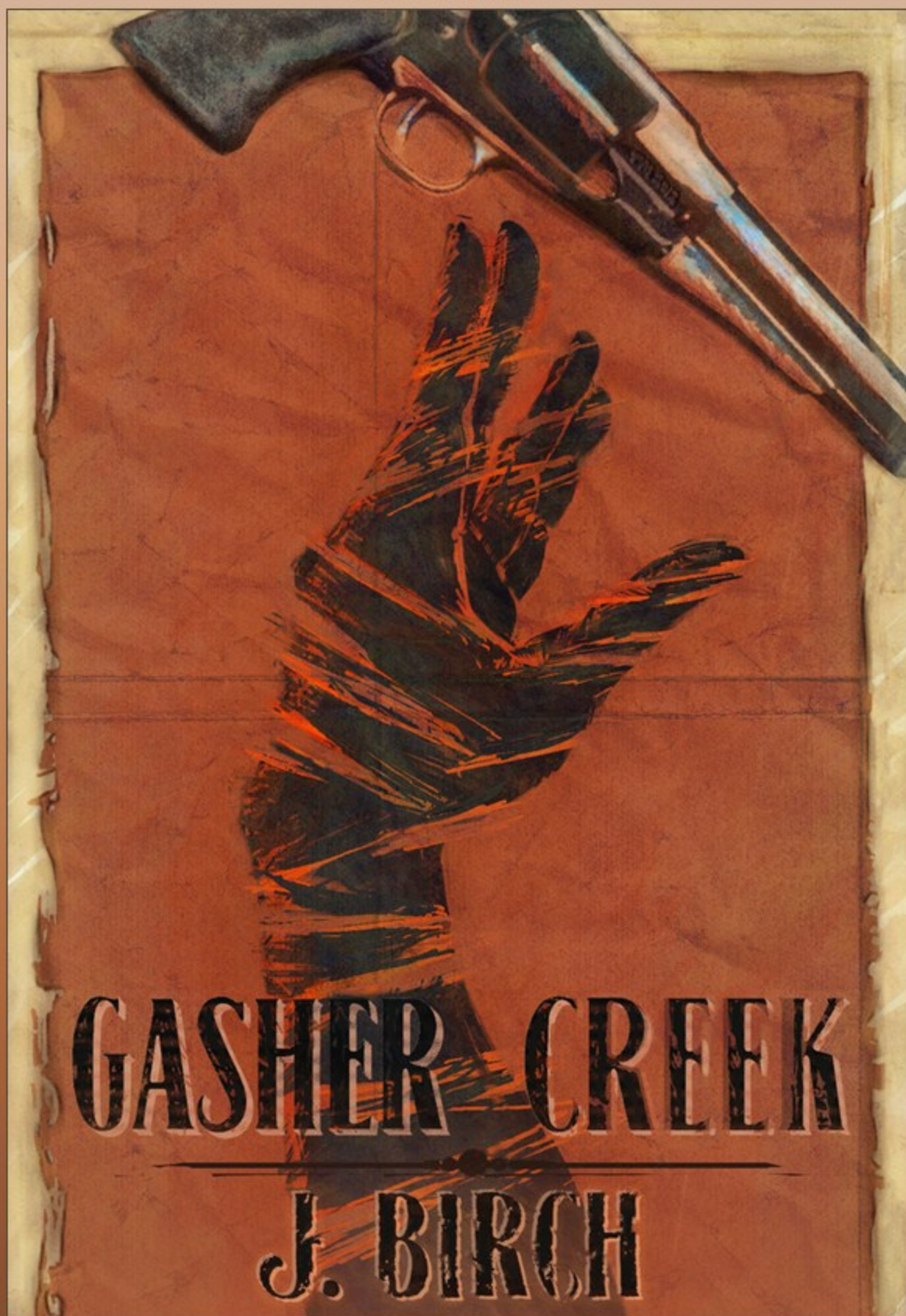
A door opens. A gasp. A worried face at the end of a barrel. Salvation.

Told you today would be the day...

The Challenge:

Write 300 words; no more, no less, using the photograph as inspiration.

"Clear your weekend; this is one page turner you are not going to want to put down.."
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Killer Bagel *Ken MacGregor*

Carl woke up hungry. He rolled out of bed and into the shower, stale smoke and beer sweat sluicing off him and down the drain. As he dried off, the church in the next block rang the bell, as it did every hour. He counted them. Ten. He felt each one like a blow to the head.

"I am never drinking again," Carl mumbled. It was his mantra.

Carl lurched out the front door; the sunshine lancing into his brain as he hustled to put on the sunglasses. Avoiding human contact, he made his way to Max's Deli. His stomach craved bread, and his brain coffee. Thank God ten am was a slow time for Max. Early mornings and around lunchtime, it got very loud in there. Max himself was at the counter. He looked up and beamed.

"Mr. Carl!" Max always used "Mr." or "Ms." with his customers' first names. It was oddly endearing. Carl gave Max a weak smile and ordered a large coffee and an everything bagel.

"So sorry, Mr. Carl," Max said, regret clear on his face. "We had to 86 the everything bagels. Garlic and onion we still have; that's as close as it gets. I give you the coffee for free, to make up for it, okay?"

"No, no," Carl said. "Garlic is fine. I'll pay for the coffee. Things run out. It happens. Don't worry about it."

"Thank you," Max grinned. He yelled to the kitchen. "Drop a garlic! You want cream cheese and lox with that?" Carl's stomach did a backflip when it heard cream cheese, but lox would be good. He ordered it that way and sat down on the cushioned bench, sipping the too-hot coffee in the to-go cup.

"Order up!" Carl's head whipped around; he had been woolgathering, and the movement hurt him. Wincing, he got up, paid and left the deli, coffee and bagel in tow. A tiny wisp of steam rose from the sipping oval in the lid. This time, he remembered to wear his shades before he got outside.

Carl found an empty wooden bench in the park nearby. He sat down, set his cup next to him, making sure it was level and wouldn't tip over. He opened the bag, removed the bagel; the lox were wrapped separately. He pulled the halves of the warm, crispy bagel apart and slid the pink fish inside. He brought the food to his mouth and took a bite.

When it hit his taste buds, he was shocked. Carl had never tasted anything so good! Ravenous, he wolfed down the rest. Carl sat there, stunned for a moment. That was delicious.

Mechanically, he lifted the coffee to his lips and drank some. It was cold.

The church bells down the street rang once. One o'clock? How could that be? He had been sitting there for two-and-a-half hours. Carl shifted his weight, and realized both legs and his butt had fallen asleep. The pins and needles were excruciating. But they were nothing compared to what came next.

Carl's stomach clenched. He doubled over. It felt like a spear was in his gut, a big one. The pain migrated. It went lower. The pressure was awful and intense. Carl lifted his shirt to look at himself. Something was pushing against his abdomen. He could see it, bulging under his skin. Watching and feeling it move inside him made him puke. He lurched to the side, but a lot of it got on him.

The thing inside Carl moved again and the pain almost made him pass out. He fell to the ground, writhing, groaning. He was distantly aware of a voice nearby. A man was talking to Carl, asking him if he needed help, if he needed a doctor.

"Get it outta me!" It was all he could manage. The stranger put a hand on Carl's shoulder. His other hand pulled out a cell phone and dialed 911.

"Oh God! Oh my fucking God!" Carl ripped at his belt buckle, tore it open. He pulled his pants down as fast as he could. The bystander backpedaled, worried that this man might be crazy.

Carl bucked off the ground, screaming. Blood flecks flew out of his anus and the other man gasped and backed even further away. Carl's whole body went rigid. He screamed once more and passed out.

The other man approached Carl. Morbid curiosity forcing him to look. There on the ground lay a blood-covered lump. It was round, bumpy and looked too big to have been passed by a human being.

The man looked closer, leaning in.

"What the hell," he said. He recognized it. A bagel. A bagel that had been chewed and swallowed. Somehow, it had put itself back together inside this poor bastard's stomach and forced its way out. "Jesus."

