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October 2013
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Featuring:

Stories of REVENGE

Poetry, Short Stories, & Flash Fiction

300 Word Comparative Flash Fiction

Original Artwork by Doug Rinaldi

Interview with G.L. Helm, Author of 'Sometimes in Dreams'

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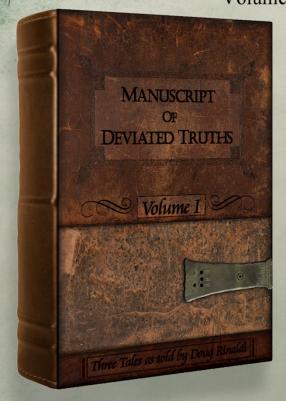
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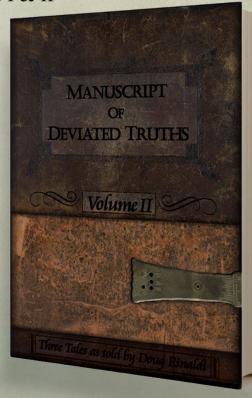
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Revenge: Is It Worth It? An Editorial

Gloria Bobrowicz

The most common type of revenge is brought about by a lover scorned. One partner betraying another. When we give our heart and soul over to another person and that person betrays you, we all fantasize some way of getting even. If we're going to be honest with ourselves, I think we all need to admit that at some point or another, we've considered hurting another person for a perceived slight – I know I have. Whether in our dreams or by some type of actual payback, we've all experienced it. Read a paper or watch the news on any given day and you'll read or hear about someone on trial for murdering - almost always in an atrocious and horrible way - their former lover or spouse. I'm sometimes horrified that any humans are capable of such violence. I look at the individual and cannot picture them doing what I'm pretty sure they did. This kind of revenge is the worst kind. Writing horror is one thing, witnessing it is something else entirely.

Another common type of revenge is workplace revenge. I have seen this many, many times. An employee, who can't stand their boss, waits patiently for their boss to screw up so they can point it out to their bosses' superior. Do they really think it shines a positive light on their behavior as far as upper management is concerned? I've always been cautious of someone who behaves that way. As a former executive myself, I've always been very leery of subordinates who attempt to become overly friendly. Let your guard down once and they'll stab you in the back. I don't care how good you are to people, there is always one in the bunch who covets your position and will stoop as low as they need to take what you have. It's not that they really want to make you look bad, as much as it is to make themselves look good.

The last type of revenge worth noting is making another person look stupid. Have you ever met someone who can't wait until you make that one little mistake so they can gleefully point it out in a public forum? Maybe you unintentionally pointed out a mistake they'd made, even in private. This person will take great delight in ruining your reputation. What you do and how you react is the key. Do you wait for them to make a mistake and get revenge of your own? Or, do you let it ride because you understand their petty nature and don't rise to the occasion? Life is all about choices.

So, I ask you, is it worth it? Only you need to know the answer to that question.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Gloria Bobrowicz has been a huge horror fan since early childhood. She loves books related to true crime — particularly the serial killer variety. Watching the movie 'Night of the Living Dead' or some of the older horror movies such as, 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers', 'The Thing from Another World', or 'War of the Worlds' with a bowl of popcorn is her idea of relaxing. Gloria is a co-owner and the Editor-In-Chief of Sirens Call Publications.

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Revenge, a Dish Best Served – Excuse Me? An Editorial

Nina D'Arcangela

The common saying that 'revenge is a dish best served cold' is a well founded statement. Mind you I'm not a spiteful or angry person who feels the need to hold a grudge, let alone seek revenge, but if I were, I think I'd go about it exactly as prescribed; with a calm head, thorough plan, and icy cold demeanor.

Let's face it, if someone were to slight me and I went off half-cocked seeking revenge, odds are I'll later regret some portion of what I might, or might not have done. But if I take the time to calm down and think about it, I'm guessing I can hatch a far better plan than one conceived in the heat of the moment. And while I'm not gender-biased in any regard, after having read the stories submitted for this eZine, it would seem the ladies might have a minor advantage in this arena. Now don't get upset, I'm not saying a gentlemen can't or won't bring down the wrath of whomever from on high, I'm only proposing that this may be an issue of the mego versus the fego. Follow along; the logic is sound on this one. The mego (male ego) is at the mercy of its level of testosterone combined with society's expectation that the man in question will take care of business when business needs to be taken care of. Whereas the fego (female ego), has been quietly groomed since puberty to scheme and plot the most efficient and excruciatingly effective method of exacting revenge by baptism in the fires of high school peer-pressure and society's expectation of how the fairer sex will behave in public. After all, the phase 'behave like a lady' originated somewhere.

Where does that leave us on the revenge scales of justice? On the one hand we have the feather fluffing, fist pumping, chest inflating mego that might force a man (through no fault of his own other than his biological wiring) to turn bright red and respond immediately to a perceived threat, thereby robbing him of a proper revenge; this would be revenge served steaming hot. While on the other hand, we have the possibly diabolical, quietly scheming, female plotting fego that might enable a woman (through no fault of her own other than the stricture of behaving as expected) with a need to drop the temperature of any given room by ten degrees and begin devising the demise of her adversary, their current friends and family, and any future relations they may have; this would be revenge served cold.

What does all this speculation mean when it comes to serving up a dish of revenge? I don't know, but if the room gets frigid, I suggest you glance over your shoulder because *Lady* Justice might just be peeking out from under her blindfold and you wouldn't want to be caught in the crosshairs when she mutters, 'Excuse me? What was that you just said?' But what do I know, I'm one of the nice ones, remember?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Nina D'Arcangela is a quirky horror writer who likes to spin soul rending snippets of despair. She reads anything from splatter matter to dark matter, and is an UrbEx explorer who loves to photograph abandoned places, bits of decay and old grave yards. Nina is a coowner of Sirens Call Publications, a member of the writing group Pen of the Damned, and the owner and resident anarchist of Dark Angel Photography.



Revenge: Why Is It So Satisfying? An Editorial

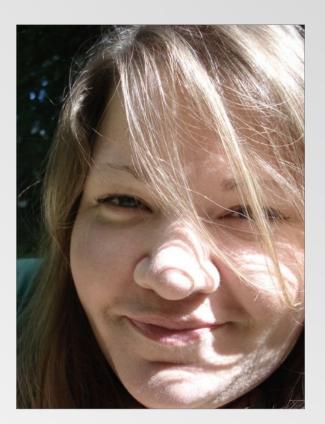
Julianne Snow

Let's admit it. We've all thought about it. Heck, many of us have probably done or said things geared at getting our own back. Whether it's starting rumours or doing something more drastic, we're a society who focuses on slights; whether intentional or not. Revenge is a theme that runs through all of your expressions of art and as a matter of course; we consume it without giving it a second thought.

We only need to look at our movies to find examples of revenge. Take for example *The Princess Bride* and *Office Space*. Within each of these movies, there is someone who is looking for an opportunity to exact their revenge and once it comes, they take it. Horror movies are especially full of revenge motifs: *The Last House on the Left, I Spit on Your Grave, Friday the 13th, Cape Fear, Carrie, The Crow, Dead Silence, What Lies Beneath* – the list goes on and on. You might sit there any wonder why so many movies are made with revenge laden themes – it's simply because we can all relate to them. We get the motivation behind it and that shared empathy brings the characters closer into our worlds. We don't need to have lived through the exact same situation, but our desires to come out on top, even if it's just the once, connect us all.

Revenge is a powerful theme in literature as well. Just look at Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado*, or *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville. Stephen King's *Carrie* was a book before it was adapted for screen and it hits the same mark as *Paradise Lost* (Milton) and *Invisible Monsters* (Palahnuik). Do I dare say we feed from it? Does it excite us, or do we simply enjoy seeing someone get the justice we think they deserve.

Therein lies another question: why do we see revenge as a form of justice? No one wins and the feelings derived from knowing you got a leg up in that one instance fade the moment someone else slights you. It's a never ending cycle fed by our own insecurities and it's reinforced within us from a very young age. I'm not going to state the obvious and give society a way out of the vicious cycle we're on, but I will say this: it feels good sometimes, doesn't it?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Julianne Snow is the author of the Days with the Undead series and the founder of Zombieholics Anonymous. She writes within the realms of speculative fiction, has roots that go deep into horror and is a member of the Horror Writers Association. Julianne has pieces of short fiction in publications from Sirens Call Publications, Open Casket Press, 7DS Books, James Ward Kirk Publishing, Coffin Hop Press and Hazardous Press as well as the forthcoming shorts in anthologies from Phrenic Press, May December Publications and others. Also, she recently helped spearhead a collaborative novel for charity called *The* Carnival 13 which is available now. Be on the lookout for her contributions to a number of collaborative projects to be announced shortly.

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Charlotte LE Jamez

Charlotte was the apple of her parents' eye. Arriving late in their life, she was the miracle child they never thought they'd have, the very ground she walked on was worshiped. As such she was spoiled by parents and grandparents alike.

"Mummy, I want that new talking dolly."

"Of course honey, I'll just get my purse."

"This doll is broken, get me a new one. Only better."

"Right away sweetheart, I'll just send Daddy to the shops."

Everything she asked for she received, whether it was the latest doll, fashion roller blades, talking bears, custom made accessories, the list kept growing.

By showering her with toys whenever she asked, Charlotte learned that she didn't need to care for her possessions; if something broke it could easily be replaced. Her room became a graveyard for unwanted, unloved and broken toys. Arms from six Cindy dolls mixed with stuffing from various zoo animals, a once treasured bear missing an eye & nose, crammed between a bookcase and the skirting board, jigsaw pieces from several boxes mixed together and misshapen; the joy of finding that one last piece gone forever.

"Charlotte, honey, why don't we throw out some of these broken toys? Or maybe Daddy could fix some of them, what do you think?"

"NO!! They're mine, I'm keeping them. Stay out of my room."

Her parents realised their mistake when she approached the age of ten, they had fostered her destructive nature, nurtured it even and they paid dearly for it. The monster within had taken hold and all attempts to remould Charlotte into a gentle, more caring child ended in failure. Withholding presents caused tantrums. Threatening to remove all toys, whether broken or still whole, to charity shops and the dump created tears and threats of reporting to authorities. It was with a sad heart that her parents took the easy option and reverted back to spoiling her once more.

Charlotte would spend many a happy hour scoring the faces of her dolls with a serrated plastic knife, or doodling on her collection of expensive bears with pens stolen from her Daddy's office. With every act of vandalism inflicted upon Charlotte's possessions, a little bit of malicious energy was transferred to the world around her and by the time of her parents' failure, the energy had grown to critical mass.

The force seeped into the broken toys scattered around the room, each one slowly brought to life. Barney, a long forgotten armless dinosaur, was the first to drag himself across the floor. Thoughts flickering behind glassy eyes he watched in amazement as; Snow White comforting a weeping Rapunzel; fairies trying to fly with tattered wings; groups of zoo animals gathering their stuffing and helping each other fill their baggy bodies. All around him were signs of destruction and suffering.

As the night wore on Barney gained strength, in body and in mind. The realisation that he could end his friends suffering dawned just as the first rays of early morning light filtered through the curtain. With the daylight the toys returned to silent suffering once more. No evidence of their rebirth apparent to humans eyes, all waiting for the night. It was time for a rebellion, they had been abused for long enough.

Late at night the least damaged toys gathered together arms, eyes and whatever else they felt could be used. It took several days for the toys to gain enough confidence and power for the rebellion to begin in earnest. A block left in a slipper so when Charlotte put them on in the morning her toes would be stubbed; the tumbling of books from a shelf to land on a head, arm or foot. Nothing caused her to change her ways and with each and every purchase, more disgruntled toys were added to the growing army. So caught up in her own world she never even gave the little accidents a second thought. The vengeful group had finally reached meltdown, the time for gentle hints had passed. All out war had begun.

Days passed, finally they had a plan, that couldn't fail. The sound of Charlotte's gentle breathing was all the toys needed to start the assault. Those that had arms dragged the quilt from her sleeping form, whilst skipping ropes were used to tie her down on the bed. A sound sleeper, it wasn't until bears began to fill her mouth with the stuffing she had cruelly removed from their bodies that she woke. Of course by then it was too late to scream.

The toys set to work, the power coursing through them giving strength to their desires. With precision Cindy's dolls plucked out her eyelashes one by one, before using pens to gouge small groves into her cheeks. Bears used scissors to snip away at the flesh between her fingers and toes, reminiscent of the way she would cut away at their stitches in order to get to the stuffing. Building bricks were used as scrubbing brushes, leaving long deep groves in her arms and legs.

Down the corridor while Charlotte suffered in muted silence, her parents slept on, safe and secure in their bed, unaware of the tortures performed on their once idolised child. Unable to admit their faults awake, while they were asleep their subconscious allowed them to dream the unthinkable, of a life without their spoilt child. A life filled with magic and wonder.

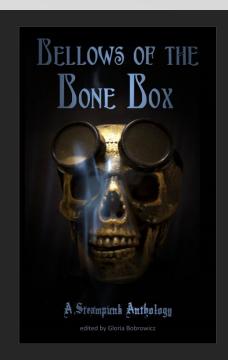
With every act of vengeance the toys inflicted on her squirming body a little bit of her humanity was stripped from her, the toys energy slowly transferring her into the object of her tortures. Her flesh became less pliant, her eyes lost their sparkle. By the light of dawn Charlotte was no longer a spoilt little girl but a living breathing embodiment of malicious energy. Her mind no longer her own, swam with vengeance. It was a different being that moved from the bed across the floor of her room. With no thoughts but that of destruction she moved on stiff legs out of her bedroom and down the corridor, the small scissors clasped in a plastic claw like hand.

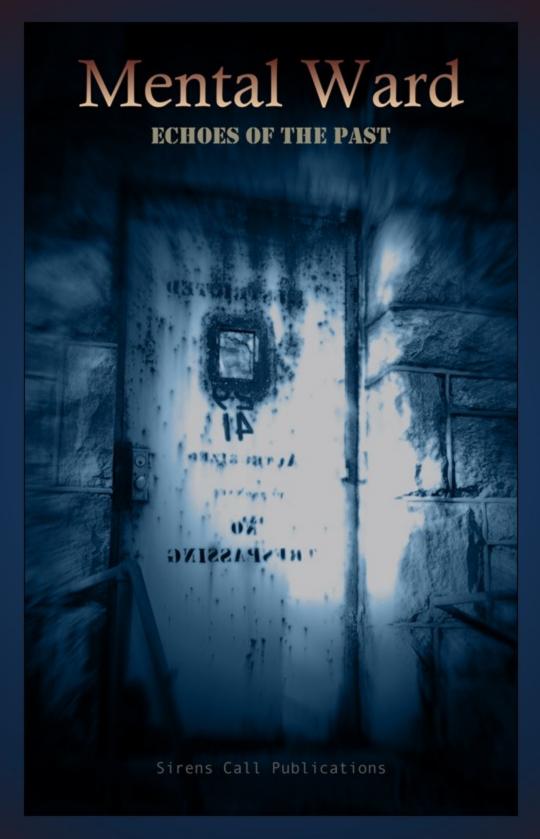
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - LE Jamez is a mother of two from Dunfermline in Scotland, who has been obsessed with horror from an early age. Recently she decided to share her love of horror with the world and her first collection of flash fiction 'Kitchen Antics & Other Tales' was released as an ebook in May 2013.

Blog: www.officemango.com

Bellows of the Bone Box

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Available on Amazon, CreateSpace and Smashwords

Something in the Bath Alex Woolf

Edmund sipped his coffee and stared with a mixture of disgust and curiosity at his flatmate's foot, propped casually on the table opposite him. Damian was reading a magazine while absently rubbing his thumb in the gap between his big toe and its neighbour, easing the itch of a long-standing fungal infection. Edmund could see tiny bits of cheesy-looking toe skin adhering to Damian's thumb as he rubbed. He then observed the same thumb, with the help of a forefinger, picking up a piece of ketchupsmeared sausage from a plate and disappearing into Damian's mouth. This was followed by an elaborate slurping sound, as the young man sucked his digits clean of ketchup and everything else.

Damian Rose – spoiled, pampered, delinquent scion of a family that had last been economically productive about four generations ago, and had spent the subsequent century burning their way through a multi-billion-pound fortune with the same enthusiasm and zeal that their forebears had demonstrated in creating it. Damian had been born 25 years too late to inherit any of the family moolah, but that did not stop him inheriting many of the other traits of recent Roses, namely idleness, arrogance and a complete indifference to matters of hygiene and sanitation. Edmund knew this because, as a school friend of Damian's, he'd had weekly play dates at the Rose family's crumbling ancestral pile – the one remaining legacy of their days of affluence – and retained vivid memories of dog-food-encrusted carpet, bathroom cobwebs gold-flecked with urine, and a pervading stench of bad plumbing.

The flat where they now lived belonged to Damian – an inheritance from one of the only branches of the Rose family tree that remained vigorous. Of course, the Damians of this world would always have wealthy spinster aunts willing to throw properties in his direction. But how on earth did Edmund end up living with him? Did he convince himself that, as a property owner, Damian would miraculously shrug off his indolent genes and become responsible and house-proud? No, of course not. It was the low rent. Greed, Edmund was forced to concede, was not one of Damian's many faults. And as a lowly bank clerk, Edmund did not earn enough to be too choosy about where he lived.

Damian put down his magazine and scratched himself. 'The question,' he said through a suppressed belch, 'the cosmically important question of this moment... is what I should do with myself until the pub opens...' He yawned, revealing several half-masticated fragments of sausage, stuck to his teeth.

"How about doing some washing-up?" Edmund suggested. I'd do it myself, only I did it the past six hundred times, at least.

Edmund didn't actually say this last bit, not being by nature the confrontational type. For years, his default response to Damian's persistent failure to do any household chores had been a passive-aggressive sullenness of vocal and facial expression. Damian, as usual, failed to notice. He grinned as if Edmund had made a joke. "You funny little man," he said and went back to reading his magazine.

Feeling hungry, or perhaps just needing to bite something, Edmund decided to risk a bowl of cereal. He removed a packet of Wheaty Crunch from the cupboard and blew dust off it. Then he reached inside and tried an exploratory flake. It crunched satisfactorily between his teeth, so he tipped a serving of it into a bowl. When he poured the milk into the cereal, about a dozen weevils immediately rose to the surface, their tiny legs waving desperately in the air. Edmund's stomach convulsed, and he dropped the spoon he'd been about to put in his mouth. Rising quickly from his seat, he added the bowl and his mug to the pile of dirty crockery by the sink.

This can't go on, can it?

Edmund peered morosely into the sink. Dirty cups and plates broke through the murky surface of the water like the wrecks of old ships. There was cutlery down there, he was sure of it, lurking in the depths like sunken treasure. They were running seriously short of spoons, but no way would he go fishing for

any, not in there. He couldn't remember the last time he'd actually washed the dishes in that sink. Was it six weeks ago? Ten? The water was unnaturally thick and motionless – more like slime – putrid-smelling slime. These days he only used the crockery piled up on the draining board, rinsing it under the tap whenever he needed anything clean.

He had no idea what Damian did.

Once he'd accepted that he couldn't afford to move out, Edmund embarked on a different strategy, which he christened the 'wait-it-out' plan. His thinking ran like this: eventually the germs would have to win. Damian's extreme recklessness with personal hygiene, his total, wilful indifference to the mushrooming microbial menace in their midst, would eventually prove his undoing, and he'd be felled by some horrific, fatal disease. As he lay dying, he'd beg for help. The Damians of this world are very good at begging. He'd look up at Edmund from his bed, eyes shiny with suffering and remorse, vowing that he'd be good from now on and do his share of the chores – if only Edmund, dear Edmund, would fetch him a doctor. I'll fetch a doctor on one condition, he'd tell his expiring flatmate: that you sign over this flat to me in your will. By this time, Damian would be too weak to resist. The deed would be done, the will altered, but still the doctor wouldn't be called. Instead, he'd simply wait for Damian to die, and for the flat to become his. Then the cleaning, the deep cleaning, could begin...

The trouble was, he'd first come up with the 'wait-it-out' plan more than a year ago, and Damian Rose remained as robustly, annoyingly healthy today as he'd ever been. In all that time, he hadn't suffered so much as a sniffle or a wet fart. Twenty-five years of exposure to every form of *E. coli, Staphylococcus* and *Salmonella* known to nature had bequeathed him a constitution of steel. The 'wait-it-out' plan, sadly, wasn't working.

He checked his watch. Time to go to work. The rubber soles of his slippers clacked on the sticky linoleum. Six months ago, when Edmund was still mopping the floor with reasonable regularity, he may have risked bare feet, but not now, not with the layer of greasy, beery residue that now covered it so thickly and stickily that only last week it managed to stop an invasion of ants.

Clack, clack, clack went his slippers.

He stopped outside the bathroom door. Dare he take a peek? He wouldn't actually use it of course. These days he always washed and showered at work. But he was curious about the room, in the way one might be about the contents of a pet dog's coffin, months after burial.

The door squeaked as he opened it, and the smell hit him like a punch in the head. A medieval midden in the midst of a dysentery epidemic couldn't have reeked like this. The bathroom was the scene of the first battle of wills he'd fought with Damian – though he wasn't sure his adversary had ever even been aware of the conflict. Today, it was a no-go area – the radioactive core of his particular Chernobyl, the seventh circle of the Hell he was obliged to call home. But once, long ago, he used to clean it regularly. Back in those fresh-faced halcyon days when he was younger and still believed he could hold back the germ-tide, he would roll up his sleeves once a week and blitz the place with Domestos, Mr. Muscle, Flash and Pledge. But then, one day, he couldn't exactly remember when, he just gave up. It might have been the sight of yet another unflushed Damian Rose turd floating cheekily in the bowl, or a Damian Rose faecal stain, or that specialty of post-modern bathroom art, the Damian Rose urine puddle on the linoleum. At this point, Edmund probably began to shout something along the lines of: Why am I cleaning up after this pig? He's been nannied and coddled and indulged for far too long. I'm not his mum or his nursemaid, and I'm not going to do this anymore!

Edmund probably felt very good after this rant, and probably also enjoyed witnessing, over the following weeks, the bathroom's gradual descent into third-world levels of squalor. At some point, he'd say to himself, Damian will make some comment about the state of the bathroom. And then, oh boy! That's when I'll tell him. Oh yes. I'll let him have it. No more mister nice guy. Edmund shivered at the prospect. Like many people with an aversion to confrontation, he was very adept at imagining it. We'll establish a cleaning rota, that's what we'll do. One week me, the next week you!

