


The Sirens Call

October 2015

issue #23



Bat-Shit Crazy for You!
Stories of those driven
to the brink of insanity
and beyond by love!

Featuring
Poetry, Short Stories of
2500 words or less,
& Flash Fiction

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John Mc Caffrey,
Author of
'Nora's Wish'

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Sevalina Ghoulies



Gavin shook his head, muttering to himself, "On the edge of a fucking swamp." *Okay, that's an exaggeration*, he thought. It was a private piece of land next to Simon's Creek, near the Big Sandy River; it stayed damp and shady so the single-wide stayed dank and musty and the garden never grew

"I told her," he said, thumping the steering wheel of his Chevy truck. "Stop asking me to do things, stop being so dependent. I'm your fucking ex-boyfriend!" He still felt guilty for breaking up with her; she'd been so quiet, so obsessed with him. "And so damn clingy. Of course she tried to off herself when I told her I was leaving." He turned slowly onto the long, winding, gravel road that led to the trailer park. "Why am I doing this again?"

'Please, Gavin, I need your help,' Aileen said. 'It'll be the last time, I promise,' she begged.

He pulled into her dirt driveway, behind her silver Hyundai, and turned off the ignition. Before he could completely exit the truck, he saw her skipping down the steps of her wooden porch. She was wearing tight denim capris pants and a yellow t-shirt that bulged and bounced.

"Gavin, thank you for coming," she gushed, her hands clasped as if in prayer. "I think I'm going crazy!"

He exited the truck, closed the door. He stuck his finger-tips into his jeans back pockets. He felt more annoyed and uncomfortable than he usually did, when he came to her 'rescue,' and his expression showed it.

"Oh, Gavin, don't worry. I remember what you told me. I'll try to be more independent, to do more by myself. I've entered a new world, I have new friends...."

"I don't mind helping you out sometimes," he interrupted, trying to ease the tension. "I'd do the same for anyone. But you call me every time you need to make a decision, or there's a noise outside at night."

"I know, I'm sorry. Won't happen again. Just this one last time, please? Could you take a look at something?" Her light brown hair was wavy and loose around her shoulders. Her hazel eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed

He felt the old attraction, like a vice tightening in his belly. *It takes two to make a co-dependent relationship*, he told himself. *You've got to be firm; you've got to put your foot down.* But he followed her as she walked rapidly around the side of her trailer.

"It's out back," she said over her shoulder. She extended her arms high, like wings, and wriggled her fingers.

It wasn't typical body language, even for Aileen. He wanted to leave. But he kept his cool and trailed after her, turned the corner after she did. He stopped short. "What the hell?" He scanned the entire backyard as it sloped down to the creek; it had turned into a shallow sea of dancing, undulating shades of green, with bushes and trees emerging here and there like pylons. "What the hell happened?"

"Ferns! I found a few of them along the bank a mile from here, and planted them. Nothing else would grow." Her words rushed out, her voice high-pitched and excited. "Only vines and weeds, remember? But these guys, they just took off. Really spread! Those are Wood Ferns there, and Spleenworts over there, and some Cinnamon Ferns closer to the deck, see?" she pointed. "I couldn't identify some of them; I don't remember bringing them in, they kind of crashed the party." She giggled. "Look over here, I'll show you...." And she motioned him along a walkway, to a brick-bordered planting bed. "See, I've been trying to clear them out, to plant

something else. But I couldn't." She squatted down in front of a small cluster of unfurling fiddleheads and tender, newly emerged fronds about ten inches high.

Gavin stood behind her, peering down. To their right, the bed was a tangle of weaving, feathery, brilliant jade.

"Those resemble Ostrich Ferns; but they're very aggressive. I tried to get this little guy out... you know, to transplant him, but..." She found the trowel she'd left at the spot, started to dig.

The plant moved. Gavin was sure of it. It leaned away from her. He thought he heard something, like an audible hissing. He glanced again to the right; the jade-colored ferns were swaying in unison.

"Did you see?" Aileen exclaimed. "Am I crazy? Did you see it too?" She stopped, and as soon as she did, the entire mass of ferns quieted. She came upright, hopped to her feet and wiggled her fingers again in that odd way. "Please, try it yourself. Tell me if this is real."

Gavin thought--*it's the wind, or some kind of static electricity*--but remained silent. He watched as Aileen shifted out of the way, pressing close to the adult plants that seemed to wave and bob on a breeze, stroking and licking her legs.

She vigorously motioned him to take her place. "Well, go on, see if you can dig him up," she pleaded, her face glowing with excitement, "see if I'm imagining this."

He felt confused and uneasy, but didn't want her to know it. He stepped forward, lowered to one knee, took up the trowel. "You want me to dig this up, like under the roots?" he asked.

"Yeah, scoop under it... but be careful, there are roots and rhizoids and a prothallus; ferns usually have antheridia, male sex organs, and archegonia, female sex organs, but these guys seem to be separate boys and girls; that little dude is a boy."