Sirens approached the park, followed closely by police and an ambulance. The man told them what happened, nodding when they looked at him like he was crazy.

"I know what it sounds like," he said. "But, that's what happened. I'm not going to make something up just 'cause the truth sounds crazy."

He tried to show them the bagel, but it was gone. Of course it was.

The EMTs loaded Carl into the ambulance. Before the doors closed, the man heard one of the EMTs shout, "He's flatlining!"

The man looked at the blood on the ground. There was a lot of it. Still no sign of the bagel. He shook his head. Maybe I'm losing it, he thought.

Then, he saw it.

The bagel was sitting on the bench, next to paper cup with a plastic lid. The lumpy circle of toasted dough was still wet with blood, but there seemed to be less of it. How did it get there? What the hell is going on?

He took a step toward the bench, never taking his eyes off the bagel. He squatted in front of the bench, leaned in for a closer look.

The bagel moved. The man flinched, but stayed where he was. He couldn't take his eyes off the thing. It moved again, a little. The man watched, fascinated. He was pretty sure no one had ever seen anything like this. The bagel was inching its way across the bench in his direction. The whole event was surreal and captivating. The man noted that it left a trail of blood on the wood and wondered how long the bagel would take to reach the edge.

Then, Bang! It flew into his face, covering his nose and mouth. He couldn't breathe, garlic and another man's blood filling his nostrils. He pried at it with his fingers, but it was already forcing itself into him, filling his throat and sinuses.

The man choked and gagged and clawed at his nose and mouth; he had time to think, "Well, this is a stupid and absurd way to die." Then he was gone.

Max looked up as the bells on the door chimed. He grinned.

"Ms. Jessica!" he gave her a friendly wave. "So nice to see you."

"Thanks, Max," Jessica Saunders said. "Do you have any sesame bagels left?"

"Oh no," Max said, full of regret. "I'm so sorry. We only have garlic left."

"Okay, she said. "I'll take one of those. Toasted with lox, please."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Ken MacGregor's short stories have appeared in the anthologies: *A Quick Bite of Flesh*, *The Dead Sea*, *Heavy Metal Horror*, *For All Eternity* and *Erie Tales* (spelled like the lake intentionally); his work has also appeared in various magazines. Six of his screenplays were made into short films. He is a member in good standing of The Great Lakes Association of Horror Writers. He lives in Ypsilanti, Michigan with his brilliant wife Liz and astounding children Gabriel and Maggie. He drives the Bookmobile for the local Library. He can be found on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/KenMacGregorAuthor>, Amazon, and Goodreads.



The Last Temptation *Suzie Lockhart*

"Bossman, don't worry. They will come." The familiar's voice held a pleading note while desperately trying to reassure his master.

Victor patted the small man's head as though he were nothing more than a pet, then dragged long fingernails through his thinning hair, lightly scratching the scalp. A shudder ran through the man's round little body.

"I sincerely hope so, Anthony."

The scent of human flesh and blood wafting through the air. Victor inhaled deeply, drinking in the warmth pulsating through the night. His mouth watered as he imagined himself drinking the delicious crimson liquid,.

He wondered what tasty morsel the others were bringing him tonight. During the several hundred years he'd been a vampire, Victor had found himself gradually developing a taste for younger and younger victims. The youthful blood seemed filled with an undeniable vitality, invigorating him and causing him to crave more.

"I shall be waiting inside." Victor dismissed the familiar as he entered his private quarters.

The vampires disguised themselves as a traveling circus, moving from city to city. Victor always stayed in his tent. His appearance was somewhat odd, thus he did not blend well.

So he sent the newer ones to do his bidding.

Vampires aged slowly, but Victor had been undead since the time of the black plague. It had ravaged his family, centuries ago. Watching them die, one by one, had been devastating. True torment was watching his beautiful five year old daughter endure unspeakable agony.

Victor had just turned fifty when Rachel

entered the world. It had been a difficult pregnancy for his forty-six year old wife, but the child had brought them great joy.

Victor sighed, still yearning for his family.

"Bossman?" Anthony called from outside the vampire's tent, seeking permission to come inside.

"Enter," Victor commanded.

The small man's face was animated as he informed his master, "We have something special tonight! Yes, very special indeed!" His expression was eager as he added, "A young girl."

"Hmm," Victor mused, "bring her."

The vampire watched in anticipation as Anthony reached outside.

The child stood before him, unafraid. Victor's eyes widened at the sight of her porcelain skin, the dark brown curls, the big blue eyes...

"Are you gonna take me to my daddy?" she asked.

Victor's voice was consumed with unbridled rage. "Take her home! See that not a hair on her head is harmed!"

The familiar trembled, from fear that he had angered his master

"DO YOU UNDERSTAND!?" Victor admonished, his fangs protruding menacingly.

"Okay, bossman. Sssorry," he stammered, cowering away as he left with the girl.

Victor was shaking from head to toe as he walked slowly to an ancient trunk holding his belongings. He gently slipped out the delicate painting. Surely, this must be some sort of punishment for his vile deeds, for the young girl brought before him tonight had appeared as an exact duplicate of his long dead daughter.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Suzie Lockhart was in her forties before finally realizing her seventh grade English teacher was right. She has since had several short stories published. Two years ago, she partnered with her 19 year old son, Bruce, and together they completed a young adult novel; which is presently being considered for publication. If can connect with Suzie directly at suzieartist@aol.com, on Facebook at Suzie Wargo Lockhart, or on Twitter at @Suzieartist.

Part cyberpunk, part tech thriller, part dysopian
Mad-Max mashup, all adrenalin.

<author>

COLIN F.
BARNES

</author>



<title>

The Techxorcist
Part 0.5: Rebirth

</title>

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The Exhibition *Colin P. McBride*

Jacob walked down the dirt road towards the farmhouse. The October wind blew the hem of his field jacket around his waist. He shifted the weight of his backpack as he brushed his brown hair out of his eyes. He had traveled two thousand miles in the last week and a half, from Florida to northern Washington State. He had hitched most of the way; however he had managed to slip onto a bus in Portland and had enjoyed the temporary luxury.

The bus had dropped him off in town; from there he knew he had a six mile walk towards the farmhouse. There was a rough map in his pocket journal, drawn after a vivid dream three days ago. When he was getting this close, the dreams were as helpful as much as they tortured him. But it had been days since he had been able to close his eyes without some flash of pain. Nodding off on the bus an hour ago, he had a feeling of painful fullness, and a voice behind him screaming, something about thankfulness, honoring, the usual religious screed. It wasn't as bad as the dream the night before, but it still made him grateful for the pack of caffeine pills he had lifted at the truck stop yesterday. He had all the information he needed at this point.

The farmhouse came into view. When he got a little closer, he checked it against the drawing he had made after the first of this series of dreams. It was close enough. Night had begun to wrap around the valley, and it began to get seriously cold.

Another few minutes and he was standing outside the kitchen window. The farmhouse was perfectly dilapidated, well maintained with an eye towards utilitarianism, not beauty. The once-white paint was dingy grey where it wasn't missing entirely, the back wall was held in place with diagonally set two by fours. A rusted tractor sat in a shed a little ways from the house, where Jacob had placed his pack. Jacob knew that the fields had not been plowed in some time, the woman living off of her late husband's pension and a lucrative collection the local church had had for the poor widow.

The woman was on her hands and knees in the kitchen, scrubbing away at a orange and red-brown mess on the floor. Normally, Jacob knew, she hated cleaning but this mess was the mark of accomplishment, a punishment well deserved by her whore daughter. She hummed a hymn as she scooped the last of the mess into the bucket and poured a generous helping of bleach on the tile, to let it sit.