But, of course, the moment never came. Damian went on using the bathroom without comment, gaily leaving his excretory stains on the floor and the toilet bowl, along with the ring of scum around the bath and the hair in the plughole. Edmund was stubborn, though. He'd already decided he was prepared to die in the trenches over this one. Let typhoid get him, let cholera. It was worth it if it got Damian, too. That was his attitude during the first few months of hostilities. But then, as the horror and the stench of that room reached truly monstrous proportions, his bravado deserted him. He became squeamish. And from being the front line of battle, the bathroom became, to him at least, a no-go area. From time to time, in the sullen, passive-aggressive voice he'd since perfected, he would ask Damian if he thought it might be time for him to clean the bathroom, and Damian always grinned and said: "You funny little man", and went back to reading his magazine.

How long ago was it now since Edmund had set foot in there? He couldn't remember. But he was certain that Damian still used it. Did he use the bath? Edmund glanced at the tub, and nearly gagged. It was three-quarters full with filthy black stagnant water. He couldn't possibly... which would account for the miasma of stale sweat that constantly surrounded him like an evil aura. Could a man live for months, years, without bathing? Clearly, in Damian's case, he could.

That evening, when Edmund returned from work, he found, along with various bits of breakfast or lunch, a peculiar smile clinging to Damian's face.

"You'll never guess what, old boy," announced his flatmate. "I've gone and got myself a job interview." Edmund nearly fell over in shock. The Roses didn't get jobs. They were either dyed-in-the-wool welfarists, sucking at the tit of the state since their trough of inherited wealth ran dry, or they were, like Damian, financial speculators, with clever friends in the City telling them where to put their money.

"What sort of job?" Edmund managed to splutter.

"Oh, night watchman sort of thing. Minimal actual work luckily. Trouble is, as it's an interview, I suppose I'll need to have a bath, and..."

Edmund went very still.

"And..." continued Damian, "I don't know if you've been in there lately, but patently, the bath is not a practical option in its present state, so as your landlord, I was wondering if I could prevail upon you to..."
"To?"

"Clean it."

Edmund allowed a gentle smile to trespass upon the habitually sullen contours of his face. "I believe it's your turn to clean the bath," he said mildly. "In fact, it's been your turn since the 15th of February 2006." Calendrical exactitude always sounded impressive, even when – as in this case – the date had been plucked randomly from the air. Edmund had no idea when he'd last cleaned the bath, but he was confident that neither did Damian.

"My... turn," murmured Damian, swilling the word around his mouth like a new brand of brown sauce. Then he grinned. "You funny little man."

But as time went by, and the day of the job interview loomed closer, a dim awareness seemed to grow in Damian that Edmund was not going to be prevailed upon – was not, in fact, going to clean the bath.

On the morning of the interview, Damian finally broke. "Look," he said with a wobbly smile, "I'll forego this month's rent, if you'd just, you know..."

Edmund shook his head.

"If I could afford it, I'd call someone in," sighed Damian, "but, if you want the truth, I've got a touch of the shorts, which is why it's really important that I get this job."

Damian was looking paler and twitchier than Edmund ever remembered seeing him. "You haven't been in there lately, have you?" he muttered.

"No."

"So you don't know about... the thing."

"Thing?"

"I believe there's something... something living, as it were... in the bath. The water in there, I swear I saw it move the other day, as if something was, ugh, *lurking*... in its depths."

"You mean like a rat?"

"Not sure," said Damian with a shiver. "Look, if you're forcing this one on me, then I'll do it. But I'm telling you now, I have a peculiar fear of—of things that *lurk*. If I'm in there, and I see it... well, it just doesn't bear thinking about..."

It was then that the plan formed in Edmund's head. It came to him all at once, fully formed, like a vision. It wasn't a plan with any particular strategic aim. It wouldn't advance his situation in practical terms one iota. But Edmund had come to realise that he didn't care about that any more. He didn't care about himself or getting out of this flat. All he wanted – all he really desired – was to make Damian suffer.

Half an hour later, Damian entered the bathroom, cloth in one hand, bottle of bleach in the other. He stared into the oily blackness in the tub. It was as still as glass. There's nothing in there, you silly old fool, he told himself as he reached towards it. His fingers touched the cold, greasy surface. Somewhere down here is the plug. Nothing else, just the plug, and all I have to do is reach down. That's right. Down we go. A little further, and we'll find... Wha...?

Damian screamed as something grabbed hold of his wrist. He stared in perfect horror as his hand resurfaced, caught in the grip of something black and shiny – something that was, *somehow*, living in there.

After Damian had fled, bellowing, from the bathroom, Edmund raised his rubber-clad head above the surface. He clambered out of the bath and pulled off the mask and hood of his wetsuit – a relic of his surfing days.

Wretched sobs were drifting through from the living room, and for a long while Edmund sat on there on the side of the tub, listening to this sound and smiling.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Alex Woolf is a professional author with over sixty titles to his name, including books on spiders, Nazis, asteroid strikes, ghosts and aliens. His recent fiction includes 'Chronosphere', a time-warping sci-fi trilogy, 'Aldo Moon', featuring a teenage Victorian ghost-hunter, and 'Soul Shadows', a horror novel about cannibalistic shadows.

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Betrayed Gloria Bobrowicz

Georgia was a gorgeous, gregarious and vivacious woman who was extremely successful at selling celebrity mansions in the sunny, expensive and exclusive hills of Los Angeles, California. She had everything going for her; more money than she could possibly spend, big name friends, and invites to all major parties with the A-list people in town. Hobnobbing with celebrities was common for her and her list of clientele was envied by many in the highly competitive Los Angeles real estate world.

One night while at a party given by a client celebrating the purchase of her new home (which she facilitated of course) she met Brad, six feet two inches of muscle and charm. All the other women at the party flirted shamelessly with him. He approached her and asked her to dance; she was taken with his good looks and the attention he gave her. While twerking with Brad, she fell into lust with him—not love—just lust. Leaving the party together, they drove in his Mercedes to her ten bedroom, six bathroom home which she bought for a fraction of its worth from a down-on-his-luck, out-of-work celebrity. After a few hours of fantastic love making, Brad got up to leave. Georgia asked him to spend the night, but he said he had an important meeting in the morning and left.

They dated for a few months, enjoying the finest restaurants and attending a few movie premieres. Things seemed to be going well. Brad told her how beautiful she was, how he loved her so much and couldn't live without her. He showered her with jewelry, designer clothes and expensive perfume. Over time Georgia fell deeply in love with Brad. The only issue she had with him was he never spent the night with her. He always had one excuse or another for why he couldn't stay over—he had an early appointment or he had to take his dog out—the list went on and on.

Even though they always used protection, Georgia got pregnant. Although shocked when she did the home pregnancy test and saw it was positive, she had mixed feelings. Georgia loved Brad and thought maybe this would solidify their relationship and possibly result in a more permanent living arrangement. On the other hand, was she ready to give up the success she had achieved through hard work in her high-end real estate business? Well, she didn't have to worry about that right away; she had some time to figure it out. Georgia was both excited and scared to tell Brad, she hoped he would be thrilled with the idea of becoming a father. She called Brad and arranged a candle-lit dinner that night at her home to break the news.

That night, Brad walked into Georgia's kitchen to the delicious smells of dinner. After removing her apron and pouring a glass of wine for each of them, they sat down in the dining room to eat. Over dessert, Georgia told him the news of her pregnancy. Brad was shocked and angry.

"Didn't we use protection? And, don't you have an IUD? How the hell did this happen?" He got up from the table and paced around the room.

Georgia was devastated; it was not the reaction she had hoped for. Brad stormed out of the house telling her he'd call her later, saying he needed time to think.

Georgia chased after him wanting to talk but he jumped into his car and peeled out of the driveway rapidly. She grabbed her car keys from the hook in the garage and raced after him at speeds higher than she should. Georgia spotted him waiting at a red light; she hung back a bit so he didn't see her follow him home. He pulled into a driveway, got out and headed into the house. She could see him through a large bay window lit up with bright lights showcasing a beautiful living room. She watched him give a hug and kiss to the beautiful blonde holding a small child on her lap. He tossed the laughing child into the air and gave her a big hug. Georgia couldn't believe her eyes; the bastard was married and had a child. What was she going to do? Alone and pregnant was not her style.

Feeling like a complete fool was not a pleasant feeling. She was smarter than that, how did she allow

herself to fall for that idiot? Vowing to get even with Brad for leading her to think they had a future together, Georgia plotted to tell his wife. She wrote a letter and included photos of herself and Brad walking the red carpet of movie premieres they had attended together. Delivering the letter the next day to Mandy, Brad's wife, Georgia was shocked to learn that Mandy knew all about their affair. After all they hadn't hid anything; their pictures appeared in all the gossip magazines, often times lauded for her designer clothes by the world's finest designers.

Mandy laughed at Georgia saying, "You're just another one of his bimbo's, did you really think you were the only one? One woman has never been enough for Brad but he always comes home to me." Georgia couldn't believe her ears.

That night she called Brad to come over for drinks and to talk. After several glasses of champagne, she told him she accepted the situation and that she still wanted to continue their relationship they'd always had a good time together wherever they went. Brad was happy, not having to lie any longer. She had agreed to be his mistress openly and Mandy was okay with it too. He thought he was one lucky son of a bitch. Life was good, who said you couldn't have it all.

Georgia asked him if he wanted to go out clubbing. Feeling relieved, Brad agreed. She insisted they take her Jaguar, he lowered the top and off they went down the steep road toward the city. As they sped along the road, Brad stepped on the brake to slow down for the hairpin turn ahead, but nothing happened.

As he slammed both feet down on the brake, Georgia turned to him and softly said, "Did you really think you could get away with treating me like a common whore? I cut the brake line; we have no way to stop, and now we can be together forever, my love."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Gloria Bobrowicz has been a huge horror fan since early childhood. She loves books related to true crime — particularly the serial killer variety. Watching the movie 'Night of the Living Dead' or some of the older horror movies such as, 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers', 'The Thing from Another World', or 'War of the Worlds' with a bowl of popcorn is her idea of relaxing. Gloria is a co-owner and the Editor-In-Chief of Sirens Call Publications.

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THE UNDYING LOVE Greg McCabe

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

Last Goodbye Glance Doug Rinaldi

They found her body mangled beyond repair and discarded in a filthy and hidden alleyway off the main strip. Covered only by a plain white sheet steeped in crimson, she lay bent in positions alien to normal skeletal structure. Under the sheet, the woman's remains supplied the cracked and littered ground with enough blood to satisfy its thirst. Homicide detectives and forensic teams toiled feverishly around her corpse to work the scene and gather any evidence they could before the crashing thunder in the distance brought a well needed cleansing to the city.

With face destroyed and hands mutilated, the only identifying details, aside from the battered butterfly tattoo on her right calf, were the few teeth that were found strewn all about the alley. The weapon of choice, the flesh caked crowbar, rested in a pile of trash behind a nearby dumpster. Apparently opting for a quick and unrestricted escape, the murderer—the butcher—tossed the weapon in haste. Yet, the evidence left to be found would become nothing less than incriminating.

Finally, after days of searching for next of kin, the cadaver lying on the cold metal slab had a name. Becka Gorman. From the missing persons report that had been filed to the discriminating tattoo, her husband, Thomas, arrived to identify what was left of his wife. He broke down in tears. Newly widowed, his tribulations had just begun.

The day had come and Thomas saw all the witnesses file quietly into the room, the detectives that worked the case, the legal counsels, the distraught family members. Square and uninteresting, the room's dull institutional gray walls spoke nothing of what they saw time and time again. In three uniform rows, uncomfortable looking metal folding chairs had been set up for the witnesses to sit on and watch the judicial system's show of shows. The execution of Becka Gorman's murderer.

Thomas recognized most of the attendees as they entered and solemnly nodded his head. They took their seats, patiently waiting for the final tick of the clock, the final second before they would be able to start down the long hard road of acceptance and recovery. For one morbid reason or another, but mostly to watch Becka Gorman's killer get what he deserved, the witnesses felt a sense of obligation to be there. Nothing beat a good soul cleansing execution to kick off the healing process. One after another, they shambled into the gray box with the big picture window perfectly situated for catching the glorious throes of death.

A sly smile graced his lips. What a simple foolproof plan it happened to be. Jeffrey had been so easy to convince that it seemed almost criminal. A promise here, a lie there—anything to get his half-wit Mongoloid brother to do the all the dirty work. Thomas had offered him fame, promised that people would like him and shower him with the attention that he deserved. Simple minds think alike.

The fluorescent overhead light reflected off the viewing window, mildly obscuring sight of the room beyond. But he knew already what was on the other side. Oh, if he could have been there and seen the mighty blows inflicted upon the head of his wife. He closed his eyes and could almost see the depressions that the crowbar made, the indentations and breaches that the claw hook had ripped in her flesh. The truth? She deserved it. Every last bit of it.

He chuckled. He almost couldn't help himself. The irony, the intensity, left him breathless. Such a literary reflection, the big retard killing the beautiful young girl.

How poetic, how *Of Mice and Men* it all turned out to be.

What an awful feeling it should have been. How distraught he should have actually felt. Their parents, reeling from heartache, refused to come to watch their murderous wretch of a son die at the hands of fate and the criminal justice system. A shame really, he thought. Maybe they'd catch it on the nightly news or in the daily paper the next morning, see the product of their tax-dollar fueled wheels of justice turn. It didn't matter, though, it was over and done with. Time for everyone to get on with their lives.

Thomas relaxed his head and closed his eyes to recall the memory from his storage banks. He remembered the night had been cold and foggy when Jeffrey came to his home. Becka, the whore Thomas thought her to be, had gone out with her friends. But he knew better. Without a doubt, he knew the truth. Visions of smashing her skull in, breaking her face with any hard object he could get his hands on, mercilessly plagued his thoughts. Leave her? Not on your life, he told himself. That trust fund just ready to ripen kept him deaf, blind, and dumb to her obvious infidelities.

"You know, Jeffy, Becka can't stand you." The plan had been set in motion, with only one thing left to do, convince Jeffrey that it had to be done, that he had to be the one to kill Becka. No ifs, ands, or buts. "But why, Tommy?" Jeffrey slurred.

"It's Thomas, you moron!" His scowl ripped across his face and instantly sent Jeffrey's eyes into a downward spiral. "She thinks you're a useless retard and she wouldn't even let you wipe her ass. That's how worthless she thinks you are, Jeffy-boy."

Sorrow crashed with silent bombardment in the big man's eyes. Thomas almost felt sorry for his younger brother... almost. Plans for all the things he would do with all that money, all the whores he'd buy and fuck and then leave just to spite her—just to spite her memory—had danced in his mind.

Nervousness wrestled with his stomach that night, tying it up in knots, his anxiety mere minutes away from total meltdown. What if Jeffrey hadn't played along? What if he chickened out or his feeble little brain screwed it all up? What if he couldn't rid himself of the excess bullshit that made his life so insufferable? *The money, just think about all that money,* he repeated like a mantra. Being the beneficiary, the sole recipient of the fund in the case of death, it had made all the sense in the world. It had to be done one way or another. Jeffrey would have to crack. And he did—threats notwithstanding. Who would believe him anyway even if he did plead innocent?

Everyone.

It took the jury roughly five hours to deliberate. Five hours for his whole life to crash down around him like a ten on the Richter scale. The plan? Totally useless, like a script for the wrong show. Incriminating evidence abound, his dreams had been dashed.

Then came the pointing of fingers. Pointing right at him. Thomas quickly learned that no grieving façade would save him any longer, his alibi shattering from the hurricane-force winds of accusations and proof. Obviously set up from the get-go, he hadn't counted on one thing: the power of hate and revenge.

So, as he looked through the plate glass window, saw all the people preparing to witness the execution of a brutal murderer, he had to laugh some more, no longer trying to conceal it.

With irony beyond comprehension, an award worthy performance had to go to Jeffery for fooling everyone since physically recovering from his accident in tenth grade. He had intelligence far surpassing his feigned mental handicaps and thoughtfully confessed to his older brother all his secrets after the trial. Secrets that even his wife kept from him. Secrets that stabbed him right in the heart, and in the back. Jeffrey had been the one having the affair with Becka and had also been after her trust fund. After that, the rest of the scheme just fell into place.

Thomas, livid at the thought of such deception, stared into his brother's big blue eyes. Jeffery still played the role. Thomas had learned the truth first hand, but who would believe him now, a convicted wife murderer? Outsmarted and set-up, he succumbed to the fact that Jeffery had beaten him, vengeance for all the years on end of verbal & physical torment. Or just for the sheer joy of it. Not that it

mattered anymore, he realized.

As they all sat, preparing to watch the death of Thomas Gorman, not a trace of compassion for him could be found on their faces. The executioner fit the electric crown to his head and made sure the straps had been pulled tight. On his throne, Thomas looked one final time at the last people he would ever see and laughed. No remorse. What good would it do?

"Any final words?" asked the Warden as he stole a glance at the clock on the wall.

With a smile full of sincere admiration, Thomas answered, "Well played, Jeffy-boy. Well played."

Before the guards placed the tape over his eyes, he caught his brother's gaze. Jeffery's hand sat gently rubbing the leg of the woman next to him, a tall brunette with a very obvious dye job. A furtive smirk decorated both their faces. With fuzzy realization, Thomas noticed a familiar butterfly tattoo on the right calf of the woman's crossed leg. A gasp caught in his throat, but he could not speak.

She winked at him with her brown eyes that he now knew used to be green, just as her brown hair used to be blonde. The guard prepared to cover his other eye. She looked at him again, this time smiling wide, showcasing her brilliant pearly whites. With a quick flick of her tongue, she slyly popped out the fake set, flashing him a mouthful of missing teeth. A small price to pay. After all, with all the money they'll now have, she could buy new ones.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Originally born in the bowels of Connecticut, Doug graduated college, receiving a degree in Computer Animation and Special Effects for stage/screen. However, writing dark fiction had always been his passion. With the new millennium he bid CT farewell and relocated to Boston where he's been faithfully honing his writing skills.

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CARNAGE: AFTER THE END - VOLUME 1

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Ordeal By Poison D.L. Smith-Lee

"How many people do you think would miss him?" Claudia hissed into my ear over the phone. Her voice carried a harsh and biting chill which made me question her humanity. Had she no remorse for what we'd done?

"Claudia... we have to be careful is all I'm saying," I reasoned. "Some people may have caught on that we were the last people he was with."

"How? He was only here for a little while. No one could have known unless someone gabbed off at the mouth."

Her voice gained a level of hostility that caused the hairs on the back of my neck to stand on end. Did she hear herself?

"Claudia, you make this sound like you've done this before. Maybe we made a mistake."

"So what? You think we can just waltz up to the place we buried his body and suddenly give him his magic and his life back somehow? Let me know when you can come up with magic like that, Jerry."

And before I had the chance to respond the familiar sound of a monotone beep sang in my ear. She hung up on me. I put the phone on the charger.

My thoughts raced through my mind quicker than I could grasp. I looked to the palm of my left hand which still bore the runic figure. Its ink remained unmoved, permanently etched into my skin. It was the same in Claudia's left palm. I had to force myself to feel no remorse for Michael's murder. I had to remind myself that the very power he possessed was the power we were destined to receive. But the thoughts only provoked more guilt in their place. The thought of it all made me physically sick to my stomach, and Claudia's cold, uncaring demeanor only made matters worse. I propelled myself from the chair and desk from which I sat and began pacing my room. I tried to start with the basics of the situation. My girlfriend and I stole Michael Rosewell's dark magic. The spell we cast killed him in the process. We buried his dead body in the forest not too far from the plantation ruins.

"He's dead. He's dead," I told myself, the words slammed against my mind as they fell from my mouth.

"Who's dead?" I stopped dead in my tracks, the hairs on my neck stood on end again and a sudden chill ran through my body. This voice had to be my imagination because it was all too familiar. I turned around to locate its source.

Against my now closed bedroom door leaned a tall slender boy about my age. He wore a black shirt with an emblem of fire colored red, black jeans, black and white converse, and a leather trench coat. His pallid face and deep brown eyes were fixed directly on me.

I stood there frozen, feeling my heart throb against my ribcage.

"Well I must be a ghost because you certainly look like you've seen one." He glared at me expectantly. I was speechless, astounded to say the least. Micheal, the guy we killed and buried, could not possibly be standing in my room right now. My head began to shake involuntarily.

"No." I hissed, almost inaudibly. "You're dead. You're dead!" As I spoke those words I felt it, the rush of energy surging through my chest. I felt it flood my eyes, sending my vision into impeccability, focusing in on my target. I raised my left hand and felt the wave of focused energy rip itself from hand, hurtling itself toward Micheal. The wood of the door frame cracked as the blast made contact. However, it missed Micheal completely. In fact Micheal disappeared from the spot in which he stood no more than a moment before. I exhaled heavily in relief. I must be going out of my mind, I thought. I turned away from the door frame, damage I would have to explain to my father somehow in the morning, to my bed and there he stood. Micheal forced me against a wall shoving his forearm against my mouth. His strength was unbelievably inhuman, so immense there was no hope of resistance. The blood of an opened wound on his forearm spilled into my mouth. I gaged, nearly vomiting as the salty metallic flavored liquid

seeped into my mouth. I'd have attempted to spit it out but it was too late, I'd swallowed the blood. My resistance began to fade, I felt weaker. I could not bring myself to fight anymore. Micheal removed his weight from me and his arm from my mouth. I fell to my knees in response. I felt my stomach jerk uncontrollably. "What the hell did you do to me?" My stomach jerked again and a pain tore inside of me. Oh god, I thought. It felt like I'd swallowed a fast acting poison. I began to cough wildly until a stream of dark red liquid stained my sky blue carpeting. Blood. My stomach jerked again, this time I cried in pain.

"That's not what's important right now," Micheal said standing over me cleaning the blood from his wound with a white napkin. "What is important is that you take these last few moments of your life to be thankful for a peaceful death. I never had the pleasure." His words sent a chill down my spine but all I could focus on at the time was the stabbing pain in my stomach. I began to cough again, upchucking another thick stream of blood from my mouth to the carpet. My vision began to blur and my head hit the ground. All I remember is the sight of Micheal's black and white converse as my vision faded.

"Claudia." A voice called my name from the darkness of my room. Someone stood at the foot of my bed. I reached for the lamp on my nightstand blindly, knocking over a glass in the process, and turned on the light. Jerry, who I'd gotten off the phone with no more than ten minutes ago, stood at the foot of my bed. Blood seeping from his mouth, covering the front of his blue shirt.

