The Sirens Call



October 2014 issue #17



Trick - or - Treat

Poetry, Short Stories, «L Flash Fiction of Halloween Horror!

200 Word
Comparative Flash
Fiction - One picture,
three tales of 200
words each

Artwork by Jeanette Andriulli

Interview with Carson Buckingham, Author of 'Gothic Revival'

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It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year: An Editorial

Julianne Snow

Most people consider Christmas the most wonderful time of the year, and I will admit it's pretty great, but Halloween wins that moniker in my book! It's the time where we horror-loving freaks (and I mean that in the most flattering sense of the word) get to revel in the fact the genre steps into the mainstream for the month of October. Not that any of us really care what's considered mainstream, but it's nice to turn on the television to classic and modern horror movies and walk into the stores to grab our favourite treats like candy corn and chocolate-covered marshmallow ghosts on little white sticks.

So what are some of my favourite things? I'm so glad you asked! I'm a huge fan of costumes and having that one time (or multiple times if you're lucky) to become someone else for a period of time. We all do it; we all adopt another persona the moment that costume goes on. It's fun to play at being someone else for a few hours—it gives our imaginations a little bit more freedom with ourselves.

And the candy! Who doesn't love candy?? Sure they may be some of you out there, but I maintain you're all closet candy fiends. That's the only way my mind can process such an eventuality. Halloween has some of the best candy out there! And all of it in little packages that allow us to mix and match for the perfect combination. Yum!

Halloween wouldn't be complete without the requisite attractions generally open only during the month. The scary haunted houses, the scream parks, the terrifying corn mazes. All of them are fun, and all of them will make it hard for you to control your bladder as the scares keep coming! I have my favourites that I visit each year, but I'm always looking for more to add to that list.

As a zombieholic, I wouldn't be true to my love of the genre if I didn't mention that *The Walking Dead* returns from its long hiatus in October. To be able to sit down again on Sunday nights to catch up with characters that have invaded my world like family just seems to make it all right again.

Halloween and October really are the most wonderful time of the year!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Julianne Snow is the author of the *Days with the Undead* series and *Glimpses of the Undead*. She is the founder of Zombieholics Anonymous and the Publicist and Co-Founder of Sirens Call Publications. Writing in the realms of speculative fiction, Julianne has roots that go deep into horror and is a member of the Horror Writers Association. With pieces of short fiction in various publications, Julianne always has a few surprises up her sleeves. Be sure to check out *The Carnival 13*, a collaborative round-robin novella for charity which she contributed to and helped to spearhead which was released in October 2013.

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Special Memories of Halloween: An Editorial

Gloria Bobrowicz

Family vacations have always included scouting the local cemetery, wherever we were visiting. My kids remember that well. It instilled a love of cemeteries and everything scary in them. To this day, we think a fun family outing is to stroll through old cemeteries for hours and hours. They joined us in loving everything scary. Halloween is a favorite holiday for the entire family.

I can remember we always had lots of Halloween decorations on our front porch. The years went on and it became bigger and bigger. As our children started growing up, they helped decorate with us. Our house became the place to go in the neighborhood to see the scary costumes and decorations. It didn't hurt that we also gave out big chocolate bars, none of those little candy bars or lollipops. Over the years, our children became adults and our grandchildren came along, Halloween became a theatrical presentation. We turned our garage and driveway into a 'haunted house'. Months in advance, we would scour yard sales to pick up props to use. Every member of our family participated, including cousins and sometimes their in-laws.

We had interactive props for the trick-or-treaters. Flashing lights, sound effects and lots of screams. Many people dressed in costume walking around, some standing statue still as little ones, and sometimes their parents, tried to figure out if it was a dummy or real. Only to have the pants scared off them when the 'statue' moved. Great fun!

We built the set and our props over several months. My husband and oldest daughter were our creators and directors of our event. Over the years, word spread to people in other neighborhoods and we received so many visitors.

Our town allowed a two hour window for the holiday from 5:00PM – 7:00PM. We bought tons of candy for the older trick-or-treaters; I'm talking enough to fill several large cardboard boxes, and small stuffed animals for the wee ones in strollers who couldn't eat the candy yet. Everyone came to see what we'd do the next year. We had one of our members use a clicker to count the people who came. Two years ago we had over 2,000 people in those two hours. There were so many visitors that we couldn't break down our set until after 8:00. Yes, all that work, time and money went into those few hours. By the next day, you wouldn't have known anything was there. We had lots of fun and made great family memories.

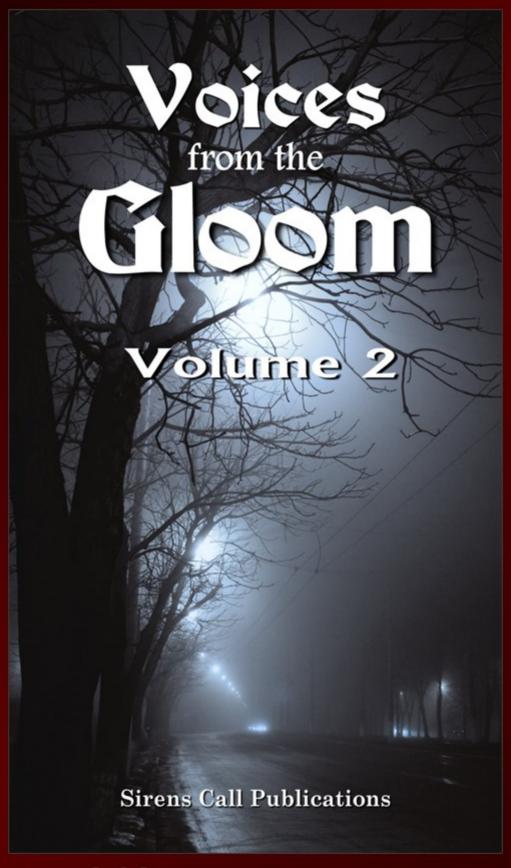
This past year, my son decided to get married on Halloween. It's his favorite holiday also.

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.

Twitter: @GlorBobrowicz
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An exceptional collection of eclectic tales of horror...



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

Tricked? DJ Tyrer

She hated this time of year. She hated the damp, the dark and the cold that began to set in. She hated the fireworks that exploded with such terrifying noise overhead. But, most of all, she hated the trick-or-treaters who seemed so intimidating in their masks with their demands for treats and who would dole out vandalism to those who refused to treat them or to answer their doors to them. She had read in the newspaper, a few years before, of a house that had been firebombed when they'd failed to bribe them to leave them alone, and had lived in fear of such an attack every year since. There was something about this time of year that seemed to drive people mad; maybe those fundamentalists who'd been leafleting about the occult dangers of Hallowe'en were on to something, after all?

Certainly, she'd be much happier if she could get away. The adverts for sunny getaways in foreign climes seemed to taunt her. It was all very well for those with money. People like her just had to suffer. Then again, if she'd any money, she wouldn't be stuck here. They said money couldn't buy you happiness, but it sure could buy you a better class of misery, like those celebrities with their depression and mental problems booking into luxury spas to recover. The chance would be a fine thing. If only her problems were so glamorous. But, nobody ever said life was fair.

Unable to just lock her door and hide away, she'd invested in an extra-strong chain and a large box of sweets with which to dissuade them from acts of aggression. She'd open the door and thrust some sweets at them and, then, quickly shut it again. So far, this evening, her ploy seemed to be working and the few trick-or-treaters that'd visited had been and gone without trouble. She supposed that was one good thing about living near the top of a tower block with a perpetually-broken lift: relatively few such troublemakers took the stairs so far. She was seldom bothered by Jehovah's Witnesses or doorstep sellers, either, which suited her fine. The only ones it didn't seem to deter were the loan sharks, but she'd the sense to ignore their offers of easy money.

There was another knock at the door, this more slow and methodical than those before. Warily, a little wearily, she went to answer it, but, looking through the spy-hole, she couldn't see anyone there. Assuming it was kids playing what was doubtless, to them, an amusing prank, she ignored it and went back to her television.

Again, the same odd knocking. Exasperated, she went to the door. Once again, there was nobody there. But this time, she noticed that the wall opposite her door had been defaced by a graffito in red and black paint that declared, ominously, *They want to come in*. It was probably kids, alright, but she shuddered to wonder exactly how they intended their prank to conclude...

A further knock. She didn't want to go check, as if doing so was to validate the yobbish game that they were playing. She had no desire, anyway, to actually open the door to them. Yet, to do nothing was to invite retaliation – flour over the peephole, at best. Why did some people get off of bullying others? Why couldn't they just leave her alone?

Reluctantly, she went to the door, looked through the peephole. This time, she was a little surprised to see people out there; two of them. Like so many of the local chavs, when it came to trick-or-treating, their only concession to costume was hideous masks: not that she could see them clearly as their heads were bowed and their faces were obscured by the hoods of the unpleasantly grey-beige tops that they wore – the colour of washed-out blood. One was barely in view, but the other was stood right in her field of vision and raised his head as if to gaze at her, although she knew that he couldn't see her. As he raised his head, she saw the freakish, lumpy face that she'd thought was a mask. Suddenly, she wasn't so sure.

She retreated along the corridor and cowered against the wall. This wasn't right. Not right at all. She was shrieking, an inarticulate combination of cries to God for salvation and begging the two beings to leave her alone. Not that she had anything to offer them to leave her alone as she was certain they had no interest in the sweets she had to hand. She'd no idea what to do, with them standing out there, just waiting.

She remembered the graffito – the graffito she'd assumed they'd written on the wall – and the message seemed to state their intention. They wanted to come in. But, why would they want to come in? What terrible plan did they have for her? Shrieking, she prayed that the door would hold and keep them out.

It didn't. They hammered loudly upon the door until it, suddenly, burst open. It was as if her worst nightmares had taken form and this was a terrible trick being played upon her with no option of using a treat to send them on their way: unless, of course, she was to imagine she was to be their treat.

From somewhere, she wasn't sure where, as they slowly advanced on her, she heard a voice chant a rap; the only words she could make out were not reassuring: "The joke's on you!" the voice spat. "Death awaits those who fall into the clutches of the Laughing God!"

They loomed over her and reached out with doughy hands, tearing at her. Blood splashed across their hoodies and seemed to merge its colour into them. The pain was unbearable and she wailed with it, hoping that it would soon end. It did; she didn't live for long. The rapper had been right; death had, indeed, come for her...

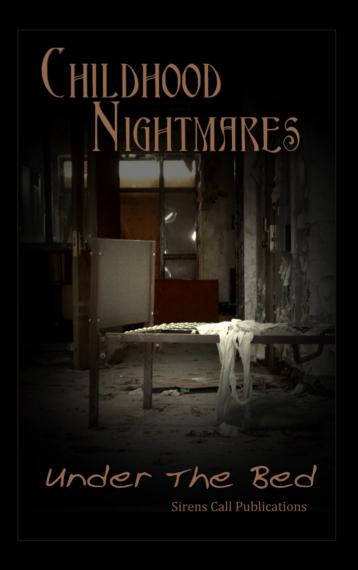
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing* and has been widely published in anthologies and magazines around the world, most recently in *Amok!* (April Moon Books), *Steampunk Cthulhu* (Chaosium), *Tales of the Dark Arts* (Hazardous Press) and *Cosmic Horror* (Dark Hall Press), as well as *Tigershark* ezine, and in addition, has a novella available on the Kindle, *The Yellow House* (Dynatox Ministries).

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Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo and iTunes



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



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

Through the Mask Jeff McFarland

"I hate it," Todd said with a scowl. "I hate everything about it."

"What? Come on, it's adorable!" Jane said with a toothy grin that showed through the hole of the mask's mouth.

"That thing is nightmare fuel," he muttered, pretending to be looking at the wigs. It had been a long time since he actually saw a mask that scared him, especially in a two-bit seasonal shop like this.

"Oh, come on," she laid a hand on his shoulder and took a step closer to him. "What if I was wearing this... and nothing else?" He shuddered and shook his head. The thought sent lightning down his spine. He imagined her beautiful hourglass figure, soft skin, long legs — all exposed, save for a smiling pig mask with tiny crescent moons for eye holes and ears that stuck out comically from the sides. There was even a little tuft of black hair on top.

"If I could get it up while you were wearing that thing, I'd need to be thrown in the looney bin." Jane pulled the mask off and laughed, putting it on her hand like a ventriloquist's puppet.

"Why does it bother you so bad?" she asked, wiggling her hand and causing the mask's flesh to ripple.

He stared at it for awhile. It was easier now that there was no one inside. The mouth was wide open in a grin that looked like it would be at home on the face of some deranged clown. The eye holes were barely there at all; he had no idea how she had seen out of them.

"I have not the slightest clue," he said, continuing to stare. "Something about it just... ugh. It's way too 'dueling banjos' for me." She laughed again and put the mask back in the bin with the others on clearance.

"So, is that a 'no' to making me squeal, then?" she asked. He shook his head and slapped her ass in response. She jumped and hurried away with a giggle. He turned to follow her, but as he did, he found that the mask's gaze met his. He stopped. The way it folded and laid on top of all the others had turned its grin into a large frown, like some sort of Comedy / Tragedy cliché. He grabbed it, shoved some of the other masks aside, and buried it deep in the bin.

"Darlin'! Are you coming or what?" he heard her call from a few aisles over. He stood there, looking into the bin. "Yeah, I'm coming."

Of course he had to be wearing that mask. How else could it have gone down?

Todd sat alone in a booth with duct taped seats and stared across the bar. Lights of every color danced in time with the DJ's music, painting the zombies and serial killers on the dance floor. Behind the bar, a sign lit by a blacklight read 'SHOW UP IN COSTUME – DRINK HALF OFF!' with a crudely-drawn pumpkin beside it. He was watching Jane over at the bar. She was smiling big and laughing at whatever the man in the pig mask was saying. He couldn't tell. Todd swished his drink around, staring into the glass and drumming the fingers of his other hand on the table. All he could hear was the music pulsating around him, some remix of the Monster Mash.

The guy in the pig mask had been taking advantage of the half-price drinks. Todd watched him from the booth as he had bought Jane and himself a shot. Then another. Now, she was giggling about something with her hand on his shoulder. Todd continued to swirl his drink. The guy put his arm around her waist. Todd finished his drink in one gulp and bolted up from his seat.

He shoved past the people on the dance floor, seeming to time his steps with each thump from the bass of the music. The other side of the bar felt a lifetime away. Todd's vision swayed back and forth. The music, the lights, and the room's movement made Todd feel like he was outside of his own body. Like he was watching a movie of his own life.

"Oh, Todd! We were just-" Jane couldn't finish before Todd had shoved the man in the mask against the bar. The guy went sprawling backward, his back shook the counter, and his drink flew from his hand. "Todd! What the hell?" Jane shouted. The guy in the mask had already recovered. He stepped forward and was nose-to-nose with Todd. Todd couldn't see anything past the mask. His eyes were locked on it. There were no eyes in the slits. The mouth was only a dark cavern. Todd stood and stared for what felt like forever, his fists clenched tight. His heart pounded in his ears, again thumping in time with the music. Jane was shouting at him, tugging on his shirt sleeve, but he didn't hear her. Todd was craving it. Itching for this guy to say the wrong thing, to make the wrong move. But he didn't. He just smiled. Smiled big. His teeth shone in the black light, giving the pig's face an uncanny human grin.

"What?" Todd shouted over the music. "You got a problem?" The guy turned and walked away without a word.

Todd's whole body relaxed. He was suddenly aware that the room was spinning faster than before, and that Jane wasn't saying anything anymore. Only glaring at him.

"What?" he asked again, plopping down on one of the stools. "Did I interrupt something?" He could tell by the look on her face that was the wrong thing to say.

"You know what?" she started, getting nose-to-nose with him herself. "Yeah, you did. We were just talking about how I already have a boyfriend that I love very much." He felt his shoulders slump.

"You have a boyfriend you love very much, but you'll happily keep taking drinks from the guy?" Todd asked, avoiding eye contact with her.

"Duh!" she said with a laugh that he knew was more frustration than good humor. "Free drinks are free drinks! It's like the one good thing about being a chick at a bar," she said. "I was starting to tell him to step off when you stormed over like some fucking macho man."

"Gee, I wonder where he would get the idea you were available. It's not like your boyfriend was sitting alone across the bar while his girlfriend was being hit on," Todd said with a sneer.

I can't even talk to you right now," Jane said, her eyes becoming misty. "I'm going home." She stormed away, cutting through the dance floor full of werewolves, vampires, and guys in banana suits.

"Seriously?" he slurred. He gritted his teeth and spun around in his stool to face the counter. He threw his wallet down on the bar and waited for the bartender to notice him.

The bartender, surprisingly, hadn't cut him off. Now, he was wishing she had. He was taking some very cautious steps to the parking lot behind the bar, bracing himself against the building's brick exterior. The alleyway leading to the parking lot was decorated top to bottom with city-sanctioned graffiti that glowed eerily in the dim orange streetlight. The shadows danced to the music still pounding in Todd's ears. All of the scantily-clad women and strange monsters on the walls watched him stumble though, doing nothing to help him. When he heard another set of footsteps echoing with his, he knew who they belonged to immediately. He didn't turn around. He didn't need to.

By some miracle, he had made it to his car. He fumbled around his pockets, looking for his keys. The footsteps were growing louder. Closer. He didn't have them. He tugged on the handle of the door anyway, and to his surprise, it opened. He stooped and reached under the driver's seat, searching frantically. They were drawing closer. He thought he heard someone speaking, but his breathing was too heavy for him to tell. The steps were behind him. He heard them echoing through the alleyway. His hand found around a handle under the seat. Someone else's hand was on his shoulder. He had to save himself.

Todd stood and whirled around with a cry. He plunged a three inch blade into the guy's neck. He still couldn't see his eyes. That pig's stupid fucking smile was all he could see. But the person underneath wasn't smiling now. Todd was. The man grasped at Todd's wrist and at his face, gurgling and gasping desperately for air. Blood drizzled down the front of the guy's costume, leaving a trail of crimson down the once-pink fabric. Todd shoved him back, and he fell against the car behind him. Todd saw something shimmer in the guy's free hand. He stooped down to look. It was a set of keys.

The man pressed a button on the keyring, and the alarm on Todd's car began to go off.

Each honk from the car exploded into Todd's head like a set of church bells. The man had pulled the knife out of his throat and was pooling blood on the dirty alleyway ground. Between the car's honking and the alarm's wail, Todd heard the stuck pig wheeze out a few final words.

"W.. want, ap-p-pologize," it gurgled. "Dr.. dropped.. keys.."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jeff McFarland was sent back in time from the year 2112 to save the world from total annihilation. Currently, he's enduring his senior year studying Literature at Chadron State College. He has been lucky enough to appear in the Demonic Visions series, as well as issue #10 of The Sirens Call, and writes regularly for CSC's newspaper, The Eagle.

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Halloween Scavenger Hunt Laura Jamez

"If you hadn't opened that door we'd be home and safe." Ralph shuffled back toward the wall. "Instead we're stuck here waiting for that bloke to come back"

"I'm s...sorry Ralph, but I really believed we would find what we needed for the scavenger hunt in this place." Stephen dragged his hand over his face, smearing the dirt and tears into the sleeve of his already grubby jumper.

"It's okay, don't worry about it, stop sniveling and let me think".

Ralph couldn't help but wish he'd decided to give the scavenger hunt a miss this year, but with the council changing the rules he thought this was the best chance he and Stephen had of winning. Normally the rugby team, all twelve of them, would split up, thus covering more ground faster than any other team, and they'd always won. But this year no one was allowed to split up, so smaller teams had a better chance.

They had only one item to get; a large metal hook. And everyone knew that the old abattoir was the best place to look. They hadn't been the first to look here either, the evidence behind the door they'd looked through had proved that.

He didn't know who the girls were, but he'd seen them around campus. They'd obviously thought to look here for the hook same as them. They found the hook too, in fact they'd found several. The three of them were hung from the ceiling, the large metal cattle hooks piercing each neck. Blood, once flowing through their veins, now pooled in the basins at their feet.

There was no clear way out for both of them, Ralph knew that; one of them would have to sacrifice himself for the other. Just watching how Stephen - his best friend since primary - had crumbled when he saw the girls, he knew it would have to be him. Ralph would do anything to help his friend survive - even if it meant risking his life.

"Listen Stephen, that guy will come back at some point and when he does I'm going to attack him, that's your chance to run."

Stephen looked at his friend, "Okay, I suppose that's as good a plan as any. You'll follow me out once you've got the guy to the ground, won't you?"

"'Course I will, then we'll get the police and everything will be fine." Ralph got up and stood near the door, unable to look at his friend after lying to him for the first time ever.

It was at that moment that they heard the scrapping of a key in the lock. The door opened. "This is my chance." Ralph thought. "Run fast, Stephen I'm not sure how much time you'll have."

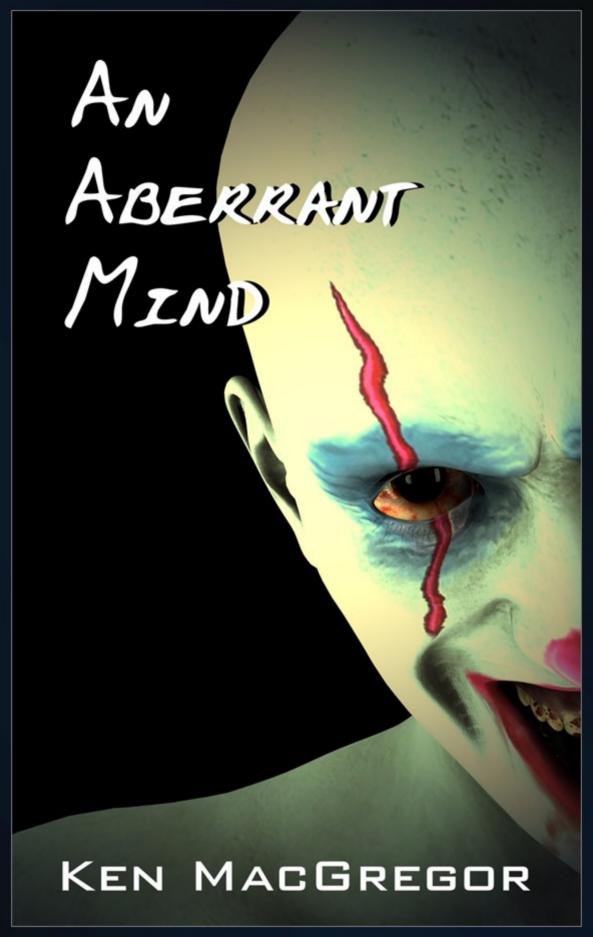
As the door opened, Stephen charged. "I won't let you do this for me, Ralph, together we can both survive!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Laura Jamez, a mother of two from Dunfermline, has been obsessed with horror from an early age. She has recently published an anthology of 50 horror Tales, In Creeps The Night, in collaboration with J.A.Mes Press. One more Sirens Call acceptance and 2014 will have been a successful year.



Twisted Realities: Of Myth and Monstrosity

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Available on Amazon, CreateSpace, and Smashwords

Night at the Scream Park Stephen Crowley

This year, I take Halloween night off. That's it.

Mikey thought hard about a whole Halloween evening away from the usual malevolence to a different kind of night time horror - one not of his own doing for a change. He stroked his chin dwelling on that thought, so nice to be scared rather than scary for an evening.

The email arrived just a week ago: Come visit Fright World on Devil's Road. Mikey's first thoughts - this must be a joke as no one emails him, no friends, disconnected. A quick Google map search showed the park nestled in the grounds of a local esteemed billionaire. This rich guy transformed acres of his park into a fun fest filled with various horror attractions called The Scream Park.

Mikey loved the idea. He swiftly bought a ticket for one of the later Halloween sessions.

He emerged from the smelly toilet cubicle and rejoined the group. Strange, he thought, how the pungent ammonia stench of urine turned his stomach more than rotting flesh.

Those six bodies this year, dragged out of my cellar smelled better than this, he thought. He dwelled on his choice of burial places for a moment, a spot deep in the woods near his home.

"After all this time, I still worry about being caught. C'mon Mikey, been at this for a couple of years now." He muttered to himself.

Mikey loved this park. He felt fear as he thought about the horror ride ahead but not as a common cold chill others feel, or dizziness, or weakness in the legs, not even a racing heartbeat.

No, this fear was exhilarating.

It was heartwarming. The acreage of sprawling green pastures set against the manor now filled with gory attractions just plain made him feel at home.

The queue started to move as a guide up front almost completely shrouded in a satin robe shouted, "Okay guys and ghouls, here we go, your Halloween night begins, stick close, keep your hands at your sides, and be aware...of your surroundings..."

The guide donned a ghostly white face, enough to cause a squeal when he swung around to address the group. Mikey just wanted to yell his thoughts: *Get on with it!* He found the guide's cheesy lines nothing but an obstruction to what the ticket paid for. For a second, Mikey could have sworn the guide just stared cold at him. He didn't shout 'Get On With It' out loud yet it felt to Mikey, he heard him.