Jacob waited until she had walked out of the room and up the stairs before unlocking the kitchen window and letting himself in. Though he knew he would not be noticed, he still made a effort to stay silent. The kitchen was filled with the smell of bleach and cooked macaroni. The trash can was filled to overflowing with empty boxes of generic pasta and off-brand Velveeta cheese. A large, dented pot sat soaking in the kitchen sink, filled with orangish water. The pool of bleach had already started to discolor the mottled tile, matching the other stains that littered the floor.

Jacob left the kitchen and walked down the hallway towards the stairs. He slowed and stopped near a hall closet. Leaning down, he placed his ear against the door. A soft sobbing could be heard inside. Inside was the woman's eight year old daughter, Ruth. Ruth had not heard the woman's warning to come inside four days ago, she had been playing. As a punishment, she had been shackled inside the closet and denied food and water. Jacob had come to the conclusion that the woman had forgotten about Ruth, usually she took the time to add mental cruelty to her physical tortures, along with a fireplace lighter she saved to add visual reference to her speeches about the fires of hell. But the woman had been distracted in the last two days.

Jacob walked up the stairs. He took the time to straighten a picture of St. Sebastian hanging on the wall. He had never been religious, but sometimes he enjoyed the imagery of the saints. Some of them had been so happy to endure whatever pain their god chose to inflict on them. Jacob envied them that.

At the top of the stairs, he first passed by the boys' room, John, age ten, and Luke, age thirteen. The

two of them slept the perfect sleep of those dosed with sleeping pills. The woman had started giving them to the boys before she really began the earnest punishment of her daughters. They had their own punishments, usually work until their hands blistered, but she never seemed as...offended by them as she was by her daughters.

A little further down, and she came to Rebecca's room, age fifteen. She laid, nude, on a filthy mattress, her stomach bloated with the meal she had been forced to eat. Yesterday, she had committed a terrible sin in her mother's eyes. While the two of them were in the general store in town, a local boy had smiled at her. At that moment, her mother knew that the boy had enjoyed carnal pleasures with her daughter, several times, probably along with his dirty, dirty friends. She knew what had to be done.

She had taken her daughter home. She immediately told the boys to stoke a hot, hot fire on the front lawn. Then she told her daughter to carry all of her dresses and skirts out to the lawn and throw them onto the fire (for they must be far too revealing, she would have to work harder when sewing the next batch). She then locked her in her now bare bedroom while she considered the next part of the punishment. When Rebecca had complained of being hungry in one of her pleas for mercy, the woman had known her next action.

Rebecca coughed and began to vomit again. Jacob carefully rolled her onto her side to make sure that she did not choke in her sleep. He walked out of the room towards the end of the hall. He opened the door and looked at the woman.

Her room was the only one decorated in the house, colored in girlish pinks and blues, the fruits of her boys' punishments. A princess phone, the only phone in the house, sat on her nightstand. She sat in front of a white vanity, giving her hair it's daily one hundred strokes. She seemed enraptured in her reflection, seeing the girl that she once was, the one that existed before age and hate had twisted her face. She was once the town homecoming queen, a beauty, envied and desired. But then, fifteen years ago, she had committed sin, and been punished for it by bearing the fruit of it, her whore daughter. Her husband happily married her, knowing that he had been successful in his attempt to trap her. He had forced her to bear three more of his children, two good sons and another daughter that already bore the marks of whoredom her eldest carried.

She had shot her husband three years ago. The police were told that she had caught him in the act of committing forcible incest with her eldest, and her daughter quietly confirmed the story. Her sons and other daughter knew nothing, but they were so young.

Since then, she had felt that she needed to make sure that her daughters did not turn out like her. And to prevent that you had to carry a firm hand.

Jacob pulled himself out of the woman's mind. This close to one of his subjects, it was easy to fall in. He relaxed with a deep breath and walked in. He then reached into her mind and removed the block he had put there, the one that prevented her from seeing him.

She gasped at his sudden appearance in her vanity mirror and turned with a start. He was able to see what she saw in her mirror. He saw a face not much different than the one on the picture of Saint Sebastian he had straightened on his way up the stairs, a face framed by full lips, pale eyes and longish hair. She seemed terrified, but he knew that his physical beauty was having an effect on her. More than once he had been accused of being an angel by his subjects, due to the combination of his face and his sudden appearance, but, he reasoned, few angels would arrive wearing a dirty military jacket and torn jeans.

She wasn't going to speak, so Jacob began. "Rosemary," he said in a firm voice.

She nodded, frozen in shock.

"I am going to be honest with you. What you have done is inexcusable, and I have been sent here to enact the punishment that you deserve."

She snapped out of her trance. “How dare you enter my house and accuse me of...of...” Jacob had seen this before. She knew if she said what she had been accused of, she would be admitting to it, because she hadn’t been accused yet. Jacob watched her struggle.

Finally she stopped. “Get out of my house!” she screamed. Jacob let her dive for her closet and grab the shotgun that she had killed her husband with. He watched her clumsily load the gun and raise it towards him. He knew there would be no warning before she fired, and he was right.

The bullet thudded into the plaster where she thought he was standing. She suddenly realized that he was right next to her. He grabbed the shotgun out of her hands, and pushed her out of her bedroom window.

After checking to make sure she was not going to be able to run away, he walked back down the hallway and down the stairs. He knew that her sons would sleep through everything that was to follow, and her daughters would also be unable to intervene, even if they wished.

She laid at the base of a tree, her legs broken. She screamed at him for mercy, but he no longer heard. He considered what he was going to do, but when she began to scream to god for help he knew his next action. He focused his will to hands and lifted her towards the tree. The tree had two stout branches jutting out of either side, and it was towards these that he raised her. There were no nails, but a few clothespins, thrust with sufficient force did the trick. The clothesline rod did for a spear in a pinch, thrusting into her side just below her left breast.

Jacob stood a ways away, assessing his work. Good, but something was missing.

He mentally reached out to the rusted fence a distance away. There, a length of barbed wire broke away and flew towards her, wrapping around her head three times.

Perfect.

Once she had stopped writhing he walked back in the house. He unlocked the hall closet and the shackles holding Ruth in place. She slumped forward, unconscious. She was in bad shape, but he was certain she would live. Then, he walked back up to the woman’s room and picked up her phone.

“Operator.” He said after dialing,

“Yes?” the voice replied.

“There is a woman dead here. She also was abusing her children quite severely, so it is likely they will need ambulances.” He gave the address.

An hour later, he watched from the top of a tree a distance away as the police combed the house. The children were taken away, hopefully to better lives than this, thought Jacob. Though police searched every inch of the property for anything, they never came close to finding him.

The next morning, he paid for a motel room in the next town with some of the money from the woman’s nightstand. There, he took a shower (his first in days) and collapsed on the narrow bed, exhausted. He knew that tonight, his sleep would be undisturbed with dreams of beatings, confinement, torture and horror. Before he fell asleep, he opened his journal. There, after all of his notes of the dreams of the last few weeks, his drawings and gleaned names and details, he was finally able to write the word “Finished”, the fifteenth time he had been able to in this particular journal.

Jacob placed it onto his nightstand and fell into a dreamless sleep.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Colin P. McBride lives near Philadelphia with a loving wife and two cats that occasionally disagree. He is working on his first novel, which will be finished any time now. He hopes to one day write a story without crucifixion imagery. Connect with Colin on Twitter at @cpmcbride or his tumblr blog at halozeta.tumblr.com.



Black Victoria *Jane Wright*

The sea was calm and the night was clear. The Black Victoria rocked gently from side to side under an ink black sky peppered with stars, as small waves buffeted at her meekly. Five of her six man crew sat in her cabin, playing cards by the pale light of a waivering lamp, while the sixth man took his turn to patrol the Black Vic's deck, studying the constellations and watching the fishing lines that spidered out into the water in all directions for signs of movement. Samuel Maye headed towards the prow of the small trawler. He was used to the sounds of the sea by now and found the soft splash of the waves comforting, but as he stared up at the night sky he suddenly realised that he could hear something else over the gentle murmur of the water. He walked to the side of the boat and narrowed his eyes, peering into the darkness to try and see while straining his ears to make out the sound. He thought he saw a movement in the water but knew it was probably a fish jumping, or perhaps a seal. He continued to watch, certain that he could hear something now. It was a sound that was unmistakeable.