I sprang from my bed to his side instantly as he fell over. I held him in my arms gazing into his blue eyes as his body convulsed helplessly. He raised a shaky hand to my tear-drenched cheek and opened his mouth.

"He's... alive," he said.

"What?"

Jerry's hand fell and his body seized to convulse. He was dead.

"He said I'm alive by the way," a voice said from behind. "He also should have told you that you read that spell book wrong."

I turned and there stood Micheal at my door. I rose to my feet and backed away shrinking in fear.

"Any witch who kills another witch deceitfully shall taste the poison of their treachery."

Faster than I could blink he appeared before me, his hand constricting my throat and his forearm shoved against my mouth. I could taste the warm metallic flavor of blood in my mouth as I struggled for freedom.

"Drink up." he said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - D.L. Smith-Lee was born in Harvey, Illinois. Since the age of nine he has been an insatiable writer, reader, and video gamer. Hoping to flood the Earth in the dreamworlds of fantasy, he writes for escape from reality and the love of writing. He currently resides in Virginia.







The Rematch Julianne Snow

For a short while, in his own peculiar breathless way Tortoise gloated, often repeating to his friend Hare, "Slow and steady wins the race."

Eventually the memory of that race faded into the background for most, but not for Hare. No, he always remembered his folly of taking that nap and allowing his smug friend to best him. From the first taunt, he set himself to plotting. To scheming. Oh, he'd make Tortoise pay alright. Of that he was certain.

Hare was content to bide his time: waiting, watching, studying. His need for retribution ate him up inside, but the end goal kept his emotions at bay for the most part. Only in weak moments did the rants play out, and luckily only behind closed doors.

It wouldn't do him any favours if Tortoise caught wind of what was going to happen. In fact, Hare had found the perfect way to exact his revenge. An opportunity to show all the other animals just how evil Tortoise truly was. And he couldn't wait!

The day of the second annual Animal Kingdom 5K was quickly approaching and as Grand Marshall this year, Hare was ineligible to compete. Not that it mattered, he didn't need to race in order to claim his victory. Instead he'd secured a few ringers to show Tortoise that slow and steady doesn't always win...

Cheetah was ready and in prime condition to claim the title, having been recently inducted into the Hall of Fame for winning every race she'd ever entered. A flare-up from a hunting injury had prevented her from running in last year's event, but this year, she was the odds-on favourite to take home the blue ribbon and the bragging rights.

Antelope had also been roped into competing this year. It had been a hard sell to get him to come out of retirement, but in the end, everyone had a price. Plus, Antelope wanted one last chance to claim victory over Cheetah.

Greyhound had befallen much the same fate as Hare last year. Believing himself to be a shoe-in to win, he'd decided to sleep through much of the race, thinking he could squeak out a win at the very last second. Problem was, he slept through each of his alarms and by the time he got to the race, there was no way he could make up the time. It was an utter embarrassment and Greyhound turned to drink to drown out his sorrows. Three months of diligent coaching and sponsoring his sobriety was sure to pay off as victory for Hare.

And then there was his dark horse: Kangaroo. Just released from prison for fatally beating Human in the ring, she was the one wild card no one expected. She was fast, and she played dirty when the need arose. Never being one to turn down the opportunity to fight, Kangaroo would do whatever needed to be done in order to win. Of all the cards Hare had stacked in the deck, she was the one he favoured the most. And part of that was born from him wanting to see Tortoise covered in his own blood...

Seeing them all at the starting line with Tortoise made his heart soar! Soon he would be firing his starter's pistol, driving the last nail into his conceited friend's coffin of shame.

Hare allowed himself a small smile as he raised his furred paw high into the air.

"Three."

Hare watched them all take to their marks,

"Two."

Each of the competitors rose on the balls of their respective feet, anxious and primed for the start.

"One!" The retort of the gun echoed off the surrounding hills as his adrenaline kicked into overdrive. Oh how he wanted to race, but he couldn't give anyone else the opportunity to disgrace him again.

Off to an early lead, each of his conspirators burst from the starting line, easily breaking away from Tortoise. None of them content to be the loser, there was some mild jostling as they all jockeyed for

position. Rounding the corner out of the stadium, they dropped out of the spectators' view. The only one who still remained was Tortoise; his pace slow, but steady.

Hare couldn't resist a parting shot, "You'd better hurry up my friend. You don't want to come in *dead* last do you?"

Tortoise wheezed his answer, "I'm not in any rush."

Out on the course, things were getting a little dangerous for the other competitors. It seemed that no one wanted to play nicely with each other.

The first to draw blood was Cheetah.

Looking over her shoulder, she spied Greyhound just behind her, running full tilt as if he were chasing a rabbit. Slowing her pace just a little, she matched her speed to his, noting the lithe muscles that moved beneath the shiny pewter-coloured coat.

Greyhound spared her a glance as they rounded another corner just in time to see the pounce as the powerful jaws lunged for his face. The crushing pain forced him to stop suddenly, but the momentum of the attack propelled the pair end over end into the bushes surrounding the course.

Out of the view of the rest of the participants, Cheetah ended the life of Greyhound quickly. Normally she would have played with her prey a bit, but she had a race to win. Leaving the limp body of Greyhound in the bushes, she watched as the rest of the runners passed her hiding spot before sprinting out of the foliage.

None the wiser, the race continued.

Further ahead of her, Cheetah could see the animosity brewing between Antelope and Kangaroo. Content to stay back for a bit, she let the two of them work out their differences.

It was Kangaroo who started it. Dealing a swift kick to Antelope's side as they rounded yet another curve, she threw him off-balance. Not enough to take him down completely, but just enough to piss him off.

Breathlessly he screamed, "Why'd you do that?"

Kangaroo laughed before answering, "Why not?"

"Look here criminal, I don't know what types of behaviour were acceptable behind bars, but cut it out!"

Kangaroo laughed even harder. She sprinted forward, breaking away from Antelope then came to a full stop as she whipped herself around and brought her strong hind legs up right in his path as she balanced on her thick tail.

With the sudden movement, Antelope had no opportunity to alter his course and ended up running head first into the powerhouse of muscle waiting for him.

He was thrown forcefully back and landed against the trunk of one of the trees growing up along the roadway. Taking a moment to catch his breath, he stood and took stock of his body. With nothing broken, he turned to find Kangaroo standing way too close to him. Seizing upon her intent, Antelope placed his backside into position and kicked out with all his might, watching over his shoulder to ensure he aimed correctly.

As the boxing match continued, each of them got in a number of good blows, but it was obvious that Kangaroo had more practice. Undefeated in all of her bouts, she was the superior fighter.

The pummelling continued as Antelope got more and more tired, his kicks losing much of their steam. Then came the crack that stopped them both for a moment.

Antelope dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes and howled in pain. His back left leg was positioned at an odd angle and there was no way he would be able to get to his feet again. At least without the help of the paramedics.

"Now look what you've done! I'll never run again!" Antelope wailed.

Kangaroo just laughed as she turned and hopped away, content to have knocked out at least one of her competitors.

Cheetah watched from a far distance as Kangaroo and Antelope fought. Being a surprise attacker, she knew she had no place in a bout of boxing. After watching Kangaroo hop away she approached the bawling Antelope.

"Can you believe what a bitch that Kangaroo is? The idiot broke my leg!"

"Perhaps she's not the only bitch, Antelope..." Grabbing a hold of his neck, she squeezing until the crushing pressure snapped his spine. Then she dragged him off into the shadows of the greenery.

Cheetah feasted, taking care to keep her coat clean. It simply wouldn't do for everyone to believe she had killed the rest of the competitors. Sure, they would find the bodies and likely try to blame the deaths on her, but she already had an alibi all worked out.

Cheetah was going to win a race.

Tortoise walked his slow little walk, not concerning himself with anyone other than himself. He passed by the spot that hid Greyhound's body and noticed the evidence of the tumble. Thinking nothing of it, he continued.

Coming upon the next disturbance, he could smell the sharp tang of blood, but didn't want to investigate any further. He had a race to win after all.

By now Cheetah had caught up to Kangaroo, matching her pace. The two females glanced sidelong at the other, each sizing up her final competition.

"So what happened to Antelope back there? I heard he stopped screaming. Have anything to do with that perhaps?"

"Someone had to shut him up after you hobbled him. Why shouldn't it have been me?"

"You're absolutely right, Cheetah. Why shouldn't it have been you?" The hit from Kangaroo's back leg came as a shock, the impact driving them both of course and causing a bit of a tumble. With only one kilometer left in the race, she knew she had to move quickly.

"So you want to play do you?" Cheetah had a look of expectancy on her face; despite her taunt, she was not playing around any longer.

"I'm always ready for a good bout!" With that said Kangaroo took her stance and waiting for Cheetah to make the first move.

Cheetah circled her prey for a few moments, looking for an in. She wanted to end it quickly without sustaining too many injuries. She's heard about Kangaroo's prowess and had no desire to join the ranks of her defeated victims.

"Scared?" The taunt was warranted and it made Cheetah's blood boil. She wasn't going to admit she was a little frightened of Kangaroo, but in truth, she was. Kangaroo was a formidable figure, and she stood between her and the finish line.

Deciding it was better to attack sooner than later, Cheetah lunged, sailing over the kicking hind legs of Kangaroo and knocking her flat on her back. The muscles in Kangaroo's thighs continued to thrust those feet over and over, connected with Cheetah's body as they tussled.

Cheetah's mouth was clasped firmly around Kangaroo's neck and when she felt the other's body relax, she let up her pressure, thinking she had won. Releasing her neck, Cheetah opened her eyes for the first time, only to be knocked back with one forceful blow from those powerful hindquarters.

As she was knocked back a few feet, Cheetah struck the curb of the roadway, her breath forced out of her lungs with the impact. Raising her head slightly she shook it, trying to dispel the foggy feeling that had come over her.

Kangaroo was already up on her feet, hopping toward her prey. She smiled coyly and couldn't help but taunt, "Aww... Did someone hurt themselves?"

Enraged, Cheetah could do nothing but bide her time until Kangaroo got within striking distance. She was hurt and needed the last vestiges of her strength to fight.

Sensing her victory, Kangaroo started to gloat. As she got closer to the downed Cheetah, the trash talk started in earnest. "You were no match for me, Cheetah. I've killed bigger and badder than you with my tail tied behind my back. Such a waste..."

Cheetah looked up from where she lay to see the large paw of Kangaroo coming down resolutely upon her spine. Gathering up all her strength, she lunged one last time, her mouth connecting with Kangaroo's throat again, this time drawing blood and sinking deeper into the delicate tissues.

Propelled by her downward motion and the new weight of Cheetah clasped around her neck, Kangaroo fell. Hard.

Cheetah's spine snapped as the full weight of the marsupial came down on top of her. Not able to howl in pain, she simply held on as Kangaroo's life flowed from her neck. Within moments, Kangaroo stopped struggling and the dead weight of the carcass pressed Cheetah more firmly into the ground.

Hare was starting to get anxious. None of his ringers had made it back to the stadium yet and with the clock ticking away, it wasn't looking good for any of them. Pacing, he couldn't share in the festive mood of the crowd. All he wanted was to see that arrogant look slapped from Tortoise's face.

The crowd began to roar; someone was making their way into the stadium. Hare stopped pacing and turned to stare as Tortoise came into view, as slow and steady as ever.

Losing it completely Hare screamed, startling the crowd around him. Not realizing he was being watched as his wrath consumed him completely, he sprinted toward his former friend.

Drawing the starter's pistol from its holster, he aimed it between Tortoise's eyes. "For the last time you will best me you good for nothing reptile!"

Tortoise, not knowing what to do, continued moving toward the finish line, his momentum and desire to win the race winning out over his fright at the turn of events.

"I'm not sure what you mean, Hare," he said breathlessly.

"What did you do with the others? How did you manage to pass them?"

"They took each other out of the race. I just stayed true to myself and here I am." With each slow step, Tortoise got closer and closer to the barrel of Hare's gun.

"Impossible. You can't win again; I won't let you!"

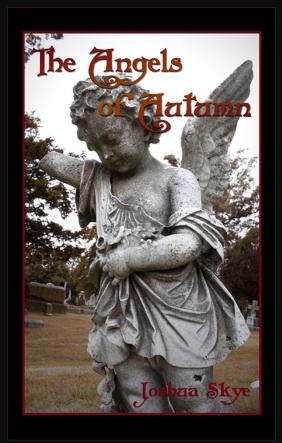
In the blink of an eye it was over. Hare pulled the trigger and shot a blank into the face of Tortoise. The crowd erupted in panic and while some fled, others tried to come to the injured reptile's rescue. Hare was taken down by Buffalo and Donkey, while Chimpanzee and Duck tried to stanch the blood flowing from Tortoise's ruined face.

Within minutes the scene was calmer and as Hare was taken away by Zebra and Pig, Tortoise was pronounced dead on the scene.

It was a sad day in the animal kingdom but one they would never forget. While slow and steady may win the race, wrath and jealousy may get you shot in the face.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Julianne Snow is the author of the *Days with the Undead* series and the founder of Zombieholics Anonymous. She writes within the realms of speculative fiction, has roots that go deep into horror and is a member of the Horror Writers Association. Julianne has pieces of short fiction in publications from Sirens Call Publications, Open Casket Press, 7DS Books, James Ward Kirk Publishing, Coffin Hop Press and Hazardous Press as well as the forthcoming shorts in anthologies from Phrenic Press, May December Publications and others. Also, she recently helped spearhead a collaborative novel for charity called *The Carnival 13* which is available now. Be on the lookout for her contributions to a number of collaborative projects to be announced shortly.

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Amy Clark's Last Thought L.A. Forman

The night was still, as if being watched intently by the moon. Not even the slightest breeze made itself known. The sky above was clear but thunderous clouds were brewing over the horizon, slowly moving in to obscure the light of the stars and put the evening to rest.

Amy Clark was watching the bright flashes of lightning that cracked through the sky from her kitchen window. She had tried to sleep but accomplished only lying in bed with her racing thoughts to torture her. It was bad enough that her husband was away on a business trip, leaving her alone in the house, which was as far away from civilization as could be, but she now suspected him of cheating on her.

This realization came to her when she found receipts in the pockets of Bill's suit pants while she was doing the laundry. They were all for things like perfume, jewelry, and women's clothing. At first she had thought they were gifts Bill had gotten her when he was away for work but when she never received any of the gifts she had a pretty good idea of what was going on.

The gifts were for another woman.

How could he be so stupid? To leave the receipts in his pocket knowing I would do his laundry... Either he wants me to know or he really is an idiot.

Feeling the need to keep her mind occupied Amy turned on the television, not necessarily to watch anything, but to drown out the silence. She slumped onto the couch, burying her head in her folded arms. Images of Bill with another woman stabbed at her mind. Tears began to roll down her reddened cheeks as she boiled over with rage and sadness. Amy tried to push the images away but they only returned with more intensity.

A knock at the front door startled Amy out of her grief. Her heart jumped and fear gripped her in its firm grasp. The sound had startled her but what Amy was really afraid of was who could possibly be at the door. The house was in the middle of nowhere. Her closest neighbor lived at least five miles away. Her family was an eight hour drive away and she had no friends here. She had left everyone and everything behind when she married Bill.

Maybe it's the police, come to tell me that Bill died while on his trip.

What bothered her most about her first thought was that she could feel herself hoping it were true. While she imagined it she was involuntarily smiling. She resented him for taking her away from her friends and family and dropping her in the middle of nowhere. And on top of that, now he was cheating on her. But was that enough to make her wish he were dead? She had never felt like that before, even though worse had been done to her by past lovers.

There was a knock at the door again. This time Amy jumped from the couch, running to answer. She felt a sickness growing in her stomach, a wretched feeling of excitement and fear, the anticipation of finding out if Bill was dead, as she reached for the doorknob.

When she opened the door there was no one to greet her but the stillness of the night. She peeked out of the doorway, looking around in the darkness. Who had knocked on the door? Were they still out there in the darkness? Was she being watched?

Suddenly Amy felt something brush past her leg and dart into the house. It must have been an animal, she thought, and grabbed a broom from the pantry hoping she would be able to get the animal back outside where it belonged.

She searched with the broom in hand, being cautious as she did so. She didn't want to get bit by whatever it was, especially if it was rabid. The living room and kitchen were free of wild creatures. She next searched the hall, pushing the bedroom doors open with the broom handle as she went. She peeked into each room, turning on the light to see. Each time she flicked the switch she expected to see the animal but each room yielded no find.

Amy was beginning to think that this whole situation might be only her imagination running wild. Maybe she only *thought* she heard a knock at the door. Maybe she imagined feeling something brush against her leg. She never actually saw anything.

Giving up the search, Amy sat on the couch, wishing she weren't alone. She wished she'd never married Bill and that she still lived back home among civilization, where she could simply walk outside and there would be other people. Maybe then she wouldn't be freaking herself out from loneliness. It didn't help that she suspected Bill of cheating on her. Suspected? No. It was obvious and he threw it right in her face when he left those receipts in his pocket. When he came home she was going to give him hell for sure.

Then Amy realized, all at once in a single thought, that it wasn't her mind playing tricks on her at all, there was something in the house. Amy didn't know how she knew this, couldn't explain it, but she *felt* it somehow. She felt the truth of it like it was something she had known her whole life.

Fear grew inside her like a tumor. It filled her entirely, suffocating her, choking her mind, clogging her arteries until her heart stopped. She knew deep in her mind, deeper than any knowledge could be buried, that whatever was in the house with her was not an animal, but a *thing*. She had no idea exactly what that meant but she knew that it wasn't something that could be described or understood. She wished it was her imagination. She wished that her mind was making this all up, that she was going crazy, but she knew that wasn't true. How did she know? That was what scared her the most.

Amy knew she should run, try and get to the door and out as fast as she could, but an overwhelming feeling of curiosity took hold of her. She was more afraid than she had ever been in her life but somehow she couldn't run. She had to stay. She had to know.

It came into the living room slowly, floating like a cloud, leaving a trail behind it as if the air were stained by its very presence. Its shape was indefinable. It was neither liquid, nor solid, nor gas. It was unrecognizable as anything that could be described in words. It had no color whatsoever, yet it was the darkest thing Amy had ever seen in her life.

The moment Amy's eyes made contact with the thing that came into her house she was instantly filled with a flood of knowledge so vast it defied all reason. It seemed to come all at once, instantaneously, yet it was also like it came in real-time, like she had watched a movie. It was like living a nearly infinite amount of lifetimes and like having a brief flash of memory at the same time.

From this knowledge she knew the thing in her living room was vastly ancient. It had existed in time before time, in other universes, in other dimensions. Amy saw countless worlds, most of which were beyond her understanding. Some could only be described as colors or sounds, lacking a physical reality.

Through this being's memories Amy saw that it fed on knowledge. It lived on the minds of other beings. She could feel it sucking on her mind as her consciousness connected with its consciousness. She could feel it feeding on her at the same time that she was seeing inside it.

All the knowledge of the universe and beyond, and the only way to know it is to be eaten.

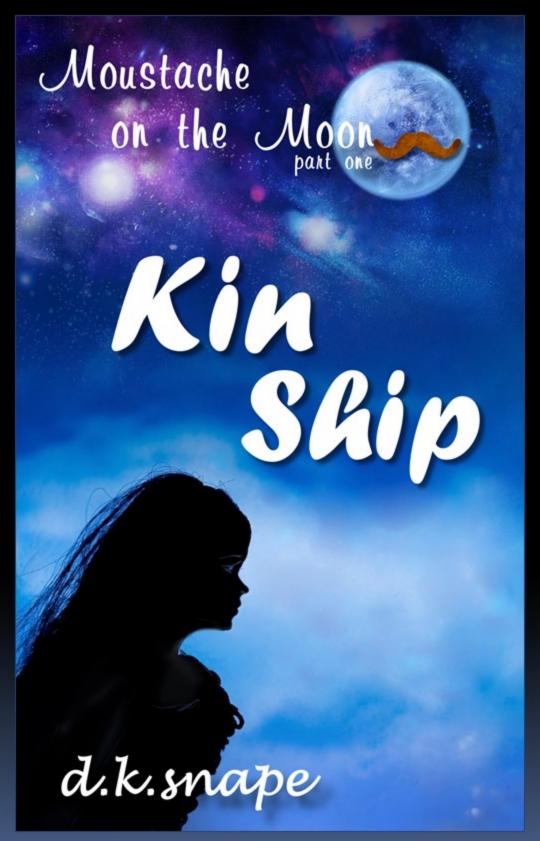
Amy could feel herself weakening. She felt further and further away from herself and more a part of the thing which was absorbing her. A dull grayness began to wash over her as the last of her fleeting thoughts were being sucked away, and she smiled. Amy knew the creature had all her knowledge, and she had all its knowledge. Bill would be home soon. The thing knew this. And it would wait for him. She knew Bill would also see the entirety of the creature's knowledge. Everything it ever saw, all the thoughts of everything it absorbed.

This is what you get you cheating bastard, was the last thought that went through Amy's mind. Then she was gone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - L.A. Forman has been an avid fan of horror for decades. He resides in Orange County, New York, where he spends most of his time writing short fiction and hiking trails in the Hudson Valley with his daughter.

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Available on Amazon, Smashwords, & Create Space

Juno's Ashes Rivka Jacobs

Viola draped one knee over the other.

She lifted the same leg again and set both four-inch heels flat on the rug.

She folded her arms over her chest, then unfolded them.

She fingered her gold bracelets and platinum and diamond watch and glared at the Tiffany favrileglass vase that sat dead center on her cherry and marble mantel.

She rose from the easy chair, her hands hanging like pendulums. She strode to the plump, chenille couch to her right. She dropped onto the middle cushion with such force that it emitted a sighing sound, as if weary of this game of musical seats. She half turned and braced herself with her palms on the upholstery. She stared once more at her fireplace and the blue-green vessel resting above it. She studied the vase's stylized, Art Nouveau, peacock-feather design - the single peacock-eye in the middle of it seemed to gaze back at her with equal measures of amazement and amusement.

"Fuck you," she said to it. "You never had a positive or kind word for me my entire life, you bastard," she whispered, feeling her face grow hot. She looked down at her bright lime-green sweater, skirt, and matching pumps. She would have scandalized the other mourners, if there had been any other mourners present. But she'd been the only one at the funeral home that morning, collecting her late father's ashes as they were handed over to her in a metal box.

His instructions, according to his will, had been for his son by his second wife to organize some kind of memorial service, invite a select group of his old friends, and then scatter his ashes in the forest of the mountain where he liked to hunt. But Viola was the one who ended up taking care of him after he had his stroke a year before, and she had her own ideas about how to dispose of his remains. She hadn't told his son, her half brother Brady who lived a thousand miles to the west, that their father was dead.