The guide continued rambling. "There are things here to eat you, trap you, beware of..." Nope, he now definitely threw a stare in Mikey's direction, the guide lowered his chin and crooked his eyebrows, croaky voice, his eyes on Mikey. "...Your sins here, the dark ones will know your sins."

Some of the others in the queue jostled and turned to look at Mikey who until now enjoyed being quite nondescript. The guide's eyes stared at him then he burst into a jolly frenzy throwing his arms up, spreading his robe and smiling at everyone. "Welcome to The Scream Park folks, enjoy yourselves."

With that, he walked and the group followed.

A few beads of sweat lined Mikey's forehead as he felt somehow - invaded. This guy actually disturbed him, and no one disturbs him, he does the disturbing. He quickened his pace to try and get closer to this guide. What does he know, why that stare? Mikey thought as he came within a few feet of the guide.

The dark haired pale faced leader of the pack - stopped.

The group almost walked into each other as he froze. Mikey kept his eye on him.

The guide's head swivelled slowly, one eye again seemed trained on Mikey. This time, he held his gaze; the bulbous eyes of this curious man felt like they scraped around Mikey's mind, frightening eyes fixed on him, face wrinkles showed a discomforting grin; cold eyes, almost grey, colder than Mikey's.

The guide turned his head and pointed ahead at a gloomy paint-flaked building with two gargoyles guarding the porch entrance.

"First folks, the Haunted House."

The first attraction entertained Mikey: a few dark corridors, some actors skating around in Victorian attire, someone banging the walls and a speaker with a mocking cackle, somber portraits covered in fake dust, some nervous whimpers from a couple of group members. Most clapped to thank the guide for the effective scares once past the exit door.

"The next attraction, The Scary Maze." The guide pointed at what could be endless hedgerows as they rose high in the air. In single file, the group followed the guide inside. This excited Mikey, wandering around prickly borders, seemingly no exit, only to have the guide feign the fact that the maze changed as the group moved. "Yea, right," Mikey muttered round one corner.

Only to have that steely eyeball strike him again.

Who is this guy? Mikey thought. About twenty minutes later, the group emerged - some quite relieved.

"Next, The Mine." The guide barely waited as he pushed open a shaft door cut into the ground and led the group through musty tunnels. Mikey felt exhilarated by the yells and squeals among the group as they stumbled around its dark winding corridors.

"Take care victims, watch your step...things...lurk here..." The ominous voice of the guide flowed as he faded into the darkness ahead yet Mikey could still feel that pulsating eyeball staring at him, frightening eyes aware of every foot step. The way ahead required some crawling, crouching and the occasional dash as some actors lunged from walls with slimy arms. Confined spaces never bothered Mikey. Lately, he found himself crawling through the darkness of his house cellar dragging a body; such a dark life experience kind of killed any chance of a chill here.

"Cool stuff." Mikey called out to get the guide's attention as they emerged from the attraction. The guide just smiled back at him, prominent cheek bones raised.

"Ahead, The House of Pain," the guide bellowed. He stopped by the entrance and turned to face the group. His eyes rolled around as he searched the wowed faces before him. Some still collecting themselves prompted the guide to clear his throat and wait a moment. Then a serious emotionless face began speaking. "Did you know that every year, there are approximately forty active serial killers in the UK?"

For a moment, Mikey dwelled on that speech wondering if maybe - he knew. The others just glanced at each other before following the creepy guide into the next attraction. Mikey loved this, a winding passage past rooms showcasing some of the most grim murderers through history: Ted Bundy in an act of necrophilia, the Son of Sam or as he and all inspired serial killers knew as the .44 Caliber Killer David Berkowitz, Ian Brady and Myra Hindley burying a child on Saddleworth Moor, and many other nefarious evil doers. Each window pane strolled past revealed an intricate snapshot of historic sordid detail.

Grim to the group, moments with like minds for Mikey. He tapped Berkowitz's glass and muffled his words. "Screw you Mister 44, I use a polished maul, so take that."

Mikey stared at Ted Bundy's malevolent eyes. For a second, he wondered if it was a dummy, the eyes looked so real.

He flinched.

For a moment, he could have sworn this dummy winked at him.

"Silly." Mikey said in a hoarse whisper and brushed off such nonsense. Just tiredness he told himself.

On leaving the house, ahead an enclosure bordered with a high brick wall and just one door entrance.

"Last shock for Halloween night, Zombie Road."

Mikey strutted with the group as they followed the guide through the entrance and onto a street set which resembled a typical section of a village and comprised of just a few buildings along a road including a bar, gas station, small cinema, a couple of shops and some bungalows. Most cowered as the actors appeared by the dozen all decaying, some chewing on bloody meat.

"Follow me close," the guide called out. Again, again, that eyeball fixed on Mikey before paying attention to the rest of the group.

They crept along a darkened road lined with some flickering and dim street lamps, fake grocery stores; as they walked by the cinema, more zombie actors shuffled towards them raising a few screams as Mikey just chuckled.

"Nice blood, nice undead flesh eaters." Mikey said to one of the actors who professionally stayed in character. Spooky to some, just plain fun for Mikey.

"Would you like to meet them?"

Strange cold breath struck the back of Mikey's neck and he turned fast. The guide stood there, eyes wide, blood-red and leering.

"Okay, love to meet...them..."

"Anyone else...no, of course not." The guide barely gave the rest of the group time to respond before ushering them through a door leading out of the enclosure.

The door locked shut.

The guide approached him, a confident smile, arms crossed behind his back.

"Now for the last, Mister...Mikey." The guide's voice monotone and lined with a foreboding that gave him chills.

Mikey strode to within a foot of him. "Okay, okay, who the hell are you? You have been giving me the eye since I got here, how do you know my name, what..."

The guide's arm pointed at the darkened petrol station just fifty yards away. Silhouettes became shapes, shifting forward.

Mikey grimaced. "What, oh, okay, a special just for me. Meet the undead. You really think you can scare me? And I still want to know how you know my name."

The guide nodded, a confident nod, a gleam in his red streaked eye and turned away heading for the exit door. "We have been watching you for some time, Mikey. So, we freed your victims from that place...in the woods, and brought them here, a little Halloween gift from The Scream Park. This is a very special place boy. Such darkness exists here, such surprises for slime like you. And now Mikey, your final and personalized attraction. Raising the Dead."

"What, you called me what?" Mikey briskly approached the guide and clutched his shoulder. "You did what?Who are you?"

A groan echoed and Mikey stared at the shapes coming, more undead, shuffling his way. Their faces soon came into view, clarity became familiarity, and then Mikey's face lit with a fear he had never known.

Six. Their faces. He knew the faces as they quickened their shuffling walk.

"Can't be."

He knew the faces. But how?

Now clear against the moonlight. Each grisly act of murder came flooding back as recognition finally gave Mikey the fright he never thought would come.

"Say hello to your unfortunate victims who fell by that blunt weapon you so love. We know about all evil men across the country, and invite them here every Halloween night. You got the email." The guide almost hissed the words. "How, how did you know?" Mikey's voice brittle.

The guide smiled. "Told you, we see all evil here, you could say evil is attracted to this place. Time for penance has come Mikey. And we brought some familiar faces to settle a score."

"No way. What kind of a joke is this?" Mikey backed off as they neared.

Something clutched him.

More undead, blank eyes, missing skin from their bodies held Mikey in a tight grip.

"Okay, joke is over, you actors have managed to give me a scare." Mikey tried to shake them but their strength surpassed his ability to slip from their rotten palms. Their eyes glared at him, their dull lifeless eyes, they smiled back, groaning.

Mikey stared at the faces of the approaching undead. The six figures now as familiar as the day he dug the graves and buried them. The faces of the bodies dragged from his cellar, out to the woods, each victim bludgeoned with his heavy maul. He knew these people. All fell to Mikey's night stalks one by one over a year, a couple more rotten than the others with bone showing beneath sunken dead flesh.

Their hands with dark bloody nails reached out as the other undead clasping Mikey pushed him toward them.

"Great joke, Haaaaaa." Mikey cried out. "You got me, Something finally got me. I am scared. Haaaaaa."

The faces of his cellar victims locked in an intense and fevered stare, drooling mouths, each clutched a limb.

Within seconds, a series of rips as they tore his body asunder.

The six zombies strolled off each munching on a piece of Mikey's bloody limbs.

The guide peeked through a crack in the exit door, grinning. He shut the door and addressed the group waiting outside. "Hope you all loved our scream park. Each attraction offers surprises to scare the living daylights out of

anyone."

Then he paused and leaned forward to get closer to the group.

"And for some, some very bad people, here on Halloween, you shall find your final resting place."

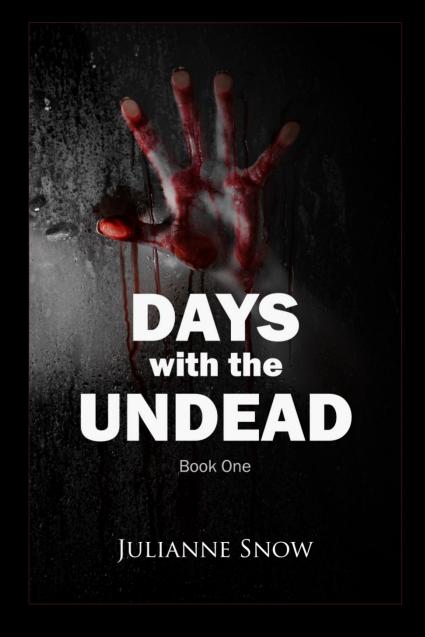
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Stephen Crowley writes short horror stories from micro-fiction length of 1000 words up to short tales reaching several thousand words. He is based in Leeds, England. Inspired by early horror movies and great authors including Stephen King and James Herbert, Stephen spends his free time honing his writing style. For some time, Stephen has entered global flash fiction and short story competitions.

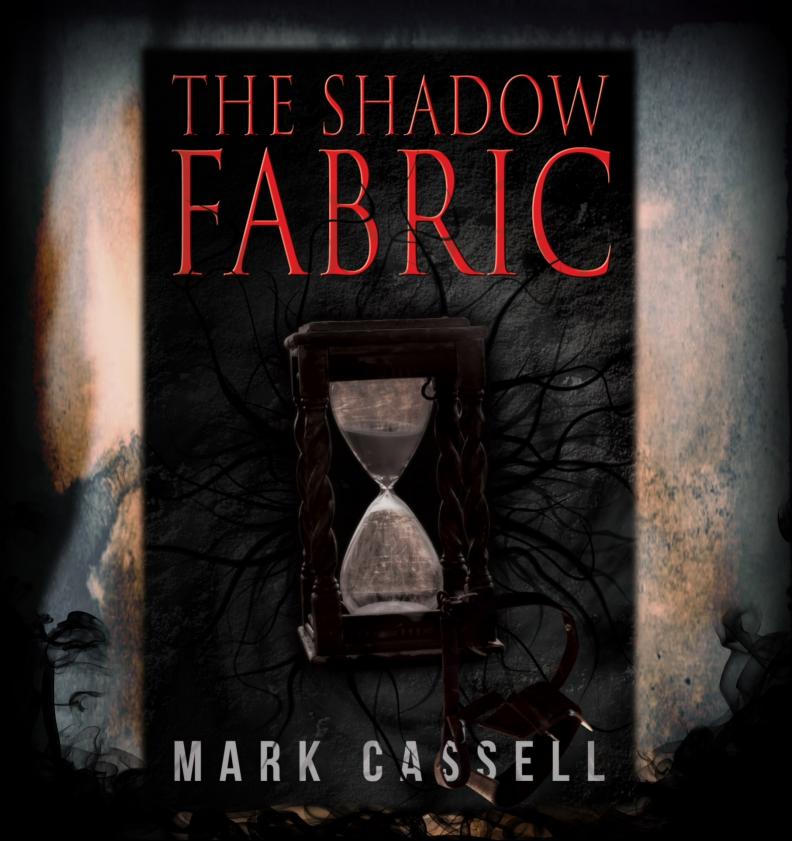
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The Harvest Shannon Yingst

I've always been afraid of the dark, but there has never really been any reason to be so inconsolably scared. Maybe it was all the silly stories I was told as a child, or maybe even the way I thought something lurked just beyond the reach of my nightlight.

There was a time when my mother would have to let me into her bed every single night on account of this dream I would have. I would be in bed- thinking now, I'm not too sure if I was awake or asleep. The room would be pitch black except for the light from the moon in the eerie blue-black sky. Outside my window, a small screech would sound, and this is when I would close my eyes and wish for the safe haven my blanket oh so kindly provided night after night. My old window would slowly squeal open; my body trembled beneath the thin blanket, my hands gripped tight on the edges. The only sound that reverberated around the room was my slow, fearful breathing. Then, the blanket would be ripped from my body, leaving me exposed to the suddenly frigid room. He stood high above me, eyes yellow and black like rotting teeth peering deep into my wide sky blue. Those eyes studied me, and my eyes couldn't look away from his face. I took in every detail. The way his black skin gave way to black bumps that slowly got smaller as they spread out over his sunken cheeks and faded out on his neck, giving way to a sickly grey color. Where his nose should have been instead was what looked like a deep cut, the skin peeling back to reveal pure white.

"Breathe," his voice was deep and rough like he had been coughing his entire life. I stared at his mouth, the most horrifying thing about him. Thin, cracked white lips stretched from temple to temple. When he opened it to speak, there was just a black abyss. He tore his gaze from my eyes to search my face. A thin, grey hand came to my cheeks, a long finger extended and slid down my jaw line and over my still lips. It was only when he let out a throaty laugh that I breathed out heavily and continued to breathe sporadically so long as his hand stayed near me, fingers playing on my lips. In the other room, my parents turned over in bed and the creak of the bed startled him. His head turned fast toward the sound, his body moved in the other direction, his long black robe flowing behind him. In one swift motion, he was gone.

This would occur almost every night until I was twelve. Then, it stopped. He never came again. Even though my window stayed shut every night, I still feared the dark. What if he lingered just beyond the edge of my bed? What if he was waiting until I turned off my light to slither out from under my bed? The 'what if's' scared me more than the thought of him coming back. I almost wished him back. Almost.

Halloween 2014 rolled around and I was twenty-one. It was my first official Halloween where I could legally drink. There was no paranoia to keep me from getting smashed, the cops couldn't stop me this year. My friend David smiled and hugged me when I walked into his yard and screamed over the music and people. I couldn't hear him, so I just laughed and smiled.

"Yay!" I read his lips, he smiled wider and danced, then handed me a shot. Someone else I hadn't seen in a long time did the same. Shot. Then some other people came over. Shot. Shot. Shot. By the end of the night, I could barely see straight. The clock read four in the morning, I think. Part of me remembers telling David I had to go, but then the other part isn't sure if I said anything to anyone. Maybe I just stumbled out of his yard and started walking home, completely ready for bed. A few blocks from his house, the streets became quiet. The gentle humming of crickets and the light blow of wind orchestrated in the dark, but it was just the click clack of my high heels on the cement that was human. My breath formed in front of my face, the brisk afternoon turned into a cold night, but I could barely tell, my body warm from the alcohol. The street lights were very evenly spaced; I would pass under one every few minutes and see my feet take unnatural steps that felt completely natural. It was the sixth or seventh light that I noticed another puff of breath forming close to my cheek.

No breathing. No footsteps. No shadow. Just puffs of cold I now felt steadily hitting my shoulder. My feet instinctively started to move faster, but my blood was too infused with vodka and rum to move anywhere fast. My body hit the ground hard; my palms smacked the cold concrete with a loud, sharp whack. The thin stockings that donned my legs ripped at the knee as I pulled myself forward and leaned on my hip. I closed my eyes then shook my head to clear the blur that took over my vision and wiped my hands on my cheap costume, the small stones making barely audible taps as they hit the ground. Tap, tap, tap.

"Breathe," that rough, deep voice shattered the numbness of the alcohol and instead replaced it with each limb feeling heavy, unable to move from the frigid sidewalk. Those same rotting eyes looked me over, his white lips twitched as he stepped closer, extending that thin hand toward my face.

"It's just a dream. Wake up. Wake. Up," I repeated over and over, nothing more than a whisper escaped my lips as his nails, longer than before, scraped up my neck and over my chin to my lips. He began to laugh again just like he had all those years ago. I closed my eyes tight and spoke faster, "Wake up!"

"You will never be rid of me, I am not a dream," his tone low and rocky. His boney fingers masked my cheek with the palm of his hand on my chin and his thumb across my other cheek, he squeezed tight. "I can finally have you all for myself," he whispered. His fingernails dug into my cheeks as he clenched my face and cut deep into my skin. He lifted me hard from the ground, yanked me from the cold earth and high into the breeze. My hands gripped at his, my fingers tried to pull him from my face. "It will be the perfect addition. My only regret is how long it took me to get you." Dark red blood dripped from the deep wounds where his nails tore into my skin and contrasted against the grey of his hands. He studied my face in silence.

"I have nothing for you," my voice was low, I was terrified.

"Oh, but I only need three things," he looked deep into my eyes again, "those meaningful eyes, those luscious lips, and these precious cheeks," he laughed, a more menacing laugh than before. His eyes squinted as he laughed, the black tunnel that was his throat never ended. His other hand, with fingers that were almost only bone, lifted next to my face. He pushed two fingers together and snapped one hard, loud snap. From the dark, a smaller figure in a dirty white robe slowly made its way toward us. It took its place next to him and sighed before dropping the robe. The face was just a forehead and a nose; black holes surrounded the bones and light skin that was there. "Thank you," he smiled before he put his other hand around my neck and squeezed. My feet kicked for a few seconds, but the sickening crack stopped them dead.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Shannon Yingst is a college student with big dreams. Growing up in Southern New Jersey, she never thought that life would change much. Upon attending Monmouth University in the glamour of a rich town, she wanted more. Now a senior in college, she is working towards being the next big thing in writing. She plans to make a lot of money for her shoe addiction.

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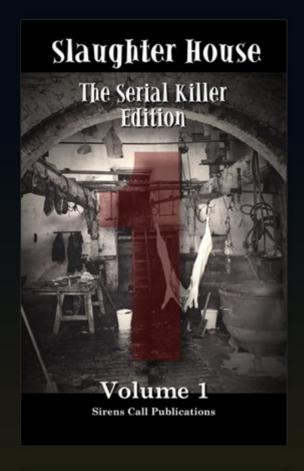
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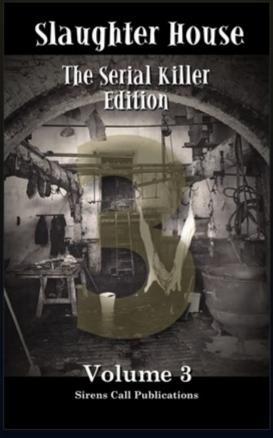


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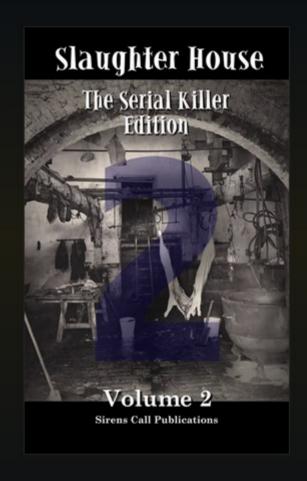
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Gus Nina D'Arcangela

Muttering to himself as he always does, ole Gus shuffled to the basement door, pulled it open, and carefully descended the barely lit stairs. Once in the subterranean cavern – as he liked to imagine it – he began searching the dusty shelves for boxes marked 'Halloween' in Ester's neat, tidy handwriting. God rest her soul. Given what a pain in the ass his wife had been in life, he'd never thought he would miss her nagging so much now that she was gone. Oh well, you have to go on, can't dwell on the past. That's the way he'd always lived his life, no reason to go changing now. If he could just get the damned Priest from their church to stop coming by, he could finally watch his game shows in peace. To get a little extra change on the plate each weekend, that old coot would do just about anything. Gus couldn't see any other reason why the man would keep coming by the house to console him; always bringing casseroles, and baked this, or homemade that from strange women Gus had never even met. Yup, it had to be that Sunday Salvation Savings account he kept making deposits into. No other reason for it. She'd been dead for, Christ – what was it, six or seven weeks by now. Treating him like a lost mute-child found wandering the streets was getting to be a bit much! These people just didn't know how to keep to themselves and stop meddling in his affairs. But at least he was eating well. Ester, God rest her soul, was a fair looking woman with many fine qualities, but cooking wasn't one of them. Nope. She must have been looking the other way when that train went whistling by. Oh well, that book was closed, no point in flipping through the pages.

Rooting around the musty shelves in the dim light, Gus finally came across what looked like the right boxes. 'Course, they were behind the 'X-Mass' boxes; now he'd have to move those first. Speaking of 'X-Mass', that was something he'd always wondered... Why spell it with two S's on the end? Christmas was spelt with one S, and he couldn't see the Arch Diocese endorsing X-Priests, like X-Men, so X-Masses had to be out of the question. Now that would be a service he wouldn't mind paying to attend – hell, they could charge admission. Those money grubbing, wafer toting, alcohol peddling Men of the Cloth zipping around with special powers... that would be a show! What, no change for the plate? Father Laser Eye, incinerate that cheap son-of-a-bitch who came to service empty handed. Zap! Ha! Ahhh, well, it would probably be more like Father Lazy Eye with those clowns, anyway. Speaking of clowns, if he didn't stop imagining The Flying Priest-capades in his head, he'd never get the lawn set up for tomorrow night. And Ester, God rest her soul, wouldn't have that at her home. Nope. Better get back to gettin' to it.

Finally, after clearing the 'X-Mass' boxes out of the way, and pulling down the Halloween decorations that had amassed over the years (get it, A-Massed?) – ha! He really should have been in show biz; his talents were wasted in the mill all those years... Anyway, after moving the boxes around and getting the right ones out, he'd need to get a move on it if he was finally going to get back at those little shits for the years of fucking with his Ester's, God rest her soul, lawn.

A few hours later, he'd managed to drag all the boxes and loose pieces of seasonal ornamentation up from the basement and out onto the front porch. Looking around at the leaves cluttering the lawn, Gus figured there was no sense in raking them, they only added to the ambiance of the festival. Plus his back was way too sore for that kind of manual labor, especially considering what was still to come. Yup. Ester, God rest her soul, was going to be proud of his efforts this year; and whether she was too kind-hearted or lady-like to admit it, she'd enjoy the vengeance he had planned for those crap-faced teenagers. Ha! Well, time to break out the cob-webbing, and get the decorating over with.

Gus worked long into the night, waving to passers-by as they called out a hello, taking a break only to sit and eat the latest dish of whatever you call that stuff the Priest brought by. To any and all watching, it seemed the kindly old widower was going about making his home as inviting as he could for the pip-squeaks who would come mooching for candy tomorrow night. Sometime around 10:30 pm, he placed the final prop in its honored and very conspicuous place. It was the most realistic, most expensive severed head he and Ester, God rest her soul, had collected. It was really a bit too pricey for them, but from the moment she saw it, she simply wouldn't leave the store without it. He'd spent the last several years sitting up awake on All Hallow's Eve just to protect that one prop from the neighborhood vandals. They're just kids having fun, Ester, God rest her soul, would always say. Kids, my ass, he always thought. Lighting his last cigarette before heading inside to wash up and sleep for a few hours, Gus wondered just how much fun they'd be having this year. After a few drags, he flicked the butt onto his neighbor's lawn, picked up the prized latex head, and trudged inside to catch a little shut-eye.

At 2:00 am, his alarm clock sounded. After splashing cold water on his face and shaking off the sandman, Gus got down to the real business of this year's decorating. Collecting his shovel and pickaxe from the shed out back, he shambled his way around to the front lawn. He might be an old geezer, but years of working in the mill hardened him into something much different than most people thought. He was a smart man, one who knew how to foster good will and empathy, but one who also knew when it was time to use his strengths to his advantage. Making his way to the spot where the prized head would sit later that evening, he tossed down the shovel and began breaking up the dirt on his front lawn. By 4:30 am, he had a man sized vertical hole dug in just the right spot. He'd wheeled all the loose dirt – minus a few shovelfuls that he used to camouflage the 3ft by 2ft board masking the opening he'd just created – to the back and blended it into his freshly turned garden soil so it wouldn't look suspicious. Returning to the front once more, he gathered and scattered handfuls of leaves around to hide his handiwork. Back inside, he made his way to the shower, cleaned himself up, then cooked a hearty breakfast of poached eggs, instant grits, bacon, maple sausage links, and six slices of toast. Just like Ester, God rest her soul, used to make... well, maybe a little better, but don't tell her that.