In the cabin Thomas Hyle, the captain of the Black Victoria, gathered the cards up with a sigh as one of his young crew eagerly dragged the kitty of matches from the centre of the table and added it to his pile. Thomas knew that this would cost him a draft of beer when they got back to port. His crew was young and in some cases inexperienced, quickly put together after an influenza epidemic claimed most of his old team, but they were learning fast and the two Miller brothers, Frederick and Michael, were especially keen to prove their worth after their family's boat had to be sold and they had lost the place they had just gained on its deck. Isaac Jessop, his one remaining crewmate from years past, sat in the shadows in the corner of the cabin, smoking a pipe and keeping an eye on the game while whittling a tiny boat from a piece of wood. Thomas was sick of playing cards but there wasn't much else to do when the sea was this still during the long nights they spent fishing. As he shuffled the cards and prepared to deal again, the cabin door burst open and Samuel stood wide-eyed in the doorway.

"Can you hear it?" Samuel seemed both excited and nervous.

"Hear what?" Thomas asked.

"That sound. The crying... Can you hear it? Listen."

A hush fell over the cabin as the men all stopped the game to listen. There was nothing to be heard except the soft splash of the waves against the Black Victoria's hull.

"I don't hear-" Frederick started, but Samuel cut him off with a loud "ssshhhh."

"You're losing your mind, Sam," William Boyes joked. "Or else you've been drinking out there. Either way, I'll tell Emily when we get back and she'll sort you out".

"Shut up William, I'm not! And Emily doesn't need to know her husband is hearing things. But I can definitely hear crying. Can't any of you?"

The men all shook their heads, rolling their eyes and preparing to continue with the game.

"It's the Bray girl".

The unexpected voice from the darkened corner of the cabin made them all turn to look at the speaker.

"What you can hear is the Bray girl."

"Come on now Isaac." Thomas re-shuffled the cards with deft fingers as he addressed the old man. "That's just an old wives' tale. There's no truth in it."

"There's truth in it," Isaac said. "My grandfather knew the Bray family. It was a tragedy what happened to that girl and it's a tragedy for all that hear her lament now."

"Who's the Bray girl?" Samuel asked. "I've never heard of her."

The Miller brothers and William shook their heads in agreement. Isaac looked at the young crew for a moment before putting down his knife and the half-carved boat and pulling a salt-stained leather pouch from the pocket of his oilskin. With thick, yellow-stained fingers he refilled the bowl of his clay

pipe with fresh tobacco and re-lit it. A heavy, woody smell filled the tiny cabin.

Then he spoke.

"Alice Bray's family owned Hawkecrest, the big house on the cliffs a throw down the coast. She was just a young thing when she fell in with Henry Searle, a fisherman from Saltport. Henry was a dashing character by all accounts, he had inherited his own boat and crew when his father died and had the gift of a quick wit and an even quicker tongue. He used that tongue to talk Alice Bray into his bed a few times and she soon found herself with a child on the way. Her father, Joshua Bray, was a man of considerable means but he was very religious and he had no warmth in him so she was scared to death of telling him about the bairn. When she couldn't hide it any longer, she ran to find Henry in Saltport, hoping he would see them right.

"But for all his talking, Henry hadn't told the girl that he was already married and that his wife also had a little one on the way. He wasn't best pleased to see Alice Bray turn up, telling anyone who would listen who she was and why she had come. Henry denied it all of course, and they had a terrible argument by the harbour wall, for all to see. They parted ways full of fury and spite and Henry went out on his boat to do his days' fishing.

"No one ever knew where Alice went after that but her body washed up a way down the coast three days later, bloated and pale. Henry said he had nothing to do with it and there wasn't a mark on her, so her death was marked down as either a suicide or a tragic accident, and he stuck to his story that the bairn wasn't his and that he had never seen Miss Bray before the day she turned up on the harbour.

"Three months later Maggie Searle went into labour but it was a difficult birth and both mother and child died. A few weeks after that, Henry Searle's boat went down in a storm. His crew were all rescued by another trawler that was on its way back to port, but Henry was lost. His men said that the storm came on them suddenly and that before it hit them, Henry had said he could hear a woman crying, but none of them had heard a thing and they were too far away from land for it to have come from there. The crew of the other boat had seen no storms nor had any of them heard any strange noises. People started to say it was the ghost of the Bray girl, come back to make Henry pay for his lies and what he did to her, and they also began to whisper that he had more to do with her death than he'd ever let on.

"Since then, a number of men have been lost to the sea around here in similar circumstances. All have gone down when a sudden storm came upon their boat, all have reported hearing crying just beforehand and all have been the only man lost from the crew. And do you know what else all of them have had in common... ?"

Isaac paused and looked around the cabin at the faces of the crew, eager to hear the end of his story.

"All of them were faithless to their women."

He stopped and sucked on his pipe. The crew were silent for a minute before bursting into laughter.

"It's a great story, Isaac," Thomas said, "but it's absolute rubbish. I'm telling you, it's an old wives' tale, nothing more."

Isaac shrugged. "You believe what you want to believe, Captain Hoyer. But you remember my words; it's happened often enough."

The crew were still laughing. All except William Boyes, who was staring intently at Samuel. Caught in his gaze, the laughter died on Samuel's lips as he struggled not to make eye contact with his brother-in-law.

"Is there anything you need to tell me, Samuel?" William asked.

"Don't be silly William. I didn't hear anything, it must have been the wind or something."

"But there is no wind, Sam. It's like glass out there and the skies are clear. Is there anything you need to tell me?" William's voice had an edge of steel to it.

Thomas put a restraining hand on his friend's arm. "Easy William, it's just a story."

Ignoring Thomas, William continued. "My sister was crying the other week, when I visited. She said you've been keeping strange hours, going out at odd times, coming in late and that you won't tell her where you've been. She also said she found a lace handkerchief in your pocket and that she thought she could smell a strange perfume on you when you came home. And you just said you heard crying but you didn't even know the story of Alice Bray until now. So I ask again, is there anything that you need to tell me?"

"I was just joking, I..." Samuel sighed, caught out by the unanticipated question. "I just got caught up, Bill. It didn't mean anything, none of it. I didn't mean to get involved with her; with anyone. I love Em, I just--"

With a roar, William launched himself at his brother-in-law and the two men spilled through the cabin door onto the deck. Shouting at them to stop, Thomas and the Miller boys followed them into the cold night air. Only Isaac remained seated and in the commotion, only Isaac noticed that the sea had begun to get rougher and that the boat was beginning to roll and sway.

Out on the deck, William had Samuel pinned to the boards and was kneeling astride him, pummeling his body and hurling curses into his face. The waves were building and the other men were struggling to stay on their feet as the Black Victoria pitched and saltwater crashed over her sides, sluicing the deck and drenching the crew, filling their eyes and mouths. Struggling over to the brawling men, Frederick and Michael hauled William off his brother-in-law and held his arms back as best they could while trying to keep their balance. The captain helped Samuel to his feet and gave him a handkerchief to wipe his bloodied nose and lips. Samuel grimaced as the saltwater made the cuts sting.

"What's happening?" Frederick shouted, struggling to be heard over the crashing of the waves.

"It's just a flash storm," Thomas yelled back. "It will be gone as quickly as it came."

"But Thomas, look..." The others looked, following Frederick's arm as he pointed up into the sky. The night was still as clear as it had been when they set off from the shore, the moon and stars shining brightly.

"It can't be..." Transfixed by the stars, Thomas was staring at them with a mixture of wonder and terror, as though it was the first time he had ever seen them. "But... this storm is... impossible."

Samuel suddenly fell to his knees with a shout of pain. "I can't bear it, I can't bear it, make her stop. The crying, the shrieking, it's so... pitiful." Covering his ears he curled into a ball on the deck, rocking backwards and forwards, moaning, "make her stop, make her stop."