"You did nothing but run me down my entire life," Viola said to the vase. She shot to her feet, paced back and forth in front of the couch a few times, then walked past her gilt and cabriole coffee table, to the two silk-dupioni chairs positioned across from the sofa. From this angle she could see herself in the Venetian mirror that hung behind the Tiffany piece. She shook her fist at her own image. "You have the right to be angry," she said to her reflection. She lowered herself into the first of the chairs, gripping the arms with her fists, her knuckles whitening. She crossed her right leg over her left; her dangling right foot began to shake.

She uncrossed her legs once more and moved her hands to lie flat on her thighs; she made repeated motions as if smoothing her skirt. "Nothing I did was any good, as far as you were concerned. You always thought the worst of me. No matter what I said, what I did, you always found something to criticize," she muttered in the direction of the fireplace. "When I was dating, you called me a whore and said I needed to settle down and get married. When I got married, you said I was a loser and an idiot. When I found work, you said it wasn't good enough for me, I didn't have any ambition, I was a redneck moron like my mother. When I decided to take the chance, to start a new career - you were the first to tell me I was a 'stupid, lazy, crazy bitch' and would end up in a homeless shelter."

She stood abruptly and marched to the bay window. She stopped and remained standing, peering out through the clear panes at the vast lawn, landscaped grounds, and circular driveway below. She twined her arms tightly against her breasts and turned around. "That's the vase, Daddy, that cost me two-thousand dollars," she said to the peacock-eye. "I put you in there because if you recall, it was why we had our last big fight, the one where you told me I was an 'uppity shit' and you never wanted to talk to me again."

There was a swishing sound in her ears - the sound of her own throbbing pulse. The anger boiled inside her, expanding like lava, filling her to capacity. She started to walk towards the mantel, when she thought she heard the jingling of her phone. She paused, her fury dissipating as if someone had snapped

their fingers and broken a spell. She listened. The high-pitched metallic sound continued and Viola pivoted, headed for her kitchen.

In the creamy pale-yellow kitchen, with the late morning sunlight beaming through the windows overlooking the sink, Viola felt cooler, more in control of her life. She retrieved the receiver from the cradle that sat on the snack-bar counter dividing the kitchen from the family room. "Hello, may I help you?" she asked.

"Mrs. Spurlock, Mrs. Viola Spurlock? This is Lucille Holt form Caper-Kingman Mortuary. Do you have a moment? I'm afraid we've made an awful mistake...."

Viola felt a buzzing sensation in the tips of her fingers and her toes. She held her breath for a moment, unable to speak.

"Mrs. Spurlock, are you there?"

She exhaled forcefully. "... Yes, I'm here. What are you talking about?"

"Well, I'm so sorry, but I believe we gave you the wrong ashes this morning."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"We are fairly certain that we gave you the remains of a Mrs. Juno Cole, aged 89 years," Lucille Holt said in a sing-song voice, trying to be upbeat and sweet.

"And who did you give my father to?" Viola asked, surprised at how dispassionate she felt.

"Well, no one, really. The medical examiner's office, the probate court couldn't find any of Mrs. Cole's friends or family. We tried to do a little searching, as well. Here at Caper-Kingman we handle the county's indigent dead, you see. People who are either unclaimed, or their families can't afford a funeral, are cremated and...."

"What did you do with my father?"

"Well, that's what I'm trying to explain to you. The indigent dead - the homeless, the unwanted, elderly people who've outlived their loved ones, or people whose survivors can't afford any kind of funeral - are interred in mass graves in a special cemetery outside of the city. We transport the ashes to the burial site in the same metal box that we gave you this morning, so that might explain why...."

Viola blinked several times as it began to dawn on her.

"Mrs. Spurlock, are you there? We're prepared to refund you completely the cost of your father's cremation and services. We'll send one of our associates by your house, to pick up Juno Cole's remains. We are so sorry for this, for the inconvenience...."

"So," Viola said, "you can't retrieve my father's ashes at all?"

"No ma'am. We really are so sorry...."

"He's buried forever in a potter's field? With the homeless and abandoned?"

"Well, I wouldn't quite put it like that...."

"And you gave me the ashes of this Juno Cole instead?"

"It really was a ridiculous mistake. After a cremation, the ashes are cooled and then immediately transferred into a plastic bag that is labeled and then inserted in its designated container. Usually a stone, ceramic or wooden urn or small casket. Someone whose family can afford a funeral almost never is deposited in one of our basic tins. But in your case, you instructed us, you specifically requested.... Anyway, one of our employees apparently switched the ash baggies of your father and Mrs. Cole, placing them in each other's receptacle. It was only after your father's remains were poured ... consigned ... to the burial site, did our people catch his name on the inner packet...."

"So, you gave me the ashes of Juno Cole, who died abandoned and alone? Did she have any belongings, nothing to indicate where she might have come from, who her people were?"

"Uh, no, not really. She was cremated in a pair of old slippers and a nightgown. Whatever she owned

must have been pilfered long ago, or thrown away by the home that sent her to the hospital. But don't worry yourself about her ... we'll have someone at your door in an hour, to take her off your hands," Lucille Holt said in a jolly tone.

Viola breathed deeply. She gazed around her, at her custom kitchen curtains and roman shades, the granite countertop, double oven, and Viking range, the terracotta tiles imported from Spain. "That's okay," she said into the phone. "I'll keep her."

"Excuse me?" Lucille said loudly.

"I said I'll keep her. No one else wants her," Viola said. "It'll save you time and money."

Viola could discern what seemed like whispering, and then Lucille returned and said, "I don't think that's possible, Mrs. Spurlock. I don't think it's legal...."

"It's not legal to mix up remains, either. I've got her in a very nice place. I already threw away the tin. I'll keep her where she is." She thought a moment and then said, as Lucille started to protest, "How about we do this. I'll forget all about the entire matter, and you don't have to refund me anything, if I can keep her."

Lucille excused herself, putting Viola on hold for what seemed like five minutes. When she came back on the line, she said, "I've discussed it with the owners. They're prepared to forget all about the matter, too, if that's what you want." Her tone was flat and had a sour edge to it. She seemed a bit hesitant and confused, unable to depend on her usual routine and patter.

"That's fine, it's a deal. Thanks for letting me know. Have a nice day, Lucille," Viola said, imitating the other woman's inflection. She ended the call. "Well, well, well,..." she whispered as she replaced the receiver in the charger.

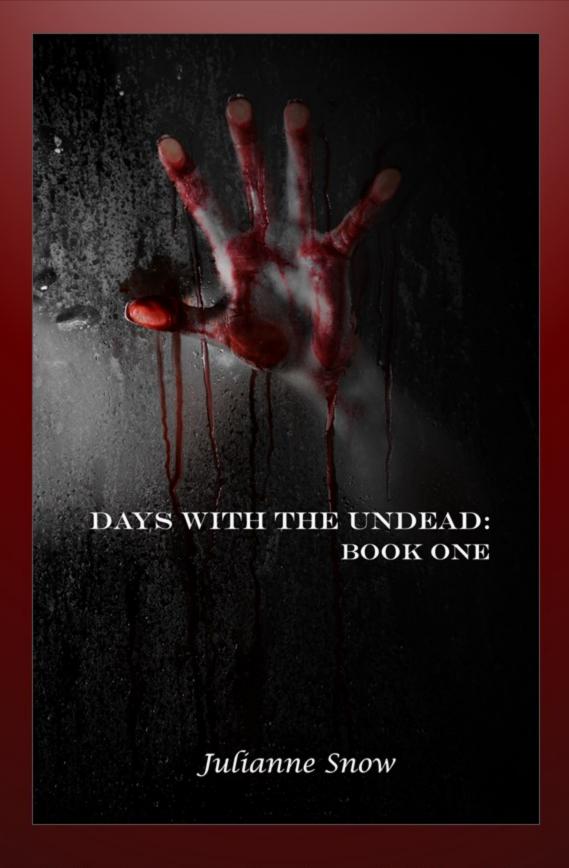
Viola ambled back through the family room, and into the dining room of this spacious, two-story home she'd built herself from the money she earned as a real estate agent, her mid-life second career that had finally brought her success. She passed by her expensive and beautiful dining room suite, the one her father had called cheap and ugly. 'Cheap and ugly like you,' he'd said to her at the time.

She entered her elegant living room and turned to face the Tiffany vase that reposed gracefully in front of the Venetian mirror. She smiled as she studied the peacock feather design fired into the glaze, and the bemused expression of that single peacock-eye that seemed to watch her. "Welcome to my house, Miss Juno," Viola said, her eyes stinging as she giggled. "I can't think of a better place for you to spend eternity."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Rivka Jacobs grew up in Miami, Florida, and has lived in West Virginia for thirty-five years. She has a master's degree in sociology and another in mental health counseling. Rivka went back to school in her fifties to earn a BSN and is currently an RN specializing in psychiatric nursing. She have one grown son, who lives in Philadelphia. Rivka published several stories in the 1980s, then stopped writing for a number of years. She resumed writing in 2009 and was lucky enough to have a story published in The Sirens Call February 2013 issue, "Women in Horror," and the August 2013 issue, "Monsters."

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A Hair of the Cat that Killed You Alex Chase

"So, are you folks ready to order?" Jasmine said, her gaze flitting around the table of six but lingering on Jeff Marcone, a stocky man of thirty seven with eyes that were slightly greyed; he'd inherited those discolored whites alongside his father's alcoholism, as evidenced by the two beers he'd downed before the appetizers had hit the table and the two more he'd had after.

The group chattered about which foods were best, most of whom glanced at Jeff in the I-don't-want-to-be-rude-but-can-I-buy-this-fifty-dollar-steak way, because it was abundantly clear that he would be paying.

"Special occasion?" Jasmine prodded, knowing the answer.

"Yeah, and I'll take another beer to celebrate, sweetheart," he said, raising his empty glass. Snatching the glass, she moved to the bar, jerking the handle down and filling it (mostly with foam).

Smoothing her skirt, she went back, smiled, and asked, "So, what's everyone celebrating?" She could feel the way her face protested the false grin.

"My company is taking over this shabby little crap hole, some kind of wild cat house. We've been trying to arrange this deal for months but it just went through today. We're turning it into an upscale retail outlet, you know, to drag in more tourists. Marcone Travel Associates—that's us—is going to put Fairhaven back on the map before you know it," he grinned, downing half of his foam, not realizing it wasn't really beer.

"Wild cat house? What's that?" Jasmine's voice rose, imitating all the bottle-blonde cheerleaders that had tormented her throughout high school and still managed to annoy her while at Winston University.

"It was a sanctuary for tigers, the people there wanted to boost the population by breeding them here in America and sending them back to Thailand and wherever the hell else, but so what?" said a smartly dressed woman in a charcoal pantsuit. Her hair was tied in such a tight ponytail that it drew her forehead back, making it unnaturally smooth as her eyes bulged outward, like she was trying to see the end of the world just by staring really hard at the sun.

"But don't the tigers, like, need more, you know, tigers, to not be endangered?"

"So?" quipped a tiny man with slick, shiny hair and giant glasses. "We have a business to run, and besides, those things are too dangerous to let live

"So people got hurt?" Jasmine said, eyes wide.

The group shuffled and murmured, clearly knowing the answer was 'no' but not wanting to admit it. "We can't discuss our contracts while they're still being processed," retorted the tiny man. "It would be unprofessional to discuss it since we've only just acquired the building."

"Sorry!" she held up her hands. "Didn't mean to pry. Tigers are pretty, though! Anyway, what can I get you folks?"

The orders went around, each more obnoxious than the last (did Ponytail really expect her filet mignon pre-cut?) with Jeff asking if tiger was on the menu. Everyone guffawed at that as Jasmine scribbled down their orders, slipping off to the back, calling it out to the chef.

She felt in her pocket for a small bag, grinning when she confirmed it was still there. Sometimes, offmenu wasn't out of the question.

Darting back into the eating area, Jasmine attended to her usual business, sweeping finished plates away and serving steaming hot whatever to the blurred mass of people. She wasn't paying attention; she had no reason to. Sure, she messed up a few orders, but they wouldn't fire her mid-shift, and they certainly wouldn't be able to fire her afterward.

Soon, the Marcone table's order was ready, and the kitchen was too busy for anyone to notice her. Sliding the bag from her pocket, she sprinkled her own little garnish onto each dish before enlisting a busboy to help carry everything out. He scampered off as Jasmine beamed down at the hungry table.

"Excuse me," called Ponytail. "What is this?" The woman had one of Jasmine's additions clutched in her fingers.

"Tasmanian truffle," she said, reciting what she'd prepared in case asked. "A very rare, exotic, stringy mushroom. Costs over five hundred dollars per head, but we here at DeLouise's believe in only the finest ingredients for our finest customers. Each of your meals was carefully garnished with this foreign, nearly-extinct delicacy."

"Here, here!" slurred Jeff around the edge of his glass.

Satisfied, Jasmine turned and walked away. She hovered nearby, doting on them throughout the night, flashing the biggest smile she could at each comment about their recent deal. They left the moment they finished their entrees, the tiny man complaining of a stomach ache. *You're going to have more than some minor aches soon*, she thought. Their laughter echoed across the pavement outside; Jasmine flitted about until she was sure they were gone, then handed her manager her nametag and left without a word.

The next day, the morning news was abuzz with a sensational story: six people, who happened to also be the six leaders of Marcone Travel Associates, had dropped dead. Each had the same symptoms of massive internal bleeding, perforated bowels and profuse vomiting prior to death. The police investigating the matter found no obvious cause; the only connection was their having eaten at DeLouise's an hour earlier.

As this news broke, the Rock Valley Tiger Reserve group petitioned the city of Rock Valley to return the property to them. Within a few days, the group had their old facilities back and moved the tigers in, none of which seemed too disturbed from the brief displacement. The only odd thing was that their whiskers had been trimmed so that an inch or so was missing off every tiger. Of course, only Donna realized this, and she had a propensity for tale tales, so no one took that comment seriously.

The reservation group's founder, Walter Ipswich, called Jasmine Philone several times, but she didn't respond. Poor girl, he thought, she was so distraught when she heard we were losing the place. I was upset too, since we'd have had to send the tigers off or euthanize them, but still, I hope she's ok...

Several states away, Jasmine was barreling down a highway, passing the exotic flowers and evergreens of the northwest United States. She kept an idea of distance by how many times she stopped to fill her tank with the cash she'd advanced while maxing out her credit cards. If caught, she'd have to answer for six murder charges (and a hefty credit card debt), but Orten had given her permission to use his cabin, a neat little two-bedroom place so secluded that GPS couldn't find it.

No cell service, no internet, no evidence, and no credit card trail; Orten was her only tie back to the real world—and what she'd done—but he'd never rat her out. Not since she'd helped him kill the drug dealer that got Orten's sister hooked on cocaine. Besides, they were friends, and if he'd had any objection, he wouldn't have lent her his magnum opus, an encyclopedia of the world's poisons and other discrete ways to kill.

She recalled the night she'd found her method of choice. Jasmine had started looking the day she'd discovered someone was trying to buy them out, but she didn't have to look for long. "Tiger whiskers..." she'd whispered, eyes straining as she clutched at her fifth coffee with trembling hands. "...if placed in food in sizable quantities... cuts into the bowel... it will be as if your opponent had swallowed broken glass. Using glass won't do, as no one wants to eat glass large enough to kill, but these whiskers can be passed off as an herb or spice, tricking the unwary. The result is internal bleeding and death."

Now, driving through the night with nothing but a guiltless consciousness and the cloudless sky above, she thought back to those six people, imagining them gasping, choking, spitting up blood as their panicked minds tried to figure out what was killing them.

"Those things," she said, smiling at the image of their corpses, "are too dangerous to let live."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Alex Chase is an awarded American horror author who has published 15 short stories in the past year. When not writing fiction, he can be found writing newspaper articles or editing. He is a member of the Horror Writer's Association and Mensa.

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Limits Miranda Kate

Cheryl could see the woman's mouth moving, jaw going up and down, but she couldn't make out all the words, not from across the aisle. The woman was going at him nineteen to the dozen, and keeping her voice low, but the high pitch whine sounded upset to Cheryl. The woman seemed to be pleading with him, her eyes searching his face for some kind of attention or recognition. He just stared out the window, rocking gently with the motion of the train, oblivious to it.

For a moment Cheryl wondered if they were together; maybe the woman was talking into a hidden mobile phone mic - or even talking to herself. But then the woman sat forward and flicked her hand against his leg in annoyance, making him jump.

He drew back from her touch as though it was something vile and stared at her, his eyes hard and unforgiving. The woman sat back again, silenced by the look, her cheeks flushing. Cheryl could see she was trying to stay composed, but a stray tear betrayed her attempts. He resumed his overview of the passing countryside.

Cheryl was about to do the same when a quick movement caught her peripheral vision, followed by an ascending scream. He looked as shocked as Cheryl, the expression remaining on his face as the light faded from his eyes.

Everyone in the carriage stopped what they were doing and turned in the direction of the scream. Hands went to mouths, and the inhaling of breath was audible as they sat aghast at the spectacle, too horrified to move or speak.

With her scream spent the woman sat back down. This time it was her turn to stare out of the window, while his frozen gaze stared down at the umbrella handle sticking out of his chest.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Miranda Kate is a British expat living in Holland, who by day is a freelance editor, and by night a writer of dark, disturbing real life fiction. Primarily a novel writer, Miranda enjoys exploring her writing through flash fiction, finding a certain satisfaction in the end result.

Twitter: @PurpleQueenNL

Blog: Finding Clarity http://purplequeennl.blogspot.nl/

CARNAGE: AFTER THE END - VOLUME 2

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An Interview with Artist Doug Rinaldi

This month we have the pleasure of featuring an interview with Doug Rinaldi, an artist and an author. Let's take a moment and let Doug introduce himself to you...

Doug Rinaldi: First off, I'd like to give big thanks to Julianne and *The Sirens Call* eZine for finding me intriguing enough to interview as their Featured Artist for the month of October. I sure got them fooled! Seriously, though, it's an honor and a pleasure and greatly appreciated.

My name's Doug Rinaldi, no relation to the tomato sauce. I was originally born and raised in the bowels of Connecticut. I don't recommend it, well at least not in my area of the state. I graduated from the Art Institute of Pittsburgh in 1995 and received a degree in Computer Animation and Special Effects for stage and screen. However, writing dark fiction has always been just as big of a passion of mine as art. As soon as it was fiscally possible, I joyously bid CT a final farewell and relocated to Boston where I've been honing my crafts ever since.

I really don't offer any services, but if somebody likes any of my work or likes my style and wants something done all they have to do is hit me up and we can chit-chat about it.

Here's the rundown on how you can find me:

Facebook (writing): www.facebook.com/deviatedtruths
Facebook (artwork): www.facebook.com/mentalabortions

Deviant Art Profile: http://goat-head.deviantart.com
Personal Blog: http://thugrinaldi.blogspot.com

Twitter: www.twitter.com/thugrinaldi

I'm not actually a thug, I just play one online. Find me, be my friend, and bug me. I've got nothing else going on!

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

DR: Pencil, color pencil/marker, and pen mostly. I usually scan my drawings so I can digitally manipulate them into something more complete and cohesive . . . and interesting. Other times I will just start from scratch digitally with shapes and textures until I have something I think is quality.

I completely and utterly suck at painting! I can barely paint a wall that's how bad it is. As for mediums I would like to give a whirl, I guess I'd really love to get back into sculpting. With my special effects background, sculpting again would feel so good. But I just haven't had the time or space. In reality, I'd



just like to get better at the mediums I work in regularly before I go all willy-nilly in something I'm new to.

SCP: Who or what are some of your main influences?

DR: Foreign horror movies like those in the New French Extreme and all the great stuff coming out of Spain right now influence me as deeply as a lot of the legends like John Carpenter and David Cronenberg have done for years. Horror in general, whether imagined or real life, has always held a special place in my life. Fear is so honest and visceral you can't help but be feel its allure somehow.

A lot of my artwork has been influenced by comics regardless of the fact that I don't draw in that style. Artists like Todd McFarlane and Jim Lee were my idols growing up. Eventually, my tastes shifted to an appreciation for artists with more macabre and untraditional styles like Maxime Taccardi, Arthur Suydam, Wes Benscotter, Hal Rotter, Dan Seagrave, Derek Hess, and Ola Larsson to name a few. Check 'em out. Their stuff will change your life!

Clive Barker and HP Lovecraft have both greatly influenced my styles of writing and art. I'd probably be a completely different writer/artist if I had never found them. As far as writing goes, Stephen King and his gift to this genre has been undeniably influential to most. But more personally, it's the dedication and appreciation of the small press publisher/writer that make it somewhat worthwhile. Guys like Charles Day with his undying and relentless passion for this craft and his helpfulness and encouragement to those around him are nothing short of amazing. And then there are guys like Gregory Norris and Brian Keene with their natural talent and their supernatural ability to produce copious amounts of quality product.

Zombies and beer are somewhere on that list, too.

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

DR: With my art, I usually just scrap it. Sometimes there will be a small part of whatever I was attempting that sticks out which will in turn spawn something else. If that happens, I usually will run with it until it either morphs into something I can work with or ends up in the doodle pile. Writing is different. I never toss anything I've started. I have a folder on my computer called 'In The Works' for stuff I start but for whatever reason can't bring to completion. It's usually because I only have a beginning and a middle with no ending in mind. So I keep them handy in the rare case that something miraculously does pop into my head. There's a bunch of those, sadly.

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

DR: There definitely is. For me anyway. Yet, it's not as crippling and annoying as real writer's block. Sketching something out while sipping on a beer is a lot more relaxing and cathartic than staring at a blank page. With a sketch pad I can just doodle ideas or goof around until something clicks and forms something solid. I do all my writing at my computer, so sitting there typing swear words at myself because I'm blocked isn't as much fun as doodling.

As for battling this affliction, I usually just give myself the benefit of the doubt (sometimes) and don't

punish myself. When it comes, it comes. Forcing it will just make me angry and before I know it I'm frustrated and off watching the same episode of Seinfeld for the 50th time.

SCP: How often does your writing spark ideas for your art? And vice versa?

DR: Good question! That's something I've honestly never really thought about. To answer the question, rarely, surprisingly enough. If anything, my stories spark ideas for drawing, like maybe a character/monster design of what my mind's eye is showing me. The two are really very separate entities for the most part, but something I would like to revisit and consider in the near future.

SCP: Where do you find your inspiration? What influences your composition? Props, setting, costume, subject?