Sitting out on his front porch that afternoon and evening, Gus dutifully rewarded all the little children with their hands held out begging for candy. As the night wore on, he was sure to keep an eye on that ghoulish head, and all the little bastards who had their eye on it, too. He knew that one of them would come back and make a play for it well after everyone was asleep. With all the wee ones home by 9:00 pm, it was just a matter of waiting the right amount of time. By 11:30 pm, Gus had been alone on his porch for an hour and a half without seeing another soul. He figured now was as good a time as any. Giggling to himself and saying a silent prayer that Ester, God rest her soul, was watching, he began his own Halloween fun! Tucking the latex head inside the house, he slid the board covering the hole out of the way and tossed it under the porch, hiding the evidence of his deceit among the other debris stored there. Sitting down on the lawn, Gus dangled his legs over the opening for just a moment before he shimmied his way into the ground. Having left one arm free, he scooped the loose dirt and leaves that had concealed the board onto his broad shoulders, then worked his arm into the dirt as well. Buried up to his neck, Gus stood in the tight confines of the vertical grave he'd dug earlier and waited. It didn't take long.

Judging it to be just past 12:30 am, he heard a rustling sound, and the drunken whispers of the aforementioned idiots approaching. Holding dead still, eyes closed, he waited and listened.

"Damn man, it looks so real!"

"Of course it looks real, dick-head, that's why its such a great grab for this year's scavenger hunt. Plus that pain-in-the-ass isn't sitting on the porch guarding it like he usually is."

"Show some respect, man. The dude just lost his wife. My dad comes by here with food and shit from the church cronies like every night."

"Yeah, I'm sure he does it out of respect. He's just hoping the old fuck leaves his money to the parish."

"Whatever, asshole. Just grab it so we can get the hell out of here before someone sees us."

The sound of footsteps grew closer as the leaves crunched in his ears. Gus felt the warmth of the little bastard's hands nearly touching him.

"You sure the coast is clear?"

"Yeah, man. Just hurry the fuck up and grab it!"

Sensing the impending hands closing around his head, Gus's eyes shot open as quickly as his jaw. He'd taken the time to file his teeth to razor sharp points while he'd waited inside. In one fluid motion, he turned and snapped his mouth closed on the arm of the fuck-wad trying to steal his head. His teeth sliced clean through fabric and muscles, and as soon as the kid yanked backward, his forearm detached at the elbow. They all started to scream like the little piss-ants they were. Blood was spurting everywhere, making Gus's head really look like the prop. As the teens ran screaming for their lives, Gus spit the arm out toward the bushes. Cackling with maniacal laughter, shreds of fabric and gristle still clinging to his teeth, Gus shouted, "See Ester, God rest your soul, that's the perfect prop to finish off our display!"

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 co-owner of Sirens Call Publications, a member of the writing group Pen of the Damned, and the owner and resident anarchist of Dark Angel Photography.

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Blog: <u>Sotet Angyal</u>, <u>The Dark Angel</u>

Prophetic Signage John H. Dromey

Vincent punched in a new customer's 'call after sundown' phone number.

"Hello?"

"The Postal Service, those guys that wear brown, and their competitors all refuse to deliver to New Transylvania," Vincent said.

"Why?"

"I used clear plastic to shrink wrap the signs you ordered. The delivery people could read the ones on top: 'Curb Your Werewolf,' 'Shape Shifter Crossing' and 'Don't Feed the Zombies.'"

"Bring the signs yourself. I'll pay extra."

"Are the warnings for real?"

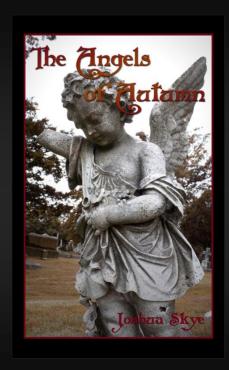
"No. They're for a Halloween theme park."

Vincent went. It was a one-way trip. His customer had lied through his teeth... his fangs, actually.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri. He's had short fiction published in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Black Denim Lit, Gumshoe Review, Plan B Magazine, Plasma Frequency Magazine,* and elsewhere, as well as in a number of anthologies, including *Now I Lay Me Down to Reap* (Sirens Call Publications, 2012).

The Angels of Autumn

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The Patch Beyond the Hill David D. Pagan

"I'm telling you it did happen, and right down there," Eric said, as he pointed at the patch. "They found the body the day after Halloween." Eric paused and lowered his hand. "But that wasn't the worst part." He looked directly at Joey, his eyes growing wider with each word spoken. "His head was gone ... ripped right off his body. And they never did find it."

Eric hopped off his green Sting-Ray bike, swiped its kickstand, and let the two-wheeler balance itself precariously near the edge of a steep slope overlooking the Hawes Farm pumpkin patch. Joey, a few months shy of Eric's fourteen years, clumsily pulled himself off his Schwinn ten-speed. He parked his bike next to Eric's then stood beside the only friend he'd made since moving to town in September. A chilly breeze picked up and swirled around the two boys.

"His name was Danny Palmer," Eric whispered, as if trying to keep a secret. "He lived down the street from me, in your..."

Eric paused and looked at Joey, his eyes vacant, as if still peering over the hill.

"In my what?" Joey asked.

Eric turned away and looked out over the patch. Joey grabbed his friend and whipped him around. Eric appeared puzzled for a moment, then angry. Finally, he pushed Joey's hands off, shoved him away and started laughing.

"Your house. He lived in your house," Eric finished, chuckling. "What? Are you afraid now?"

"No, but why didn't you tell me about that before?" Joey asked.

"I don't know," Eric replied nonchalantly. "I guess I just didn't think about it until now."

"Well, how'd it happen?" Joey asked, feigning confidence. Eric knew better, though.

"Nobody knows for sure. All I know is that Danny's parents came by my house on Halloween night three years ago because he hadn't come home from trick-or-treating."

"And," Joey prodded.

"And nothing," Eric added. "Danny just never came back to school. It wasn't until a few days later that the stories started going around, about how he'd been killed and all."

Eric grinned at Joey for a moment then darted over the edge and disappeared down the hill. Joey scrambled over the side just behind Eric and slid down the incline. Near the bottom, his arms pinwheeling to keep balanced, he finally fell in a heap and rolled the rest of the way down. Engulfed in a cloud of dust, he picked himself up and coughed his way to Eric, who stood, hands on his hips, staring into a sea of green and orange.

Joey smacked the remainder of the dirt off his jeans. "So this is where it happened, huh?" Eric ignored him and took a step forward, his sneakers disappearing into the thick, green foliage. He turned to Joey. "C'mon, let's go."

"Go where?"

"Out there, where they found him."

Eric ran out into the patch. Joey followed, but slowly, like a man walking to his execution. When he finally reached his friend, his eyes widened even before Eric spoke.

"There it is," Eric said flatly as he pointed to where vines had pulled away, withered, and turned brown. Blackened husks of dead pumpkins still clung to the lifeless branches. Joey's mouth fell open when he saw the shape of a small body, perfectly cut from the patch as if with a cookie cutter. But this mold had a fatal flaw: there was no head.

"Whoa," Joey whispered, his eyes glued to the form left by Danny Palmer's remains. He could almost imagine the headless body lying out here on that dark Halloween night. The thought of leaving crossed his mind.

"I told you so," Eric said. "And the rest of it's true, too, I'll bet. Even though I've never seen it."

Danny Palmer had come back the next Halloween, at least that's how the story went according to Eric. No one was sure anymore who'd started it or who'd seen him; it was always the friend of a friend who'd been there and witnessed the resurrection of the headless body. But the tale was always the same, no matter who was telling it. Around and around the pumpkin patch the body would float, the wind carrying echoes of a lonely little boy's cry for help that would never be answered.

Joey took a step backward. His legs felt like heavy weights dragging through knee-high water. Eric turned to find Joey standing several feet behind him.

"Oh brother. What are you doing?"

"I don't know," Joey replied, unable to take his eyes off what had been left by Danny's body. "But why don't we go now, okay?"

Eric shook his head, annoyed at what a wimp his friend had turned into. "Fine, let's go," he sighed, then trudged through the growth and right past Joey, who waited but a second to turn and follow closely behind him until they reached their bikes.

"You still want to do it, don't you?" Eric asked as he straddled his Sting-Ray. His confidence in Joey had fallen considerably in the last few minutes, and now he wasn't at all sure whether he would come with him. Joey grabbed the handle bars, kicked the side stand and swung his leg over his bike.

"Gee, I don't know, Eric. Aren't we going trick-or-treating and stuff?"

"Sure. But we'll still have time to come out here after we finish. That is unless you're chicken."

Eric looked away as he used the oldest trick in the book, but it was one that almost never failed and probably never would. Joey took the bait.

"I'm not chicken, Eric. I just don't want to miss out on trick-or-treating just to come out here and stare at a stupid ol' pumpkin patch."

"Sure," Eric said casually, pulling the line tight and sinking the hook.

"Well, I'm not. And I don't care what you say, either."

"So are you coming with me or not?" Eric asked once more, assured now of the answer.

"Yeah, I will," Joey replied defiantly, unwilling to admit to himself he'd just been snowed.

"All right, Joey," Eric said, smiling. "I'll come over to your house tomorrow when it starts getting dark. After we do some trick-or-treating, we'll come back out here. Then you'll see."

Joey crested the hill and flew down Old Miller Road. The beam from his small headlight was all that broke the utter darkness. He squinted to see where he was going, the overcast sky turning what little moonlight there was into a gray hue that more muddled his vision than anything else. He pressed gently on the hand brake as he neared where the pavement gave way to a narrow, bumpy trail.

Eric scooted by Joey on his Sting-Ray, always the daredevil. He turned and grinned impishly at Joey from within black makeup smeared over the bottom of his face. Atop his head was a black felt hat pulled low on his brow to keep it from blowing away. His holy jeans completed what Joey'd thought was a convincing homemade bum costume. He flew across the edge of the pavement and bounded across the dirt, with Joey close behind.

After a mile of winding their way through a crooked, treelined path, they finally emerged into a clearing the size of a football field. When Eric finally hit his brakes, his rear wheel skidded forward until he stopped just shy of and parallel to the slope overlooking the patch. Joey squeezed both handbrakes and slid to within inches of his friend. Eric jumped from his bike, hastily leaned it on its stand, and took off down the hillside. Joey scrambled off his Schwinn then headed after his friend. As he stepped up behind Eric, who was squatting at the edge of the pumpkin patch, he shivered in the cold wind despite his dark blue mechanic overalls, just like those worn by Michael Myer.

"Get down," Eric whispered. "You don't want it to see you, do you?"

Joey dropped down flat, face planting in the dirt.

"Is it there?" he whispered, the words shaking as they left his lips.

"No, stupid. I just don't want you standing there gawking, 'cuz if it finds you then it finds me. Get it?"

"Oh," was all Joey could manage at the moment. Finally mustering some courage, he pushed himself up and crouched behind Eric. The patch didn't look the same as it did yesterday, the moonlight seeping through the wispy clouds turning it into a black soup punctuated with glowing silver circles. It was creepy, and Joey no longer cared if he was chicken.

"I want to go home now, Eric. Let's go, all right?"

"Shhhh!" Eric shot back. "I think I hear something."

Rustling of vines.

Joey trembled as he glanced at Eric, who remained motionless. A sound, like someone crawling through the

patch. And it was coming closer. A lilting, distant cry, and words as faint as the breeze.

I see you... Eric. I see you... Joey.

Eric bolted to his feet and was gone, but Joey froze, unable to pull himself away. The dusty patter of his friend's feet faded into the night. And there he remained, like a statue.

I'm glad you stayed. I've been so lonely here all by myself. And you have just what I need.

Joey jumped, then fell backward. He saw a small, headless body hovering in the air. Like a balloon drifting against the wind, the figure inched toward him. As it approached, Joey finally tried to scramble away, his arms scooping first dirt then cold vines as he grasped at anything he could find. Further into the patch he went, hands swiping and ripping at branches, heels digging into the earth, until he hit something hard.

A hollow thunk.

Joey turned. A huge pumpkin, three feet across, blocked his path. He gasped as a ghastly face grew upon the husk. Black, circular eyes popped open, then a triangle nose and a wide, grinning mouth with sharp pointed teeth. It leered at him as it sat on the ground, just inches from his face. A yellow light flickered on, lighting up the features as if a wind whipped candle burned inside. The smell of burnt pumpkin wafted through the air.

Its eyes blinked, the light winking off and back on again. The mouth opened wider, its spiky teeth growing into long fangs. Joey flew up from the ground and stepped backward, but was stopped by what felt like ice-cold jello wrapping itself around him in a vice-like grip. He couldn't move.

The pumpkin, grinning and winking, rose from the ground, ripping from its vine with a snap. It floated through the air until again it was near Joey's face. It observed the scared little boy for a moment, then rose further until it was directly over him. Before Joey could look, there was a blow to the top of his head he thought sure would break his neck. He blacked out for a moment, then awoke to a world as seen through circles. His face began to burn and blister, as if he'd been thrown into a furnace.

The pumpkin shell collapsed onto Joey's head and squeezed tightly around his neck. It dug into his skin then began spinning, slowly at first. Joey watched as the circular eyes drifted to the left and then reappeared on the right. Faster and faster they went, each revolution bringing more agony. He screamed, and would have continued screaming, had his head not finally been neatly severed. Joey died in a spinning haze, his last memory that of burnt, rotten pumpkin and a child's voice asking him to play.

Eric threw his bike onto the front porch, ran into his house, and flew up the stairs to his room. He leaped into his bed and threw the covers up and over his head. Later, exactly how long he wasn't sure, Eric heard a rapping on the front door of his house. Somehow, he'd expected it, and it sounded all too familiar, as if living a dream dreamt long ago.

Screams. Shrieks of the dying. Then silence.

Tapping on his bedroom door.

Eric peeked from beneath his blankets. A whisper.

Why did you leave me?

From the hallway, the wind began blowing. A dreadful wail called to him.

Why did you leave me, Eric? Why?

The door suddenly caved inward. Eric huddled against his headboard as two figures floated in. On the left, Joey's head sat atop a body draped in the ragged remnants of an old Halloween costume that had, over the years, decayed into a ghoulish death shroud. What his friend had become smiled at Eric, which made it all the worse. Joey's head spoke, its lips moving in slow motion and out of synch with the words Eric heard.

We only want to play, Eric. Joey and I only want to play. But you must come with us to the patch. Then you can be like us, and we can play forever.

"No. I don't want to go. I don't want to play. Just leave me alone." Eric stammered. "Just go away."

The pumpkin head's glowing smile flattened into a dark line, its eyes and nose shining even brighter. Atop Joey's body, it glided across the floor, until it stopped directly next to the side of the bed. It leaned over and peered closely at

Eric. The pumpkin's eyes widened still further as its mouth gaped open, then a bone-jarring roar of childish laughter. Its fiery breath burned Eric's skin, and he could smell the pumpkin flames. Then it spoke to him, light peeping out with each movement of the lipless mouth.

What's the matter, Eric? You chicken?

The pumpkin head giggled then separated from Joey's neck with a pop. It began spinning as it slowly rose into the air, leaving nothing but a blood clotted stump between Joey's shoulders. On its way to bringing along a friend, the grinning pumpkin hovered above a breathless Eric, who never even had the chance to utter the scream that welled up inside.

Eric's eyes flickered opened. He lay still and quiet for a moment, then wept uncontrollably. Sobs of hopelessness eventually gave way to simple tears, then a deep breath and a sigh. He sat upright and looked about. Though it was still mostly dark, enough sunlight poured through the window shade to illuminate the familiar surroundings of his bedroom. There were several knocks on his door.

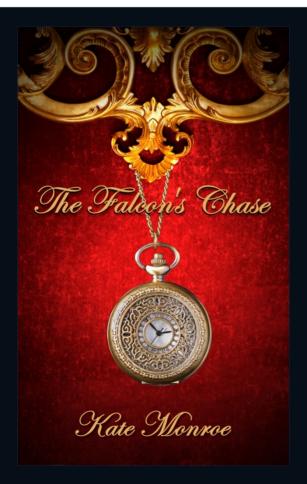
"Eric, time for school," his mother reminded him from the other side.

It was late September, he knew that now, and he knew he would meet a new friend soon. He rolled out of bed and wandered through his normal morning routine. By the time he left for school, it was just another day. And Halloween was just around the corner.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Dave lives in northern California with his wife. By day, he is a telecommuter working full-time as a systems software programmer for a large corporation. In the evening, he writes horror/dark fiction novels and short stories. Late into the night, he can sometimes be found playing survival horror and FPS video games.

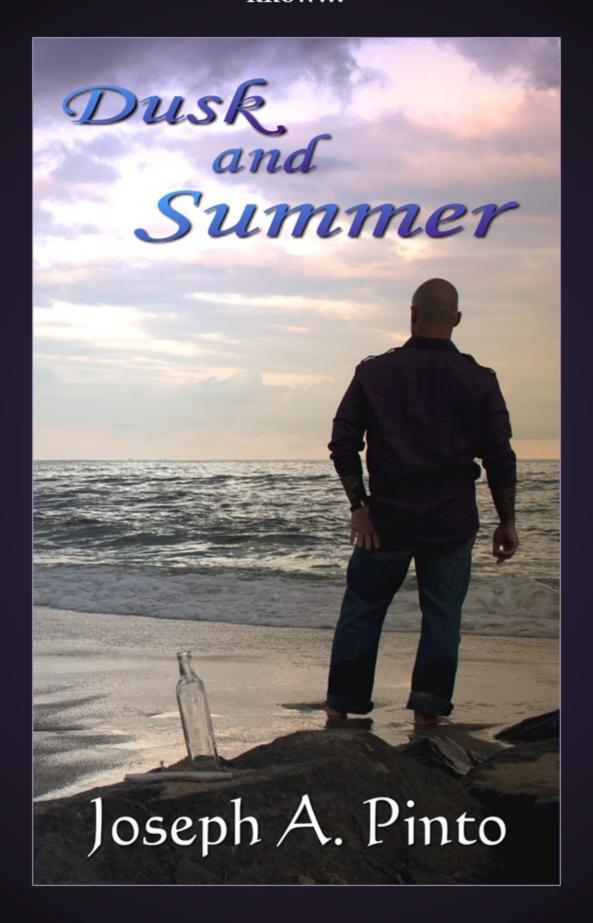
Twitter: @d pagan

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The Falcon's ___Chase

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo and iTunes Does Heaven await beneath the waves? One man needs to know...



Available on Amazon, CreateSpace and Smashwords

Soulfully Sweet Kameryn James

Footsteps stomping excitedly onto the porch alerted Lena before the doorbell chimed again. She fluffed the white plume on her pirate hat and scooped up the bowl of candy. She put on a bright smile to greet the small gang of costumed children who held out orange bags in anticipation.

"Trick or treat!" rang the greeting.

Lena gave them a comment on their costumes loud enough for the parents standing watch a few feet behind them to hear. She then gave them a polite wave before shutting the door.

With classic Halloween music playing in the background, Lena cheerfully gave away sweets for each group of trick-or-treaters. The barrage of superheroes, zombies, and fairy princesses thanking her for candy took her mind off the recently finalized, yet messy divorce.

The last slit of sunlight had just vanished below the horizon when the doorbell clanged without the warning of footsteps or excited voices and giggles. Lena swung open the door to see a single child that came up to her thighs. A large black cloak draped over his frame, looking as if he were wearing an older sibling's costume that was way too big. Centered in the hood was a silver, expressionless mask. Square black eyes stared back at her. The child simply stood there, canopied by the decorative spider webs that stretched along the porch railings and posts.

Lena glanced around her small front yard. No parents, or anyone else, accompanied this child.

"Sweetheart, where are your parents?" she asked.

No answer.

The cape shifted gently when the little one held out his gloved left hand toward her.

"No bag either, huh?"

The masked face tilted to one side.

Lena's brows furrowed. She guickly set two pieces of chocolate into the tiny hand.

"Happy Halloween!" she stated with a forced smile. She closed the door and walked away, shaking her head.

The darkening night brought a few teen-agers and a couple of tired children fighting exhaustion in hopes of more candy. Lena considered settling in to watch some cheesy cult classic horror movie. She reached for the television remote, yet the doorbell ding-donged and drew her away.

Lena opened the door, holding the bowl with diminishing candy supply. Her smile faltered when seeing the familiar child with the silver mask. She huffed, trying to stifle her impatience and looked around again for parents or older siblings. No one.

"I'm pretty sure you've been here already tonight, Sweetheart," she said.

No reply.

I'll give you a couple more pieces just this once, okay? Then you should head home. It's getting late," Lena said. She placed a bubble gum filled lollipop and another chocolate into the chubby outstretched hand.

The mask tilted downward as if gazing down at the candy. The fingers closed around the sweets and popped open. The palm was empty. Leanne gasped lightly and stepped back. The blank face then fixed on her.

Words flowed from under the mask, deep and intense.

"Gummies and chocolates are a fine treat,

but a soul is far more sweet."

"What?" Lena whispered. "Good bye." She nearly slammed the door.

The doorbell rang again. Lena threw the door open, threatening to call the police if he does not leave. But no one stood in the entrance. Her boots thudded onto the wooden porch when she carefully stepped out, standing under the light. Her glaring eyes searched her yard area and onto the dark sidewalk. She listened to distant laughter and calls of trick-or-treaters. Yet her little trickster was not in sight.

Gripping the candy bowl tensely, she mumbled curses under her breath and harshly shut her front door, then locked it. Lena hurried through the den, around her small dining table, and into the kitchen to the back door and checked the area through the window. Still no sign of the little creepster. She blew out a sigh of relief, hoping that she had evaded whatever trick the short monster had in mind.

Lena thumbed through the few pieces of candy remaining in the bowl and headed back to her den, thinking it was time to enjoy that cheesy old cult classic horror movie while munching on chocolates.

Yet she skidded to a startled halt. The bowl slipped from her grasp, and candy scattered about her feet.

The runty cloaked figure stood a couple of feet inside the threshold. The bottoms of his cape folding loosely on her rug, his silver mask staring coldly at her.

"How did you...? Get out of my house!" she yelled, stomping forward. Lena fumbled in a pocket for her cell phone, ready to call the police.

The ebony cape fluttered and snapped as the freakish child dashed out of her sight in a blink. She twisted right and left, but did not spot him in the den. Lena swiveled around to search the kitchen, yet he was not in there either. Her breath came in shaky gasps as a horrid feeling spilled from her head to her toes. She lifted her trembling face upward.

The silver mask loomed above her and the cape slithered along the ceiling.

Lena screamed and ran toward the back door.

Blackness flashed around her, and the caped creeper materialized, blocking her exit. She tried to stop and turn, yet her frantic feet slid away and she fell backward. The sinister cloak stretched out and grabbed her like wicked fingers, and the silver face was upon her with black eyes boring into her. The square mouth leaning in for a terrible kiss. Lena's heart first pounded with terror, then slowed as her tense muscles went limp. Her flesh prickled and cooled, quickly growing frigid, feeling as though her entire self and being escaped through every pore and whispered out through her breath. Her bright blue eyes glazed over with lifeless shadows.

It rose, renewed, content, satisfied, as if full. From behind the metalline face, it considered Lena's listless body briefly, abandoning her on the floor. It stretched not chubby fingers but long slender black dactyls and playfully wrapped them around each piece of scattered candy. It glided into the cozy living area, the cape barely brushing the floor. The entrance swayed open, and the figure swept onto the porch. The door gently shut. It set the bowl of remaining candies down in a welcome manner on the top step. The being drifted into the street, curiously watching a few late night trick-or-treaters, blending in with unsuspecting, disguised ghouls and monsters.

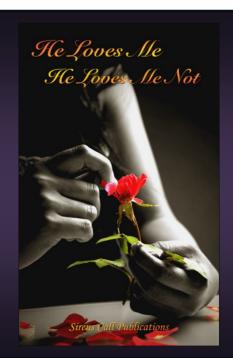
All Hallow's Eve was still very young.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Kameryn James is a Southern woman currently displaced in New England. She has five published short horror stories, and three of them are brought to you by Sirens Call. She has a lot more horror and dark fantasy ideas in her head and scribbled in notebooks throughout her house.

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He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo and iTunes



Silver City Dreaming Maynard Blackoak

A strange pawing at the front door aroused the attention of Elmer Fulch as he sat reposed in his favorite chair watching a classic horror film. His first thought was that his dog had exited the house while he had handed out treats to the last batch of trick-or-treaters. A quick glance at the floor showed his faithful companion sleeping soundly at his feet. Noting the late hour, he was skeptical that any more costumed children would be visiting him for Halloween. Still, it would be Halloween for a couple more hours and it was not out of the norm for teenagers to trick-or-treat after the younger children had returned to their homes.

Arising from his chair, he made his way to the door, listening to the strange pawing sound as it grew louder. Convinced it was teenagers playing a Halloween prank to give him a fright, he chuckled and grinned, and then readied himself to appear horrified at whatever shocking sight he would discover on the other side of the door. Turning the knob, a throaty snarl began accompanying the pawing. Remaining undaunted and confident that all he would discover on his porch were a few mischievous teenagers, he opened the door.