"We're going to go over," Michael shouted, grabbing Thomas' arm and shaking it to try and rouse him from his trance. "We have to do something."

Freed from the grasp of the Millers, William grabbed the crying Samuel and pulled him to his feet. "Stop whining," he hissed through salt and spittle flecked lips. "You caused this; you need to end it."

Samuel stared into his brother-in-law's fierce eyes from his own terrified ones. "You have to make her stop, Bill. You have to make her stop crying."

A towering wave engulfed the Black Victoria, sweeping bait buckets and fishing tackle aside and knocking the crewmen off their feet. As the wall of water hit them, Samuel and William were flung against the side of the boat and Samuel was carried up and away from his brother-in-law.

"Don't let go of me," he screamed. "Don't let go of me. I'm sorry, I'll make it right. I promise I'll make it right."

William tried to answer but the breath had been crushed out of his chest by the force of the water. His fingers grasped frantically at Samuel's slick, wet oilskin and he could only grunt as his nails scraped over the tough material but he couldn't find any grip. As the monstrous wave ebbed, Samuel was pulled

screaming from his brother-in-law's grasp and into the water, swallowed for eternity by the furious sea.

With an undulating sigh, the waters stilled and the Black Victoria found herself becalmed once more. The only signs of any disturbance were the overturned bait buckets, the snapped fishing lines clinging limply to the side of the boat and the terrified, ashen faces of the fishermen. Exhausted, Thomas Hoyer struggled to his feet, managing only to whisper "man overboard..." but he knew that it was already too late.

Standing in the doorway of the Black Victoria's cabin, Isaac sighed.

"Aye, that was the Bray girl," he whispered to himself, before taking a deep pull on his pipe and turning back inside.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jane Wright is a web editor, writer and photographer based in Manchester, UK, where she lives with her partner Raymond, a small army of cats and a slightly bewildered dog. According to her Twitter profile, she is also a full time TV watcher and pet entertainer. She has previously had work published in FEAR: A Modern Anthology Of Horror And Terror - Volume 2 and is currently working on her first novel, as well as some new short stories and a collection of haunting photographs. You can follow Jane on Twitter @janewright and you can see her photography at <http://www.janewrightphotography.org>.

Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed



With terrifying contributions from:
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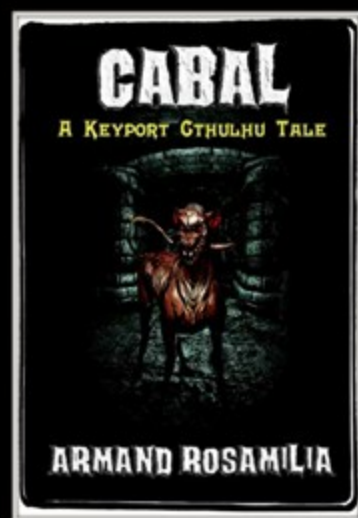
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Cabal, Dagon, and Evil – Coming Soon

The Summer of Love? *James Keough*

After chanting the devil's name for over an hour, a hooded figure ascended the altar with a ceremonial dagger clutched in hand. The girl, no more than eighteen, lay naked on a stone slab, and like the others probably a runaway. Her limbs were bound to each of the four corners, and the lack of movement suggested she was drugged. The leader of the underground sect cited passages from the cursed book while taking a step to stand behind the hooded figure.

Richard "Dick" Spencer had been trying to break into the satanic cult under the fake alias of Tyler Sage. Dick, an undercover police detective, had always looked young for his age. He jumped at the chance when his Lieutenant asked for a volunteer to ascertain any connections between the latest string of missing girls and a local satanic cult.

In college, Dick took a few drama classes and soon became famous for playing a multitude of different characters. When asked how he did it, he cracked what became his trademark smile saying it came naturally.

His latest venture playing drifter and burnout, Tyler Sage proved to be tougher than he thought. The local hippie community, despite being called 'The Summer of Love', was very suspicious of outsiders. Dick tried every drug known to man, and only after did he learn the latest trip, worshipping the devil. Dick did his research, but trying to break into the secret circle took over a month. He had an exemplary record with the SFPD, so his impatient Lieutenant cut him a break.

It was Dick's second black mass and it was shaping up to be the one to blow the case wide open. One major snag was, he didn't have his badge or gun. Dick regretting not having a better plan. Like all the wicked congregants, he was naked underneath a flimsy black robe.

Because he didn't want the girl on the altar to die, he pushing his way to the front of the crowd. Everyone was too drugged out, so they parted like the red sea.

Just as Dick got to the front, the leader, Alton or Anlon, called out for a volunteer. Nobody raised their hand, and the hooded figure with the knife pointed at Dick. The crowd dispersed, and a couple of people who recognized Dick began chanting, "Tyler." The rest of the congregation joined in, droning his fake name.

Dick wondered if his cover was blown, but he climbed the steps anyway trying his best to stay in character.

He stood face to face with their high priest, Abron, Adon; why didn't he remember the person's name? "What is your full name, my son," the high priest asked.

"Tyler... Sage, uh... sir."

The evil priest smiled wide.

Dick felt a sudden sharp pain in the middle of his back and he collapsed at the high priest's feet.

Before his vision faded, he stole a glance at his still grinning face.

"You can't lie to the devil's children, my son."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - James Keough is a freelance writer, poet and lyricist. Still a musician, he leads a local writers group in Nashua, New Hampshire. His work has appeared in Pill Hill Press, and in addition to his numerous projects, he's working on his first novel. Connect with James on Twitter at @NashuaWriters and @FailedPoets, and on Facebook at NashuaWritersGroup and Failed Poets.





Lucian's First Trick *Red Tash*

"I don't know about this one, Dad. The light's not on." He stood on the sidewalk looking up at the porch of the house next door. Unlike every other house on the street, it was dark, same as every night. Not once from his bedroom window had the boy seen the glow of a TV, or a light in the bedroom. "Let's just go home."

"Lucian, it's your last year trick-or-treating," his father said. "You said you were going to hit every house on the block." A glowing iPhone illuminated the man's face.

Lucian shrugged. He took a step toward the house, then froze, as he heard the sound of voices shrieking from across the street.

"Hey, Lucy-N! You got some 'splainin' to doooooooo!" It was Elmo Jenkins, threepeat douchebag champion of the world, doing his best Ricky Ricardo.

Lucian looked to his dad. His dad looked to his phone, now held sideways, thumbs typing away, frowning vaguely.

"Sup, Peanut Boy? You get me any Reese's Cups yet?" Elmo raised his fingers to his mouth in a crude gesture, wagging his tongue at Lucian and rendering his costume a sudden obscenity.

How many years had Elmo threatened Lucian because of his peanut allergy? Lucian did the math. He was eleven now, so...four years?

Lucian held up four fingers in Elmo's direction. As the bully's face registered delighted surprise, Lucian lowered each of three fingers, except for the middle one. He danced it around in the air, merrily for a moment, before putting it away as his dad looked up from the phone.

On the porch of the house next door, the light flickered on.

"Go on," Lucian's dad said. "Light's on now." In a whisper he added "Maybe we'll finally see what the old recluse looks like."

Elmo grabbed his crotch and made lewd gestures from across the street, his cronies snickering. Lucian stole up the steps to the front door before he lost his nerve.

The door creaked open as Lucian approached.

"Hello?" he said. No answer. "Trick or treat?" This time he whispered, and looked over his shoulder to see if he'd just given Elmo more ammunition for making fun of him. *Who says "trick or treat" anymore?*

"Come in, child," the old lady said, her bony hand grasping Lucian by the wrist and pulling him inside, before he could whip his head around and register her appearance. A confluence of teeth and darkness, the smell of smoke like a million cigarettes and Grandma's church at Christmastime. He pulled away from her grasp, but she was quick and powerful and he felt himself fly forward with a jerk, like that time his dad had taken him to the Harry Potter theme park, and they'd ridden the 3D ride.