DR: A lot of my stuff, art as well as writing, is random and spur of the moment. A idea, however fleeting, will pop into my melon and I'll obsess over it until I either find success or give up and go back to watching Seinfeld reruns for hours at a time.

But when I'm dialed in on something, I find that listening to dark ambient music focuses me and, before I realize it, the piece is coming along as something I don't think absolutely sucks. So between that and just what I observe from horror (imagined, written, or real life), I believe that's what my subconscious pulls from. And drinking...

I also, strangely enough, can only produce when my depression is at a low and tolerable point. I'm not one of those tortured artist types that can solely draw on his inner turmoil. When my depression hits all I want to do is sleep. Writing and drawing is so far from being on my to-do list.

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

DR: Hmm... that's a tough one. I'm my worst critic so I'll pick one that I actually managed to impress myself with. I guess I'll go with "The Reclamation". It's very symbolic and at the same time filled with a morbid truth of what I believe happens when we die . . . the earth reclaims us and it's a perpetuating cycle, nothing glamorous or mystical, just fodder to be absorbed back into the dirt.

SCP: What is your favourite piece of artwork that you did not create?

DR: Perhaps one of the most mind numbing pieces of art I've seen lately is a piece by Ola Larsson titled "Swallowed By the Ocean's Tide". It's his interpretation of Cthulhu nestled away in R'lyeh that he painted for the band Sulphur Aeon. All of his stuff is amazing, but this piece really is haunting.

SCP: What would be your target audience and your highest hopes for your work?

DR: I found that I don't really have a target audience (yet?). Most of the people that know my stuff base their opinions about me and my style according to each story or piece of art and how it affects and stimulates them personally.

I would love a strong fan following someday, people that will get on my case when I haven't produced anything in a while because they are hungry for more. Word of mouth and self promotion are life or death in this industry. I just want my stuff to reach a strong and devout audience that wants to help me master my crafts so I can continue to entertain them. Getting one of my screenplays optioned wouldn't be too shabby either.

SCP: As far as your writing goes, what genre would your work be considered and what publishing credits do you hold?

DR: Most of my stuff is generally dark, but there is no real genre called Dark Fiction. So, Horror is the easiest way to explain it to people. I mostly write short stories, but I do have two ebook anthologies out right now titled "Manuscript of Deviated Truths, Volumes I & II". Both are available on Amazon.com and Smashwords. Currently, I am deep into the second draft of my first novel, "White Island."

As of right now, I have about 18 publishing credits for works in various anthologies, both in ebook and paperback format. Some are for poetry but most are for short fiction. It's been an interesting and eye opening ride so far and I hope to get more of my stuff out there for everyone to read and, hopefully, enjoy!

Thank you Doug for taking the time to answer our questions and for allowing us to feature some of your artwork in the issue!



Bäckahästen* Mathias Jansson

Fascinated the children stare
At the horse white as snow
Eating dew wet grass
In the glade of the fairytale woods
Shining bright in the midnight sun light

Slowly they approach
To pat its smooth coat
The boy pulls boldly the horse's mane
Swings up on the horse's back
Helps his friends to take a seat
Comfortably they sit when a sad tone
Echoes through the night

Suddenly the horse starts to gallop
Faster and faster
Deeper and deeper into the night
Over the misty meadow
Against the streaming river
But he doesn't stops he jumps
Hovering over the wild water
Before he dives into the cold depths
Taking the young ones with him

On a stone in the river stream
Näcken** plays his enchanting melody
Smiles when he thinks about the children
Who never will mock him again from the riverside

- * Bäckahästen (translated as the brook horse) is a mythological horse in Scandinavian folklore.
- ** Näcken in Scandinavian folklore is a male water spirits who played enchanted songs on the violin.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and poet. He has been published in magazines as The Horror Zine Magazine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock, The Sirens Call and The Poetry Box. He has also contributed to several anthologies from Horrified Press and James Ward Kirk Fiction as Suffer Eternal anthology Volume 1-3, Hell Whore Anthology Volume 1-3, Barnyard Horror and Serial Killers Tres Tria.

Blog: http://mathiasjansson72.blogspot.se/

WHATEVER AMBER WANTS ...



www.DualHarvest.com

The Nag Justin Tate

There goes that irritating ghost again!

Always haunting just as I go to bed.

She whoops! She wails! She speaks of killing men,
Her lungs quite powerful for being dead.

"SLICE AND CHOP AND CUT OFF THEIR BALLS!" she shrieks.

"ALL MEN MUST BE TORMENTED LIKE I WAS!"

"Oh, hush it," I say. "That tune is antique,
And is your hate even backed with good cause?"

"SERPENTINE SNAKE!" screams the enraged spirit,

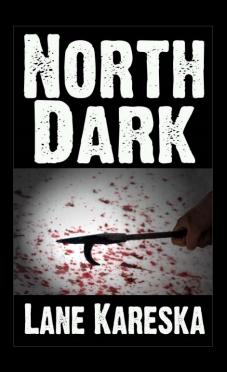
"HOW COULD YOU HAVE FORGOTTEN ME SO QUICK?

YOU LOVED ME IN PARIS, YOU MUST ADMIT,
NOW COME HERE SO I CAN CUT OFF YOUR DICK!"

Who knew they can vex worse in afterlife?
I guess there's just no way to kill a wife...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Justin Tate's poetry and prose have appeared in literary journals, webzines and anthologies. His books include "The Death Sonnets" and "Morning Sickness".

<u>Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/JustinTateAuthor</u>



NORTH DARK

Lane Kareska

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

WHERE THE LOST ONES DWELL Tony Flynn

There is a place, so deep in Hell, Where they say The Lost Ones Dwell. And in this place, a tree does grow From a lake, where blood does flow. And the captives here will not know peace. Their sufferings will never cease. The blood flows forth their awful crimes, And flow it will, for all our time. And from this blood, the Tree draws strength, And with more blood, it grows in length. And from the branches of this tree, Not leaves do grow, but Souls, you see. The Souls, whose actions blood did spill, Now a place upon the tree they fill. Like fruit they grow from on the branch. To escape from here they have no chance. Because food are they to those in Hell, In the Forest where the Lost Ones Dwell. For beyond the tree, there stands alone, A mountain The Harpies call home. They know no mercy; nor pity; nor grace. They hunger always in this place. And only one thing can their bellies, satiate: The souls of those put here by hate. And so they fly from up on high, And plummet forth down from the sky, To envelop in their monstrous wings Those put here for terrible things. They pluck them whole from off the tree And carry to their lair to see, A nest of Harpies: Young and old, But hungry all, and bitter and cold. Yet even after, no peace resumes, For every year, the tree does bloom. And forth the tree, they rise again, The souls of those condemned as men, And plunged down to the icy pit, To wait until Harpies see fit To take them, and their Souls devour, Those foolish men, seduced by power.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Tony is 25 years old, and lives in Dublin, Ireland. A writer of poetry, screenplays and short stories, he is terribly afraid of most everything and therefore has a particular interest in the horror genre.

Previous publishing credits include the short story 'Monica' which appeared online in the Autumn 13 edition of wordlegs.com. Other writing can be found via http://tonywritesstuff.tumblr.com

One Photograph: Two Points of View 300 Words ~ Comparative Flash Fiction



Never Saw It Coming... Julianne Snow

Was it wrong to imagine that infernal can being driven deep into his forehead?

I don't think I can fucking take it anymore! All that infuriating sipping, the sucking of the last drop; it was enough to drive a woman to drink. But never from a can... Ever! Why won't he simply give up; admit defeat? How can he possibly not know he's done? Does he do it just to grate on my nerves? There's a part of me that believes he does it for that very reason. He's slowly filing down each of my nerves, waiting for me to strike out. I certainly will not disappoint him one of these days, but I need to bide my time. Stupid fucking ass is going to get what's coming to him and I will be the one to give it to him! Oh yes I will, and I dare anyone to stop me. Hell. I don't even care if I go to jail – it would be worth it never to have to hear that infernal slurp again.

The skin on the back of my neck crawls as I hear it again. My blood boils as my last nerve is frayed beyond repair. It snaps and so do I. I grab that fucking can from his finger and crumple it, hearing the tiniest of tinkle as the last of the amber liquid sloshes against the aluminum side. Fucking perfect! This time he really wasn't done, but I don't care... It's going to be the last time he ever sucks the fumes from his beer again. My hands hurt as the sharp, pointed edges draw blood from my fingers as I shake the can in front of his dumbfounded face. That look... I want to savour that look. He never saw it coming...

Indiscretions Nina D'Arcangela

Sitting on the deck together after dinner, I can't help thinking about his whereabouts each Saturday night. How could he do this to me? I begin idly slicing my empty soda can in two with my steak knife. He asks distractedly what I'm doing. I simply glance up. His sneer as obvious as his desire to leave. With a final stroke of the blade, the can splits in two.

Are we done yet, his eyes question, his need to be away from me nearly palpable. Looking up from the sharp glistening edge of the bisected can, I silently decide. Yes, we are done. I reach over and playfully unbutton his shorts, reminding him of times past. Times before the Mercedes, before the Rolex, before the debt collectors; before he blew it. His breath quickens while he reaches for the cuffs we keep hidden in a small table on the deck. He then removes his shorts and lipstick stained briefs. Not my color, but do I really care?

As he slides his chair away from the table he leans back. I slip to my knees before him. I cuff his hands behind his back, his ankles to the legs of the weighty chair. He moans 'Oh, baby' as his eyes close, his grin widens. I then drive the razor sharp edge of the can into the sensitive flesh surrounding his groin. It slides in as smoothly as my teeth sink into perfectly set custard. The bulk of his hard-on slaps onto the deck as his eyes fly wide open. His scream, utterly soundless. Stuffing my linen napkin between his teeth, I see his sack barely hanging on by a strand. Flicking it with a finger, I look up and ask in a dispassionate voice, "Is any of my money left?"



MICHAEL W. GARZA

THE HAND THAT FEEDS

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Butterfly Dreams Donald Jacob Uitvlugt

Once Chou dreamt he was a butterfly, happily flitting and fluttering around. When he awoke, he didn't know if he was Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chou.

-- Chuang Tzu

It was finished. Doug Kane pulled the door of his brother's home closed behind him, making sure that the lock caught. He slipped behind the wheel of his black Mustang and backed it down the driveway. He waited until he could work his way out of Russell's development and then hit the gas. His Mustang was a conspicuous car, but he needed speed more than stealth. He hoped to be two states away by the time the police found his brother Russell's body.

Doug pulled onto the highway and clicked on the radio. Perhaps that would distract him from his swirling thoughts. "We'd like to take a moment to thank our day sponsor, Sōshi Tech. Sōshi Tech, for all your--"

Doug mentally tuned out the commercial and the station identification. He had finally caught a break. The highway should have been bumper to bumper this early in the morning. But while the flow of traffic around him was steady, there were enough gaps that Doug could weave through them without ever having to drop below ninety.

Something about moving around the cars evoked a strong feeling of déjà vu. Doug shook his head. If only Russell hadn't started hitting Kathy, none of this would have happened. Doug gripped the steering wheel, trying hard not to think about the way his brother had looked up at him with those unseeing eyes. Tried not to think about how Russell's marriage to the kindest and prettiest woman in the world had started to unravel before the couple had returned from their honeymoon. The attacks had been verbal at first, Doug only hearing about them after the fact. But the night Kathy had shown up on his front porch, in tears, with a black eye...

He turned up the volume of the radio. Don't think about it. Concentrate on getting out of town. His mind would go round in circles if he let it. "...was Del Shannon's 'Runaway'." Doug found himself hating that perfect radio voice. "And now here's Johann Sebastian Bach's 'Toccata and Fugue in D Minor'."

Doug blinked as the melancholy strains of organ came through the Mustang's speakers. *Eclectic mix. I didn't know that there were any independent stations left in town. I thought they'd all been bought up by the big conglomerates and it was all that pre-programmed shi--*

He slammed on the brakes, only just avoiding the golden retriever that darted in front of the Mustang. What the hell's that dog doing on the highway? A quick glance around told Doug that it wasn't the dog that was out of place. He wasn't on the highway any more. Somehow he had wound up back in the suburbs, not at all sure how he had gotten there.

"That set finished with 'Slip Sliding Away' by Paul Simon. Next up, the Monkees with 'Pleasant Valley Sunday'..."

Doug ignored the background buzz of the radio, trying to figure out where exactly he was. *God. I'm in Russell's development. How the hell did I get back here?* Guilt? Or perhaps his subconscious mind was trying to help him out. Maybe he had left something at the scene. Should he check?

He idled at a red light, deciding which way to turn. He saw someone out of the corner of his eye. Her face... She looked so much like Kathy. Only without the black eye and bruises she had sported last time Doug had seen her. But there was something else...

The only thing Doug could compare it to was the feeling he sometimes got in department stores, when he caught sight of a person out of the corner of his eye, even felt a presence behind him, but when he turned, it was only a mannequin. This was that same feeling, only in reverse. Like the woman had been less real until Doug had looked at her, some unseen force popping Kathy's face into place at the last minute.

He shook his head, even though the light had turned green. Was the fact he was seeing Kathy in strangers another omen? I don't have time to worry about this. Stick to the plan. Get the heck out of Dodge. He turned left, away from his brother's house, leaving Russell's body behind him.

He drove past a park, moving slower than he would have liked, trying to get back to the highway. A number of children played there, odd for a school day morning. Doug's stomach churned as he watched the children. He could almost see their faces snapping into place as he looked at them. Just as before, it was like they were somehow less real until he looked at them directly. Nerves. It had to be nerves. Doug hadn't been as cold-blooded about killing his brother as he thought he had been. The deed was catching up with him.

"-- 'Proud Mary', by Ike and Tina Turner. Talk about your explosive relationships. And with that, we move on to Judas Priest with 'You've Got Another Thing Coming'..."

Doug forced himself to drive past the park. As he rounded the block, he saw a kid leaning up against the fence, watching him. *Bobbie? Bobbie Reynolds?* It couldn't be. Bobbie had taken his own life when he and Doug were both in the eighth grade. He had always felt guilty about not doing something to prevent Bobbie's death. His guilt had to be taking over. He was seeing things.

Whoever the child really was, he seemed to recognize Doug, waving to him as he drove past. Doug forced himself to look away, gripping the wheel tightly.

"Another blast from the past with the 'Theme from M.A.S.H.' And a special note to those of you in the western suburbs. Police have just discovered the body of prominent local physician, Russell R. Kane. The doctor was found murdered in his own home. The suspect or suspects are believed to be still in the area. So lock your doors, kiddies, leave your lights on, and stay with us. Next up, Soft Cell with 'Tainted Love'."

Doug fought down his panic. How had they discovered Russell's body so fast? His brother was supposed to be out of town for the next week. Everybody at the hospital and the club knew this. And Kathy and the kids were away at her mother's. It had been the perfect time to try to stop Russell from ever hurting Kathy again.

And now his carefully made plan was falling all to hell.

He nosed the Mustang toward the highway again, trying to move as fast as he could without drawing unwanted attention to his car. He could hardly breathe. In the distance he heard the sound of sirens. Flight instinct set in. Doug floored it, turning the wheel.

Downtown? How had he wound up downtown? The sirens grew louder, and Doug could see the squad cars. This was going to be his last chance.

"And I am out of here. I leave you with Mozart's 'Dies Irae'."

As Doug rounded a corner, a police car t-bonded into him and another rear-ended him. His windshield cracked, red pain blossoming like fireworks in the night sky. As he died, the last few hours flashed before his eyes. Kathy. His careful planning. His confrontation with his brother. The murder...

It was finished. Doug Kane pulled the door of his brother's home closed behind him, making sure that the lock caught. He slipped behind the wheel of his red Firebird and backed it down the driveway. He waited until he could work his way out of Russell's development and then hit the gas. His Mustang was a conspicuous car, but he needed speed more than stealth. He hoped to be two states away by the time the police found his brother Russell's body.

Doug pulled onto the highway and clicked on the radio. "We'd like to take a moment to thank our day sponsor, Sōshi Tech. Sōshi Tech, for all your--"

The highway should have been bumper to bumper this early in the morning. But there were enough gaps that Doug could weave through them without ever having to drop below ninety. Something about moving around the cars evoked a strong feeling of déjà vu. Doug shook his head.

If only Russell hadn't started hitting Kathy, none of this would have happened...

* * *

Russell Kane smiled, looking down from the view screen to his brother in the VR machine. Doug's head was immobilized by a web of wires and straps, with goggles over his eyes thicker than a blind man's sunglasses. A breathing mask and feeding tube blotted out the rest of his brother's face. It wasn't going to be a pretty life for Doug, trapped in that loop, reliving forever a death that had never happened. At least it's better than what you had planned for me, Dougie. A marvelously full-service place this. What do their ads say? 'Sōshi Tech, for all your Virtual Reality needs.' They've gone above and beyond here.

Still, no need to let them know that. They might charge him more, citing God-only-knew what clause in the fifty-page contract. He tried his best to hide his smile of triumph, succeeding poorly.

"Do you want to see the loop again?" Russell turned to see the moonfaced technician in his white lab coat. The man had one of those nondescript faces that you swore you had seen before but couldn't remember where.

"Just one more time."

"You approved the script yourself, Dr. Kane. I can assure you that the scene loops with only slight changes in scenery and casting, drawing from the subject's own memories. We find that the variation keeps the subject from ever figuring out that he's in a VR environment. Your brother will experience that car crash ad infinitum. Especially given what you're paying us."

"I didn't pay for that commercial for your blasted company."

"Policy, I'm afraid. I was able to place the advertisement as close to the beginning of the loop as possible, where the subject will be the most disoriented."

A sudden thought occurred to Russell, triggered from a news report he had read once upon a time. "And if he figures out that the commercial repeats, he could wake himself from the cycle."

"In the long history of this firm we have never had a subject awake due to autosuggestion. Consider too that he would remember our name from the ad. If your brother were to awake, I doubt that things would go well for us. An over-zealous DA might even interpret our actions on your behalf as criminal. And leaving the law to one side, we've seen your brother's violent tendencies. In fact, our lab studied them in-depth to create that environment. Trust me, Dr. Kane. Your brother will remain in VR until you choose to release him or he dies of natural causes."

Russell had to admit that the technician had answered all his questions. His gloating smile returned, and he turned back to his brother. He watched the view screen for a moment, enjoying the growing desperation playing out there. Then he looked down at Doug's real body, trapped in the VR machine, his face obscured by the goggles, breathing mask and feeding tube. What was that slogan? 'Sōshi Tech, for all your Virtual Reality needs.' It was not going to be a pretty life for Doug at all, but it was better than he deserved.

"Do you want to see the loop again?"

Russell turned toward the technician, a hint of a smile still on his lips. "Just one more time..."

"And you're certain he feels no pain?"

"None at all, Mr. Kane." The technician seemed to sense Doug's hesitation and went on. "Your brother is a sick man, Mr. Kane. It's clear from your own research that, not only was he abusing his wife, he was going to have you institutionalized in this facility. Illegally, I might add. That's why we contacted you."

"Yes. But to do to him what he was going to do to me. It still doesn't seem right."

The technician paused before speaking. "Remember, it is an illness we're speaking of here, Mr. Kane. And a serious one at that. We still don't understand the sort of compulsions that drive someone to try to

act in such antisocial ways, but psychiatric science is making new advances all the time. Perhaps one day soon your brother can be cured of his rage and jealousy. But until then, it's safer for everyone for him to be here. Including for Dr. Kane."

Doug looked down at Russell. Behind the grotesque goggles and mask, his brother was smiling. He couldn't remember the last time Russell had smiled. Doug wondered what he saw. "Ok. Where are the papers?"

"Right this way, Mr. Kane. And thank you for choosing Sōshi Tech for all your Virtual Reality needs." Doug froze a chill running down his spine. From somewhere he heard the sound of a woman laughing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Donald Jacob Uitvlugt lives on neither coast of the United States, but mostly in a haunted memory palace of his own design. He strives to write what he calls "haiku fiction," fiction that is small in scope but big in impact.

Twitter: @haikufictiondju

Blog: http://haikufiction.blogspot.com/

TWISTED REALITIES: OF MYTH AND MONSTROSITY

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Playing For Keeps Mari Wells

That bastard thought I'd never find out. Or did he think I'd turn my head, I wouldn't see what everyone else saw, because I didn't want to. I've known, known for weeks now. From what I was able to find out, it's been going on for three months. I'm not really sure which betrayal hurts more. Not sure whether it's my heart, all the years I've faithfully loved him, or my pride that hurts most.

That's only part of my problems, the whore who's taken him into her arms is no other than my best friend. My best friend and my husband, not one but both stabbed me in the back.

I smile sweetly as I serve them a slice of their favorite cake. Her poor husband, he doesn't take his hand off her thigh, since the day they were married, he can't keep his hands off her. Does he know she's sleeping with Rob, or does he turn his head? He refuses a slice, I knew he would, he always does. That kept running through my mind all the hours I slaved over a hot stove and baked today.

I'd use his excuse and not taste this decadent cake today either. Or I'd lie and tell them all I wasn't feeling well. That was always part of the plan, since the day I invited the Gerhings to dinner. An extra ingredient in Rob and Sharon's cake that would teach them both. Teach them both not to screw around with me.

I take another sip of my coffee, my eyes dart from one to the other. He makes small talk with Rob, something about some team, of course Sharon adds her opinion. Perfect Sharon, knowledgeable in all things, and beautiful, too. Cascading red hair, large breasts, a thin waist, and curvy hips; perfect. I wonder if Rob knows it's all fake.

Would their moments of passion show him the scars, or would he not care. I'd say he wouldn't care. Sharon's told me once or twice about all the twisted things she enjoys in the bedroom, and that pervert must have enjoyed it all.

Sharon sets her fork softly on the side of her plate. I force my face to remain neutral. Half of her slice is eaten, half that would be an understatement. She enjoys her sweets as much as she does sex. Two bites are all that remain on her plate. Her face scrunches up.

I glance quickly at Rob. No sign of pain yet, but it shouldn't be much longer. Three bites remain on his plate.

"Is everything okay?" I ask softly. "You love that cake. I spent all morning making it for you."

"You shouldn't have, honey. It wasn't necessary." she says through gritted teeth.

"Nothing is too much for my two favorite people."

I smile at Rob first then at her. She lifts the fork and takes another bite. I stand and gather the empty plates, refill the coffee cups then perch on the side of Rob's chair. He and Rob begin talking about their company. Sharon's body stiffens, and her face pales.