Standing in front of him, he observed a towering creature covered with thick black fur and piercing lavender eyes, resembling some manner of a mutated bear. Its long snout held a pair of powerful jaws that were filled with jagged teeth. Long streams of frothy saliva dripped from its mouth, and formed disgusting pools on the porch. As Elmer studied the creature, he experienced both fear of the monstrous beast and admiration for the painstaking skill with which the costume had been constructed.

"Oh my!" he exclaimed in a mocked frightened tone, "Aren't you the scariest thing I ever saw."

"Now you just wait there for a second while I get my camera. I want to get a picture of you," He instructed, gesturing with his hand for the creature to remain where it stood.

As he made his way toward a nearby desk, he turned back toward the door. "Of course I want to give you an extra special tasty treat too."

Rifling through his desk, searching for his camera, he became aware of the creature's presence directly behind him. Though disconcerting, he remained unafraid, believing the monster was merely the byproduct of someone's vast sewing skills and a horrific imagination. After all, it was still Halloween, a night for frights and tomfoolery. As long as his costumed visitor did not take the role of monster too far, it was all in the name of fun.

His thoughts quickly turned to alarm when a sharp nailed paw came to rest on his shoulder, and began puncturing his skin. A deep and rumbling growl emanated from the gut of the beast, sending goose bumps racing down his spine. Turning his eyes to face the creature, he was struck with a terrifying thought. What if this was not a teenager in costume, but a very real monster?

He pulled away from the creature's grip, causing its talons to rip several cuts in his shoulder. Wincing in pain, Elmer decided to place some distance between him and it. He backed away cautiously. The beast, however, did not comply, instead matching him step for step, remaining directly in his presence.

"If you're just some kid in a costume, now's the time to end this prank," he begged of the creature through pleading eyes, hoping it was merely an extremely well performed hoax.

The monstrous beast regarded him through a menacing expression and continued emitting a guttural rumble. Its eyes began to glow with blood thirst, leaving no question as to its deadly intent. Elmer, having decided the creature was not a teenager in costume, turned, and began running toward the door, but the speed of the beast cut him off before his hand could reach the knob.

With the creature blocking his means of exit, he switched directions, and ran toward the bathroom, hoping to lock himself away from the terrible monster. Once again, before he had reached his objective, the creature had blocked his path of escape. If he were to elude a gruesome death, he reasoned, he would need to employ some type of misdirection. Moving quickly, he feigned a dash toward the front door. Once the creature had committed to blocking that maneuver, he adeptly changed direction, and darted into his bedroom, locking the door behind him.

Believing his bedroom door offered little resistance to the powerful nature of the creature, he moved a chest of drawers and anything else he could find to bolster the strength of the partition that separated him from the monster. As he placed the final heavy item upon the chest of drawers, he felt the impact of the creature throwing itself against the door. Several of the items he had placed upon the chest teetered and fell to the floor. Scrambling to return the fallen items to the top of the chest, he felt another, more forceful impact, as the creature once again hurled itself into the door.

A grim vision of a grisly death appeared in his mind, realizing that the creature's resolve to break through the door would not be deterred by a few items stacked upon a chest of drawers. At best, they would only grant him a few extra minutes. If he were to escape, he would have to be able to hide in a place where the monstrous beast could not find him.

Glancing anxiously around his room, his eyes locked onto a window. Maybe the extra time it takes that thing to get in here will be enough for me to climb out the window, and get away.

Having crawled through the window, Elmer stood outside, deciding which way to run, all the while nervously waiting to hear the sound of the beast crashing through the bedroom door. To his left was his backyard and beyond that a wooded area that would offer many opportunities to hide from the creature. There was one major drawback; he would have to scale the security fence to make it to the woods. Given his age and slightly arthritic joints, he was skeptical of his ability to perform such a feat.

As he glanced to his right, the loud racket of the beast crashing through the bedroom door startled him. Lacking the time to make a proper decision, he began running toward the front yard with the sound of an angry monster tearing through his room. Rounding the corner of his house, he nearly smacked into a young woman.

"I'm sorry," she offered in a sweet voice. "I was so occupied looking at this old neighborhood where I grew up, I wasn't paying attention Maybe you remember..." she began.

"No time for that, missy," Elmer interrupted her with a nervous expression.

He glanced back at the window through which he had just exited with a frightened stare. "There's a terrible monster after me. If we don't get out of here fast, it'll get us both."

She smiled understandingly, and placed a compassionate hand on his arm, as her eyes observed the blood stains on his shirt. "My car is close by. Let me take you to the hospital to get you looked over."

"I don't need a hospital. I...We need to get the law with some big guns out here to shoot that thing before it kills us or someone else," he contended, anxiously scanning the area all around them.

Suddenly, the young woman's face began to change, and then her eyes began to take on a familiar glow Elmer had seen several minutes earlier. He felt a sharp pain in his arm where she had placed her hand. Looking down, he noticed that her once feminine and smooth hand had become a furry paw with sharp talons. Before he could utter a sound, the other paw appeared swiftly, and covered his mouth.

"No. We definitely don't need to bring the cops in on this," she stated in a deep, throaty voice.

"In fact, I insist we keep this a secret between you and me, one that you will take to your grave," She added with a sneer. "Which won't be for very long."

Tossing her head back, a hideous laugh emerged from her lips, as the transformation that had begun to come over her began happening more swiftly.

"Trick-or-treat, Mister Fulch," she cackled in a coarse tone, as the final stages of the transformation were completed.

Doctor Cravits aroused his patient from her sleep with a series of gentle nudges. As she slowly returned to consciousness, he regarded her with a puzzled expression. It was not that it was uncommon for his patients to fall asleep in the dental chair while awaiting him to enter their room, especially since he was running well behind schedule and the hour grew late. Rather, it was the unusually animated manner in which she had slept that had him bewildered. Despite having been in the next room with another patient, he had heard her mumbling and the sound of her movements as if he had been in the room with her.

"That must have been some dream you were having, Lavender. I heard you in the next room," he informed her, beginning to examine her teeth.

A mischievous look fell over her face, as her mind filled with images from her slumber. "I dreamed of being back in my home town of Silver City, Oklahoma for Halloween tonight."

Distracted by something peculiar caught between her teeth, he was only slightly cognizant of her reply. Continuing to probe at the unusual object with a pick, he only offered a meager "uh huh" as a response.

After a short time, he was able to extract the object from her mouth. Holding it in the palm of his gloved hand, he ruminated over it for a time, and then cast another puzzled gaze at her. "This looks like some kind of bone, but I've never seen one like it before."

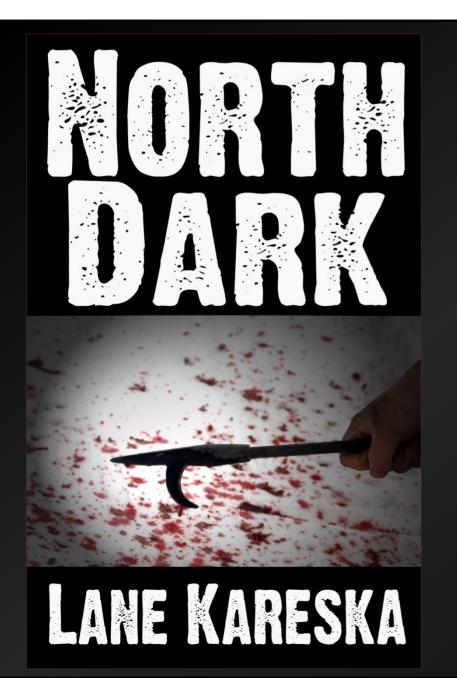
"Oh. It's probably just a sliver of Mister Fulch left over from my dream," she informed him, adopting an innocent guise.

An eerie and guttural laugh erupted from her mouth, taking note of the shock and confusion draping his face. "Trick-or-treat, Doctor!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR – Maynard Blackoak is an author living in Oklahoma. The greatest influences in his writing have been the works of Poe and Dickens. He draws inspiration from the sounds and shadows of the night and processes them through the splintered windmill of his mind to create his tales.

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Trick-or-Treat Trap

Justin Tate

To lure trick-or-treaters, here's what you'll need:
Candy for the young, drugs if they're a teen,
A costume that scares, but isn't too bloodied,
A light show, a crow, and a slot machine.
The slots will distract all parental eyes
While you bait the children further within.
Fill their fat sacks with a sugary prize
And promise boat-loads more, down in the den.
In the den they'll hear the crow and ask "What's that?"
And you'll say, "My pet, would you like to see?"
Adjourn to the dungeon, with some chit-chat,
Then fasten the fools to your machinery.
Round and round, like trained ponies they'll go,
Pushing the cogs and fueling the light show.

Annie May's Halloween Bash

Justin Tate

Annie May is known to put on a show.
They say no one does Halloween better.
But if I were you I don't think I'd go,
Lest you do something wrong to upset her.
Get in the way or prevent her success
And find yourself in a situation most dire,
Last year sweet little Beth critiqued her dress
And soon fell face-first in a roaring fire.
Then there was the mistake of Bernie Scags—
Whose costume was a rude innuendo—
He left the party in black body bags.
There was an 'accident' with a crossbow.
If you do go, keep your temper placid.
Those apples bob in vats full of acid.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Justin Tate's poetry has appeared in multiple literary journals, webzines and anthologies. His works include The Death Sonnets and Morning Sickness.

Twitter: @DeathSonnets

Web Page: https://www.facebook.com/JustinTateAuthor

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A Samhain Lament

C.S. Kane

Shrieking, wailing ghouls,
Attack my dying derma,
Masochistic, monstrous mayhem,
Has resulted from my sloth,
And here I lie in a pit of melancholia,
Infested with multiple Incubi,
Nurturing my own demon.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - C.S. Kane is a dedicated horror author. Her debut novella, SHATTERED, has been released by US publisher DarkFuse. Kane has been enthralled with horror since she was a child. Her bedtime stories were twisted tales and her favourite lullabies were murder ballads. She is based in a village just outside Belfast, Northern Ireland. C.S. Kane is an active member of the online horror community.

Twitter: <u>@CS Kane</u>
Website: http://www.cskane.com/

Broomstick

Timothy C. Hobbs

What magic dust have You weaved in the straw? What blood Varnishes the handle?

Night flier, old crone,
Whose only crime is
To love the dark.
Is that your laughter I hear,
Dancing across the risen moon?

Do I hide from you?
Fear you?
Or ask to attend you and linger
In the shadows of the night
Wrapped in the arms of autumn clouds?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR- Timothy Hobbs' novels *The Pumpkin Seed, Music Box Sonata, Maiden Fair* and novella *The Smell of Ginger* are available from Amazon.com. A collection of his flash and short fiction, *In the Blink of a Wicked* Eye, is due for publication by Sirens Call Publications. A novel, *Down in the Hollow There*, will be published by Angelic Knight Press this November.

Twitter: @TimothyHobbs8

Amazon Link: http://www.amazon.com/Timothy-C.-obbs/e/B00A603SWG/

Scifaiku *DJ Tyrer*

Dead rise from the grave Lifelike spirits not zombies All Hallows Even

Hallowe'en Tanka DJ Tyrer

Tonight Hallowe'en
Veil between life and death thins
Through the darkling hours
Children seeking their reward
Unheeding of true meaning

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing* and has been widely published in anthologies and magazines around the world, most recently in *Amok!* (April Moon Books), *Steampunk Cthulhu* (Chaosium), *Tales of the Dark Arts* (Hazardous Press) and *Cosmic Horror* (Dark Hall Press), as well as *Tigershark* ezine, and in addition, has a novella available on the Kindle, *The Yellow House* (Dynatox Ministries).

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The Witch's House

Lisa Lepovetsky

In daylight it was nothing much but just before dusk, when dew hung delicate prisms from leaves and her crazed windows burnt mad like the eyes of an iguana

the house whispered to us children in a candy-voice, cane-sugar dripping from her sweet words: follow night to my door, little dears, whistle three notes and I'll hear you.

We stumbled closer to hear, palms packed with old sweat-dampened bread, heads huddled close for imagined safety in numbers. Now as adults we parade bravely in the sunlight

but still hear the dangerous lyric hidden in the night wind's vespers circling the frayed edge of town. A saccharine summons is unanswered by whistles still frozen to our lips.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Lisa Lepovetsky earned her MFA in creative writing from Penn State and taught for them and the U. of Pittsburgh for many years. She has fiction and poetry appearing in dozens of magazines, including *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *The Pedestal* and *Cemetery Dance*, as well as many anthologies, such as *Grails*, *Blood Muse* and *Dark Destiny*, to name a few. She also writes and hosts mystery dinner theaters.

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Day of the Dead

T.S. Woolard

The witch stirs boiling blood in the pumpkin.
Ugly imps dance around it, and jump in.
Their toenails scrape against skeleton bones,
And ogres rest upon gigantic stones.

The fire blazes from underneath the side.
Banshees shriek and cackle at those who died.
Vampires suck blood somewhere deep in the woods.
Werewolves howl at the moon, wearing red hoods.

Tombstones shift silently across the ground. The witch smiles at her snarling Hellhound. Gray, decayed hands jut out like a spear. Be careful, the Day of the Dead is here!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - T.S. Woolard lives in North Carolina with his wife and four Jack Russell Terriers. For the latest of his work, look for Cellar Door III: Animals, and his short story collection, Solo Circus, both by jwkfiction, and Floppy Shoes Apocalypse by J. Ellington Ashton Press.

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Dracula

Kyoko M

Keep the Thermostat low
I like it cold
Like the marble of my skin
Or the linoleum of your floor
Don't latch the window
It screws up my mojo
To crouch like an idiot and pick the lock
Your husband is out
You're lonely
You need me
Just a nibble
Your left earlobe
Your soft stomach
Slurp, slurp.
Delicious.

Bloody Mary Kyoko M

Give me your tongue
I'll keep it safe
Slurp your scream
Scrape your lungs
My hands are soft
To touch your neck
It won't hurt, I promise
Breathe deep and count slowly
Lights out, my little ones.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Kyoko M is the author of the bestselling Black Parade book series. She is a graduate from the University of Georgia with a B.A. in English Literature. She has a passion for urban fantasy, science fiction, high fantasy, supernatural, and paranormal works. She is also known for being a sarcastic nerd whose influences include comic books, anime, movies, and various novel series.

Twitter ID: @misskyokom

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ONE PHOTOGRAPH – 200 WORDS ONLY COMPARATIVE FLASH FICTION



EYES

Julianne Snow

All you could see shining out of the identical white masks were their eyes. Cold, dead, almost limpid in their desire to have one follow them into the depths of terror. They'd come into the bank in the middle of the day, flowing in like water from a split container. At first, the patrons thought it was some sort of special Hallowe'en show, the equivalent to carolers around Christmastime. Many of them clasped their hands together and they exclaimed how cute they were.

Then the giggling started. It was quiet a first, almost whisper-like in its intensity. But it soon began to ring clear as a bell. Lilting, almost melodic, and high-pitched—more than a little creepy. Patrons felt uneasy, either clutching their purses closer to their bodies or folding their arms akimbo to ward off the icy feeling that now permeated the air. Now, no one made eye contact with the wee ones, trying their hardest to ignore the strange tableau completely. But they would not be ignored, each one coming to stand directly in front of a customer, their dark eyes probing for something. Then it was over and they were gone, leaving something strange in their wake.

THAT TIME AGAIN

Gloria Bobrowicz

It's that night once again, October 31st. My friends and I are off to get our stash of candy. We know all the houses that give out the largest chocolate bars and the other good stuff. No lollipops for our crew. We all donned our masks and grabbed our empty pillowcases. Trudging along with our cool costumes, we ventured out on our 'best streets' to trick-or-treat. The town only allows a couple of hours, so we need to be quick. No goofing around!

After a good haul and our pillowcases full, we headed to the local 'haunted house'. We heard that this house provides the best candy AND scares the heck out of you. As we approached the 'haunted house', scary music was playing, lights were flashing and many ghouls walked around outside. My friends and I were scared but determined to make it through the 'haunted house'. We stayed close together, peering through our masks, holding hands for strength in numbers and literally tip toed through the maze of scary stuff. Making it through was a big relief, some of us being rewarded with a large Hersey Bar and others with huge Snickers or Mars bars as our prize.

CLASS PROJECT Nina D'Arcangela

A class project, how neat, thought the children – what fun we'll have making masks to Trick-or-Treat! The scissors too sharp, the staples too biting, the matron of the classroom meticulously crafts each coveted headdress. She snips, and she clips; she rounds the corners just so, as they watched in rapt fascination awaiting their turn. The ringing of the bell, other children screeching, running about in the corridor – it is Halloween after all. Her dead stare holds them still, scissors no longer moving. The echo of the last door slamming; quiet once more, she finishes the final piece. "Line up children; we're going someplace special," she whispers with a false smile, "to the basement."

Fear twists their little faces, twists them so that they resembled him. Her shame burning, she helps each don their little ghostly shroud; a rainbow of hues. The trusting glint of childish glee returns, tugs at her heartstrings. *Don't all children deserve a treat on this night*? Why should hers be any different; but then again, he was – different. She ushers them down the stairs, into a dank room. As she locks the door, she begins to hear the screams, she murmurs, "Happy Halloween, my sweet boy."

Passing Souls Miranda Kate

Father Robert shivered as he shuffled under his robes to find the key to the vestry door. He wasn't keen on being at the church late at night, and tonight was noisier than usual with it being the eve of All Hallows.

Besides the normal rush of the wind through the trees in the graveyard, there was the sound of children's voices and the rustle of bags echoing down the street, which was alive with the activity trick or treating.

He pushed the door open and stepped inside, thinking about the views expressed by some of his parishioners about such activities. They said it wasn't right; that it was inciting evil doings, blasphemous, even going against everything the church stood for, but Father Robert didn't agree. On the whole he thought it was good for people to enjoy a celebration – even one about death. It was good to take a light-hearted approach, particularly for the children in today's world, when death and killing were so pervasive.

For him personally, death had tried a couple of times, but he's refused to let it take him. He'd side-stepped it deftly, while those around him had succumbed, losing their way entirely on their mission to find the ultimate high. In the end it's what had led him to his calling, as he sought sanctuary in a place that would keep his demons at bay. And he rejoiced in the idea of lighting the way for the others; it eased his guilt.

As he prepared the hymn books, he smiled as he thought about the children he'd seen out tonight. Most of them were dressed as their favourite superhero or film star, rather than ghosts or other creatures of the night, so he didn't really see what all the fuss was about.

He took the pile of hymn books into the nave, flicking down the row of switches with an elbow. When the light revealed a group of people seated in the front rows, their heads bowed in prayer, he was momentarily startled, until he realised they were probably expecting a midnight service.

"I'm sorry to disappoint, but there's no service tonight." He called out. "You're more than welcome to return in the morning, when we open the doors for the 9 o'clock service."

There was no response, and Father Robert froze as his words came back to him. If they weren't open now, how did these people get in?

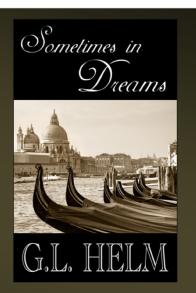
Cold air prickled his arms, but he refused to heed his rigid legs, which wanted to lock in place. He walked to the alter, turning to look up at Christ's image as he genuflected, hearing the shuffling of feet behind him. Then he crossed himself muttering prayers for salvation as they gathered. He shut his eyes tight and clasped his hands, as he felt theirs on him, and he knew that tonight he wasn't going to be able to trick death again. It was time for him to join them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Miranda Kate adores writing Flash Fiction. Primarily a novel writer, flash brings out her darker side, allowing the disturbing elements to bubble and surface. Whether a side effect from years of reading horror, or just how she sees the world, she's not quite sure, but she is thoroughly enjoying it.

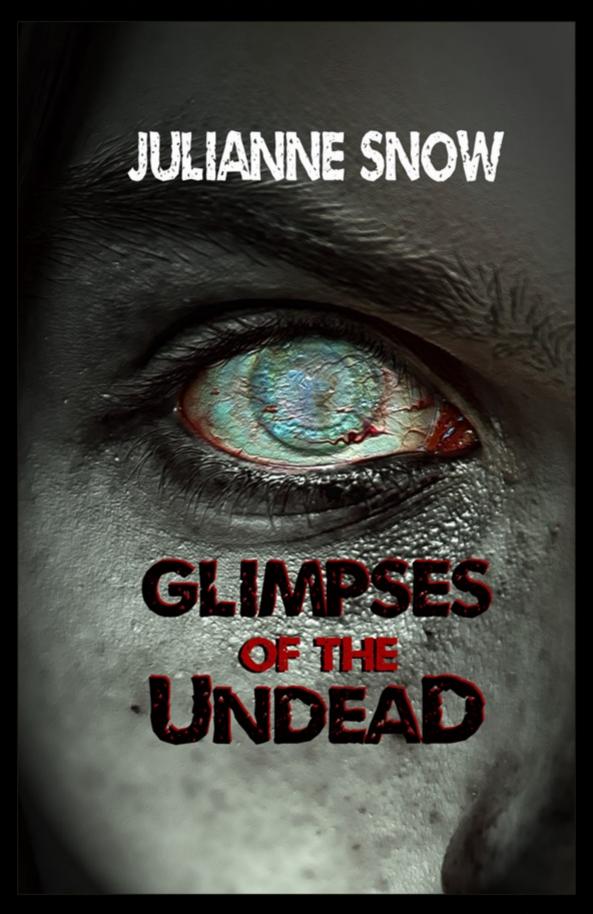
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Only Thorns E.F. Schraeder

Everyone wore a mask on Halloween, but the masks tell the truth of the lies we told about ourselves every other day of the year when we popped on a facade, played dress up. Whether painting on lipstick or slicking back hair, people hide to feel like something other than what they are. Halloween played it to the edges: the kind become cruel, the cruel disguised as clowns, covering our real faces, releasing fetishes, and imagination twisting.

A perfect night for a masquerade of mayhem and infatuation, a freak show fantasy on an ideal stage. The unexpected became the norm, and it was the only time I felt like myself. Outside the six foot iron gates of a party, I staged a finale. The finale of a love affair.

I met Jules while celebrating my twenty-third birthday at a club where she, believe it or not, was celebrating her twenty-third birthday. Coincidence felt like fate when I was lonely, so I asked her to join me for a continued celebration dinner the next night. To my staggering surprise, she agreed, and over the next few months we fell in love. I did, at least. That was six years ago.

But maybe I've rushed over the important steps in our courtship. The flowers, anticipation, first kiss. *Whatever.* Maybe I should have savored better memories. But I was busy pretending something else tonight.

Sitting in my car, I imagined Jules, not dancing and flirting with another guy, flipping her silky auburn hair over her shoulder. I blinked, erasing the images: she was not imagining my face disappear as she squinted her bright eyes shut.

Tonight was my last chance to pretend. I pushed her out of my mind, like I was erasing a CD. I didn't want the last thing I remembered to be an ugly, scratched face, pupils dilated, those bright eyes dimming in a dark corner.

I dropped my head to the soft vinyl of the steering wheel and unrolled my window to catch my breath. I could have lived there forever with the cobwebs of memory tangling, tickling at my face with their fine tendrils. If I pushed back into the crevices of thought, maybe I'd find something besides rage, something to keep me company, or a new costume.

At exactly 10:20 p.m., I performed 'early,' acting out the details of a waiting game like I expected Jules. I hopped in and out of the car, repeating the charade: slamming the door, pacing, shifting on my feet, slumping back into the car. I tapped my feet impatiently. Glanced at my phone. It's how I had to look.

I waited for Jules outside the tall iron gates covered with half dead vines outside the hippest bar in Grendale Michigan (if anything was hip in Grendale). The gates looked like they came straight from a 1966 Vincent Price movie. Honest to God, they did. The chipped sidewalk in front of the building was littered with candy wrappers from trick-ortreaters, condoms, and more than a few beer cans from the raging party inside.

The bar was an old house renamed Fade. It had huge exposed beams and Tudor styling. Fade was the oldest thing in the city and the last real house within a mile full of businesses, trendy shops, and yuppie condos. Fade lived a quiet life as an under the radar Goth scene, but on Halloween, anyone was welcome. Even me.

Ten minutes passed. Felt like twenty. The act continued with pacing and watch checking, anxious glances and frowns as I busied myself getting in and out of the car.

Grendale promised any emo dork with a paintbrush, bad haircut, and skinny jeans an opportunity to start a city reinvention project in the name of artistry. On the other side of the street, maybe three blocks west of Fade, Grendale hid poor people, crammed into crappy schools and decayed housing the way most cities did: just outside of newly defined artsy or gated neighborhoods. The poverty smoldered quietly, behind a row of sterile, generic box stores and faddish chain restaurants at a monochrome strip mall. It was that kind of street: indie music, decent coffee. Everyone knew the place. There was probably one in most cities, or coming soon. It was the place to be seen. As a moderately disgruntled young man, this neighborhood offered a fine place to disappear.