Lucian caught his breath, stumbling away from the woman and landing hard on his bottom, his trick or treat bag spilling onto the grimy hardwood floor. As much as he wanted the candy, he didn't dare scoop it up from the mess of ooze and sticky goo.

"What the hell?" he said. "What was that?" He stood and tried to take a look around the dark room. It was candlelit, but just barely. They were deep into the house now—somehow the old crone had pulled him inside. She was cloaked in a black flaxen robe, the kind he'd seen in a number of boring Halloween specials every year.

She laughed. "Oh, you're better than I thought, little boy. You've come for a treat, I think, and--"

"That's cool and everything, nice costume, but I gotta get back to my dad," Lucian said. He tried to squeeze past her, and it shouldn't have been difficult, as slight as she appeared to be under the robe. She reached for his wrist, but Lucian pulled away. His hand flailed, striking a thick glass jar, and he cried out in pain as he bungled past the woman.

The witch threw back her head and laughed. "Oh, oh ho, oh no," she said, leaning over, one bony hand clutching a crowded wooden table as she rasped hard for breath. "Don't go, Lucian, don't go. This is too much fun."

Lucian was set to run, for real and for truly this time, but just as he felt his body respond to the sprinting impulse, his mind registered the contents of the thick glass jar upon which he'd banged his hand. Hair. Swollen lips. A lazy eye.

"Dad!" he screamed. "Dad, Daddy, Dad!!!" At first he couldn't move anything but his teeth and tongue, a web of paralysis hand-sewn and tailor made for him, trapping him to the spot in the dark hallway of this stranger's home as he shrieked.

The laughter continued, the woman laboring through wheezing breaths to beg "Lucian, no--Lucian stay, please..."

But Lucian wouldn't stay. He tore out of the house and ran hard into his father's chest, who wasn't where he'd left him, but had found his way to the front porch to retrieve his only child. "Where you been? What's going on? Did the old lady give you any candy?"

Lucian pulled his father down the steps to the sidewalk in fits and starts. His father wasn't much bigger than he was, but his old man strength made moving him like dragging an anchor across the ocean floor.

"Dad, I pissed myself, okay?" he finally blurted, Elmo or no Elmo. "I gotta change!"

The wall of laughter across the street told him there'd be Elmo to pay, indeed.

"Ah, damn it, Lucian," his dad said. "Good thing we're almost home..."

Lucian was already on the porch of the house next door, taking the key from the shoestring he wore around his neck, and putting it into the lock, eyeing the porch of the house next door.

The old lady waved, laughing. "See you soon, Lucian!" she called.

And then Lucian slipped inside, panting, the door shut against his father's pounding. "I didn't see what I thought I saw. That didn't happen. It couldn't have." In his mind's eye, he saw the witch waving again, transmuting into some amalgam from a Disney flick, or a Bette Midler movie. *Was she really that hunched over and warty?*

"Lucian. Let! Me! IN!" and now that his Dad was kicking, Lucian's reverie was broken.

That night in bed, after his father had kissed him goodnight and left him to his comic books, Lucian stared at the ceiling, his copy of the latest Deadpool lying discarded on his lap among the candy wrappers. He'd tried to read along—it was a new issue and he'd spent most of his allowance on it earlier in the day—but he just couldn't seem to focus. He tried plying his woes with various treats purloined from the Halloween goodie bag stowed atop the fridge for rationing.

Where do skulls come from? The voice in his head refused to be still. *Those were heads in jars. Were they real? Pretend?* Every shop in town had been decorated for Halloween for weeks. *I'm hardly a baby, I'm eleven years old. I know a fake skull when I see one.* A chill went through Lucian's body, bringing goose bumps to his flesh. *They were real.* He rubbed the bumps down and buried his face beneath the covers.

Lucian flew through the air, unsteadily beside Deadpool above a sea of oozing, wriggling things in the darkness. *Deadpool doesn't fly*, he told himself from within the dream, *he teleports. And what is that scratching?*

He smelled her breath before he opened his eyes and found his glasses on the nightstand. He knew it was her, her bony hand clasped tightly around his wrist. He pissed his pants. Again. *Dad'll be mad. Dad!*

"Da--" he opened his mouth to call for help, but the witch shoved a balled up pair of superhero

underwear into his mouth. Lucian thought he would choke. *How did she get in here? This has to be a dream. Deadpool, save me!*

"Trick or treat," she whispered, her eyes inhumanly white in the glow of Lucian's halogen desk lamp. She squinted until all Lucian could see were the yellow irises, then she whispered into his face with breath that gagged him, "Let us steal away into the dark of night, into the graveyard, the bone yard, the de-cay get-away, your way right away, my pet, my sweet, my sweet trick or treat," she crooned.

Lucian felt himself begin to calm, although his mind did not stop racing. "Mmm, mmm," he hummed from behind his gag. *She put a spell on me. I can feel it.*

She chuckled, stooped on the edge of his bed like some hellish grandmother. Her robe smelled of death. Lucian hadn't realized he'd even *known* the smell of death, but here it was, that undercurrent of decay he'd only sensed one other place: in the funeral home, when his mother was lain to rest. It had been disguised with flowers and candles and food smells, but it was still heavy, ever-present. Now it was here, sitting on his bed giggling, beckoning for him to come away with all its mysterious grotesque gifts just waiting.

She removed the underwear from his mouth, one bony finger held to her paper-thin lips. "Shhhh..." she said.

Thump. Thump. Thump. Dad was coming up the stairs. This was his chance, if he wanted saving.

The witch backed away silently, stepping into the shadows of Lucian's deep walk-in closet, not even closing the door. *How many times has she hidden there?*

Lucian's bedroom door swung open, and his father poked his head inside. "You still up? Turn out the lamp and go to sleep, kiddo. Deadpool can wait until morning."

Lucian switched off his lamp and turned over on his side. "Okay, Daddy. I love you," he said.

"Love you, too, kid," his father said. In a moment Lucian could hear his father's bed creaking beneath the man's weight as he crawled in it to crash. In another moment came the snores.

The witch crept back out from the closet, perfectly gleeful. "Well done, my boy," she whispered. "Your father sleeps lightly, so let us repair to our facilities in silent haste."

"I gotta change my pants," he said. "Could you at least turn around?" She put a hand atop her mouth, seemingly stifling a laugh.

"Why do you talk like that?" Lucian said, shimmying out of his wet clothes and pulling on dry ones—the Spiderman set out of his hamper would do. He remembered how his mother used to make a note of what he wore before they parted ways at the amusement park, in case she had to describe him to the authorities. He wondered if Dad would remember the Deadpool pajamas, or figure out he had changed. He slipped a black Spider-Man tee shirt over his head. He knew he should be screaming for help, but he could feel the witch's spell mollifying him and he was so very curious.

"Are you ready, my child?" the witch asked.

"Almost," he said. "Normally my dad carries this, but..." he eyed the witch, his set of EpiPens in hand. She seemed confused. "I'll just hold onto these," he said, tucking them into the waistband of his pajama bottoms. "Medicine," he explained.

He couldn't later say how they left the house, or how they traveled to the graveyard in the dark of night, but the witch snapped her fingers and then he felt like he was flying, not unlike the dream she had woken him from. He knew the graveyard, of course, and as their feet set down on the crumbly dry dirt of a newish grave, he looked around to spot his mother's headstone.

"We're here for heads, aren't we?" he asked, his voice full of undisguised dread.

She pulled two small shovels from beneath her cloak, handing him one. "Trick or treat, smell my feet, give me something good to eat," she sang. Although her face was shriveled and dry in the

darkness, Lucian saw the girl in her, just for a moment.

“As long as we don't dig up my mom,” he said. “Or my grandma or grandpa.”

The witch laughed. “Dig in, dig in!”