His palm slides down Sharon's thigh and begins to rub her knee. Rob stutters for a second. Jealousy, God I hope so. I hope he feels what he made me feel for those first few days. Heart wrenching jealousy, disgust that knots the stomach and bile that burns the throat. I hope rage moves through his blood, and self pity taunts him of all his flaws. I got over it. I decided to take things into my own hands. I could have thrown myself at her husband. I had thought of it for a moment.

Why would he accept my indecent proposal when he had such a whore in his bed nightly? The thought of someone in the company, someone in a lower position crossed my mind, but I quickly decided that wouldn't be enough.

No, I wanted full revenge, absolute indulgence. I spent days trying to think of something worthy of their betrayal. Nothing came to me, well I thought of beating them both, but Rob is so much bigger than me. That wouldn't have worked. I could have beaten Sharon. Rob would have found out though.

Sharon's body stiffens, her back straightens. I can see her breasts seem larger, has she sucked in her stomach in an attempt to bear the pain. She bites on her bottom lip, a habit she has when stressed. The

cake must be working.

My arm goes around Rob's shoulder. The neck of his shirt is damp. His chest rises and falls rhythmically. He feels warm though, a fever maybe. A moment of regret washes through my conscience, before my evil side rears its head. They screwed me over, both of them betrayed me.

This isn't near enough to repay that. Rob's breath has become irregular. Perspiration forms around Sharon's beautiful lush hairline. How long did it say it would take? A few hours, a day or two. Just long enough to not point a glaring finger back at me.

My heart races. They would have never expected such a reaction from me. Rob looks up at me; a viperous smile plays at his lips. Before I can search his eyes he turns back to the conversation. What are they talking about now? I don't know or care. I'm sure they think it's above my sweet little head.

I search Sharon's face for an ounce of pity or regret for betraying me. Nothing of what I look for is there. I've made a wise choice, removing them both from my life. By tomorrow night or the next the poison will have worked through their bodies.

Eating at their organs and stopping their cold treacherous hearts. The best part of it all, is this poison isn't commonly considered deadly. If an autopsy is performed, the poison would look like an accident. A poisonous plant from the cabin they both stayed at over the weekend.

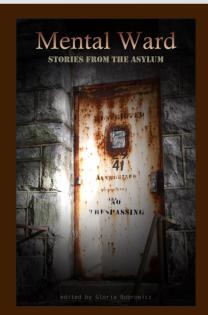
Their betrayal will be exposed. I'll have to act the ignorant little housewife, but I've been doing that for weeks now; I can do it for a few more. I look at Rob again, the echo of his marriage vows come to me; until death do us part, I want to laugh. The two most important people in my life, they should have known better. They should have known not to screw with me.

I play for keeps.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Mari's love of the paranormal goes back to her tween years with origins in vampirology. In recent years, she has expanded her knowledge to other paranormal beings. Her paranormal pieces have been included in supernatural magazines, websites, and blogs. Other stories are featured online and in print.

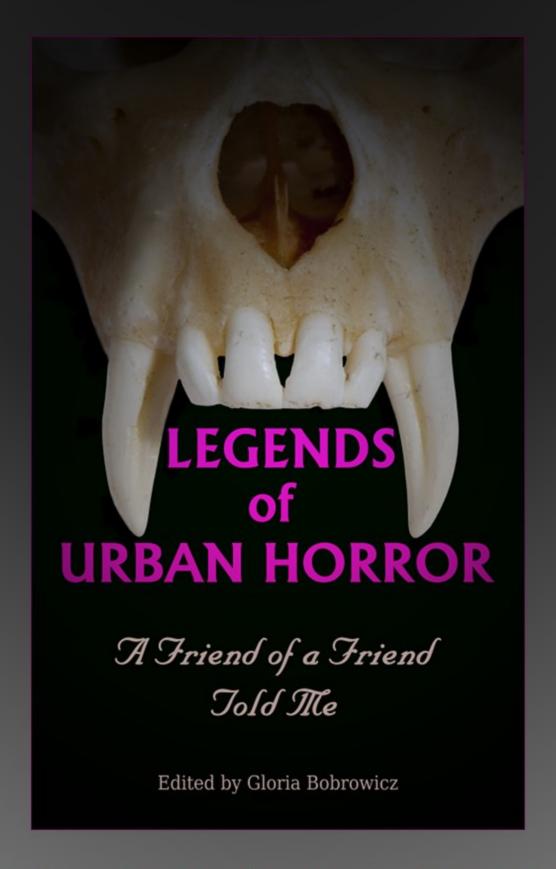
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Mental Ward: stories from the asylum

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



Available on Amazon, Smashwords, & CreateSpace

This is What Killed My Hamster Ken Goldman

Run, Caesar, run!

The little guy sure could get that wheel spinning.

My shrink says I have a pretty active imagination because I free associate a lot. See, when I let my mind drift I lose my focus. It doesn't mean I'm stupid or anything, and it doesn't mean I'm mental either. It's like I float away somewhere and then all this confusing shit inside my head happens. He tells me I'm only imagining all these terrible things people are thinking about me but I'm not so sure.

I pretend to listen when my therapist talks but I don't always because, like I told you, I sometimes wander. Besides, you can't be too careful about who you trust. Wait! I mean whom you trust, object of the preposition 'about.' I learned that stuff in tenth grade, although I think teachers teach you this crap to keep your mind off sex. I used to think about getting laid all the time, especially whenever I saw Sandy Cutler at the 7-11 check-out. Watching out for prepositions can't make you stop thinking dirty thoughts about a girl like Sandy.

Anyway, the point I was making is, most of the time you really can't trust anyone. Look at what happened to Julius Caesar, after whom I named my hamster. (See? I didn't end that sentence with a preposition, did I?) I used to spend hours studying Caesar (my hamster, not the emperor). He would run 'round and 'round on that squeaking wheel inside his cage, and I'd be thinking how we're all so much like the little guy, the way we just run ourselves ragged on our own little wheels. It's amazing what you can learn just watching a rodent, but it makes me sad to think how Caesar (again, my hamster) came to his end.

Run, Caesar, run!

Anyway, people never say what they mean, or mean what they say. I know that sounds like doubletalk but it makes sense when you think about it. You trust someone who lies or cheats, then you're like Caesar running on that damned wheel, wasting a lot of energy but going nowhere. Or like that other Caesar (the emperor) trusting his pals and getting stabbed about a million times.

Take tonight when I went to the 7-11. I just wanted a newspaper, maybe a pack of gum because I gave up cigarettes and you can't get cancer from a stick of Juicy Fruit. Of course you can get cavities, and a shitload of germs can spread through your system and then hit your brain, so maybe you *could* die of brain cancer if you chewed enough of the stuff, now that I think about it. I believe in playing it safe because there are a lot of things that will hurt you if you're not careful, even a lousy stick of chewing gum. It's more important than watching out for prepositions every minute, something only a fool would be concerned with. Of course you shouldn't end a sentence with 'with,' which is the preposition I just ended my last sentence with. Damn, I did it again! You can't go around being ungrammatical all the time or you're liable to start thinking about sex. So maybe it isn't so foolish after all, watching out for prepositions and chewing gum, I mean.

Anyway, I'm in the 7-11 and I'm pretty sure it's Sandy's shift tonight. I would feel good if she smiled in my direction the way she sometimes did. Sure enough she's there, and she's ringing up someone else's purchases when I'm readying to hand her my fifty cents at the check-out. I'm kind of shy and wind up looking at her throat instead of her eyes.

Her neck is very white and so delicate, and I decide against buying the gum with the newspaper because a guy can't be too careful. I make sure I have the exact change for Sandy because I don't want to put her to any unnecessary trouble having to fumble through the cash register for a couple of stupid quarters. You can never tell when crooks are just waiting for someone to keep their cash register open an extra few seconds so they can shoot everybody in the store because killing someone is so easy to do just because I didn't have the correct change for a paper. Like I told you, you can't be too careful. It isn't like I'm afraid to step on the sidewalk cracks or anything crazy like that. Hell, I couldn't care less about the

cracks in the sidewalk. I never even think about them, and sometimes I purposely step right on top of them. Step on a crack, break your mother's back, right? Well, my mother's back is just fine, thank you.

Oh, I know what people say about guys who get fixated on their mothers, but I'm not one of those. I mean, there's nothing wrong with loving your mother and it's not like I don't think about having sex with guys sometimes although my mother has nothing to do with my thinking about that stuff and I would never actually do it. It's Sandy I'm interested in, like I told you, even if she never noticed me unless I was in line with money to spend.

Well, I'm a customer and I'm thinking she can't ignore me because the customer is always right and she has to worry about keeping her job selling Big Gulps, so she's supposed to be nice although I would rather she was pleasant because she wanted to be and not because she had to be. I hate when people act nice just because they have to.

So anyway, I'm thinking tonight how I ought to give Sandy the right change and that she'll smile at me if I smile first at her, and maybe this time she might figure out that I came in just to see her. But she was joking with this other guy standing in front of me, and he was taking his sweet time talking to her like maybe he was thinking about asking her out and Sandy, she seemed to like it. Then just before it came my turn in line she took her break. Didn't say a word, just walked off when the other girl told her to take a few minutes. I have to admit I didn't feel too good about that.

All right, maybe Sandy didn't think she had to be nice to me. Maybe she needed that smoking break like I've seen her take a million times behind the 7-11. But she could have noticed that I'd been standing there waiting just for her to smile. She saw me standing there and could have decided right then not to take her goddamned break.

[I knew you were smoking alone in the dark near the back parking lot, Sandy. You go maybe four or five times a night to the loading zone just to satisfy your urge, don't you? Didn't your mother teach you how bad cigarettes are for you? If you were my girl I wouldn't ever let you smoke.]

She wouldn't have listened anyway. Why would she trust my opinion? I was only another shopper waiting in line, no different than some shriveled prune buying a carton of skim milk. So why did I waste my time thinking about her when there are so many other important things to think about - no, I mean about which to think - like keeping yourself healthy and clean because it's so easy to come down with something, you know?

I have this long file I always carry in my pocket to make sure my nails are clean because no one likes a guy with dirty nails. I know it sounds really queer but the file folds out like a pocket knife and I was cleaning my nails when I walked outside and decided to take a stroll behind the store. See, I figured Sandy would notice me if I stood right in front of her when it was just the two of us there. Maybe I'd even get a smile out of her.

She noticed me, all right, but she kept right on smoking and never said a word, just looked at me then looked away.

Her throat was so white, her neck so delicate.

See these nails, Officer? Clean, right? And I made sure I carried the correct change just for her. I smiled until my face felt like it was going to crack. All for nothing.

I was the guy she should be with.

[Damn it! Ended that with another preposition!]

Things can hurt you if you're not careful, and your mother isn't always around to keep that from happening.

There's nothing wrong with loving your mother, is there? [No one loves a little boy with dirty thoughts or dirty nails.]

I'm a customer, and a real man doesn't give a crap about the cracks in the sidewalk if he steps right on them, and clean nails are important, they really are.

Her neck. So white. So delicate. So very easy to do.

I keep it sharp. My nail file, I mean. Really sharp.

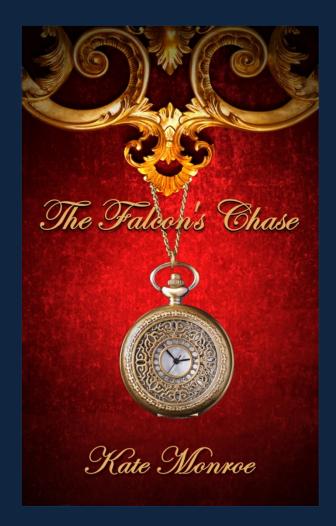
[Our own little wheels.]

Anyway, I was telling you about what happened to my hamster ...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Ken Goldman's stories appear in over 680 independent press publications in the U.S., Canada, the UK, and Australia, and have received seven honorable mentions in The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror. His new novel, ...OF A FEATHER, is due late 2013 or early 2014 by the UK's Horrific Tales Publishers.

The Falcon's Chase Kate Monroe

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



Labor of Love Brian W. Taylor

Ethan could see the infection spreading. Stephanie's body convulsed, her veins near bursting as sweat rolled off her skin. Her back arched violently as spittle foamed around her mouth. There was little he could do but watch as the woman he loved morphed into one of those goddamned shambling zombies.

She said she had a surprise for him, at the pharmacy in the nearby town of Haley. A real man would have gotten her there safely. He wiped his brow and slid down the wall deflated, weary, and defeated.

"We'll spend every last second together." He looked at Stephanie's wavy brown hair glistening in the dying embers of the afternoon sun. "I promise you won't be one of...those things."

She looked over and cracked a smile.

It wasn't fair. If anyone deserved to be bitten, it was Ethan. Ethan, who never had the guts to kill a single shambler. The same Ethan that ran when his nieces became the main course at the zombie buffet. He closed his eyes and relived the look of horror on his sister's face as he fled, leaving her to die with her babies.

Outside, the undead shuffled around the abandoned pharmacy. All of this for a pregnancy test. Stephanie had insisted. She *had* to be sure. That was the fault of many people--their inability to be patient, to wait for things to unfold in their due time.

Ethan stood and grabbed a can of baby formula. "Shut the fuck up!" He threw it as hard as he could and watched the skull of the nearest shambler shatter. It felt strangely satisfying watching it die for a second time.

His first kill.

Stephanie let out a bloodcurdling scream.

Turning back, Ethan saw two shamblers closing in.

Without thinking he pulled the sawed-off shotgun from Stephanie's bag. He knew it was loaded. Stephanie was always prepared. That same preparedness was one of the reasons why he loved her.

The first shambler was a woman. A few stray strands of hair still clung to various places on her scalp. She was emaciated, nothing more than greying, diseased skin over bones. Her ear had been gnawed off and her pink dress was covered with blood, grime, and some kind of black slime.

She reached out an arm and moaned.

Ethan ran at her screaming, infuriated that one of *them* would invade the sanctity of his last precious moments with his beloved wife.

He let it grab him. He was tired of all the running and scrounging, tempted to join the ranks of the dead. Ethan pulled the trigger and grimaced as her head exploded in a shower of bone and slime.

The second shambler was quicker. It slammed into Ethan from the side. The name tag pinned through her blue apron read Cassie. Her skin held onto some of its natural pink hue. She obviously had worked there and was recently turned.

Which meant she still had plenty of strength.

They fell in a tangle of flailing limbs and biting teeth. Cassie came out on top. She pressed her constantly clacking teeth closer to Ethan's face. He grabbed her by the throat, trying to keep her away, all the while looking for the sawed-off shotgun.

It was too far away to reach.

Cassie inched forward, unintentionally pushing a knee into Ethan's groin. *Great*, he thought, *another ballbuster*.

There was a crash from the direction of the front door. The shamblers, likely riled up from the fighting, were trying to get in.

Ethan balled up a fist and let it fly. Cassie's jaw crunched. She lurched forward, Ethan turning his head away just in the nick of time.

Even with a busted jaw, Cassie was relentless. The grinding noise every time she tried to chomp Ethan's fingers was sickening. She pushed closer, Ethan's arms quivering under the weight.

There was a pounding noise from the front door. The glass had been reinforced with various pieces of welded metal. It was just a matter of time before they got in.

Cassie pushed down with an unflinching need.

There was a creaking noise from the front of the store. Then a crash as the door gave way.

If ever Ethan needed a miracle, it was now.

Cassie's jagged teeth were an inch from his nose. Her breath smelled amazingly like oranges...and decay. She groaned as bloody saliva oozed onto Ethan's face.

The struggle came to an end as the sawed-off shotgun thundered, pellets crashing into Cassie as she sprawled across the floor. Ethan looked over to see Stephanie, now sitting, concentrating on the task of reloading. He scrambled away from the twitching pharmacy worker. Once on his feet, he hurried over to his wife.

"I'm sorry," were the only words to escape his mouth. He had every intention of staying, but his feet wouldn't cooperate. He moved toward the rear of the store and the back door.

Stephanie gave him a hard stare after reloading her weapon. One pull of the trigger finished Cassie.

Ethan turned back to see his wife, now surrounded by shamblers, point the gun at her head and take her own life. He jumped at the sound even though he knew it was coming.

He knew he should have felt *something* after losing Stephanie, possibly their baby too. But he didn't. The truth was he was too scared. All he knew was he needed to get the hell out of there. Not all the shamblers would be able to feast on the warm meal. Some would come looking for even fresher meat.

Ethan rounded the corner and stopped dead in his tracks when the back door swung open. His jaw dropped but he couldn't move, a whole new fear holding his feet to the floor.

"Surprise!" his sister said with mock cheer. "I bet you thought you'd never see me again, you son-of-a-bitch."

"No, please." Ethan looked from the shamblers to his sister, waiting.

The woman he believed dead raised her pink handled shotgun and fired.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Brian W. Taylor is a former soldier turned writer with a soft spot for the horror genre and black Labs. He grew up watching The Evil Dead with his grandmother, which led him to discover horror in literature. It was then that he stumbled upon Dean Koontz and never looked back.

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Sometimes in Dreams



G.L. HELM

Available on Amazon, CreateSpace and Smashwords

I Dare You To Drive It Now Reyes Stone

Susan sat in the interrogation room, smiling and waiting for the detective to come in. She knew she would have to explain her actions. But whenever Susan thought back from beginning to end she couldn't help but smile. She could still see the flames reaching for the sky. As weird as it may sound it had given her a sense of relief. No longer did she have to watch others enjoy themselves at her expense. Yes, some might say she went overboard but in her mind she was extremely satisfied with her actions. Now all Susan had to do was find a way to explain it to the detective so that he would understand why she did what she did.

"What happened?" Addams asked.

"Well, that's what you're about to find out," Hall answered handing Addams a folder.

"Curious, Captain."

"Very," Hall answered.

"Did she ask for anything?" Addams asked.

"Just a phone call to her boyfriend, Jake," Hall answered.

"Well, just remember, curiosity killed the cat," Addams said.

"Not in this case," Hall said. "All felines are safe."

As they entered the interrogation room Susan's attention shifted from the table to the men.

"Miss..." Detective Addams opened his folder to search for her name.

"Susan," she said.

"I'm Detective Addams and this is Captain Hall," Addams said as they entered the room.

"Hello," Susan said to both men.

Addams sat down across from her, "Before we begin we'd like your permission to check your financial records."

"Why?"

"You said that the car was yours, we just need to make sure," Addams said.

"Ok, sure," she said.

"Please sign here," Hall said placing a sheet of paper in front of her. "This just says that you're giving us permission instead of us getting a warrant."

Susan had nothing to hide. After all she was paying for it; it was hers. She took the pen from Hall and signed at the bottom.

"Thank you," Hall said and left the room.

"Now, why don't you tell me what happened?" Addams asked.

Susan looked at Addams, "What's there to tell, I blew up my car, end of story."

"Why did you do that?"

"Because my brother was driving it," she said.

Susan could tell Addams was confused.

"You blew up your car because...your brother was driving it," Addams said.

"Yes."

Susan stood looking at Addams. "I didn't do it for the insurance money, if that's what you're thinking. I have my reasons."

"You know you wouldn't be able to get it, you've already admitted to blowing up your car. Which leads me to my next question," he said. "If it's your car, why is it under your mother's name?"

"It's a long story," she said.

"We've got time."

"Ok, about four years ago I bought that car," Susan began. "It was the perfect color and the perfect size for me. There was only one problem."

"What?" he asked.

"I didn't have a driver's license," she said.

"That is a problem."

"My mother was with me," she continued. "She said I could put the car in her name but I had to make sure my payments were in on time. She didn't want me screwing up her credit. I agreed. So month after month, I made my payments and month after month my car sat in the garage."

"Why didn't you get your license?" Addams asked.

"I didn't have anyone to teach me," Susan said. "I asked my mother but she said, 'I don't have the nerves for that.' I also asked my uncle but that was a waste of breath."

"Why didn't you go to one of the local driving schools?" he asked.

"Between the monthly payments, insurance and putting money away for school, I just couldn't afford it."

"I see," he said. "How long after you bought the car did you leave for college?"

"About a year later," she answered. "But before I left I made a big mistake."

"Before we continue, would you like something to drink?"

Susan nodded her head yes.

Addams left the room.

While Susan waited for Addams to return she thought back to her earlier conversation with her mother.

"My car isn't fixed," her mother said. "Besides you don't have your license."

"It's my car," Susan said. "It's been six months, why haven't you gotten your car fixed?"

"The car is in my name so you can't take it."

"The car might be in your name but it's my money that's been paying for it. It belongs to me." Susan held out her hand, "I'd like my keys back. Now."

"No."

Addams entered with a cup of coffee and a bottle of water and brought Susan back into the present.

"Thank you," she said as she opened the bottle and took a drink.

"Ok, you were telling me your mistake," Addams said.

"A few months before going off to school my mother came to me and asked to borrow my car."

As Susan began to tell Addams about their conversation she found herself sitting in her chair, in her room, with her mother standing in front of her.

"But..."

"Come on," her mother said. "It's been sitting in the garage since you bought it."

"Because you won't teach me to drive."

"I already told you I don't have the nerves for it," her mother said.

"But I..."

"And you're not using it," her mother said. "Let me use it until I get mine fixed."

"How long is that going to take?"

"I don't know. Are you going to let me use your car or what?" her mother said holding out her hand.

Susan knew it didn't matter what she said. Whether or not she handed the keys over to her mother, her mother was going to get them and use her car.

"I guess," Susan said hesitantly.

Susan blinked and once again she was looking back at Addams.

"I know my mother. If I had told her no, she would have called me selfish. So I agreed under one condition. That no one and I mean no one else was to drive that car."

Susan found herself once again in her room looking at her mother. "I mean it. I don't want anyone driving my car."

"Ok," her mother said.

"Mom, I mean it," Susan said. "I don't care if the President has a flat tire, no spare and needs the car. No one and I mean no one else is to drive it."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

Susan closed her eyes. "I handed her the keys although I didn't really want to."

Susan opened her eyes and found herself back in the interrogation room with Addams.

"Did your mother agree to your terms?"

"I thought she did," Susan said.

The door opened and Hall's head poked in, "Addams a quick word."

"Excuse me," he said.

As Susan watched Addams leave the room, "I guess they got my records," she said to herself.

"Her records came back," Hall said handing the paper to Addams.

Addams walked back into the interrogation room. "Sorry, please continue."

"I left for college a couple of months later."

"How often would you talk to your mother?" Addams asked.

"Every day," Susan answered.

"How did you find out that your brother was driving your car?"

"A couple of months ago he made a comment about it," she said. "I didn't believe him because he likes to say things just to piss me off. But last week when I spoke to my mother she mentioned it."