Halloween provided plenty witnesses. It looked like someone opened the floodgates of a lunatic frat party. It smelled like a stewed combination of hormones and beer. Between the howling, fake-bloody faces, and general gory absurdity of the scene, I laughed out loud despite my mood. At least two black and white marked cop cars drove by slowly, sirens blaring; it hardly dented the action, though everyone tried to look innocent for a moment, including me.

I nodded as they passed. Forced a half smile, just enough to register on officer so-and-so's memory. I waved, listening to the diminishing thuds from the trunk. *Goodnight, Jules*.

Suddenly, I noticed everything. Every smell, the curious glance of every stranger, the distinct rumble of every passing car. The windows steamed. I felt my face flush hot, and in my ears I heard a rushing pound of blood swirling. I felt I'd choke if I sat still any longer. Everything pressed against me, stained me. My chest tightened and ached. Almost like a conscience. The car felt too stifling to sit in, the noises too close. I got out, swallowed a deep cool breath of fresh air, and stepped toward the crowd. Besides needing a break, I had to make appearances.

There was a so-called psychic outside set up with a tarot deck at a table on the lawn of the freakshow at Fade, and she looked about as genuinely whacked. She was sure making a killing working the crowd, and had at least five customers in the past thirty minutes. I thought about taking over a picture of Jules to see if she knew where Jules was now. Fat chance.

I wiped at the thick dark smudges on my jacket. A little too authentic. I stared at the house turned hot spot, I thought about the night we met. Jules and me. I needed her out of my head.

Jules was something that night: wavy auburn hair landing at her shoulders, that smile that made me want to sign up for life right then and there. She blinked those baby blues at me, gazed into my soul, and just kept nodding and smiling.

I was hooked, quoting lines out of Neruda poems I memorized for such occasions: picking up girls exactly two degrees prettier than a guy like me merited. 'Oh the eyes of absence' and lines from Body of a Woman. Now it was just sad. And ironic.

When I asked Jules, she didn't remember. I still heard myself questioning her, "You don't remember that poem?" My heart dropped. I knew it was over. What a lie. Six years on the wrong end of a prank. My lips curled into a sneer.

She said she must have forgotten it, like that night was a drunken haze. She was 'so sorry.'

That took the wind out of my proverbial sails. No roses for her tonight, only thorns.

Hundreds of costumed freaks marauded Grendale Village looking for their version of fun. And it was there to be had: music, love, sex, molly, anything else. I was just a plain face in the crowd. Vampire dude #24 in slim black pants paraded by me as I conspicuously leaned against the car. He asked, with more attitude than I appreciated, "What's your costume?" and laughed.

I hated his judging laugh. I supposed taunting me was his attempt to impress his vampyress friends. I shrugged my shoulders, glared at them for a moment, memorizing their faces. To be fair, I was unusually average looking for Halloween in my worn jeans, white T-shirt, and brown vest poking from beneath a snug jean jacket. Sure, the jacket had more than a few telling smudges, but I had to say something. The punk.

I looked down and snarled, "A nice guy." He stepped back into the mass of protective capes. Even if I needed to be seen, I didn't need to be the brunt of a joke. He disappeared into a smog of clove cigarettes.

I stared at the gates, feeling the pounding music in my feet. The sound traveled fast, all the way up to my stomach. The organized chaos of it all soothed me. I felt memorably invisible.

I knew it would be like this: loud, chaos, rambling people, full of itself. It was a place too busy to pay attention, too crazed to notice the ordinary. The mayhem of voices and music, the ever present thudding bass of passing traffic stayed loud enough to mask the shadowy unknown thumping from cars. Enough screams filled the air to suppress any genuine suspicion.

Nothing was out of the ordinary. My plan was to stay near the car until I heard silence, until the sounds blended into one murmuring, acceptable quiet. That was how long Jules had left.

I needed to tell myself something else happened. I acted out some other version of the night, the one I had to commit to memory in case anyone ever asked. Maybe Jules was inside Fade already, waiting to come out. Maybe she was dancing with some other guy. I was pissed, thought about waiting outside for them, but I knew better, let her go.

This was not the night I wanted. The night I wanted involved romance: an engagement ring, roses, and a kiss. When I thought about all the wasted time, I felt sick.

I decided it was time for my last stop. I had to talk to that psychic. I needed to know why I loved so hard it made

me hurt. I hoped that Madame X and her parlor tricks would set me straight.

The psychic was not named Madame X, but Ruby. Her eyes were haunting and dark brown. They flashed at me and for a moment. Ruby's clothes draped on her, wispy, a bit wild. Everything on her was purple, even her jewelry.

Ruby looked at me and said, "What do you believe?" while rubbing my palms with her long thumb. Her voice rumbled between us, low and smooth.

I liked her raspy tone. What do I believe? I wondered.

I said, "I believe that everyone will disappoint you. If you don't believe me yet, all you have to do is wait."

Ruby's hand withdrew and her eyes went cold as her eyelids folded over her dark eyes inquisitively.

What do I have to lose? I figured I may as well reveal some truth. I gave her my \$10, so I wanted my grab-bag of mysterious solutions, 'the way out is through,' and all that.

"Sit," she said. "There is pain around you. Something lonely."

Here we go, I thought.

"Some kind of—" she broke off, pausing, "disturbances, past or present I can't tell. There was some deal of brutality, but that's not clear to me. Your heart is cloudy, no one dwelling there is forgiven."

She stopped, looked at me like she was memorizing my face, which bothered me. I looked away.

"Even when people are hurt, you see only yourself," she said.

I liked her reading less as the minutes passed. I liked her less and less. "I don't think you can tell me anything." When I moved to grab my \$10, she grabbed me, insisting I stay. "So, she isn't coming? The woman I'm waiting for? She's gone?"

Ruby nodded, knowingly. She shuffled her tarot deck and laid out a spread carefully. A hint of accusation on her face hovered. "You know she's lost now. Once you cross a road, it's not simple to turn around. What you do is surrounded by a thousand possibilities. There are no ultimate predictions." She smiled. "It's my business to know what lurks in the fog of the possible. And the fog surrounding you—" she broke off again "creates more questions than answers. Tell me, what do you hold dear?"

A few people from Fade had gathered to listen. Ruby talked about the Cups in the cards. It made my throat dry to listen.

"Emotion and spirit, you are at the bridge between idea and action," Ruby winced. "But so many swords. I see bitter conflict, intense struggle," she fingered the cards then briefly stopped talking.

Ruby looked at me, her face stern. "You'll be found."

What?

My stomach clenched. I worried. My hands grew clammy. What gave me away? Her cards? She stared at me. The crowd hovered, voices muffled the throbbing blood in my ears. I sat there, the center of attention, fearing my chest would explode. She knew. How could she?

A blonde slutty witch smiled at me. Jules was too much under my skin, in my hair, on my hands, in my face. I forced myself to look away, and for a second time I tuned out Ruby. I couldn't stand truth seeping from that voice. Maybe I misheard?

Ruby laid a careful finger on another row of cards. Her voice changed as she spoke of the Queen of Cups. Aloof, in control. I knew who that was.

Finally I stopped listening because I sensed that the noise had ceased. Somehow, there were no separate sounds, just a humming blur obliterating the white noise of chatter in my mind. I sighed. Ruby touched her cards, stared at me, my face like an empty promise.

Ruby's voice became part of the purr. That was the valve I waited to hear click. My head stopped spinning. The voices returned to their bodies, released me from their clenched fists.

Ruby's hands motioned toward the sky, eyes wild. She was working the crowd. When Ruby put her head to the table and mumbled. I thanked her and she declined a handshake.

I walked toward my car and felt more than a few eyes following. I tapped the trunk of my car and thought of Jules one last time, her 'dim eyes of absence.' Neruda's lyricism was no help now.

Ruby's eyes were on my back. I wondered if she could read my plates. She stared heavily, even as her next customer counted out singles. I forced a smile. *She knew nothing*.

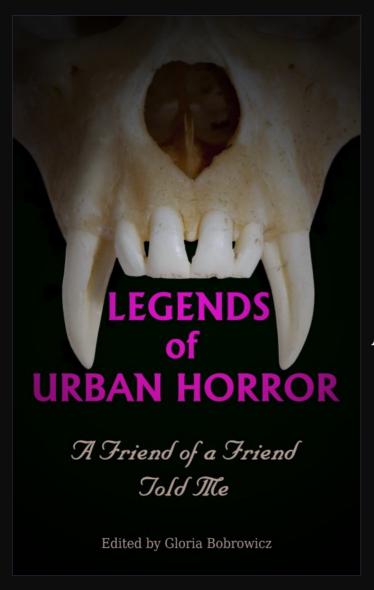
Ruby eyed my car as I rolled off. I hoped it was the last I'd see of her.

I checked my watch, two in the morning. *Perfect*. The whole night accounted for, I decided to catch a bite to eat. The lights were always on at Maya's Cafe. I ordered something mild mannered, sipped a coffee, and flirted easily with the waitress.

The waitress stared at my hand as a strange black mark appeared, like a bruise or tattoo, in the shape of a strange cup. What'd Ruby done?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Schraeder's creative work has appeared in journals and anthologies including Voluted Tales, Dark Gothic Resurrected, Flashes in the Dark, Carnival of the Damned, The Kennedy Curse, and others. Schraeder is also the author of a poetry chapbook, The Hunger Tree.

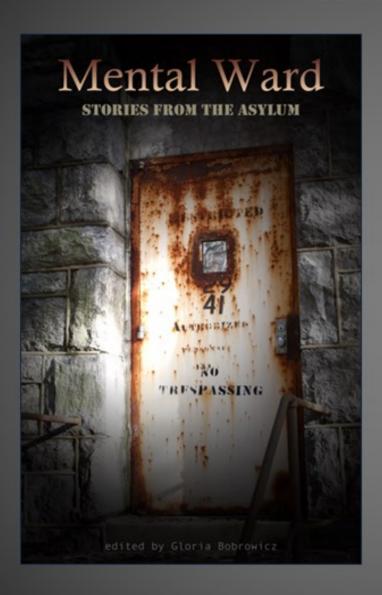
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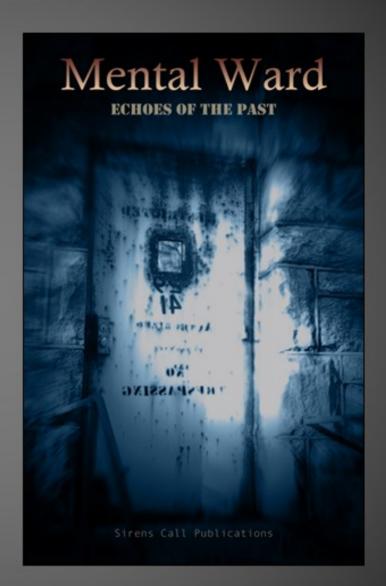


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From Fallen Leaves Guy Medley

The children are coming, Gerald whispered as he slumped in his frayed wheelchair, bathed in the light of a long-faded nursing home, hoping at long last to fade away himself. Dreary sunlight streamed in through the large rain stained windows of the common room, filtering lazily through thick gloomy layers of menthol scented dust motes, painting him and his tired housemates a sickly jaundice which seemed to peel away at their papery skin exposing old bone marinated in crippling age. He stared out through the thin glass, his only portal to an outside world he felt he was no longer welcome to be a part of, having had outlived his purpose in life.

What he could only imagine was a cold October breeze, blew gently across the expanse of lawn and trees outside that hid them from the living, lifting into the air leaves of gold and orange and red, spinning and flitting them about in a fairy dance beneath barren boughs. It might have even been beautiful, Gerald thought, if only he was able to dance about within their colorful play.

As the light faded, the leafy dance intensified, joined by more lawn detritus swept up in the swirling currents and cold eddies. Gerald watched with growing fascination as leaves and twigs, pine needles and dirt, began to slowly take shape. They swirled and gravitated hauntingly together, weaving stitch-like, until they unmistakably took upon the shape of small people. Children formed from fallen leaves in the wind, rows of sharp fangs dripping with venomous sap; rictus grins. Claw tipped green sprig arms bending into frightful reaching length; moonlight eyes. Chittering brittle bodies of nightmare took shape in every dark patch of the lawn, shedding loose debris and insects as they flexed their wickerwork frames.

The children are coming, he mumbled into the room, his weak voice nearly drowned under the laughter of the leaves, an insane wind formed deep within muddy lungs. Of course the children are coming, Gerald said in his wet gravelly voice. It is Halloween after all. Isn't it exciting?

Margret and Pearl laughed, raspy and wickedly as they looked at Gerald curiously. They both stretched their bones, creaking and cackling as they stood, and shuffled off down the hall, eager to hand out sweet treats to the visiting children, leaving Gerald and Bert sitting alone.

No, Gerald said softly to the window, to the approaching monstrosities in the fading light. No it isn't. He couldn't pull his eyes from the hideous creatures, madness threatening to pulp his feeble mind.

Gerald could only watch with paralyzing horror as the creatures drifted on the cold breeze across the yard toward the home, creepers on skeletons of gnarled deadfall; an arboreal version of what sadly resided on his side of the glass. Their dead switch fingers clacked against the door, rotten cudgels of wormwood and moss, come to gather their Halloween treats.

Commotion erupted down the hall, and against Gerald's protests, Bert struggled to remove himself from his chair to investigate what all of the racket and yelling was about. The home fell silent save for dry leaves blowing in the steady wind, and the soft hiss of oxygen snaking its way from the green tank by Gerald's side to his nose.

He saw something move where the yellow light from the room penetrated into the darkness beyond. Something moving about under the leaves. A shape roughly human in size slowly creeping under the dead mass and out into the darkness beyond the reach of any light; into the black depths of the woods and restless bowers, following hidden foreboding substratum, holloways beyond view.

The damned fools, Gerald whispered. Now he was truly all alone in the house.

He watched as a second human shaped form crawled away under the leaves, seeking the dark. Bert's head thrust up into the window from outside, his eyes wide with terror, looking directly at Gerald with pleading urgency. His mouth opened wide in a scream, but only dry and moldering leaves spewed forth, crunched and crushed between gnashing teeth as he choked on his own screams. A clawed hand of green spindly sprigs grabbed Bert's neck from under the leaf litter, brutally wrenching him back down and out of sight, disappearing under the colorful carpet of dead leaves, bones cracking and splintering, horrible kindling under autumn splendor.

Gerald watched as Bert's submerged body joined the others somewhere under the trees. He imagined them slowly turning to dirt and mushrooms, sleeping beautifully beneath the trees, a leathery compost in bloom.

His grief was cut short by a pungent odor drifting in from the hall as the room filled with the musky fragrance of damp decay. A brittle perilous scratching echoed through the house, the sound of dried leaves blowing across tile

flooring. Gerald could only watch as colorful leaves billowed in from the corridor, a chorus of children's laughter hidden among their dance. He smiled as the last tiny filament that held his mind together was finally snapping. At last, he thought, the children have come for him, a new playmate to scream under October leaves.

The children are here.....

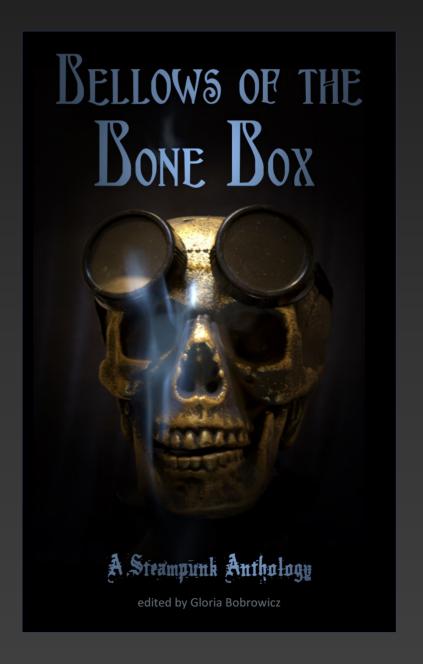
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Guy Medley scribbles down dark and horrific fiction from his cobweb infused and possibly haunted home in the Mojave Desert. Brought-up to fear the mythological nightmares that roam small desert towns, snatching children who don't mind their moms, he is never short of terrifying material to further inspire his disturbed mind and writing.

Twitter ID: <a>@medleyguy

Website: guymedleyfiction.blogspot.com

Bellows of the Bone Box

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Harvest Feast Sharon L. Higa

"You better get a move on!" Sarah bellowed from the bottom of the stairs. "The Feast starts right at midnight!"

Janey took the steps two at a time, her robe trying to billow out behind her. She snatched the ends and tied them

shut, enabling her to navigate the last few steps safely.

The other women were waiting in the van parked and idling by the curb in front of the house. An impatient blip of the horn encouraged the two stragglers to lock the front door of the Victorian style home and hoof it to the black van where the side door was open and waiting.

Sarah and Janey piled in, Andrea giving the sliding door a quick jerk, slamming it shut, then they were off.

The headlights cut through the darkness, guiding the way out of their village and into the rural countryside. The van was the only vehicle on the road as they drove steady and well within the speed limits. No one wanted to get pulled over tonight.

Inside there was a lot of excited chatter, talk of the upcoming celebration on this, the night of nights. 'Halloween', 'All Hallow's Eve', 'All Saint's Eve' or- as it was known in the old world- 'Samhain' marks the end of Harvest season/Fall and the coming of Winter. It is the night where the dead can and do enter our world and the requests made to Satan may also be granted.

The women had been practicing their beliefs all year long and were eagerly looking forward to the culmination and hopefully, granting of their petitions on this particular night.

Janey had joined the coven after the celebration of last year's feast, thus she was excited to be included in the ceremony this year. She had helped earlier in the day with the baking, but had noticed that no protein had been prepared. Bouncing along in the van, she turned to Sarah.

"Sarah, I was wondering – the feast – what kind of meat do we offer up?"

Sarah smiled, the shadows within the van preventing Janey from seeing her fellow acolyte's eyes. "Long Pig" were the only two words Sarah spoke.

"Oh! I love pork!" Janey exclaimed.

The jouncing and jostling intensified as Char drove the van off of asphalt and onto dirt. This prevented any of them from talking until they'd all righted themselves in their seats.

Sitting in the front passenger seat, Darla glanced anxiously at her watch then peered through the front windshield. "Are we going to make it, Char? If we don't get there on time, Marsha will have our heads!"

Char, the driver of the van, navigated a hairpin turn before responding. They had already turned off the main road and were headed into the hills, to a location that had not been divulged to her until late this afternoon.

Char checked the GPS system and nodded curtly. "Yeah, according to G-lady here, we'll be there in ten minutes."

The spot changed every year, for as far back as Char could remember. This was attributed to the fact that the women would never tolerate either interlopers or chance encounters during the ceremony. Char had to give it to Marsha; in the decades that she had been tasked with getting everyone to the meeting place, they had never returned to the same location – ever.

Darla breathed a sigh of relief. "Great! That gives us plenty of time to prepare the main course. I hope the others have everything else set up and ready."

Char chuckled and raising her voice above the chatter of the other five passengers in the back, she responded. "You know Marsha. There's no way they won't be ready when we get there!"

The van took another series of turns which descended into a low valley where the road abruptly ended in a circular field.

The torches encircling the area gave Char enough light to be able to pull the van alongside the other one that was parked on the verge of the clearing.

The seven ladies piled out, all wearing identical black robes and headed towards their fellow witches working at a feverous pitch inside the circle of light.

The table had already been set- blood red china plates, gold forks, knives and spoons placed upon black cloth napkins. The table was covered with a cloth dyed red and black, the blended colors reminding Janey of a Monet painting. Black goblets etched in gold with the sigils of their coven stood by each setting, waiting for the red libation each would hold within its depths; an inanimate but necessary participant in the upcoming feast.

Gold candlesticks with black and red tapered candles were set down the middle of the long harvest table, accompanied by a vast assortment of esculent offerings.

Baked summer squash, toasted nuts, roasted corn, hand churned butter, fresh baked bread, sugar snap peas, sweet potatoes, pumpkins, apples, peaches...they all had a special spot on the long table. The only place left bare was the full center section, between the candlesticks. That was the place of honor, the location for the main protein that would be the highlight of the meal.

The Ultimate Gift.

The six women that had arrived with Marsha hurriedly completed the finishing touches. The leader of the coven proceeded to walk around the table, adjusting a plate here, pushing a chair a little further in. Marsha turned when she heard the others approaching from the area of the parked vehicles.

Smiling, she pushed her hood back and walked toward the group, hands extended towards Janey in a gesture of welcome and greeting.

The other women had bypassed their Mistress and Janey, heading towards the seats around the table. Once at their chosen spot, they quickly shrugged out of their robes and laid them across the backs of the chairs.

Their naked bodies were now exposed to the night; perfect alabaster statues enhanced by the moonlight.

Marsha gently guided the bedazzled girl to an area just behind the magnificent table and its elaborate settings. Janey allowed herself to be led by the wrists, still stunned by all of the pomp and circumstance. This was her first time to join in the feast. Janey dreamily stared up at the night sky. The moon was full, ripe and orange. A Harvest moon, she thought, how appropriate.

"Welcome! Welcome all!"

Marsha's voice- melodic and bell-like- enticed and entranced all of the girls, drawing them towards her like moths to a flame.

Janey glanced around, suddenly coming out of her daze. She noticed the barbeque pit set up directly behind Marsha, the coals glowing, heat shimmering the air directly above the grill.

The young woman's attention was suddenly drawn to the ground beneath her bare feet. Janey peered closer, staring down between her arms which were still being held by Marsha. The two women seemed to be standing on what looked like white chalk lines drawn in the dirt surrounding them.

She suddenly realized they were standing in the middle of a pentagram. The other women had all taken positions around the points and curves of the circle, leaving only Janey and Marsha in the middle.

A slight nod from Marsha caused Darla to step forward and disrobe Janey, who then folded her robe and set it outside of the circle, on a rock. Marsha's robe was taken next and hung upon the chair at the head of the table. Not a word was spoken until Darla had assumed her position around the pentagram.

Sarah glanced up at the night sky then spoke out loud for the benefit of everyone within the circle:

"We're on time. Two hours before midnight."

Marsha brought Janey's attention back to her with a gentle tug on the young woman's wrists. The older woman's eyes locked onto the young girl's, commanding, cruel, filled with unholy glee. Marsha began to speak. Her voice rang out- strong and proud- for all to hear.

"On this Blessed Night-All Hallow's Eve as it is known in this millennia-we have once again been privileged to gather together to honor and pay tribute to 'Our Father'. We bring Him sacrifice in the form of flesh and blood, fear and despair, youth and innocence. We ask, Oh Sathanas, that you accept this gift on this night and grant us, through the sharing of this sacrifice, the continuance of our powers as you have throughout the past three centuries."

Bug-eyed with confusion, Janey began to struggle and pull, trying to jerk her hands out of Marshas', but the older womans' grip was strong and as solid as granite.

"I don't understand!" Janey blubbered, her eyes turning desperately to look at her fellow witches, trying to illicit aid from anyone around the circle. All she saw was the same raw emotion which was in Marsha's – no mercy whatsoever.

Marsha snatched the terrified girl around so she was facing her once more. "Janey, allow me to explain. This sacrifice ensures that the original coven of thirteen maintains our supreme power and immortality. Throughout the centuries, we have had more than thirteen members, but never less than that number. That is our number of power and in order to maintain this, well, one of our coven must make the ultimate sacrifice to Our Lord. This has been our pact with Him for the past three hundred years."

Tears were flowing freely down Janey's cheeks, blurring everything around her. She had stopped struggling, finally accepting in her heart that it was useless. Sucking in a deep breath, she looked into the Coven Mistresses' face and asked one question: "Why me?"

Marsha smiled, this time allowing a small touch of tenderness and maternal feeling to infuse her features.

"When we accept newcomers into our fold at the New Winter Solstice, we also take that time to pick who will be the next 'offering' at the Harvest Feast."

Janey was glued to the words, unaware that the outer circle of twelve were drawing inexorably closer to the terrified young woman.

Marsha continued to speak, holding the girls' rapt attention as a snake does its prey. "We use a very simple method. We write the name of each new acolyte on a piece of paper, then we draw straws."

The rest of the coven continued to move inward, bringing their hands from behind their backs, quietly but steadily shrinking the circle around the two women. The flensing knives glinted, razor sharp and deadly, in the candlelight. The naked bodies were bathed in the orange and red flickers of the candlelight while the moon itself tinged the scene with a reddish color reminiscent of blood.

As the circle tightened around Janey, Marsha's face became animated; evil and cruel, all pretense of caring wiped away.

"Unfortunately for you my dear, your name drew the short straw."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Recently published author Sharon L. Higa has a fascinating affinity for horror as well as Supernatural thrillers, fantasy/action and Mystery/drama. She has been writing off and on, throughout the years but has now, at fifty-five years young, found her 'voice' and is writing full time. She lives in East Tennessee with her nine cats, one dog and her wonderful, loving husband of twenty three years, Mark.