The shovels moved a surprising amount of dirt—Lucian figured that must have been magic. The coffins were surprisingly easy to open, as well, like overcooked clams waiting to split open, revealing the meats inside. The witch cooed in delight at the various states of decay. “Some embalmers are better than others, precious,” she said, stroking the hair sprayed head of a sad-faced corpse, before popping it off at the neck with her enchanted shovel.

Lucian couldn't help but notice the creepy crawlies that made their way inside the open caskets as they made their way through the rows of the bone yard. The old lady hummed.

“The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out, the worms play pinochle on your snout!” Lucian chanted, as the old woman erupted into peals of laughter. It was wrong. It was all wrong and Lucian knew it, deeply, but he didn't care. He laughed with her. “What is 'pinochle'?” he said.

The witch did not answer at first. Instead, she counted the heads they had lined up in a row, then drew one bony finger to her mouth, as her other hand fished inside her robe. She produced a net bag, the kind Lucian's father took to the farmer's market for carrying potatoes. “Hold this,” she said, and Lucian obeyed. As she deposited the heads, she eyed him momentarily and said “It's a card game. Pinochle. My parents used to play it.” For a moment, her eyes didn't seem to be yellow anymore—but it was hard to see in the dark, and Lucian nodded. Again, she seemed like a young girl, and Lucian smiled despite himself.

Back at his grisly neighbor's house, Lucian received a full tour of the canning cellar and all the witch's supplies--the rows upon rows of pickled heads in thick glass jars were interspersed with cucumbers, carrots, and other things similar to what his mom had left behind in her own canning closet.

So much of what Mom canned three years ago was still good. He and dad would crack open a jar once a month or so and enjoy the pickled cauliflower, or the dill spears—not crisp like the kind from the grocery store, but not bad, either.

“It's not fair,” he whispered, thinking of his mother's untimely death. How could someone so good and lovely die needlessly, while a wretch like this old woman lived on?

The witch nodded. “Aye, you're right. Not fair to them!” and she pointed her finger at the face of one of the heads, tapping against the jar and jolting it, its flesh half-off and a liberal amount of skull showing through, ivory in the cellar light.

“That wasn't what I meant,” Lucian said. He spun slowly, taking in the room, the canning supplies, the heads. Most of the faces grimaced or frowned. So many sad faces. Some of them were blurry through their chemical baths like Mom's fuzzy peach preserves. He remembered how some of mom's earlier batches hadn't “taken.” Mom had said canning was tricky. Lucian wanted to help her, but he was young, and there were hot liquids involved, a stove-top with a glowing red light—so pretty, but ouch! It had burned.

The witch eyed him now. “What's not fair?” she said. She breathed through her mouth, her lips twisting back over her teeth involuntarily, her eyes squinting. *That's a facial tick.* He had read about that in a copy of *Deadpool*. She huffed, too. *So peculiar.* Lucian wished he'd met her before. *Before what? Before she'd gone mad?*

“Before tonight,” he answered, then realized he was answering the voice in his mind, not the weird woman next door. He thought he would tell her about his mother. “My mother used to can...” he began, but then a sob rose up from inside him, like an unbidden ghost rising up from the grave. This wasn't what he wanted at all. Not to *feel*, not here, not now.

The witch nodded and picked up a jar, cradling it like a baby. "My parents taught me," she said "before they went away." She held it next to her face. The skull inside was quite old, bits of flesh loosened from it and swirling around the bottom of the jar. "See the resemblance?" Then she kissed the glass, taking on that girlish look again for one brief moment, before crooning "Who's a good Mommy? Who is? You is!" and cackling as she replaced the it on the shelf.

"I can teach you, Lucian." She picked up another, this one's bloated head with hair the same color his mother once had. *But it couldn't be, could it?* "Teach my sweet treat, come take a seat, have you something good to eat!" And then to the head, "Who's a good Mommy? Lucian's Mommy! She is, she is!" she crooned, and that was all Lucian could bear.

Without looking to see if it were his grandfather or a neighbor or a mailman from years past, Lucian picked up the nearest jar and hurled it at the witch—then another, and another. They bounced off her body before landing in the soft cellar floor with a *thud*, the witch scrambling to catch them as though they were precious. Lucian *knew* they were precious—also profane.

"Boy, *stop*," she hissed, "or I'll pickle yours next!"

And Lucian with all his might slammed a canning jar into the glass the old witch held, shattering it, thick blue shards falling as a perilous hail through the salty rain upon her legs and feet and the floor.

Then she dropped all the jars, and they were crashing and breaking, too. Lucian was a force to be reckoned with, and he knew it now, knew this was why she had chosen him—and from the goosebumps on his flesh to his newly dropped balls he knew that she could sense it, too—but too late for her. *Too late*. He flung jar after jar with the same fury--pickles and peaches and the people from the neighborhood. *The people that you meet, when you're walking down the street, the people that you meet...each...day!*

Then she toppled over him, her fingers around his throat, pushing and choking him with a passion.

"Stop," she said. "Breaking," she panted. "My!" she grunted. "Heads!" she growled.

And though Lucian could scarcely breathe, he knew again that he was, indeed, a big boy now, and the EpiPen in his back pocket was an excellent assurance--the weight of her vigor on top of him had crushed it open, and the pin now stabbed him in the flesh of his back. What had only been Lucian's panic and anger had now turned to adrenalized fury. Lucian realized he had never really tried his strength before. *No time like the present*.

Reaching his hand into the pile of mess, ignoring the mushy parts that met his fingers, he found a shard of glass. While the witch busied herself with his neck, he plunged the glass into *her* neck and chest, stabbing over and over, though he could feel the shard cutting his own fingers to the bone.

"Trick," he panted. "Or treat," he huffed. "You BITCH!" he groaned.

He sat up, the witch crumpling into the debris, and he brained her with a particularly large jar of pickles, delighted to see it crack against her head.

Lucian's hands were trembling from the epinephrine and fear cocktail, shredded and bloody from the glass as he eyed the witch, a foot on her throat. She did not *appear* to be breathing, but in her arms was the jar of a head with hair the same color as his mother's. Somehow it had survived the fight. He liberated it, and still the witch did not move.

"Yeah, trick or treat, then," Lucian whispered, pushing his glasses up his nose by his wrist. He would find his father and show him his prize, which he hoped would not be stowed atop the fridge with the rest.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Red Tash is the author of top-rated Dark Fantasies Troll Or Derby and This Brilliant Darkness, as well as the quirky short stories The Wizard Tales. Formerly a syndicated newspaper columnist, she now devotes all her writing time to this kind of stuff because real world journalism is simply too scary.



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The Falcon's Chase

Captain Reuben Costello is just hours away from facing his execution when the unlikelyst of rescuers storms into his cell. Lady Arianne Dalton needs the assistance of the infamous Black Swan to flee England and all its constraints. He finds himself more than willing to help the fiercely independent Ari in exchange for his freedom.

However, when they come to find their fates inextricably tangled in a plot that threatens the very foundations of British society, they are swept away on a chase that puts not only their lives, but their hearts at risk - and neither of them can defy the wild and stormy ride they find upon the Falcon.

The Angels of Autumn

Kincaid Kingsley returns to the town of his childhood after the death of his twin brother, Xander. Believing the crime to be motivated by hate and prejudice, Kincaid sets out to discover why the police are no longer actively investigating the case and hopefully uncover his brother's killer in the process.

Things in Wren are not as they seem, however, and the closer that Kincaid gets to an answer, the more danger he encounters. Why are all the townspeople so afraid to share what they know?

As the mystery surrounding Xander's death unravels, the town becomes increasingly blind to what is actually going on. Can Kincaid discover who killed his brother and save the town from evil?



Keep reading for an exciting excerpt from Joshua Skye's
The Angels of Autumn

An Excerpt from *The Angels of Halamn* by Joshua Skye

The Lombardi Funeral Home was among the oldest of buildings in Wren, constructed in the late 1800s as both a business and a residence by the Lombardi family, immigrants from Italy, of course.