"What did your mother say?" he asked.

"That she had taken my brother out and he hadn't done so bad."

"What made you think it was your car? It could have been her car."

"I asked her which car. She said 'the only one working," Susan said.

"She hadn't fixed her car," Addams said.

"No."

"What were your feelings?"

"I was furious, angry, pissed off. My emotions were all over the place," she said. "When I got off the phone, Jake asked me why was I so angry?"

"Did you tell him?" Addams asked.

"Yes," she answered. "I even asked him if he thought I was being childish because for a moment I thought I might have been."

"What did he say?" Addams asked.

"He said no. That just because the car is in my mother's name doesn't mean she could do whatever she wants with it."

"Tell me what happened today?"

"Jake and I drove down for the weekend," she said. "I wanted to talk to my mother."

"About the car?"

"Yes," Susan answered. "I wanted to explain my feelings to her because for some reason she still couldn't understand why I had gotten so upset. I also wanted to tell her I was taking the car back with me to school."

"How'd you get your license?" Addams asked.

"Jake taught me," Susan said.

"How'd the conversation with your mother go?"

"Not so well. A lot of yelling, by the end I had had enough."

"At that point where was the car?" Addams asked.

"The backyard," Susan answered. "My brother was washing it."

"Then, what happened?"

"I was in the kitchen when my brother came into the house," she said. "I took a piece of cloth, a lighter and headed for the car. I put the cloth in the gas tank and lit it up."

"Where was your boyfriend during all this?"

"Jake was at the hotel. I didn't want him to hear all the yelling so he dropped me off at my mother's house. Then, he went to wait at the hotel for me."

"Did he know what your plan was?"

"If you're asking whether or not he knew I was going to blow up my car," she said. "That wasn't my intention. All I wanted to do was talk to my mother but she wasn't listening. Everything I said seem to go in one ear and out the other."

"What do you mean?" Addams asked.

"She kept saying how it was going to affect them if I took the car back to school with me."

Susan closed her eyes. Once again she was with her mother.

"How is he going to get to school, baseball practice or go out with his friends?" her mother said.

"Well, let's see, he could take the bus to school and..."

"And what?"

"And his ass could walk for everything else. I don't care. He wants to drive he can buy his own damn car or lend him yours," Susan answered.

"You're being selfish. I don't know where you get it from."

"I have every right to be selfish. You've used my car more than I have. He's even used it more than me," she said pointing to the window that showed the backyard. "Why are you being so difficult, it's my car?"

Susan opened her eyes.

"Don't you think you might have gone just a little too far in blowing up your car?" Addams asked.

"Do you know what it's like to buy something, pay for it and watch everyone else enjoy it?" Susan answered.

"No, I don't," he said. "But I guess it would really suck."

"Big time."

She noticed Addams looked down at the paper in front of him.

"Well considering you destroyed your own property and since you admitted that you didn't do it for the insurance money and no one was injured. We have no reason to hold you."

"So, I can leave," she said.

"Your records show payments for the car was coming out of your account," he said. "It's your own property you could do as you please with it. Including blowing it up."

Susan laughed, "Thank you...for listening."

"My pleasure," Addams said. "Next time you decide to blow something up, please reconsider." Susan got up to leave, "I'll keep that in mind."

"One more thing," Addams said.

Susan stopped at the door and turned to look back at Addams.

"Next time your mother asks to borrow something, even if she ends up calling you selfish, tell her no." Susan left the interrogation room and headed for the front of the precinct.

"Have a nice night," Hall said when Susan entered the hall.

"You, too."

"Well, what do you think?" Hall asked Addams as he walked out the interrogation room.

"Her records proved what she told me," Addams said. "She was the one making the payments for the car and insurance. Besides there's no crime against destroying your own property."

"You've got to admit, that's one hell of a lesson she just taught her mother," Hall said.

"Does she have a ride?"

"I'll say so," Hall pointed toward Susan who was hugging a young man.

"I guess that's Jake."

She turned around and waved goodbye to Addams and Hall.

"Where, too?" Jake asked.

"My mother's house," she said as she got into the car. "I'd like to say good-bye."

As they drove back to her mother's house she took the car keys out of her pocket. She had taken them out of the car before she lit it up. Susan held the key's tight in her hand. She was out several thousand dollars but at least now she didn't have to worry about anyone else driving her car.

Jake stayed in the car while she went inside, "I won't be long."

"Are you proud of yourself?" her mother asked as Susan walked into the house.

She could tell her mother was furious. Susan couldn't help but smile.

"As a matter of fact, yes I am," she said. "I told you I didn't want anyone driving my car." She tossed the car keys on the table. "I dare you to drive it now."

She stood focused on her mother's face. "I'm going back to school," Susan said. "Oh, as to your earlier comment, I do have my driver's license. Thanks to Jake. See you in a couple of months." She gave her mother a hug and a kiss and left.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Reyes grew up in the Bronx, NY. Reyes has an AAS Degree in Computerized Office Technology and a BBA in Business Management from Monroe College in New York. She also has a diploma from Long Ridge Writer's Group. Reyes lives in Georgia with her boyfriend and their 2 1/2 year old daughter.



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Sake of Home Paul Buckel

"Oh my God, what did you do to your arm?"

I slapped my hand over it. The off-white markings stung as she grabbed my wrist.

"Don't tell gram," I said. "They're just tattoos."

"What do you mean? It looks like you've burned your entire arm."

"Let go of my arm, mom," I said. "Please."

She had told me once that her mother always grabbed her arm when she was angry and she hated doing it. I pulled on a long sleeved flannel shirt and buttoned it up over my tank top.

"The little star was one thing, Sam, but that is mutilation," she said.

I looked down at the mark on my left wrist.

"You don't have to like it," I said. "It'll look better once it's healed."

She held her breath. It made things easier.

"Just don't let your father see," she said. "He's got enough on his mind right now."

I want him to see. He needs to see. I don't say it, because I don't want to cry. I grimace and throw on some jeans. I don't bother to dry my hair the rest of the way. There's no point. My mom doesn't speak until I get to the door.

"Could you let your grandmother know that dinner is on the table?"

"Okay," I say. I try to sound cheerful as I go upstairs and knock on her door. "Grandma?" "What is it, Sam?"

"Dinner is ready." She had the television running. I rushed downstairs before I could hear the door open. I threw a few sets of silverware by the plates and sat down.

"Dad's not going to be home on time," I said as my mom pulled the chicken out of the oven.

"We'll just throw his plate in the fridge as usual," she said.

The floor creaked as my grandmother came in, her hands clasped. We stopped talking when we saw her. I had not heard her footsteps on the stairs.

"Is Ron going to be late tonight?"

"Yeah, gram," I said. I don't know why it's so new to her.

"He called earlier. I actually got to talk to him for a little bit while he was on break."

"What did he say?"

"Just that they were having a lot of issues at the plant," I said. "New equipment and all that. The entire field is being revolutionized."

My mom rolled her eyes over in the corner. Casting had not been revolutionized in over a century. Endlessly improved, but they were still doing things the same way. I didn't have the engineering degree, but we spent many nights listening to my dad ramble. That was back when he came home before nine.

"You know your father was the best," my grandmother said. "I went to that graduation years ago and he was the only one there who carried himself like a real scientist. Posture, bearing, and intelligence. Some of them didn't even shave."

She glanced at me. I had been thrown out of my graduation for smoking. The ceremony was way too long, I kept craning my neck to find my dad in the crowd, and Jared had been twirling that cigarette between his fingers for thirty minutes. Maybe if I had not looked so relieved, I would have gotten away with it. Not even my mom approved of that gaff. My grandmother did not approve of my arts education in the first place, but even less of my daring to touch a cigarette. My dad missed my graduation for work. It was just a small community college anyway. No big deal.

"I know he's great," my mom said. "But it would be nice to see him sometimes."

"He's doing more important things," my grandmother said.

If she had said it with sarcasm, I would have been offended. I clenched my fists so hard that my fingernails dug into my palms. My arm stung. I forced every word through my mouth.

"It's not like we're not trying," I said. "I've got resumes out every day. Mom already works."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean anything by that," she said.

My entire body relaxed, in spite of my chest tingling from the stress. Of course he was doing more important things. I felt my face soften, like every negative thought had been purged. I had no right to be angry at my grandmother over it. My arm stung and I exhaled the pain softly instead of yelling. It worked.

"What I mean is that he has been working twelve hours a day, six days a week for the last six months. Sometimes he sleeps over. He missed my graduation, he missed his anniversary, and it's starting to tick me off."

"Do not speak of my son in that way."

"I've held my tongue around you," I said. "I've held it since you came to live here. I'm not going to take your shit anymore."

"Do not take that tone with your grandmother," my mom said.

"Somebody has to," I said.

I got up and pushed my chair out. I already had my keys in my pocket. My foot hit the floor on its side and I toppled down and hit my head off the tile. I looked back just in time to see my grandmother smirk.

My mother was staring at the wall, wavering back and forth.

"So, Sam," my grandmother said. "Is there something you want to show me? Maybe something I should know?"

"No," I said as I stood up. "You'll just have to find out for yourself."

"I have power in this household," she said. "I am the matriarch. It affords me a certain domain."

My ankle hurt when I set my foot under it, so I supported myself with one elbow on the table.

"I know what you are," I said.

"I knew you would," my grandmother said. "It's so good to have another witch in the family. There are so many things I cannot talk about with the others."

"You'll never have the pleasure of talking with me," I said.

"There must be so much you want to know and learn," my grandmother said.

"There is," I said. I had admitted it to myself already. "I would have made my move a long time ago if I didn't care about that."

"I was trying to teach you," she said. I looked at my mother. I made myself stare at her, lifelessly gazing out the window through the curtains. I stared because my grandmother's words had almost worked.

"I learned a lot from your teachings. You keep my dad out working long hours because it gives you power. You keep my mother's mind in a fog when she gets too inquisitive. You're a bitch."

"If you knew what I was trying to do, you wouldn't say that," she said. "I'm working hard to make a place for people like us in the world. Do you have any idea what I can do from here? I felt so powerless at the old house. I've felt powerless for sixty years. I got my last taste of a steady field when I was fifteen. You try having something so sweet and losing it for that long."

"I had my last taste of a normal, loving family life when I was fifteen," I said. "You came to live with us a week after my birthday."

"Your father insisted," she said. "How could I refuse?"

"No, you insisted," I said. "When he said no, you changed his mind."

"If you knew what I was trying to do," she said.

"I know exactly what you are trying to do," I said. "Stop repeating yourself."

"You cannot even know what my goal is," she said. "You can know every detail, but you cannot possibly fit the entire thing in your head. You don't know what it meant to practice the art back then."

"So you have desecrated your own family to relive your glory days?"

"Our glory days," she said. "Back when witches meant something. Back before the towers fell. Back before people hunted us."

"Back when we invented plagues that passed by word of mouth?" I said. "Back when we conjured elementals to destroy the homes of social rivals? Or do you mean when every witch had a thrall? Which glory days are you talking about?"

"Somebody is always lording over something. Why not us?"

"Because you're one of us," I said. "And I have seen you in power. There won't be enough liquor to go around."

"What do you think you are going to do? You cannot just break my power," she said. "I am a matriarch and a witch of the fourth circle. I have wedded gods."

I looked into her grey eyes – eyes I had inherited.

"And your son begat a witch hunter." I slid back my right sleeve.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Paul Buckel is a process control engineer out of southwestern Pennsylvania. That aside, he was writing since he was twelve and always obsessed with science fiction and fantasy. He spends his days writing, reading, hanging out with his girlfriend, and attacking innocent piles of firewood with axes.

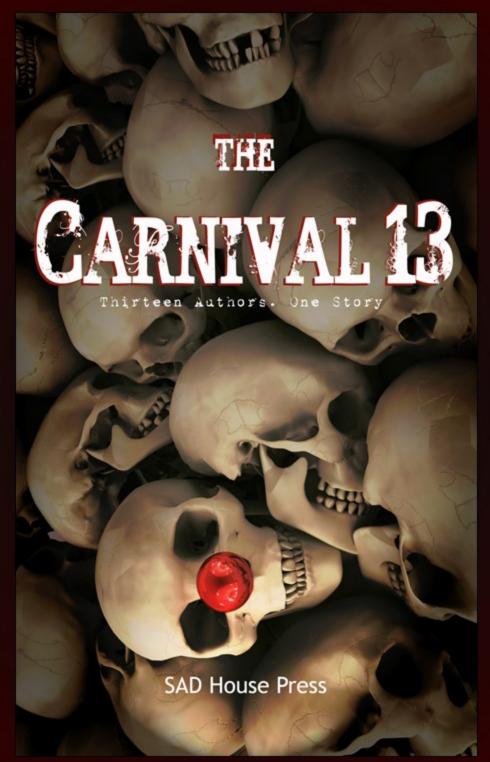
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NINETEEN Dana Wright

Larissa stabbed into a small piece of rare roast beef and seethed. The waiter had been by three times already and she was sick of the pitying glances. She knew the bruising was still there. It was hard to miss, she was sure. A nice big shiner right on her face for everyone to see.

Poor woman must have been beaten up and now she is eating alone.

"Do you need anything else this evening?" The waiter, Franklin judging by his name tag, poured more water into her glass. "Some more wine?"

Running her finger down the menu, she sighed. Perhaps she should get some chocolate mousse. It was after all, her favorite. "Yes, Franklin. Thank you for asking. I'll take a slice of chocolate mousse cake to go please."

"Yes Madam. Anything else?"

It was their anniversary. Fifteen years as a matter of fact. Should it matter that the last ten had really been in name only? It shouldn't, but it did. Every night she'd gone to bed alone sporting a new bruise, no matter if it was on her face or in her soul. This was it. She was tired of crying herself to sleep. That had been the first ten years. Now she just watched true crime television and fantasized about ways of making him pay. She twisted the traitorous strand of pearls that hung around her neck like the noose it was and thought about how they had met.

She had been a model. Furs, diamonds, pearls, drugs...the fast life and he had been a player. Larissa closed her eyes as the bitter taste of bile rushed up her throat. What a fool she had been. She glanced down at the manila folder sticking out of her purse and sucked in a steadying breath. The private investigator had given it to her with instructions to look it over where her husband couldn't see her. Tonight was perfect.

Lost in her mental ramblings, she didn't answer right away. "No thank you, Franklin. I really must be getting along."

The young man nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I'll get that right out."

Larissa nodded. "Thank you."

Swallowing the last bite of her dinner, she lifted her glass of wine and took a sip, her thoughts wandering. This would be affair number nineteen if she remembered right. The report had come in last night. Pictures. Documented movements by the private investigator. Credit card statements. It burned, deep in her stomach, mingling in with the roast beef, asparagus and new potatoes. This was their anniversary and she was eating alone. It suited her after everything really. Larissa sighed and pushed her plate away. Time to take care of business. She signaled to the waiter and handed him her credit card. Moments later he returned with her card and the to go bag of dessert.

"Thank you."

"Oh, did you need some to-go forks with that?"

Larissa nodded. "Yes, please. Just one."

"Thank you Mrs. Addams. Have a pleasant evening."

"I will." Smiling, she inclined her head. "Thank you."

Larissa walked out into the steamy Houston night. Even after twenty years of living there it was still hard to take. She approached her SUV and clicked the remote, opening the driver's door. Valet parking would not do for what she had in mind tonight.

A thump from the back of the vehicle made her pulse race. He was waking up. Larissa smoothed her hair out of her eyes and started the engine. The classical channel was playing, and she began to hum as she turned the car out into traffic. The roads were surprisingly clear for a weekend night and as she traveled up the interstate into the open farm country she was grateful for it.

Before long, she saw the turn she was looking for. The Farnsworth Historical Cemetery. Not too many

onlookers this time of night. It was perfect for what she had in mind. There would be a new funeral come morning and she had a little something extra to plant in the ground. There were not too many additions to this out of the way place and it worked very well into her plans.

Pulling into the service entrance, she got out of the vehicle and using wire cutters, released the chain holding the iron gates together. The grounds keeper would no doubt think vandals had accosted his territory, but that could not be helped. Jumping back in the car, Larissa hurried through the gates and pulled up to the area of the fresh grave. She had come here several nights in a row to make certain she would have enough time to accomplish what needed to be done.

Exiting the vehicle, she went to the back and popped the hatch. Bound and gagged, her husband was laid out on a layer of garbage bags. His enraged expression spoke volumes. An icy dose of fear trailed down her back and she angrily squelched it. Duct tape covered his mouth, where she had stuffed the latest pair of designer panties she had found. In their bed this time. It was the straw that broke the camel's back.

"Time to get up Martin." She pulled him up and released his feet, enabling him to stand. Clipping a dog leash to the collar around his neck, she gave it a tug. His vengeful look made it all worthwhile as she forcibly dragged him forward and led him out of the car.

He stood still, not moving, a murderous expression on his face. Her own cheek, still bruised after questioning him last night about his whereabouts still pulsed and burned. His clothes were rumpled the graying hair on his balding head was mussed.

"Martin. I have decided the dynamics of our relationship are going to change." Larissa smiled. She removed the tape and pulled out the gag.

"You crazy bitch! I'll kill you!" Martin lunged for her, but with his hands bound he could do little more than weave on his feet. The drugs she had mixed in with his nightly supply of liqueur were still in effect. It was really a shame they hadn't given a more permanent solution to her little problem. All of this messiness could have been avoided.

Larissa stepped away from him, smiling sadly. "Well, I'm sorry you feel that way Martin. Now, come here." She snapped the leash and urged him forward. When he refused to budge, she paused. Taking a gun out of her purse, she clicked the safety off and aimed it at her husband. "Strip. Now."

"What the fuck?" A cold, congested expression settled on his face.

"Do it." Larissa met his glare with one of her own. "Would you like to test my trigger finger, Martin? I have been practicing. All those nights alone. I really did need to find a new hobby."

Martin's hands shook as he slowly disrobed. Unzipping his pants, he dropped them unceremoniously in the dirt. Sliding off his shoes and socks, he pulled off his button down shirt and stood shivering in the night air.

"You're not done."

"Bitch."

"Off with them. *Now,* Martin. I want to see the fascination all of these women have for such a paunchy old man."

Shooting her a vile look, he complied, naked except for the dog collar and leash that hung from his bulbous form.

"I'm going to kill you, bitch."

"I really don't think you want to provoke a woman with a gun. Move you lecherous cur."

"Fuck you." He plodded along on the uneven terrain and Larissa trailed behind until they reached a desolate part of the cemetery.

"Stay, Martin."

He started to say something, but carefully paused, and watched her warily.

"Now. Do you remember this?"

He stared up at Larissa as she held up the saliva ridden pair of panties in her grasp. "You have to be fucking kidding."

"No. I'm really not." The sky above crackled with the same energy that pulsed through Larissa and she smiled. She pulled back on the trigger. The first shot hit him in the arm, knocking him backwards into an open grave. "I really was going to keep living the lie. Did you know that? But you fucked her *in my bed*, Martin. *My bed*. That is unforgivable. I was going to divorce you until I found out about all the others."

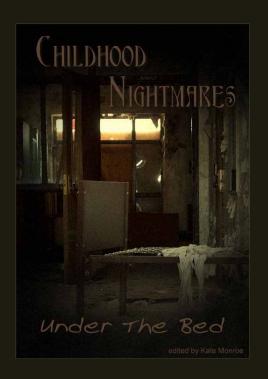
"What the fuck are you doing?" He sputtered, enraged, trying to claw his way out of the hole.

"Taking my life back." Larissa held up the gun. "I don't have enough bullets in the world for every time you've taken my heart out and stomped it flat." With that, she fired a second time. Then a third, reloading until all nineteen bullets were spent and gone. The shots and screams echoed against the chirping of crickets in the still night air until finally they gurgled into nothing. She fingered the pearls around her neck and ripped them off, flinging them into the gaping maw in the earth. Blood and dirt blended into the black of the night, spotted with the stars of the white pearls. Taking a shovel, she heaved earth over the remains of her life and smiled. She bent down and with a tiny flashlight, collected the casings and tucked them safely into her purse. She would drive by the lake on her way home. Taking out the trash felt pretty good. Now it was time for dessert.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Dana Wright has always had a fascination with things that go bump in the night. She is often found playing at local bookstores, watching monster movies with her husband and furry kids. More commonly, she is chained to her computers. She is a contributing author to several magazines and anthologies.

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CONFESSIONS Miracle Austin

Journey pulled the clothes out of the wicker hamper. As she separated the clothes into three piles, she checked all pockets.

Before placing the last pair of jeans in the washer, she dipped her hand into Roman's pockets.

They were all clean, except one.

Journey found a small envelope, opened it, and found a receipt for an Alaskan cruise for two. The end of the receipt read: "Britnee, I can't wait...Love Roman"

She reached for her cell on the counter and dialed True's number.

He was unavailable, so she left him this message: "I need to meet you now!" She screamed on his voicemail.

She threw her phone in her purse, stuffed the envelope inside, and darted out to the garage and jumped in her car.

It was 5:30pm.

True met her at Shakem Down Bar at 6:30pm.

"Journey, what's the urgency?" True asked, as he sat down in the cushy barstool next to her, while waving the bartender over to order. "A Corona, please."

"You recall my ordeal with Roman two years ago?" She slammed the empty wine glass down on the bar.

"Of course I do. We've been best friends for years, Journey. You were at your lowest with Roman's latest affair. Your three month hospitalization at the psychiatric center almost drove me over the edge."

"Yeah, I didn't think I would be walking out of there."

"Please don't tell me...Is Roman cheating on you again?"

Her eyes began to swell up with tears.

"True, I found this in his jeans earlier. She handed him the crumpled up envelope with her quivering hand.

"Sometimes, I wish...He never existed."

"You mean that?" He pressed his cranberry full lips against the beer bottle, staring hypnotically into Journey's swollen, grey eyes.

"Maybe. Of course not...You know I never told Roman about my miscarriage, during my stay at the center," she said as teardrops rolled down her heart-shaped face. "He visited me once and sent a taxi to pick me up because he was tied up in a meeting."

True placed his arms around her and held her tightly and whispered, "Journey, you know I'll do anything for you, right?"

"Yeah, I know. This isn't your problem. It's all mine. Always has been. All I can do now is leave him for good. This is it. I have no more forgiveness left inside of me."

"What if he could never hurt you again?"

"My life would probably then be perfect without restless nights and a good-bye card mailed to my weekly therapist. Look, I better get home. It's late." She wiped her face with her shirtsleeve.

"You never gave me a straight answer."