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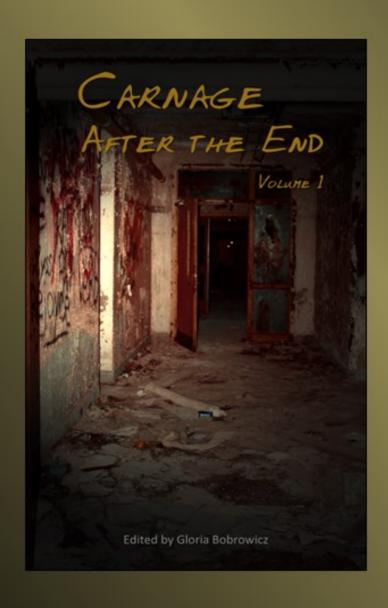
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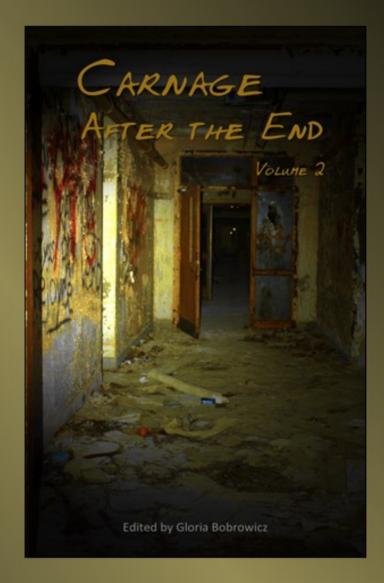
The Undying Love

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In a world where society has collapsed and terror lurks around every corner, no one can be trusted and nothing can be taken for granted...





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In Bad Taste DJ Tyrer

The asylum was a grey, oppressive building. All the more so that it hadn't been inhabited in years. It seemed forlorn as Lew parked outside it. As he went inside, it seemed worse: there was a sense of cruelty and fear in the air, as if the decades of torment within its walls lingered yet.

It was a strange place to hold a Hallowe'en party, he thought; a little in bad taste. Especially undecorated. A few pumpkins or something might have made it seem more fun. It was too gaunt. He couldn't imagine having fun here, but he supposed that was the point: this was to be a spooky night, not a party proper.

Standing alone in the lobby, Lew was glad he'd seen other cars parked out front, or else he'd have wondered if he'd been pranked. He tapped his foot on the rough concrete floor, nervously, wondering where the others were.

"Guys," he called, voice breaking just a little. "You there?"

He thought he heard a clang and, then, there was a creaking sound like a distant gurney, and a muffled scream.

"Nice touch," he muttered, shivering.

There was the sound of a door and, then, a curt voice said, "You will come with me."

Lew turned to see a hulking woman with hard eyes in a nurse's uniform standing in one of the doorways off the lobby.

"Sorry?" he asked.

"You will come with me."

"Oh, right." He remembered there had been something in the invitation about roleplaying: obviously she'd been hired to play the part, adding a little verisimilitude.

He followed her along corridors and down stairs until they came to a steel door that she opened.

"In here," she said and he dutifully stepped inside, grinning, happy to play his part.

The steel door clanged shut behind him, trapping him in a small bare cell that stank of despair. Lew spun in surprise. He'd been plunged into darkness.

"Excuse me!" he called as he heard her footsteps echoing away into the distance. Suddenly, he wasn't quite so certain she'd been playing the part.

Lew hammered on the door, shrieking for help, but none was coming; he was too deep below the asylum. He hammered and yelled as long as he could until he finally slumped into a corner, sobbing in despair.

Then, he heard the squeaking sound of an approaching gurney and he shuddered in fear.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing* and has been widely published in anthologies and magazines around the world, most recently in *Amok!* (April Moon Books), *Steampunk Cthulhu* (Chaosium), *Tales of the Dark Arts* (Hazardous Press) and *Cosmic Horror* (Dark Hall Press), as well as *Tigershark* ezine, and in addition, has a novella available on the Kindle, *The Yellow House* (Dynatox Ministries).

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Don't ever think I didn't love my daddy. I did and I always will. But we had a strange relationship, not like other kids at school had with their dads. And I couldn't talk about it. And it took me a long time to fully comprehend just what was wrong about my daddy.

No, he never touched me inappropriately. This isn't that sort of 'secret.' In that way, he was as proper as apple pie. And later in life, when I was visiting a therapist because of bad dreams, she kept asking me about my dad touching me in ways he shouldn't. I quickly told her, "No, not at all. My dad was a good dad; the kind of dad you could trust with any child; he would do fun things with us, but he never over-stepped the boundaries."

But I never told her this, either. My dad was a serial killer, and every Halloween, yes, one day out of the year, he'd take me out with him, but instead of going trick-or-treating, we would hit three houses, and when we left, three bodies would be waiting for the police.

He never let me participate, only observe. And I was to be dumb about it and never speak of it to anyone, and I kept my promise. But my dad died last year. The way I see it, that severed my promise. After all, he's gone on to the maker and whatever sins he bore, the best judge there is, he faces. Man as a judge is pitifully inadequate; they shouldn't be allowed. They can't remain as impartial as they claim to be. So they can't be as good a judge as they want to be. It's a farce.

Anyway, with Daddy dead, the law can't do anything to him. He's untouchable for his crimes. Actually, statistics say there are a lot more serial killers who go uncaught, than ever get caught and punished.

Look around you. The ones who seem the most normal; take a closer look; they're good actors and their front is too squeaky clean for a reason; what horrors do they hide?

My daddy taught me a lot about the nature of man and man as the greatest predator there is; more so than a tiger or a lion or a shark. Nothing on earth can out-beat man as a predator.

I can't say what my dad did the other 364 days out of the year, but Halloween was our night. He started taking me with him when I was five. He told me, "I chose five, because that's the year most kids really start remembering and can be molded to be the person they will become as an adult. I could have started with you at age three; you're a bright child, but I held off. I didn't want your innocence disturbed so early; darkness is an all-encompassing entity. I want you to develop nerves of steel, and nothing under the sun can scare you. I want you to watch, listen, and never speak a word; they aren't to know you're even there. If one ever sees you, that will be the last time you accompany me, understand?"

I nodded. "Yes, I do. I watch, but I don't do or say anything, and I don't let them see me."

"Excellent, Barb. You're a chip off the old block; I never minded you were a girl, instead of a boy. I find girls are quicker to catch on; boys are slower to mature. You'll do just fine, but be sure to never let your mother catch on. This is nothing she knows about and I want to keep it that way. She'd leave me if she knew, Barb. I'd be a monster in her eyes. Don't look at me as a monster, baby. Regardless what you observe me doing to the victims, remember that you're safe; we're blood, you and I. I'd never hurt you."

The year I turned twelve was the last year we went out together. That was because the next year I rebelled and said I was too old for that sort of hogwash, and I didn't believe in any of the spooky crap, no more than I believed in Santa Claus.

He took me aside, into the garage, away from any chance Mom might overhear our discussion and he said, "Are you sure you don't want to continue observing a master at work?"

I didn't hesitate. "I'm 900,000 points sure, Dad. I'm not doing Halloween again. And I won't forget either, so don't worry, but I think I've out-grown all this childish prattle about ghosts rattling their chains and the like, so let me go in peace." And he did.

He never approached me again. And we all carried on our little family unit: Dad, Mom and me. Everything seemed fine, normal, but Dad knew I knew his secret, but he trusted me, and I never dared to disclose to anyone about my dad's secret identity...but newspapers continued to discuss the continued triple kills of the Halloween killer.

One day, when I was sixteen, I overheard my parents discussing the Halloween killer. Mom was alarmed by it; I'd never heard her murmur a word about this topic and now she was bent out of shape.

She sounded truly distressed; her voice rode a roller coaster of frequency peaks, high and low as she ranted. "This killer's just too close to home to make me feel safe. What if the killer decided to hit us?"

Dad assured her that would never happen. "He better not with me here; I'd dispatch him quicker than you can spread whipped cream on top of strawberries."

The word 'strawberries' was a key word which did its wonder on mom; she calmed down, and they hugged, and soon headed off to the bedroom. I went out in the backyard for a few minutes to give them their space to make out.

It also gave me time to think, and I mused deep and long on this dilemma.

Why had Daddy wanted an observer, but never to participate in what he did? Did I accept what he did to innocent people as being something necessary? The more I thought about it, the more I was ashamed that he would pick women to torture and take away their lives; who was he to make that sort of decision: life or death? He never did anything sexual to them, but most had expected he would; and oh how they begged him not to hurt them.

He never spent more than an hour in any house, and the kill spree would be over in three hours. He allowed me to hit a few houses to fill my bag with goodies...so mom never suspected a thing. He also added extra in to make sure I'd gotten a big haul, and mom would compliment me on how hard I'd worked to win treats.

I had seven years to contemplate about my role in the Halloween Killer's performance. And then I counted three times seven equaled twenty-one. Just how many poor women had my dad killed that I didn't even know about?

Did he kill any other time of the year? Was there another handle out there that belonged to Dad?

How many serial killers were actually more than one identity? It was a frightening thought.

He hadn't wanted me afraid, but really how could anyone not be scared; it was a normal reaction.

I decided I'd start keeping a journal, and fill it with times my dad would leave with no explanation, and try to watch for signs that he was on a kill spree. And over the next months, sure enough, there would be one or two times a month, he would go out and be gone until late.

He'd done it for years and mom never seemed to be aware; maybe she just didn't give a damn, I don't know, but she seemed to remain blissfully unaware of her husband's true activities.

But Dad was a good provider; we never wanted for anything. We lived in a nice home, and had whatever we wanted. They each had their own vehicles. We dressed and ate well. I had a good education, and we went on summer vacations that usually lasted a week or longer. We hit places like Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon. We went to Disney World, when I was nine. And the year I was fourteen we visited the Big Apple at Christmas and stayed until after New Year's; that had been a glittering wonderland trip. Mom and I both loved seeing the lights, and shopping in NYC, and going to see the *Nutcracker on Ice*.

And there were times when I documented it just being Mom and me; and Dad would be off doing hell knew what; supposedly, he was involved in doing his job...but who took vacations and still worked? None of my friends' dads ever did, so what was Dad up to? I had a good idea, but Mom was clueless; and she was on such a high, it didn't matter to her. He never stayed away so long that she got alarmed. He knew just how much he could push and get away with it.

Oh, he loved us, I'm sure of it, but he wasn't always a demonstrative man. He didn't say 'I love you' very often, not even to Mom, but she seemed to understand. She once told me how Dad had a childhood that had been difficult and a mean step-father beat him for no reason that Dad could recall. Later on, I read that this was one of the things profilers would check off their serial killer profile.

Well, I had never gotten a single whipping that I could remember; not even as a little one who was learning what was okay to do and what wasn't acceptable. But yet, rules had changed and it was against the law to manhandle a child, even your own. Time-out was the usual course; I learned to read the clock on the wall from my corner which surprised mom when I caught her keeping me past the time she'd said. For all my smartness though, it never really helped me out of a penance for some childhood crime I'd done. I learned that if I did the crime, I had to do the time.

So I got to wondering why some adults never got punished, specifically my dad. All those killings and never a peep that he was suspected for any one of the many he'd perished.

Yes, it took me a few years, but finally, at twenty, I said, "Daddy, would you like for me to accompany you this Halloween?"

"You mean like we did when you were twelve?"



My Dad, the Halloween Killer Jerriann Law

"Yes, just like that," I said.

He was genuinely pleased.

But he didn't know that I had made up my mind. It was time. I was the only one who could stop him.

I dressed all in black, a Victorian Clock-mistress; steampunk was a gothic style up a step, and it delighted me to dress up with about thirty clocks and watches on my wrists.

He wore his usual inconspicuous outfit: cargo pants and a dark color tee shirt and a dark blue Navy pea-jacket. He wore rubber-soled shoes that didn't squeak when he walked.

The first victim, we parked a block away and walked, keeping in the shadows and avoiding street lamps or porch lights or anything else that would give a witness a view of us. The thrill of being seen was a rush; I had forgotten this.

It towered at the top of the hill, loomed there like a disillusioned crow. Dark and brooding, I felt exhaustion before we were halfway there.

Dad made his way with ease to the house and searched until he located the window for access, and then we entered and he made his way to the bedroom where the sleeping, elderly woman rested.

He woke her with a hand over her mouth, and then had me tie her wrists. The terror etched in her eyes cut me to the bone; it was then I decided my role had reached its conclusion, and so had my dad. Time to stop him, before three more were killed.

He never knew what hit him, but it was a statue of a golden bird I grabbed off the mantle.

The first blow brought him to his knees; his eyes wide with shock, and then I hit again, knocking out an eye, and after that, my frenzy turned to a blur.

I don't know how many times I hit him, but it was enough to kill him; he lay on the rug, a bloody pile. I looked at the woman in the bed and said, "You're safe."

And then I lifted up my dad's body, fireman style; he was a slim man, and somehow my adrenaline was so hyper I didn't feel his weight as a burden to me. We left the woman to recover best she could; cops or whatnot she did, after we were gone.

I guess I was the bad one in her eyes by attacking her attacker; I don't know or care. I took my dad's body to a quiet field and buried him there. And then I went home. Mom didn't open her door; I paused long enough to hear her snores.

I never told her the truth.

But Dad never came home again, and his absence saddened us both. But not knowing he was dead, my mother never grieved.

And today, a year later, Mom said, "I guess he finally got tired of me. I was just too boring for him."

"Mom, whatever happened to Dad, I think he couldn't help it. He loved you."

"I know he loved you, Barb; he was proud of you, daughter."

We hugged, and that evening we watched Halloween movies, ate popcorn, and avoided the door when the bell rang.

Life fell into a groove of normalcy, but missing Dad still hovered over us.

But I didn't regret laying my serial killer dad to rest. I like to think he applauded my tenacity.

The thrill of the kill...I feel how it pulls at me to repeat it. But a serial killer, I'm not.

RIP, Dad.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Kentucky award-winning author/poet/artist Jerriann Law has published nine EBooks; six with co-author/musician JD Couch. Co-owner of Snowhawk Littlebear Productions, they create music videos from original lyrics for YouTube. Lover of all things Paranormal, Jerriann enjoys scary movies, animals, photography and going to Pow Wows, and Civil War battlefields. Her Biography is in the Marquis' Who's Who of America.

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The Walking Deer Rivka Jacobs

It all started on Oct. 31st. Well, it apparently started before that. But Halloween night was when Donald Bice went running from house to house along his street in Pole Creek Hollow, pounding on doors and crying, "The deer are coming, the deer are coming!"

Now I'd known Don for twenty years, since he and his family moved here from Wayne County. He wasn't the type to get excited about much. Except for deer hunting. Don had some serious love for killing white tail. And he was good at it too. When bow hunting season started in September, he was out in the woods, finding where the mast and acorns fell in piles, tracking the does and bucks on their way to feed. Don didn't use decoys or stands. He looked for the freshly ripped rubs on trees on windward ridges; the bigger the scrapes the bigger the racks.

I didn't bow hunt, so I and my trusty Remington 700 joined Donny and the rest of our bunch in November. On Halloween night I was in my living room with my wife. The door was open and the storm door was secured, its screen covered with a large, cotton web and a scary rubber spider. On a table beside the door sat a plump plastic pumpkin filled with tootsie pops. My two teenage daughters were at a party in Barboursville. We'd been watching horror movies and listening to the kids tramp up the front steps, calling "Trick or Treat!" but it was getting late so we decided to clean up. We were carrying the candy to the kitchen when we heard shouting and furious banging that made the storm door rattle. "Who the heck is that?" my wife asked. I thought it sounded like Don, but didn't say anything. I held the curtain aside and took a peek out the front window overlooking the porch. It was indeed Donny, dressed in camouflage, down to his boots. When he saw my face in the glass, he bounded over and yelled, "The deer are coming. We've got to set up a perimeter. We've got to make sure our fences can stop them. They're coming. They're coming, Larry!"

By this time I was outside on the porch with him, in shirt sleeves and socks. "Geezus, Donny, have you been smoking that Hillbilly meth again?" I asked. "Quiet the hell down!"

"Larry, I've seen 'em. I know what I saw." He grabbed me by the shoulders. He smelled like animal guts and October woods. "They're comin' for us!"

"Okay, who is coming for us?"

"The deer. All the ones we've killed. Hoards of them. And I got off drugs years ago; that wasn't funny."

"Explain what you're talking about," I demanded. I thought I could see red and blue light reflecting in the distance; it takes a little while for anyone to drive down our long, winding road but you can see flashes on the hills and rocks that surround us for a few minutes before they get here. I figured someone called 911.

He bent almost in half, gripping his knees for a moment as he caught his breath. "We don't have time to talk," he said to the floor-boards. He abruptly straightened. His face was deeply lined and pale. He looked like he'd aged twenty-five years. His eyes were sunken, dilated, the brows arched unnaturally. He looked terrified of something.

I laughed. "Okay, this is a joke, right? It's Halloween!" I impulsively reached out and pinched his face over his cheekbone, expecting to find makeup. There wasn't any.

He punched my hand away. "You are a fucking idiot. I'm trying to warn you all. There are hundreds of 'em, thousands. Bucks, does, fawns. The one leading them--I killed him! The biggest rack I've ever seen. A gigantic, steely, wise old coot with antlers almost as big as a man is tall. The inner tines, the brow tines, were a foot high and sharp as knives." He pushed at my shoulder, knocking me backward a few inches. "I killed him Larry, I know I killed him. An arrow through the lungs, another through the heart. I sliced his throat to be certain. The old bastard had been scraping everything, and it looked like he was wearing a crown of moss and fern. I tracked him and I got him!"

I scrunched up my brows. "Look, I'm just not understanding this. So, you killed him, and he's leading a herd of thousands of deer this way, to Pole Creek Hollow? Didn't you bring him back with you? Where's your truck?"

"I left him so's I could get a bigger game cart; I only went two-hundred yards downhill to the field. I decided to rest a bit, get some food, something to drink. I was trying to unload the cart from the truck bed, when I looked up and there he was, at the corner of the corn field not fifty feet away. The arrows were still in his chest! His neck was hanging open where I cut it...." Donny started to cry; not weepy, quiet tears but a full-throated, jagged wail. "It was him, the old bastard, with the ferns and moss on his head!" he said between sobs. "And he was dead, he was fucking dead. And all these other white tail began gathering behind him and they all looked funny, like something was wrong with them."

My wife, Connie, peeked out the door. "Don, is that you? What's the matter, honey? Do you want me to call Stephanie?"

I tried to wave her back inside, saying, "Don says there's a huge herd of deer heading our way, and he thinks they're ... dangerous."

She looked confused, but then noticed the red and blue flashing lights that approached from down the street. "Someone must of called the sheriff's department," she said, and quickly went back inside the house. The cruiser was in sight, heading our way.

Don's clammy forehead reflected the flickering colors and he leaned close to me. "You've got to believe me, Larry," he said in a harsh whisper. "I tried to outrun them in my truck, but they were following. I saw them attack a dog and two horses at the Cooper's place ... that's only a few miles away. They ate that dog, Larry. I saw it with my own eyes. They tore that poor dog apart." He was wilting now, his legs trembling. He leaned against me. "I crashed the truck. I don't know what happened. I just kept running and running...."

I put one of his arms around my shoulders, holding him up. "Donny, buddy, of all the nights of the year, Halloween is the worst to go charging from house to house warning everybody about zombie deer," I said softly. "Hi, Tom," I said loudly to the deputy who had pulled up on the grass in front of my house and rolled down his window. "It's nothing really, old Donny's had one too many," I said.

Don straightened and shoved me away again. "Goddammit, Larry, you and Connie have got to get out of here! Call your girls, tell them to stay where they are! I'm going home." He paused a moment, exchanged a look with Deputy Tom Crowder, who had emerged from his cruiser, and then leaped down the steps and started loping away, down the street, toward his own house.

The deputy climbed toward me, then stopped midway, one foot higher than the other, knee bent. He gazed up at me. "So, he's drinking again? Crazy night. Worst night of the year for us. Even the wildlife is all stirred up." He took a deep breath, and started to turn to go.

"Whoa, wait, what do you mean?" I asked, thinking of all the deer I'd shot and lost, the blood trails gone cold. They died, right? Sure they did. "Any reports of ... aggressive deer?"

He opened his mouth to answer, but before he could, we were both distracted by a muffled, clopping noise coming from up the road. A mass of stars appeared floating in the darkness as they approached the headlights and flashers of the deputy's car. A foul, sharp odor wafted on a sudden, cold breeze.

"What the hell is that?" Deputy Crowder said, drawing his gun.

"Oh shit," was all I could answer as I crept backward to my front door.

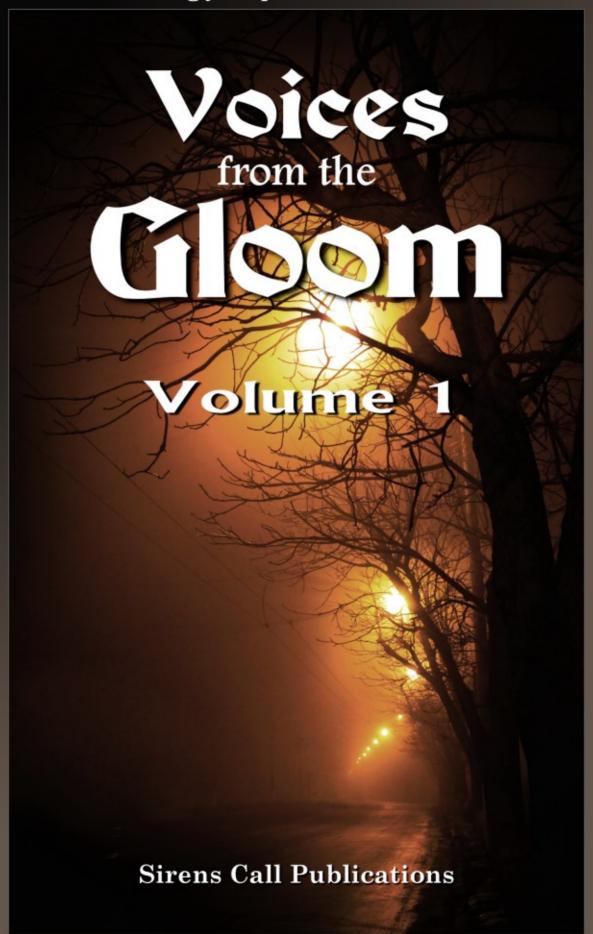
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - I grew up in Miami, Florida, and have lived in West Virginia for thirty-five years. I have master's degrees in sociology and mental-health counseling, and a BSN. I'm currently an RN specializing in psychiatric nursing. Recently I have published stories in *The Literary Hatchet*, and in *The Sirens Call* February 2013 issue, "Women in Horror," the August 2013 issue, "Monsters," *The Sirens Call* eZine issue #11, "Revenge," as well as *The Sirens Call* 2014 "Women in Horror" issue.

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Love 'n Lies

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo and iTunes Voices from the Gloom is an eclectic collection of tales that will echo in your mind, forcing you question what is real & what isn't.



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Apocalyptic Toffee Julianne Snow

Hallowe'en Night - 7:30PM

The first to be infected sat in a circle in the basement rec room of the parent who'd been sucked into the duty of trick-or-treating that year. There were superheroes, a princess, a witch, and even a cat, all of them devouring the small morsels of candy in their bags with reckless abandon. Mixed into the bounty were the small toffee tidbits lovingly handcrafted by the diminutive, elder woman who lived at the end of the cul-de-sac.

Each year the kids would run up the patio-stone walkway to knock loudly on her front door. And she would come out, her white hair always swept up into a tight bun, her arms bearing the bowl with her special treats. Each one would be greeted by name and a special remark made about their chosen costume for the year. Her house was always their favourite stop, and her toffee was the treat many of them saved for last.

But this year, the toffee was a little different. An ingredient had been tainted before it reached the small woman in her sunny kitchen. With each swirl of the wooden spoon around the saucepan, she mixed death into her sweets this year. And the neighbourhood would never be the same again.

It started with a quickening of the pulse, a flush coming over the children as they sat eating too much of their collected candy for one sitting. The stomach pains crept over them next, twisting cramps that doubled them over as they tried to climb the stairs in search of help. None of them made it past the wooden barrier before the change.

Hallowe'en Night - 8:33PM

"Kids! Your parents are here to pick you up!" The voice called from the front door, falling on deafened ears. Thinking the children were playing in the basement, or perhaps gorging themselves on all their candy, the brown-haired mother made a sweeping gesture to the congregated parents, inviting them in before moving down the hall. Her hand touched the gleaming doorknob and turned it, released the little monsters that waited for her.

They erupted from the basement, their bodies hungry for more than candy now. In a frenzy, amid the panicked screams, they ripped her apart, her blood mingling with the smears of chocolate already on their faces. It didn't take them long to decimate her body, to infect her with their toffee sickness, her body rising in turn as the other parents came to investigate the source of the screams.

Hallowe'en Night - 11:18PM

The police couldn't contain them and wound up succumbing like all the rest who'd had the misfortune of crossing their paths. It spread outward from the epicenter of the dead-ended street, a ballooning of bloody corpses in search of the uninfected. It was the start of something big, something that wouldn't be stopped.