They conducted the bulk of their unusual profession on the shadowy, beautifully decorated, meticulously maintained first level while the untidy dealings with body preparation were carried out in the basement. The second and third levels were where they actually lived. Kept in the family for well over a hundred years by strict legal clauses in every will and testament down the Lombardi line it was now owned and operated by the widow Mary Anne Lombardi and her only son, Angelo.

Kincaid felt queasy as he looked around the parlor. The furnishings were ancient, most assuredly antiques, perhaps even the original Italian décor, all aglow in the flickering light of electric candles. Aside from what little daylight filtered in through the dark sheers, there were no other light sources. A little bell had announced his arrival several minutes before but he'd yet to be greeted.

There was a musty smell and a pungent chemical odor beneath it. Someone, somewhere deep in the house turned on a hissing record player and after a few scratchy seconds a low, somber sonata began to play over unseen speakers. A curtain parted and a tall shadowy figure emerged. He said, "How may I help?"

Angelo was a handsome man with typically Italian features. He was dressed in a nice, solemn suit and had his hair combed strictly back. His large hazel eyes fell on his guest and there was an audible sound of shock, a sigh and then a deep intake of air. He said, "Kincaid. Wow, I thought you'd never come back to this place especially when you didn't attend your brother's funeral. Everyone thought it was pretty *scandalous*. So, how's it going?"

Ignoring the crude judgment, Kincaid detected a genuine surprise in Angelo's voice. He was the same age and had been in many of the very same classes as the Kingsley twins, he'd even been one of the disapproving assholes who had put them through hell. Angelo had been one of the popular kids, one of the over-exulted Wren Dragons, a dumb jock destined to forever mourn his golden high school days. As an adult, Angelo didn't seem so intimidating anymore. He was just a man in his late twenties, wasting away in the family business, no longer taut, tan and toned, no longer important, no longer a Dragon...*the toast of the town*. He had a beer belly which alone made Kincaid happy. "I'm okay," he replied. "How have you been?"

Angelo's lips quivered when he forced a smile and answered, "Good. Thank you. How's your mother?"

"As good as can be expected, I guess."

Angelo said, "Right. Well, how can I help you?" He was stiff, formal. The fingers of his hands were entwined and resting at his waist. He cocked his head to one side, the sympathy in his eyes was counterfeit, a professional automation.

"I wanted to talk to you about my brother's funeral, actually." Kincaid found he couldn't look at Angelo when he said 'funeral,' and so he diverted his gaze across the room to nothing in particular. Everything about the place was so old.

Angelo's voice got deeper and there was a hint of umbrage to it. "I imagine you would. Your mother expressed her disappointment in your brother's restoration. We're very sorry she was so displeased. I assure you we pro-rated our fees accordingly."

Kincaid slowly brought his attention back to his host and said, "Yeah well, do you do the

restoration?”

“No. My mother does.” Angelo’s stance changed, he was getting defensive both vocally and physically.

“May I speak with her, please?”

“Why?”

“I’m not here to cause a scene or anything. I just want to talk to her. That’s all, Angelo. I’m not going to berate your mother.”

The Italian man just stood there for several tedious and silent moments assessing the guest’s intentions. Kincaid refused to look away this time no matter how nerve-racking or unsettling the situation slowly became. He wasn’t in high school anymore, he wasn’t the frightened and belittled teenager who shied away from everyone and Angelo wasn’t the pompous cock-of-the-walk anymore. They were adults and far more equal now than Angelo was probably even aware of.

Kincaid prepared himself for a physical altercation. Being picked on mercilessly had prompted him to take quite a few self-defense classes over the years. Angelo might have been able to beat the shit out of him once, long ago, but his glory days were long over. He was out of shape and didn’t have his buddies around to back him up. Kincaid put on a confident little grin and stated, “I said *please*.”

Angelo’s shoulders slouched ever so slightly. He swallowed hard and his eyes turned down as his voice became professional, disengaged. He said, “Of course. If you’ll excuse me I’ll see if she’s available. Please, take a seat.”

“Thank you, Angelo,” Kincaid said lowly.

Angelo nodded and disappeared behind the curtain.

Kincaid turned and meandered into the small, dismal sitting room and over to a stiff, uncomfortable sofa and sat down. A spider crawled over the surface of the weathered coffee table. Not particularly squeamish about such things, Kincaid watched it with a distracting fascination, the way it moved, the legs *click, click, clicking* along. He frowned as he realized that this spider was malformed. It had nine legs instead of eight and yet the added appendage didn’t seem to impede it in the slightest. He found himself leaning down, close, to get a better view of the little creepy crawlly. The spider stopped. Perhaps it was now quite aware of its audience. It was perfectly still, frozen.

“Mr. Kingsley.” The voice was soft.

Kincaid flinched. The spider lurched into motion and scurried over the edge of the table and vanished. Being polite, Kincaid stood and turned his attention to the petite woman standing in the entranceway. She clutched a leather-bound portfolio to her bosom. Her salt and pepper hair was pulled into a tight bun on her head. She had modest make-up on and was dressed in a long, conservative black dress. There was a beautifully crocheted shawl draped over her shoulders perhaps utilized to hide the slight curvature of her upper spine. Kincaid said, “Ms. Lombardi, thank you for seeing me.”

She smiled courtly and entered the room, moved gracefully around the back of the sofa and sat down next to her guest. Kincaid sat down as well. Her eyes were down. He wondered what she was thinking. He imagined she thought he was there to complain. He wanted to reassure her he was not and so he said, “I didn’t come here to...”

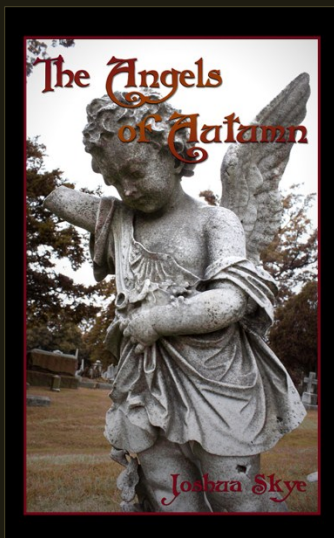
Without looking at him, she shoved the portfolio at him. Sheepishly, he accepted it and took a deep breath before opening it. For a moment he expected to see pictures of his dead brother, before and after. It wasn't something he was even remotely interested in. They were pictures of the dead and indeed they were before and after shots, *instamatic snapshots*, many of them yellowed with age. The first was an old man whose face had practically been pulled off in some horrible accident. After the restoration he simply appeared as though he were napping. The second was a woman whose forehead had been cleaved open and again the after picture was perfect. On and on the pictures went, each turn of the page revealing flawless transformations.

She said demurely, "My work. As you can see, I am very good at it."

"It's immaculate, you'd never know, but my mother said she could..." Kincaid paused as a realization hit him. He turned his eyes away from the Polaroid snapshots in the photo album. The widow Lombardi looked sad and afraid at the same time. His voice was shaky, hesitant. He said, "You did it on purpose."

Mary Anne nodded and took the album back from him, she closed it and pressed it, *embraced it*, to her breast. Her eyes moved downward until she stared at the floor and there she focused for a long time, barely breathing, silent and still. She was contemplating something. Kincaid's mind raced with what those thoughts might be. His heart fluttered nervously. What secret was she about to reveal?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Joshua Skye was born in Jamestown, New York but predominantly grew up in the Texas Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. He is a graduate of K.D. Studio Actor's Conservatory of the Southwest and has worked on indie/underground films and on stage. He lives in rural Pennsylvania with his partner Ray of sixteen years and their eight year old son, Syrian. His short stories have appeared in anthologies from STARbooks Press, Knightwatch Press, Sirens Call Publications, Rainstorm Press, JMS Books and periodicals such as Blood and Lullabies. He is the author of *The Singing Wind*, *Bareback: A Werewolf's Tale*, along with the forthcoming *Midnight Rainbows*, and *The Grigori*.



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