"True, there is only one way Roman could be permanently removed from my life. I just would like for him to suffer a little, you know." She kissed him on the cheek with her warm, wet ruby sparkling lips and slid her hand down his neck.

True's heart began to beat faster than a gazelle's heart being chased by a cheetah. He waved, until she was out of his sight. He could smell her light gardenia essence all over his chest.

Journey tossed and turned all night in bed.

The next morning she found Roman's car parked outside, but no Roman. She called his cell several times with no answer.

She quickly called True.

No answer.

She threw on a velour sweat suit and drove to his home.

Journey knocked on his door with trembling fists.

No one answered.

She jumped back into her car and called again. As she dialed the last digit, she saw True drive up behind her in rear view mirror, almost falling face down onto the gravel driveway, stepping out of her car.

She gasped for air.

"I've been calling you all morning. Roman came home last night, but I can't get in touch with him. Please tell me you didn't do anything. I was just so mad at him last night."

True remained in the car. He rolled his tongue around his mouth, paused, and stared up at her for several seconds without any verbal exchanges.

"I took care of everything. You never have to worry about Roman's extracurricular activities or your frequent use of antibiotics. I did what you wanted, but could never say it, until last night."

Journey bent down, reached her hands inside of his car, and grabbed his shirt with both hands.

"Where's Roman, True?"

"Let go and follow me."

Journey withdrew her hands, stood up, and walked back towards her car. She jumped into her car, turned the ignition key, and shifted it into drive.

Her palms were sweaty, as she gripped the steering wheel tighter and tighter.

A rainstorm ignited.

Raindrops slammed against her window. Her windshield wipers swished back and forth at a rapid speed.

After driving out of the city then down a long, twisted muddy road for 45 minutes, they parked in front of an abandoned barn.

True popped open an umbrella, casually stepping out of his car, while Journey flew out of her car seat to run towards him.

"Where's he?" Her entire body and lips trembled as the rain saturated her.

"Get out of the rain and come under with me."

"No, True! Show me now."

"There." True pointed with his index finger at the shabby barn. "Wait."

"What?"

Journey stopped in her path towards the barn and jerked her entire body around.

"Roman wasn't cheating on you. I planted that note. I knew you wouldn't leave him, if he cheated on you again. You just tolerate it."

"What the hell?"

"Listen, I did it for us. I've always loved you."

"You're insane True!"

She sprinted towards the barn, dropping her keys. She swung the massive, wooden door wide open and found only an industrial-sized freezer.

True walked up behind her, "What are you waiting for? Open it up," he whispered close to her ear.

She opened up the heavy freezer lid slowly. A thick plastic sheet covered the top.

Journey reached down to peel the plastic off. True stood over her with flashlight shining down into it.

Roman was underneath the ice. His pale face absorbed the bright light rays. His eyes were barely open. She looked into his cold green eyes.

His eyes blinked. She looked closer, and he blinked repeatedly.

His fingers slowly moved, as if he was trying to claw his way out of the ice.

He was still breathing.

"True, you placed him in there alive?" she asked crying. "Hand me that damn flashlight!" She chipped the ice away with the flashlight by hitting the ice with it a few times.

"Are you that heartless? I just wanted him to suffer a little, not kill him. What are you?" The flashlight bounced to the ground.

"Well, this is how we take care of a constant problem back home! I did leave a tube of oxygen in his nostrils, but the O2 tank is practically empty by now." He swooped up the flashlight with his right hand.

"How could you do such a horrible thing?"

"I did you a favor. He's been emotionally killing you since your wedding day, when he slept with that slutty maid of honor of yours, a few hours before you two walked down the aisle."

"What?"

"Oh, you didn't know...I really am doing you a huge favor then."

"Stop it!"

"No, you stop it! Damn it, Journey, you've been so blind about my feelings for you, just as blind as thinking Roman ever loved you. I did all this, so we can now be together." True wrapped his large arms around her.

"True, you went too far. I could never be with you! I don't love you like that." She squeezed out of his bear-grip and pushed him out the way, snatching the flashlight from his hand.

"Dear God, what have I done?" she cried out to herself. She jumped inside the freezer like a gymnast, dropped to her knees, and slammed the flashlight feverishly against the ice over and over again with all her 136 pounds in motion.

Her hands began to grow numb.

Ice chips flew up like mini razor blades piercing her face.

"Roman, I didn't mean for this to happen!" She screamed out.

The ice coffin finally broke apart enough, where she could pull him half way up between her trembling thighs and out of the freezing water.

He coughed up a gush of water and whispered from his shivering blue lips, "Journey, I'm sorry for everything. "You were the only one I ever loved..."

His eyes froze suddenly, staring up at her blood-splattered face.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Miracle Austin works in the hospice world. She's an emerging author who enjoys writing diverse free-verse poetry with mini-stories and short stories.

She's been writing since first hearing, "Who's Gonna Drive You Home," by The Cars. She's working on her first novella and resides in Texas with her family.





Woodchuck Trouble Ken MacGregor

"Son-of-a-bitch!" Grady stood by the garden, his major muscle groups rigid with rage. Every single Goddamn tomato half eaten on the vine. Cassie ran out of the house, coffee sloshing over her hand from the green mug. She was wearing the extra large men's T-shirt she slept in; the picture of Tinkerbell on it was so faded you could hardly tell she was even a biped. Someone needs to clap for that damn fairy, Grady thought and smiled despite the anger still bubbling in his blood.

"What?" Cassie said, looking around. "What happened? You okay, Grady? Honey?" She was checking for wounds on her husband, or for murderers in the bushes. Cassie switched the mug to her right hand and wiped her left on her shirt. Grady shook his head. He was already calmer.

"Son-of-a-whore woodchuck got at the tomatoes again," Grady said. "Every last one. Didn't leave us any, except for this half-a-one right here." He held it up, and the top of a bright red, ripe tomato rested on his calloused palm. Most of it was chewed away.

"I'll get you some from the store," she said, putting her hand on Grady's arm. He shrugged her off, but gently; Grady wasn't mad at her. Besides, Cassie was damn sensitive. You just never knew what would set her off on a twenty minute crying jag. Not for the first time, Grady wondered if his wife should be taking pills or something.

"It's not the same," he said. "There's nothing like fresh tomatoes you grow yourself. I'm gonna get that son-of-a-bitch, I'll tell you what."

"I think my friend Jenny has a live trap we could borrow," Cassie said. Grady looked at his wife like he wasn't sure he knew her. Cassie shrugged, embarrassed and went in the house. She loved Grady; he was her cornerstone, but she had to admit he was scary sometimes. Cassie was sure her husband would never hurt her, but someone else? Yeah. She could see that.

Around three that afternoon, Grady opened the padlock on his old footlocker. He kept it in the basement, in the back part behind the furnace. He lifted out his M40 sniper rifle and the cleaning kit. He also grabbed a box of .308 Winchester rounds; the 51mm military rounds seemed excessive. Grady opened the case holding the scope. He checked to make sure the night-vision function still worked; it didn't but he was pretty sure it was just a dead battery. He brought it all upstairs and spent a peaceful hour cleaning the rifle that had served him so well in the Corps. The scope worked just fine with a new battery. Cassie passed him several times as she tidied up the house, expressing her disapproval with weighty silence and pointed looks.

After they brushed their teeth side by side at the double sink, Grady and Cassie climbed into bed and said goodnight. Cassie had only sleep on her mind, as usual. Grady sometimes resented her sexual apathy, but not tonight; tonight, he was counting on it. Cassie got tired so easily these days. She was snoring softly in minutes. Grady gave it another few to be sure, then slipped out of bed. He made no sound as he went downstairs, his old training kicking in unconsciously.

Grady had left the rifle in pieces intentionally to make Cassie think he was done for today. The wood and metal bits lay there, spread on the frayed white sheet across the dining room table. The oil glistened in the moonlight, shining with lethal potential. In the dark, Grady sat down and put the whole thing together; his hands knew the routine and could have done it in complete darkness. When the rifle was in one piece, Grady attached the scope. He tested the night vision once again, aware that he was being a bit obsessive; the scope worked. Grady screwed the long, fat silencer to the end of the barrel until it was tight. He loaded five rounds into the integral magazine, ratcheting each in as quietly as he could.

Grady pulled on a dark gray sweatshirt; the nights were getting cool. He crept back up the stairs, past his room and sleeping wife to the attic stairs. Grady went up and over to the window facing the street. He pulled it open removed the screen. Grady slid outside onto the overhang. It was a mild decline, but his footing was good. Grady reached back in and pulled the rifle through after himself, careful not to

bang it on the window frame. He crab-walked across the overhang, leaning in toward the house for balance. Grady's shoes made crunching noises that reminded him of sand in his teeth.

At the edge, overlooking the garden, Grady lay prone and held his rifle at the ready. He turned on the green night vision scope and peered through the lens at the amplified ground. He could pick out individual leaves on the plants. Grady scanned methodically, checking the garden bit by bit. He was patient; he let his mind wander but kept his eyes focused. It was a quiet night in suburbia, but most of them were. Faintly, Grady could hear pop music from a few houses over. Probably Nina and Tom's kid who's in middle school, staying up late and jamming. Grady smiled. He missed his kids now that they were grown, but he didn't miss the noise.

There. Movement by the tomatoes. Grady breathed slowly. He relaxed his arms as much as his position would allow. The woodchuck was there, at the edge of his sights. Grady watched for a moment, to be sure, wanting to catch the animal in the act. He tracked the woodchuck as it ambled over the 2X4 edge of the raised bed. Grady kept the green circle on the beast as it lifted itself on its hind legs, sniffing the air. Grady could almost hear its tiny, rapid intakes of breath.

A tomato, barely ripe, that Grady was planning to pick tomorrow or the next day dangled on the vine directly above the woodchuck. The animal stretched up, grasped the tomato with its front paws and took a large bite. It stood there chewing.

"Gotcha," Grady whispered. The woodchuck's head snapped up and it seemed to be looking right at Grady. He squeezed the trigger and the beast fell on its side, left rear leg and a chunk of hindquarters blown off. The only sound was a muffled whump from the silencer; even the music nearby had stopped.

Grady watched the woodchuck writhe in agony. He was about to finish it off when movement caught his eye again. The night vision was still on, and he peered through the scope. Another woodchuck was in his garden. *Son-of-a-bitch*. Grady racked the bolt on his rifle to eject the shell and ready the next. When he did, the new woodchuck looked up. It rushed forward toward its fallen comrade and Grady shot it in the back. This time, Grady racked another shell into place immediately.

Two dying, floundering mammals wriggled in pain below Grady. Still, he waited. Grady had done this sort of thing before. Sure enough, another woodchuck soon appeared, furtively edging toward the garden and its dying brethren. Grady shot this one in the gut, adding to his collection of wounded woodchucks. He worked the bolt on his rifle once again.

The next two he killed outright. *Jesus. How many are there?* He thought. Grady almost wished he had brought the ten-capacity external magazine. Movement caught his eye on the ground. Woodchucks, maybe twelve or thirteen moved into view. As one, they looked up, right at Grady. Then, they began to gather the dead and wounded bodies, carrying them away.

Grady was dumbfounded. He watched them lift the ones he'd shot and drag them to a hole by the neighbor's garage. Another one popped up from the hole and eased the bodies down. With one last mournful look toward Grady, the one remaining woodchuck retreated down the hole.

They claimed their dead. Grady picked up the spent casings and carefully retraced his steps to the window. He put his rifle in, climbed in after it and sat on the floor in the dark. *Woodchucks. Claiming their dead. Huh.*

Grady's tomatoes grew unmolested for the rest of the season. He was able to harvest enough for Cassie to can some, too. Cassie loved canning things. It was a passion alien to Grady, but he liked having the food in the dead of winter and not having to buy it.

Life went on, as it does and Grady forgot about the night he shot the woodchucks. He never told anyone about the animals and their weird behavior; Grady wondered if maybe he imagined it.

Winter was settling in and Grady was in the backyard, planning to chop some wood for the fireplace.

He carried a log and the axe to the big stump. Grady noticed the ground was uneven here and he was having a hard time getting his footing. Worried he'd have a mishap with the axe, Grady looked for a better spot. He couldn't find one. Grady's entire back yard was filled with dips and lumps and soft spots. It looked and felt unhealthy to him. Grady walked around, testing the earth with his feet, poking at the dying grass with the axe handle.

His backyard was a mess. Something had been digging the whole thing up, just under the surface.

Grady hunkered down and pushed the axe handle into a soft spot. It went down half a foot, met some resistance and then sank fast all the way to the head.

"What the hell?" Grady moved around, repeating the experiment. It happened again, three times. The more Grady poked at it, the softer the ground seemed to get. Thinking he would call the people at the county about it, Grady stepped toward his back door. His foot sank in the lawn and he fell forward. Grady caught himself with his hands, but his face missed the axe blade by less than inch. He stayed like that, poised over the blade, breathing hard. Grady twisted the handle so the blade fell flat on the ground and he got up. He went inside, leaving the axe on the ground.

Grady picked up the phone, but the line was dead. Grumbling about there being no reason to still have a damn land line, he tried to remember where he'd left his cell. Upstairs, he thought. Grady brushed the dirt off his hands and clothes, kicked off his boots and walked up the stairs. Cassie was folding laundry on their bed, spread out and separated in piles of his, hers and communal. She looked a question at him, but he shook his head, focused on finding his phone. Grady saw it in the bathroom by the sink. He stepped through the door to get it and stopped short. Something was wrong.

Grady shot a look at Cassie. She felt it too. Movement. On a big scale. Earthquakes were not unheard of in Michigan, but they were pretty rare. Cassie put her hand on the footboard to steady herself. Her eyes were wide, pupils dilated. Cassie was barely keeping it together. Grady positioned himself in the doorframe. He remembered somebody saying that doorframes survived earthquakes.

"Come here, Cass," he said and held out his hand. He didn't want the ceiling to come down on his wife. She started toward him like a frightened deer, but the whole house pitched and they both fell.

They were moving all right; if this was an earthquake, it was rocking it California-style. Grady knew you weren't supposed to go near windows, but he had to know what was happening out there. Holding himself up against the wall, Grady inched across the floor to the window. Outside, in the backyard, the earth was dropping, sinking before his eyes. His back lawn was turning into a massive sinkhole and the house was sliding into it.

"Come on," he yelled, making a grab for Cassie's hand. He snagged it and they stumbled their way through the mad funhouse of tilting walls and buckling floorboards. The stairs were intact, but warping, twisting. They weren't going to last long. Grady and Cassie took them as fast as they could, nearly tumbling headfirst several times.

One step shattered under Cassie's foot and she broke her ankle, crying out in pain and surprise. Grady scooped her up, one hand under her armpit, the extra effort putting strain on his muscles, heart and lungs. The windows on the back of the house all shattered at once and Grady and Cassie were slammed against a wall by the house dropping in that direction. With heroic effort, Grady slammed open the front door; he hauled himself and his wife over the threshold and down four feet to the front walk. He sprained his wrist and cracked three ribs on impact. But, Grady managed to protect Cassie from any more harm.

Cassie was crying softly in his arms. Both were breathing hard and sweating despite the cold air. It occurred to Grady that they didn't even try to save anything. But, he reasoned, they saved themselves and that's what counted. He looked around, expecting widespread devastation in the neighborhood. There was none.

Their house was the only thing moving. And, it was still going, inexorably sinking into the back lawn. Wood crackled, glass tinkled, steel groaned and drywall dust filled the air. Where they had lived was no longer recognizable as a house. It was debris, rubble and nothing more. Over the low pile of junk, Grady could see the fence that separated their yard from the Morgan's. It looked weird, and for a moment, Grady didn't understand why. Then, he saw it.

It was moving.

The fence, the ground around it and the surrounding neighborhood yards were covered in a carpet of light brown fur. Grady blinked but the image stayed. The fur moved, en masse, pouring over the ground toward Grady and Cassie. She saw it now, too and stared slack-jawed with her husband. The sea of brown fur funneled into a narrow hole by the garage next door. The same hole Grady once saw five dead woodchucks being carried into. Like fallen soldiers.

Grady had killed those soldiers, and their military force had struck back. They used the only weapon they had to undermine their enemy. Literally.

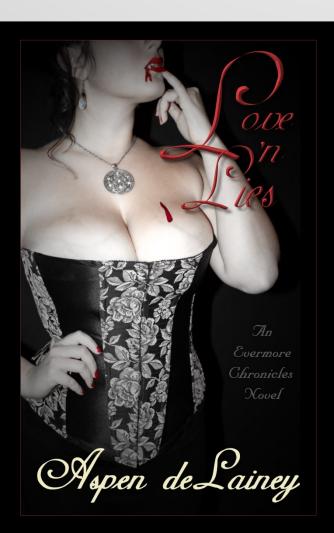
"Son-of-a-bitch," Grady muttered.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Over forty of Ken MacGregor's stories have appeared in anthologies from Sirens Call Publications, Hazardous Press, Bloodbound Books, and in other places. Ken is a member in good standing of The Great Lakes Association of Horror Writers. He lives in Michigan with his family and two scary cats.

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An Interview with Author G.L. Helm

G. L. Helm has been writing for forty years. He has traveled around the world with his long suffering Air Force wife. They raised two sons while living in Spain, Germany, and Italy, and in less exotic places like Virginia and Indiana. He now lives in Lancaster, CA. Helm has written four novels, three of which fall more into the fantasy genre than Sometimes in Dreams. He has also written reams of short stories which have been published in anthologies around the world. He is grizzled and scarred by life, but he is still tough enough to keep punching out the words. Luckily enough, we were able to sit down with him to discuss his recent release.

Sirens Call Publications: What made you decide to become a writer?

G.L. Helm: I first thought of writing a book when I was about twelve years old. Since then I have always had the yen to create worlds that I might control in ways I could not control the real world. I found out pretty quick after beginning to write that there is no real control in either world.

SCP: What is Sometimes In Dreams about?

GLH: Sometimes in Dreams is a story about a man caught up in a situation he doesn't quite know how to deal with. While living in Italy he meets and instantly is smitten by a young English woman, though he is happily married. He finds himself torn between Kit, the English girl and Amanda the woman he has loved for thirty years. From the beginning Daniel knows that this affair is not going to end well.

SCP: What is the one thing you would like readers to know about *Sometimes in Dreams* before they read it?



GLH: Sometimes in Dreams is not a typical romance novel though it falls into the genre. The protagonist is not some dashing hero. He is an all too human man caught up in a storm of passion over which he has little control and caught up in the swirling world events of the late 1990's.

SCP: What is your writing process? Do you consider yourself a planner or a pantser?

GLH: Actually I am a little bit of both of those. I usually have at least a rough idea of what the story is going to be about, but sometimes the story rather takes off on its own and surprises me.

SCP: How would you like the reader to see Daniel?

GLH: Daniel is an unconventional man. He has lived a strange life as a house husband and father and he has continued to write though he hasn't had much success at it. He is brave and macho in many ways, but he also has a very soft artistic side.

SCP: How would you like readers to see Amanda?

GLH: Amanda is as unconventional as her husband. She is tough and tough minded but she has an absolutely bottomless love for Daniel. The trouble with Amanda is that she has given herself over to her Air Force Career in so many ways that her love for Daniel sometimes gets lost.

SCP: How would you like the reader to see Kit?

GLH: Kit is both sophisticated and naive. She is a talented architecture student who has had to battle the society she grew up in to do what she wants to do, but she has a deep need to be loved by a man. She has been abused both physically and mentally but she has fought back from that abuse and is trying to make her own way.

SCP: In your opinion, what sets Sometimes in Dreams, apart from other books of the same genre?

GLH: Several things. The modern setting in the ancient culture of Venice. The reversed home life of Daniel and Amanda. The deep true and abiding love of Amanda for Daniel despite all that happens.

SCP: What is the hardest challenge that you have faced as a writer?

GLH: Very hard to answer. Of course there is the everyday challenge of the blank page. It is hard beyond belief to sit down in front of the Computer every day and create a world, even if, like in *Sometimes in Dreams*, the world is really just a slice of a real place. But one of the hardest challenges for me has always been just being able to steal enough time from taking care of family and tending to things in the real world and still have time and heart to write. And of course the rejection. The rejection can steal the heart out of you if you let it, but I have just always been too damn dumb to quit.

SCP: Are you reading anything right now? Anything special recently?

GLH: I am constantly reading. I have the word addiction in the worst way. I can't go to bed at night without a book. I usually carry one where ever I go. I stand in line at the bank reading. I am currently reading a book called "Spiritual Envy" which is about agnosticism. I have a kind of philosophical bent now and again. I just finished reading the first volume of Mark Twain's Autobiography. I loved it. He is still one of my favorite authors.

SCP: Who are some of your favorite authors? Favorite novels?

GLH: Another hard question. My favorite authors are all over the map. I love classic American novels from Hemingway and Steinbeck and Twain, but I also like the old pulp fiction SF from Heinlein and Asimov and Bradbury. I like detective fiction too. Nero Wolf, John D. McDonald, Dick Francis. I really don't have favorite novels though. I pretty much love whatever I am reading at the moment. If I don't love it I quit reading it. I did read the Ring Trilogy a couple of times and really loved them.

SCP: How do you define success as a writer? Have you been successful?

GLH: Success as a writer is hard to define. It certainly isn't by how much money you make because lots of great writers died broke. I think success is measured in longevity. If people are still reading your work in a hundred years you are successful whether or not you make a dime at it. As to my success—we'll have to wait and see. In some ways I will have to say yes I have been because I have had people come back to me after reading my books and tell me that what I said really struck them and made them think. That's a kind of success, but as I said, it remains to be seen.

SCP: Do you have any words of wisdom about writing to pass on to novelists and writers just starting out?

GLH: You really know how to ask some damned hard questions. I don't want to sound like a cynic or a smart ass, but when young people come to me and talk about wanting to write I usually try to discourage them. If they really do have the literary sickness they are going to write no matter what I say but if they can be discouraged then they weren't going to really write anyway. But I tell those who are determined that they should write for themselves. You can tweak your work a little to make it appeal to a publisher but mostly you just have to be pleased with what you write or it isn't worth the hassle.

SCP: What should readers walk away from your book knowing? How should they feel?

GLH: Depends on the book. Because my four novels have been in different genres the feeling at the end of each one is different. The feeling I hope for at the end of *Sometimes in Dreams* is happiness. Gladness that Daniel seems to have finally found a means to cope with his tragedy and that Amanda continues to love him as she has all along. I want the reader to feel that, though life is not going to be perfect for Daniel and Amanda, it is going to be good.

Thank you G.L. for taking the time to answer our questions. *Sometimes in Dreams* can be found at all major online retailers.



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