And at the centre of it all, a little old woman sat, scared and alone; unaware of the part she'd played in the end of the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Julianne Snow is the author of the *Days with the Undead* series and *Glimpses of the Undead*. She is the founder of Zombieholics Anonymous and the Publicist and Co-Founder of Sirens Call Publications. Writing in the realms of speculative fiction, Julianne has roots that go deep into horror and is a member of the Horror Writers Association. With pieces of short fiction in various publications, Julianne always has a few surprises up her sleeves. Be sure to check out *The Carnival 13*, a collaborative round-robin novella for charity which she contributed to and helped to spearhead which was released in October 2013.

Twitter: @CdnZmbiRytr
Blog: Days with the Undead



Trick or Treat Reyes Stone

Halloween had always been Lucy's favorite holiday. She loved the idea of scaring people. But more importantly Lucy found it to be the perfect holiday for exacting revenge. And this year was no different.

Lucy inherited her Halloween spirit from her parents. They loved Halloween as well and used the holiday to display their very unique and life like decorations and this year Lucy would be adding one more item to their collection.

"We'll be at the house at 8pm," Lucy said. "Is everything ready?"

"Don't worry, everything is set," her mother said. "Will she be coming?"

"I spoke to her earlier," Lucy answered. "I'll get John to meet her in secret."

"She'll get what she deserves soon enough," said her father. "And what about him?"

"From what I can gather, there's no sign of him being unfaithful. He told me what happened, when he didn't have to. Besides we weren't actually together when it happened."

"Okay, party starts at 8pm and ends at 11pm," her father said. "That leaves us one hour."

"We'll see you tonight," she said as John walked into the bedroom. "Bye mom, bye dad."

She looked over at her boyfriend, "Party starts at 8pm."

"I don't know about this costume," he said holding it up.

"You're Dracula and I'm your vampire bride. What's wrong with it?" Lucy asked.

"Don't you think people are going to read too much into it?"

"Are you afraid people are going to take this as a wedding hint?" she said.

"Well yeah, don't you?"

"It's a Halloween party. I think people would consider it a wedding hint if we showed up wearing a wedding dress and a tux."

"Ok, you win," he said kissing her.

"Lilly will be joining us," Lucy said. "She's going to be a bitch, I mean a witch."

"Not a big difference if you ask me," John said.

"Well, they're two different words, with different meanings. But she plays both roles so well," she said.

"Do we really have to take her?" he asked.

Lucy could read him like a book. He wasn't thrilled to be in the same area with her and Lucy understood why. Since his mistake she noticed Lilly being more flirtatious than usual.

"She's been lonely since Rick left her."

"I know Lilly's your friend and I made a mistake but she's relentless."

"I understand, I really do," she said. "But trust me when I say, she'll get what she deserves soon enough."

Lucy did understand John's feelings. He had made a mistake and Lilly hasn't let him forget about it or even move on from it. No matter how hard he tried and Lucy knew he was trying, Lilly was there as a constant reminder.

"We should start getting ready," she said. "I'm going to take a shower, would you like to join me?"

At that moment his phone rang and she had a pretty good idea who it was.

"Don't worry about the phone," Lucy said heading into the bathroom. She stopped at the door, took off her shirt and turned around, "So, are you coming?"

She watched as his eyes grew hungry for her and he began removing his clothes.

Lucy and John had been together for two years. They had their share of arguments but nothing like the one they had a month ago. They had argued to the point of breaking up. It was four days later when the truth finally came out.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Lucy asked.

"I don't like to burden you with meaningless crap about work," John said. "I just..."

"You just kept it inside and kept building it up," she said. "And this is the result of all that frustration."

"I'm sorry; I don't want to lose you."

"Do you promise to talk to me about anything that's bothering you and I mean anything?"

"I promise."

"Ok..."

"Wait, there's something I need to tell you before we resume our relationship."

"Okay."

Lucy sat down and listened as he explained what had happened between Lilly and him.

"I swear I never meant to."

"I know and I appreciate you telling me."

And she did. He didn't have to tell her but he did. What amazed Lucy was she wasn't angry with him but she was furious with Lilly.

Lucy and Lilly had been friends for ten years. She knew Lilly well enough to know that she didn't care if a man was taken or available Lilly was conniving enough to sleep with anyone. But when she slept with John, Lucy took that friendship and threw it right out the window. Lilly was going to pay for what she had done and Lucy was going to make sure of it.

"I need you to do me a favor tonight," Lucy said as they dressed.

"And what may that be," John said kissing her neck.

"I need you to meet with Lilly in the basement at 10:30pm."

She noticed he stopped kissing her when she said Lilly's name.

"No."

"Please, after tonight you won't ever have to see or deal with her again."

"You promise?"

"I guarantee it," she said with a smile.

On the way to pick up Lilly they rehearsed his answers to Lilly's possible questions. Lucy knew Lilly well enough to prep him properly; at least she hoped she did.

"Remember 10:30pm, basement," Lucy said as Lilly made her way to the car.

"What kept you two? Lilly asked shutting the car door.

"Oh, we had a shower," Lucy answered.

She noticed Lilly's expression change and it was not a happy one.

"How nice?" Lilly said between clinched teeth.

The rest of the trip was quiet. Lilly looked out the window and Lucy kept vigil, studying Lilly's body language carefully.

They pulled into Lucy's parent's driveway.

"How do your parents make everything look so real?" Lilly asked.

"Years of practice," Lucy answered.

Lucy got out of the car and greeted her parents.

"Happy Halloween, sweetheart," her father said.

"Happy Halloween Dad," Lucy said as she hugged him. "10:30pm, basement," she whispered in his ear.

He nodded, "You look great."

"I'm Dracula's bride," she said.

"Dracula, good to see you," her mother said to John.

She felt a little pinch on her bottom indicating to her that Lilly agreed to meet with him.

"Lilly good to see you again," her father said.

"Hi, how do you guys make everything look so real?" she asked.

"They are real," her mother answered.

Lucy's parents looked at each other and laughed.

"Sorry, we're late," John said.

"You're not late besides the party is just getting started."

By 9pm the house was filled with all sorts of monsters. Even Elvis made an appearance. There were enough people there not to notice two people missing, if they weren't paying attention. But Lucy was and at 10:15pm she noticed Lilly edging her way toward the basement door.

At 10:35pm, Lucy found Lilly and John in the basement. She stood in the shadows so they wouldn't see her.

"You showered with her," Lilly said.

"What do you want me to do?" he said. "She is my girlfriend."

"You could have said no."

"Don't you think that would make things suspicious? I'm a guy, to say no to my girlfriend is to say I'm cheating on her. Besides I don't have an excuse like women do every month."

"That's no excuse," Lilly said. "Did you screw her?"

As Lucy listened she was glad that she had gone over these questions with John earlier. He was answering them as they rehearsed and they were coming out as if he was thinking about them as Lilly asked. It gave Lucy confidence that she'd able to leave them alone soon.

"Don't do this," he said.

"Did you?"

"Yes, I did."

"I left Rick for you and you're still with her."

"I made a mistake, I love Lucy," John said. "What do you want from me?"

"What...what do I want?" she said. "I want you to leave her."

"I won't."

Lucy looked down at her watch. It was 10:50pm. She couldn't believe how much time had passed. She hurried back upstairs. Her parents were saying their last good-byes to their guest.

"Great party, see you next year."

"Bye George. Thanks for coming," her father said.

She waited for her parents to come back in the house before lowering the music.

"Ready," she whispered to them.

They nodded.

"We've got one hour, lets get started," Lucy said.

Lucy began calling for John. As she edged her way toward the basement.

"John!" she called.

"Lucy down here!" she heard Lilly say.

Lucy opened the basement door, "Lilly is that you?"

"Something's wrong with John."

Lucy ran down the stairs and was shocked to see John lying on the floor. She never imagined this outcome. The plan was for him to come up from the basement when she called, not her to go down and him lying on the floor.

"John," she looked over at Lilly, "What happened?"

"I don't know. I came down here to get a little rest and I found him like this."

"Lucy, are you down there?" her mother asked.

"Mom, get Dad; I need his help fast!"

She saw how shocked her parents were to see John lying on the floor.

"What happened?"

"I don't know, Lilly said she found him this way."

"Turn him over, gently," her father said.

The first thing Lucy noticed was the bump on the left side of his head. Lucy began looking around the room for anything that stood out of place. It didn't take long to find. Her father's wood pile had been touched.

"Let's get him upstairs," Lucy looked over at Lilly.

You bitch. How could you hit him? You'll pay for this and I think I've decided how.

As soon as they got John upstairs, her mother went down to the kitchen to make some drinks. Before she left, Lucy asked her mother to do something before Lilly and she got back downstairs.

"Lilly you look like you've been crying, are you ok?"

"I'm fine. I think I should..."

"Have a drink," Lucy said kindly.

"Dad, will you need me?" she asked.

"No," he said. "I'm going to clean up his wound and bandage it up. You ladies go on. I'll be down in a few."

"Okay, we'll be downstairs if you need us."

Lucy and Lilly went downstairs to the kitchen. Lucy's mother had the drinks ready.

"Mom, Lilly wants to know how you make your decorations look so real," Lucy said.

Lucy led Lilly outside with Lucy's mother behind. Once outside Lucy began the tour.

"Everything out here is real," she said.

"Real?" Lilly repeated, "Very funny."

"That one over there," said Lucy's mother. "Was an ex-boyfriend of mine, I ran him over with my car when I found out he was cheating on me."

Lucy guided Lilly's attention to a skeleton couple sitting on a bench.

"Those two there, are my best friend Jane and my ex-boyfriend Jacob," Lucy said. "I found them making out, so I gave them all eternity to do it."

Lucy noticed Lilly's expression change.

"You know the one thing I hate is having someone close betray me."

"I didn't want to--he did it," Lilly struggled to say. "He came on to me, really."

"Who are you trying to convince you or me?" she said. "Besides as the saying goes it takes two to tango."

Lucy looked at Lilly, she couldn't help but smile when she saw the fear in Lilly's eyes.

"Lilly," she said. "Then why have you been calling him non-stop? Why do I see your phone number in his phone?"

"I don't know but you should ask him," Lilly said.

Lucy looked at her with a smile, then smacked Lilly hard across the face. She watched as Lilly lost her balance and hit her shoulder against one of the headstones.

"Say 'hi' to grandma," Lucy said with a smile.

She read fear all over Lilly and liked it.

"You know, mom," she said.

"What's that?"

"You don't have anything without a head missing or a witch burned at the stake."

Lucy looked down at Lilly, "Which would you prefer; to be burned to death or to lose your head?"

"Sweetheart, did you forget about your aunt Sue."

"Beheading it is."

Lucy reached around the stone and picked up the ax her mother had placed earlier.

"Now hold still Lilly, I want a clean cut."

"Lucy, I've been your friend for ten years."

"That doesn't mean a damn thing when you're trying to steal my boyfriend or knock him over the head with a 2x4."

Lilly got up and tried to run; she ran into Lucy's father instead and fell back down.

"Hey Lilly," Lucy said.

As Lilly turned to look at Lucy, with one quick swing of the ax, Lilly's head went flying off.

"Dad, what time is it?" she asked.

"11:58pm."

"Two minutes to spare, cool. How's John?"

"He's fine. He should be waking up soon."

"Let's clean up and get her ready for next year."

It wasn't long after Lucy got out of the shower that John woke. She wanted to be the first thing he saw.

"How are you feeling?"

"Ok, I guess. A little headache," he answered.

"Well you do have a bump."

"Where is everyone?"

"I think Mom and Dad are asleep and Lilly's gone," Lucy said.

"Gone," John repeated.

"Thank you for meeting with her."

"Yeah, it was painful."

"I know and I'm sorry. I never would have thought she'd hit you."

"But everything is fine now; she won't bother me, us anymore?" he asked.

"You have nothing to worry about," she said. "I'll get you some aspirins for your headache."

Lucy left the room and headed down to the kitchen; her parents came up from the basement.

"Well, we have a new skeleton to display next year," her father said.

"Shh, not so loud, I told John you were asleep," she whispered.

"Right, sorry," her father whispered.

"So, she's ready."

"Yes," her parents both whispered.

"Well, I'm going to take this up to John, we'll see you later."

Lucy had kept her promise; Lilly would never bother John again. She noticed how much more relaxed he became. Their relationship continued to get better. By the time Halloween came around again they were engaged.

"No basement trips this year," he said pulling into Lucy's parent's driveway.

"Only if you want to be alone with me."

"Now that I don't mind at all," he replied kissing her hand.

Lucy got out to greet her parents.

"Wonder woman," her mother said. "I like it."

"So, John's Superman."

Lucy nodded.

Lucy began searching for Lilly. When John reached her, she turned to him, "Say hi to Lilly," she said pointing at Lilly's skeleton.

"We'll make sure to send you an invitation," he said.

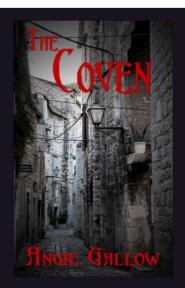
The four looked at each other and laughed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Reyes grew up in the Bronx, NY. She has an AAS degree in Computerized Office Technology and a BBA degree in Business Management. She has had stories published in Sirens Call Publications E-zine issues Feb. & Oct. '13, in Romance Magazine Aug. '14 and Over My Dead Body Sept. '14. Reyes now lives in Georgia with her boyfriend and their daughter.

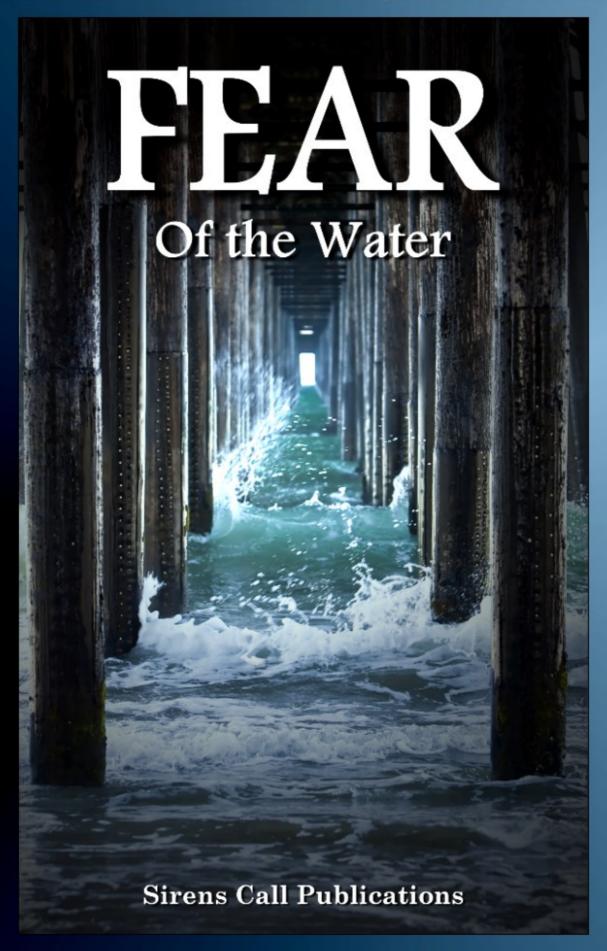
Facebook: Reyes Stone

The Coven

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo and iTunes



Not afraid of the water? Perhaps you should be...



AVAILABLE IN PRINT & EBOOK ON AMAZON!

Pumpkin Patch Mark Cassell

As sisters, Mary-Ann and I have always been close. Even though she's always the first for everything, including Ma and Pa's love. It's never bothered me, I'll always love her. We live with Grandpa too, but he doesn't say much these days—not since Grandma died last year.

When Mary-Ann found Grandpa's memoirs I told her not to read them, and when she used the paper to make her Halloween costume she said she'd hang me up with the scarecrow if I ever told. Her papier mache effort was much better than mine—I ended up settling for a not-so-scary paper bag over my head. She'd made a pumpkin mask, and it was amazing. Everyone said so and maybe even Grandpa smiled. It covered her whole head and looked like a real pumpkin. I couldn't help thinking how Mary-Ann had slapped the glue over Grandpa's handwriting.

One afternoon, Mary-Ann sat in the pumpkin patch wearing it. I first thought she was looking for ideas on how to paint it. You know, to get the right colour and pattern and stuff, but it looked finished already.

Halloween was still weeks away, yet she always wore it. One evening, I followed her out to the pumpkin patch and heard voices. She spoke with someone whose deep voice sounded a lot like Grandpa's. As the sky darkened and the clouds removed the moonlight, I saw Grandma. The cold October air snatched from my throat. She wore that flowery dress of hers and didn't look dead. She hovered above the ground. I wanted to run to her, to hug her, but the mud sucked at my feet.

Grandma leaned toward Mary-Ann and grasped her pumpkin head. Then my sister collapsed and Grandma vanished. The papier mache pumpkin rolled away and the moon returned.

Finally, I tugged my feet free and ran over to it. I snatched it up, not even seeing if Mary-Ann was okay. I pulled the pumpkin over my own little head—it didn't really fit—and I could smell Grandpa's tobacco. I gagged and quickly yanked it off.

Mary-Ann was getting to her feet. She rubbed her head.

When we returned to the farmhouse hand in hand, the sound of Ma's misery swept toward us. Pa sat on the rocking chair outside the front porch.

"Grandpa died," he murmured.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Mark Cassell lives in a rural part of the UK with his wife and a number of animals. He often dreams of dystopian futures, peculiar creatures, and flitting shadows. Primarily a horror writer, his steampunk, fantasy, and SF stories have featured in several anthologies and ezines. His debut novel, *The Shadow Fabric*, is a supernatural story and is released this month in time for Halloween.

Twitter: @Mark Cassell

Blog: http://www.beneath.co.uk

Fright Night Liz Hedgecock

"Come on, Craig!"

Jenna, aka Vampirella, waited. Pumpkinhead must be taking a leak in the bushes. He was a drag, shuffling beside her in that stupid costume, more like eight than fourteen.

Almost nine o'clock. Dad would go mad if she was late. She shook the candy bucket. At last Pumpkinhead ran out, and caught her from behind in a bear hug. This was more like it!

"Ah!" Jenna's hand flew to her neck. Under the streetlight, her fingers were red.

Craig screamed as he emerged, zipping up, from the bushes and saw Jenna fall.

Then it stalked towards him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Liz Hedgecock divides her time between the dungeon of work, rearing children (occasionally demonic), running (sometimes from zombies) and writing, which is probably the most normal part. She writes short stories and is currently attempting a longer one.

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An Interview with Carson Buckingham

This month, Sirens Call Publications is pleased to feature an interview with Carson Buckingham, author of the recently released Gothic Revival. Carson is a Connecticut native who has been living in Arizona for the past ten years. Her childhood was unhappy and complicated, and as a result of the misery she endured during her formative years, rejection and failure to fit in are common themes in much her work.

Carson attended college and received advanced degrees. She's owned a motorcycle, lived aboard a sailboat for a couple of years, and has jumped out of planes more times than she can count. She's been married more than once and collects autographed photos of comedians (she even did a stint of her own as a stand-up comedian!). Rodney Dangerfield was a personal friend.

Carson reads voraciously and writes constantly. She has a more than a few pets, is a gardening fanatic, plays several instruments, speaks Russian, and sings passably—imitating Cher, Olivia Newton John, Karen Carpenter, Cyndi Lauper, and Janis Joplin rather well.

Carson owns 7,000 books—interested in everything and her library is quite eclectic. She doesn't trust people who have no books.

If she had it all to do over again, Carson probably would be a CSI or a Medical Examiner, while writing thrillers on her own time.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Carson, what made you decide to become a writer?

Carson Buckingham: I've always enjoyed writing. Once I discovered how cathartic it can be, there was no stopping me. Cheaper than a psychiatrist, it acts as a sort of therapy, in a way. As I write, I figure out and sometimes even resolve all kinds of issues. Sometimes my characters resolve them in a story. It makes me think more than any other pursuit. That may seem like a rather obvious statement, but I've read plenty by writers who don't seem to think at all; so it's really not as foolish as it sounds.

SCP: Tell us about Gothic Revival.

Carson: Well, it took me five years to write it—stops and starts, with life intervening. Much of it is autobiographical. I think the back of the cover blurb covers it about as well as I could re-phrasing and possibly spoiling it, so here it is:

Alex and Leo Renfield are a husband and wife contractor team who've recently moved to the village of Woodhaven, Connecticut to escape the chaos of life in New York. Pretty close to broke, they meet Theodora Hamilton, a somewhat unsavory and odd individual, who offers them an astronomical amount of money to repaint the first floor of her family home.

But along with the huge paycheck comes a set of unsettling rules that must be followed explicitly if they are to accept the offer; one of which is they must reside on the property having no direct contact with the outside world until the job is complete.

Is Theodora Hamilton just an eccentric woman with a peculiar way of doing things, or is there a more sinister agenda that Alex and Leo are unaware of? What exactly does she have in store for this down-on-their-luck couple who have no choice but to accept the offer and the strange requirements that come along with it?

Gothic Revival would make a marvelous movie, I think.

SCP: What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about Gothic Revival before they read it?

Carson: All the technical information in it is completely accurate, because I research everything to death before I write it into the story. I am a research freak and I have to be careful not to lose myself researching.

SCP: What is your writing process? Do you consider yourself to be a planner or a pantser?

Carson: I am neither completely one nor the other, but a blending of both. When I sit down at the computer, the only thing I know for sure is who the primary characters are (I do write up short bios and Q&As about their motivations) and how the story will end. Then, I read the notes over once or twice, sit down, and I write to that ending.

SCP: What is the hardest challenge that you have faced as a writer?

Carson: Family/significant other support and encouragement. In the many years before I married my husband, Stij (who is wonderfully supportive), no one I was close to or related to thought my writing was anything but a time-wasting hobby at best and a complete waste of time at worst. There was discussion of 'real jobs' and no one ever bothered to read what I wrote. It's a minor miracle that I didn't just chuck the whole idea and become a dental hygienist, or something.

SCP: In your opinion, what sets Gothic Revival apart from other books of the same genre?

Carson: I do a lot more with dialog in my writing than most writers do. I feel that it helps move the plot along without getting bogged down in page after page of exposition or description in general. Draggy pacing is insidious, and is a writing pitfalls I do my best to avoid. It's easier, I think, to show your reader what's going on with a conversation rather than telling him or her using narrative. I also write shorter chapters than most other writers. It makes the book easier to dip into when the reader may be pressed for time, or prefers to close the book at the end of a chapter. Gothic Revival is a long book from the page count standpoint, but it is a surprisingly quick read because of the way in which it's written. My writing style is friendly, chatty, and accessible—not to say that there aren't some truly scary sections in the book—there are several of them.

SCP: If you could cast Gothic Revival, who would you choose to play your main characters?

Carson: It's funny you should ask that, because I mentally cast every book I write.

Here's the *Gothic* Revival cast: Leo Renfield: Hugh Jackman Alex Renfield: Sandra Bullock

Theodora Hamilton: Jamie Lee Curtis

Dr. Orbon: Michael Emerson Dr. Earle Munson: Terry Quinn Cooper Black: Deep Roy



SCP: Are you reading anything right now, or have you read anything recently that is worth mentioning?

Carson: The last thing I read that was worth mentioning is *Green Tsunami* by L.L. Soares and his wife. A corker of a novella with an unusual twist about the end of days. Right now, I am in the midst of *Doctor Sleep* by Stephen King. It took 184 pages for it to begin to get interesting. I usually give a book no more than 50 pages to grab me before setting is aside for Bookman's, but I allowed King a few more. Still not too sure about it. I think King has done better work.

SCP: Who are some of your favorite authors? Favorite novels?

Carson: My favorite authors are:

Terry Pratchett—I love his Discworld series and his expertise at satire. If Mark Twain were reincarnated, he would be Terry Pratchett.

Mark Twain—My favorite curmudgeon. If Terry Pratchett were reincarnated, he'd be Mark Twain.

Edgar Allan Poe—The true master of horror. When I read it in grade school, "The Tell-Tale Heart" scared me for weeks afterwards—especially since we had a family friend who had an eye just like the one in the story. I could never look at him the same way again.

Ray Bradbury—this man is the reason I wanted to become a writer. His word paintings easily rival Renoir, Seurat, and Manet put together. I will often re-read sentences or entire paragraphs aloud, in order to savor the sweetness of the words and hear their beautiful music at the same time.

Neil Gaiman—Mr. Imagination! Love the way this man thinks.

Maeve Binchy — Maeve Binchy was a master at fashioning characters. Nobody I've read is better.

Donald E. Westlake—a comic crime caper humorist beyond compare. Pick up his Dortmunder novels if you want a good laugh.

M.R. James—King of the ghost stories.

Charles L. Grant—got me hooked on horror, along with F. Paul Wilson.

And, of course, Shirley Jackson--I feel that *The Haunting of Hill House* is the best piece of horror ever written. She, too, is a masterful word painter... in the night... in the dark...

I also enjoy reading biographies. I think it's always a good idea to read about other folks—it has a way of resurfacing when I am creating characters.

Favorite novels:

The Haunting of Hill House (Shirley Jackson)

The Graveminder (Melissa Marr)

The Regulators (Stephen King as Richard Bachman)

White Oleander (Janet Fitch)

All Westlake's Dortmunder novels

All Pratchett's Discworld novels

Mark Twain's Sketches New and Old

Little Voice (Lindqvist)

Mary Reilly (Valerie Martin)

Grange House (Sarah Blake)

The Crimes of Charlotte Bronte (James Tully)

SCP: How do you define success as a writer? Have you been successful?

Carson: Well, I have succeeded in getting publishers to offer me royalties to publish my work, and some folks out there (you know who you are, and thank you!) have bought it and enjoyed it, so that is a measure of success. I wish I could be making enough money at it to write full-time, so I suppose that until I can give up my 'day' job, I haven't quite made it, from the professional standpoint. I am a skilled writer—now I just have to get folks to notice.

SCP: Do you have words of wisdom about writing that you want to pass on to novelists and writers out there who are just starting out?

Carson: Sure—don't think you know everything—be willing to listen to those who have been in the trenches longer than you have. If they are kind enough to offer you advice, consider it carefully before you reject it out of hand. Know your ending before you write the first line. Don't wait for inspiration—just go to work. I do not believe in writer's block. Read, read—anything and everything. Keep a pad and pen in your shirt pocket and jot down things that occur to you throughout the day. Write every day—once you get into this habit, you can easily write 250 words in 15 minutes, and that adds up fast. Not having hours on end to write is no excuse not to do it. Always print out a hard copy. Always store your back-ups offsite. Don't jump at the first offer.

SCP: What should readers walk away from your book knowing? How should they feel?

Carson: I don't presume to tell anyone how they should feel. If the book does its job, the characters ought to stay with the readers for a while after they turn the final page, though. If the characters are conceived properly, they ought to become like friends or family to the reader, because the reader knows them so well. I would hope the book would touch the heart... just a little... and cause a few chills up the spine, some laughter, maybe. Maybe some tears. Kind of like life.

As to what they should know? Maybe that they just read a good book that they'll want to read again sometime? I don't teach adults anything that they don't already know. I just try to tell a good story, remind them that real life has a little bit of everything, that nobody's perfect, and you just do the best you can to protect those you love.

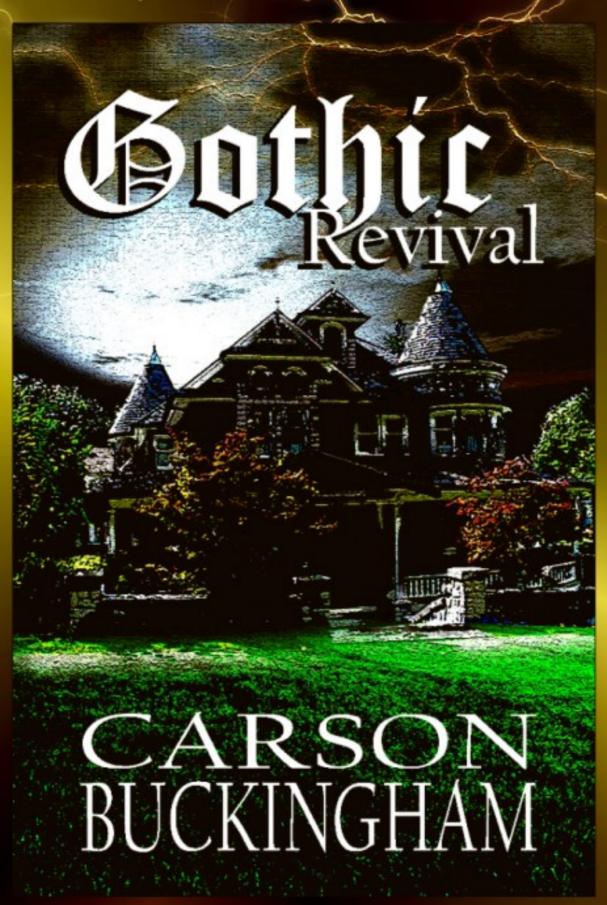
I don't have lofty goals for my books. I'd be more likely to be elected Pope than to receive a Nobel Prize, and I know it. My books are simply good stories that I hope will engage readers enough to entertain them and, in the end, leave them happy that they parted with good money to buy and read my work. Stephen King once said that he regards his work, and I paraphrase here, as the literary equivalent of a Big Mac and fries. I feel that way about my work. I want people to feel satisfied when they read it—like eating a tasty comfort food. What's better than that?

Thank you Carson for taking the time to answer our questions!

Stay tuned for an excerpt from *Gothic Revival*...



"Excuse me, did I hear you were looking for work?" but with the job come a series of unusual conditions...



Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, & iStore

An Excerpt from *Gothic Revival* by Carson Buckingham

Chapter One

"Happy Anniversary, honey!" Alex cried, throwing her arms around her husband, Leo, as he emerged from his Silverado.

"Happy Anniversary yourself," he replied, kissing the top of her head. He held her with one arm because the other was behind his back.

"What's back there?"

Leo looked defeated. "It's not much, and I'm sorry it's not. You deserve so much more than this," he said, revealing the huge bouquet of spring flowers.

"They're just beautiful! Where did you get them?"

"They were stolen with love, let's put it that way."

"You didn't."

"Oh, yes I did."

"The park in Southfield?"

"That flowerbed needed some thinning, anyhow."

Alex laughed out loud, picturing this giant of a man sneaking around the park, picking flowers. "These flowers mean more to me than anything you could buy from a store, Leo. Thank you."

"Let's go inside before the neighbors call the cops. I hear you get three-to-five for flower stealing," Leo said.

"Okay. I have something for you, too."

"Well, yeah, I was counting on that."

"I mean a present."

"So do I."

"One track mind."

"I like that track," he said, slapping her butt.

Once he was seated in the living room and the flowers were in water and on the table, she handed him his present. "Hope you like it."

"Sweetie, we don't have the money for you to be buying me anything."

"I know. I made it while you were out looking for jobs."

His smile could light up the world. "You did? You really made something?"

"Yes, but I guess you could say it's sort of a self-serving gift," Alex said.

"It's almost too pretty to open." Leo fingered the delicate pale blue rice paper wrapping. "Almost." He tore off the paper and metallic silver bow. "Oh, this is great! You made us a sign."

"Yep. I used the router and it was easy. Before I met you, I hand-carved everything."

Leo flipped the sign over and laughed when he saw that Alex had burned a small "AR" into the lower right corner at the back of it. "Aha! Now you're learning," he exclaimed.

Leo made it a practice to put his initials somewhere on all the woodwork he did. They were unobtrusive and you'd have to be looking for them to see them, but they were always there somewhere. Alex thought it was a nice idea. Why should artists have a corner on signing their work?

"You're such a natural with wood, Alex. You're going to be a huge help once we get some work to do. 'October's End Remodeling, Inc. Leo & Alex Renfield,'" Leo read from the two-lined sign.

"Speaking of work, how did the estimate go?"

Leo sighed. "Oh, you know. It's a little old lady who thinks she wants her whole bathroom remodeled, and I spend forty-five minutes with her before she tells me that her son-in-law does 'this sort of thing' as a sideline, but just can't seem to find the time to do her job."

"Well, that doesn't sound bad, if she needs to get it done. Could be work for us."

Leo shook his head. "Maybe, but unlikely. I've seen this kind of thing a million times before. I spend my time going out to talk to her, I spend my time writing up an estimate, and she takes the estimate to her son-in-law, or

whoever, and he looks at it and says, 'I'll do it for five hundred less,' and that's that as far as October's End goes. All she wanted was an estimate she can take somewhere else. Forget the fact that we use the best materials and have skills honed over most of my life and part of yours. And forget the fact that if sonny boy screws up the job, she has absolutely no recourse. All she'll see is that the job is going to cost her five hundred or three hundred to whatever amount less, and she'll go with that."

"Crap. It sounded so good, too," Alex sighed, punching the sofa cushion.

"Don't worry, sweetie. Something's bound to break soon. I've gone on a dozen estimates over the past couple of weeks. One of 'em's going to hit, I just know it. But for now, why don't you go put on that pretty purple silk dress I gave you for your birthday? We're going out to celebrate tonight."

"Oh, honey, that's a nice thought, but how can we? Dinners out are a bit extravagant right now, don't you think? I can whip something up here... really," Alex said.

"No way. I found a really chea... inexpensive place to get terrific Chinese food. All the area contractors go there. I heard about it from a fella at Home Depot."

"Then let's give it a try. However it is, tonight it will be fabulous."

"That's my girl." Leo was so pleased that he forgot all about how odd it was that there was only one person in the entire Home Depot store.

Chapter Two

"So where is this place?" Alex asked as they bumped along down the road made rough with winter frost heaves and DWP—Drinking While Plowing.

"It's on Main Street, just past the Town Hall. It's been there forever, from what I heard."

"I hope the menu has evolved some," Alex said.

"What do you mean?"

"Velociraptor with duck sauce somehow doesn't appeal to me."

Leo chuckled. "Your friends warned me about you."

"I never had friends. I was too poor."

"They said, 'That girl will always have an answer for everything. It may not make sense, but she'll always have an answer."

"Even if I had friends, they never would have understood me."

"Half the time, I don't understand you!"

"And there we have the reason I was working as a stand-up comic when I met you. Nobody has to understand you—they just have to laugh," Alex said.

"You were very funny."

"What's this? Past tense?"

Leo shook his head in mock resignation. "Not at all. You're still really funny—especially when you get up in the morning."

"Low blow there, hubby—but that was a good one."

"I know I've asked you this before, but how come you stopped? Stand-up, I mean. You never really explained that."

Alex gazed out the window and thought back over her three-year career as a stand-up on the Boston/New York circuit. Jerry Seinfeld, before he hit big, was the closer on her first open mike night and had been kind enough to give her a few pointers after she died so hideously onstage that actual death seemed to pale by comparison. After Jerry's pep talk, helpful hints, and the loan of a handkerchief in order to make her mascara look a little less Alice Cooper-ish, she gamely gave it another try, and was a bit more successful. As the weeks passed, she got better and better, the laughs got louder and longer, and before she knew it, she was getting paid. After a year, she quit her day job and spent two more wonderful years as the most popular new comic on the circuit. It had been great fun, and she got to rub

elbows with the likes of George Carlin, Rich Little, and even Jonathan Winters once. Sid Caesar was in the audience the night she took the "Best New Comic" honors at *Catch a Rising Star* in New York, and he actually came backstage to congratulate her. When two comedians in the exclusive New York Friar's Club offered to sponsor her for membership, she was convinced she was looking at a career.

Then she met Paul Rottiger—a killer comic who lived for his craft. As she got to know Paul, she discovered that the reason he lived for comedy was because comedy was all he had.

But it hadn't always been that way.

Before he hit it big, Paul had a lovely wife and two great kids, a house in the suburbs, a dog, a station wagon—the whole bit. Once he was in demand, however, he was working more and home much less—and when he was home, he was usually sleeping. He was never around for weekends, holidays, or his kids' birthday parties; so to make the loneliness more bearable, he found himself a new best friend named Jack Daniels. Then when he needed to get bright for a show after more and more frequent evenings with his buddy, the inevitable cocaine habit followed.

After a while, his wife developed a habit, too. She began habitually seeing other men until she found one who wanted to stick around.

One night, Paul came home to the tired cliché of a cold, unoccupied house and an envelope bearing his hastily scrawled name propped on the table in the hall.

The story of Paul's meteoric rise and earth-shattering personal fall terrified Alex, and she realized that it wasn't going to be possible to have it all. It would be either be a life where comedy was king or one in which she worked a day job somewhere and a man she couldn't live without took priority one. After some soul searching, Alex had decided that she'd postpone the idea of marriage and just date casually, and concentrate on comedy for a few more years.

Then she came home one night and found Leo's email from Yahoo Personals and the rest was history. She never told him that she gave up comedy because she valued him more. He'd have felt utterly awful about it. He'd seen her show a year before they met and he praised it to the skies when, through the many emails they exchanged, he discovered that she was "the" Alex Bluestone. And she was good at her craft. She was very good. But she was also smart enough to know when she had someone worth keeping, and the comedy career was shelved without regret or ceremony.

"How come I stopped? I never stopped. I still have one hell of a sense of humor. I married you, didn't I?

"Where do I go to surrender?"

At that moment, they pulled up in front of the restaurant. Alex looked at the eatery, then at Leo.

"This is a joke, right?"

"Behave."

"On, c'mon, Leo! 'Harry Wang's'?"

"It gets worse. His wife's name is 'Wing," Leo said.

That did it. Hilarity reigned in the truck, necessitating much eye wiping and nose blowing before adequate composure set in. When they could say, "Wing Wang" to each other without laughing, they left the Silverado and strolled through the front door.

"Goo' evening," said a small bespectacled woman behind the podium. "Reservation, preese?"

"No, no reservation. It's our anniversary, though. Could we possibly get a table?" Leo asked with a blinding smile.

"You bilda?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Bilda, bilda, hamma, nail bilda. You bilda?"

"Oh! Yes, we're both builders."

The small woman leaned forward and peered through her thick lenses at Alex. "You bilda?' she asked, her disbelief clear.

Alex grinned. "Yes, ma'am, I am."

"Porrite bilda, too! Goo' for you. Tayba righ' this way," she said, selecting four menus from the rack behind her in a single graceful movement.

She led them across a carpet thick enough to hide a Pekingese to a booth with a heavy antique rose linen tablecloth and matching napkins. The entire restaurant bespoke of the understated sophistication that many exclusive restaurants try for and fail to achieve. The utensils were sterling silver and polished to a mirror-like sheen. A single white taper in an elaborate cut glass holder lent the final touch to the overall harmony and richness of the unfortunately named *Harry Wang's*.

Alex and Leo slid into the booth and the tiny lady placed the menus in front of them. Next, with a nearly undetectable flip of a well-practiced wrist, she popped open their intricately folded napkins and placed them on their laps. How she managed to do this last elegantly was a mystery. She then produced a gold lighter and leaned toward the candle

Leo stayed her hand. "Please don't light it."

"No canda?"

"No. thank you."

She gazed at Leo, clearly perplexed, but the lighter disappeared into a pocket of her chrysanthemum motif silk dress of burgundy and ivory. She shrugged her doll-like shoulders and smiled. "Be righ' back, then." She vanished into the kitchen.

Alex sighed. "It's too bad you don't like candlelight, Leo. It's so romantic."

"Just one of my little quirks, sweetness."

The accommodating woman reappeared at their booth holding a Waterford crystal bud vase containing two perfect blood red roses. She reached across Alex and removed the candle, replacing it with the fresh flowers.

"There! Das one fo' each of you. You take when you go."

"How incredibly nice of you! Thank you very much," Alex cried, jumping up and giving their small hostess an impulsive hug.

"You wercome, Miss porrite bilda," she said into Alex's shoulder.

When Alex resumed her seat the woman said, "Now, we find ou' who we are. My name Wing Wang."

Alex grabbed her napkin and coughed into it.

"She okay?"

"Absolutely. Just a cold. I'm Leo Renfield, and this is my wife, Alex."

Alex composed herself enough to say, "Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Wang."

"Ah, so porrite! You cor' me 'Wing,' I cor' you 'Arrex'. What kind bilda you, Reo?"

Leo was having a little trouble with her accent, so Alex spoke up. "We're both interior remodelers, Wing. The name of our business is 'October's End Remodeling'." Alex withdrew the slim leather card holder she always kept with her. "As a matter of fact, here's our business card for you."

"Nah fo' me. Put up on board down hawhway. Jobs there, too. You need jobs?"

"Yes, we do," Leo said.

"You rook there, you find. You got bilda ricense?"

"Yes, ma'am," Leo replied.

"Ah, you porrite, too! Show ricense, preese."

Leo took his wallet size copy out and handed it to her. She studied it for some time, then handed it back to Leo, and smiling brightly, said, "Okay, you bildas. You get specia' menu. You order dlink now. Then boy come take food order. How many years you mallied?"

"It's our first anniversary," Alex answered, completely charmed by their diminutive hostess.

"Okay! Dlinks on house—bes' Baijiu fo' you." Wing patted both their hands, then swept silently across the lush burgundy carpet and was lost to sight around the corner.

Alex looked at Leo. "God, I feel so guilty about laughing. She's so adorable. What a welcome!" She surveyed her surroundings a bit more closely. The walls were adorned with ornately-framed original watercolor paintings, nature-themed and done, of course, in Chinese brushwork. The wallpaper was flocked in a subtle dark burgundy pattern, like the carpet, creating an atmosphere replete with good taste and opulence without being obnoxious or tacky about it. "Can we even afford half-price dinners here? This place looks really expensive."

"No worries, my dear. We'll eat for next to nothing—take a look at the menu."

Alex scanned the bill of fare. "But how can they do this? These prices are bargain basement. It certainly doesn't jibe with the way the place looks."

"They have two different menus. Didn't you notice that she picked up four menus, but only gave us two? The guy at Home Depot told me that five years ago an arsonist torched this place and burned it to the ground. It was a going concern, family owned and operated, and the family lived upstairs. They lost everything they had, but no one was killed, thank God. The Wangs are well liked in this town, so the lumberyard donated materials, and area contractors donated their time and rebuilt the place for them. They never forgot that kindness, so licensed contractors and the lumberyard people get to eat here for less than half-price as long as the Wangs are in business. Pretty wonderful all the way around, isn't it?"

"What a great story. I'm glad we moved to a town that takes care of its own like that. I thought that only happened on television. So what about the second menus?"

"Everybody else gets those—and the prices in those menus reflect every inch of this place."

The Baijiu arrived. The waiter, who looked about fifteen, said nothing as he poured the clear liquid into rosebud-shaped shot glasses, then placed the small ceramic bottle on the table. With a shy smile, he bowed to the Renfields, then glided away.

"Baijiu. Do you suppose it's like Sake?" Alex asked.

"Haven't the slightest," Leo replied.

Alex lifted her glass. "Well, honey, a toast to the first of many wonderful years to come."

"I'll drink to that." Leo raised his glass, then took a small sip. "It's warm, but this stuff could knock Sake's block off."

Alex sipped. "Wow. You're right, it's really strong. Tastes familiar, though."

"I can't decide if it tastes more like rubbing alcohol or diesel fuel," Leo whispered.

"You rike Baijiu?" Wing asked, materializing tableside.

"It's very unusual. Thank you so much for it," Alex replied. "We've never heard of Baijiu before."

"Baijiu Chinese national dlink. This Maotai Baijiu, make from bean and wheat. Vely old formula. From Xia Dynasty."

"And how far back does that dynasty go?" Leo asked.

"Seven t'ousand year," Wing replied with a trace of low-key pride. "Rots of kinds of Baijiu, but you get best there is."

"Well, thank you for the good stuff," Leo said. "How about having a glass with us?"

"Ah, no, t'ank you, Reo. In my culture, women canna dlink Baijiu. Against tladition."

Alex looked stricken. "Is it all right for me to be drinking it?"

"You Chinese, too?" Wing asked, peering closely at Alex.

"No, I don't have that privilege," Alex replied

"Den is okie dokie," Wing said, patting Alex's arm.

"I'm sorry you can't join us, but thank you for honoring us with this special drink," Leo said.

"No probrem. You come eat here many times," Wing said.

"I think you'll be seeing a lot of us," Alex assured her.

"Good. I get waitah for you now."

There was only about fifteen minutes between the placing of their order and its arrival.

"General Tsao's Chicken," Alex said, shaking her head and rolling her eyes.

"I always get this when I go to a new Chinese place. This is my benchmark meal."

"Benchmark meal?"

"Sure. General Tsao's Chicken is my favorite, so I know what a good version of it should taste like. For me, it's a way of telling, right off, if the food here is any good," Leo explained. "Whereas you, on the other hand, always try something you've never had before. I don't think I've ever seen you order the same thing twice."

"Well, anyway, the price sure is right," Alex said, digging into her braised fish with shrimp sauce. She rolled her eyes. "Ambrosia!"

Leo chewed thoughtfully. "This is, without a doubt, the best General Tsao's I've ever had."

"Grad you rike!" Wing exclaimed, whispering into existence at Alex's left elbow, startling her so much that she almost upset her water glass. "Waitah bling specia' dish for you, cerebrate new customahs! Have specia' ingledients – orr have meanings. Here come now."

The waiter set the oblong dish down in the center of the table, and bowed once again. Wing smiled her approval, and then glanced at the just-delivered steaming platter.

Her almond eyes flew open and she reached over, grabbed the waiter by the back of the collar and frog marched him to the kitchen.

"What the hell just happened?"

"No idea. But this looks good, too," Alex said, indicating the plate. "Want some?"

"You bet," Leo said, holding out his plate.

Alex served them both, and they had hardly swallowed the first mouthful, when Wing reappeared, with the chef and the waiter in tow.

"I'm very sorry about the 'Good Fortune,'" the chef said sincerely and in perfect English, indicating the newly arrived food.

"I solly, too," echoed the waiter, just as sincerely, though not as perfectly.

"This nevah shou' happen! I take away now," Wing said, reaching for the dish.

"I don't understand," Leo said. "What's the matter?"

Wing glared at her two employees and dismissed them with a gesture more appropriate to shooing away flies. They both plodded back to the kitchen, heads hanging, looking like kicked puppies.

"This dish cor', 'Goo' Fortune.' Cor' that becau' food in it *mean* goo' fortune." She indicated each item as she continued, "Brack moss seaweed stand for rots of money, dly bean curd stand for happiness and money, too; bamboo shoot stand for evelything to be good in rife." Then she stopped her culinary tour, as a deeply troubled look clouded her broad, serene face.

After a beat, Alex asked, "And what about those little cubes there? What do they mean?"

"Ah... so. That what bad. Shou' never be in this dish. Bad meaning. Vely bad meaning."

"What does it mean, Wing?"

"White tofu," she said, shaking her head. "White, in China, stand for death. White tofu nevah put in this dish. A thousan' aporogies. I take now," she said, reaching for the platter. She looked as though she might cry.

Fearing that an order of mass hari-kari in the kitchen would shortly follow, Alex put her hand on Wing's outstretched arm and said, "Wing, it's fine. No offense taken. And look, we'll take the 'Good Fortune' that's on our plates and put it back into the one you're taking away. We haven't eaten any of it, so there's no harm done. Please don't worry and please tell our waiter and the chef that we aren't angry."

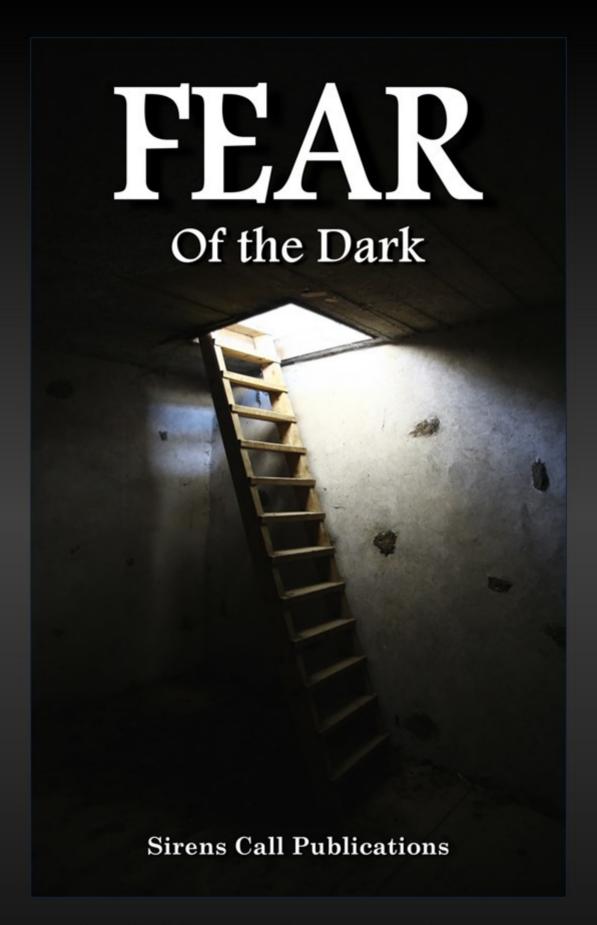
Wing looked at Alex with glistening eyes. "You goo' girl," she said as Alex and Leo scraped the 'Good Fortune' back onto its original charger. "Arex an' Reo mos' hono'ble." Wing took the plate and bowed low to them all the way back to the kitchen door.

"That was a nice lie you told," Leo said after Wing was out of earshot.

Alex chuckled. "They really take their symbols seriously, don't they? It's too bad, too, because the tofu was the best part of the mouthful I had."

"Yep. Oh, here comes Wing with a replacement 'Good Fortune."

From that point forward, the meal continued to be delicious and mercifully free of further drama.



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