"What?" He turned and tilted his head, staring up at her, then scowled and faced forward once more. *I can't wait to get out of here and never come back.* He stuck the point of the trowel into the dirt. He immediately felt resistance, almost magnetic, like a negative pole repelled by a negative pole. He shoved the metal tool harder into the soil. It was repulsed once again. "Shit," he said.

"It's so unusual," Aileen pattered on, her voice eager and happy, "for a fern prothallus to be this big too, and they're not supposed to look like this. And the rhizoids are so sensual and helpful. They need warm viscous fluids to reproduce; they're very ancient. The sperm need to swim to the eggs..."

"Just shut up," he muttered as he put his knees together and used both his hands to push the trowel with all his strength. The little fern twisted and curled. The hissing noise returned. He felt something brush his right elbow, his wrist. He grunted and jerked away without thinking, as if a spider had skittered. But it wasn't a spider. They were green and furry and looked like tendrils, curling around his entire forearm. He tried to leap to his feet but in blinding moment, he was pulled sideways and landed on his hip and shoulder, one ear and cheek half buried in rich, loamy earth. He forced his eyes sideways, glared up at Aileen; she laughed, hopped up and down, and applauded. "Get it off me! Help me!" he gurgled, before cold, soft filaments circled his head and face, worming into his ears and nostrils, forcing his mouth into the ground.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Rivka grew up in South Florida and currently lives in West Virginia. In the 1980s she published stories in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, the Far

Frontiers anthologies, and the Women of Darkness anthology, and more recently has placed stories with The Sirens Call eZine, The Literary Hatchet, and Riding Light Review. She has a BA in history, MAs in sociology and counseling, and a BSN.

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Torn Apart | *T.S. Woolard*

It had been a bad day for Jaime so far. It was that simple. The baby cried, and her husband's ex called non-stop about bringing their—her husband and his ex's—baby home so she could leave. The light company called, threatening to turn their lights off, and there was nothing for supper. They had no money, and to top it all off, her husband was not answering his phone.

Jaime breathed and counted to ten like her therapist suggested when she was feeling overwhelmed. It didn't work. It never had, and she was beginning to wonder if he was blowing smoke. As her father said on many occasions, "You can't trust a person that calls themselves a doctor who can't even do CPR".

She tried to call her husband again to no avail. She slammed the phone down on the table and marched to the bedroom. In the nightstand, under a pocketbook of Psalms her grandfather gifted her, was her pack of cigarettes. Jaime hid her secret addiction well. No one knew, not even her husband.

She checked on the baby, who lay in the bed with pillows all around it, screaming like a crow with a broke wing dodging a bobcat. She went outside on the balcony with the phone in her hand after determining nothing would help more than a smoke. Jaime dialed her husband's ex's number. There was no answer, so she waited for the beep on the voicemail.

Jaime took a deep breath and said, "Hey Connie, this is Jaime. I'm gonna bring the baby home so you can leave whenever you need to. I can't get in touch with Steve, so I'll take care of it." She hit End, and then lit her cigarette.

When she was through, Jaime loaded the wailing baby into the car seat and headed out the door.

Jaime arrived at Connie's door not fifteen minutes later. She trudged up to the door with the car seat in her hand. She rapped on the door a little harder than was necessary, from building frustration.

She could hear heel-heavy steps thudding on the floor from the other side of the door as she waited. Then the door swung open and the car seat hit the ground.

She woke up and looked around her. The room was unfamiliar. Her clothes were in disarray and she felt groggy. Jaime also heard the baby crying, but it was muffled, like the ocean inside of a sea shell. As she raised her hands to brush her hair from her face, she noticed they were covered in blood.

Jaime jumped back from her crimson caked fingers as if they were someone else's. She pushed herself upright and inspected the area more thoroughly.

Lying beside her on the floor was Connie, with a pool of blood leaking from a gash in her head. A few feet from them, at the foot of the bed, was Andrew, Steve and Connie's six year old son. He was as dead as his mother.

Horried by the scene, Jaime made herself stand up to go find the howling baby.

When she looked at the bed, Jaime nearly fainted. Steve lay naked in the bed with a butcher's knife buried in his chest up to the handle. He had thirty-to-forty wounds on his chest, stomach, and face.

Looking around for some sort of answer, Jaime saw Steve's clothes scattered on the floor. There were pictures on the walls of their family. Jaime gasped and ran out the door as the realization hit her.

As she reached the step outside, Jaime saw the baby, still in the car seat, lying face down

behind the bushes. In the driveway she saw cop cars piled in behind her own car.

“Step away from the child, ma’am,” one of the officers shouted.

“But it’s crying,” she responded. “Something’s wrong with it.”

“Hands up,” the same voice yelled in warning. “Don’t touch the child!”

“But,” she said like she was in another world, and reached down.

Jaime heard a ring of shots before feeling bullets rip through her body. She fell face down on top of the car seat.

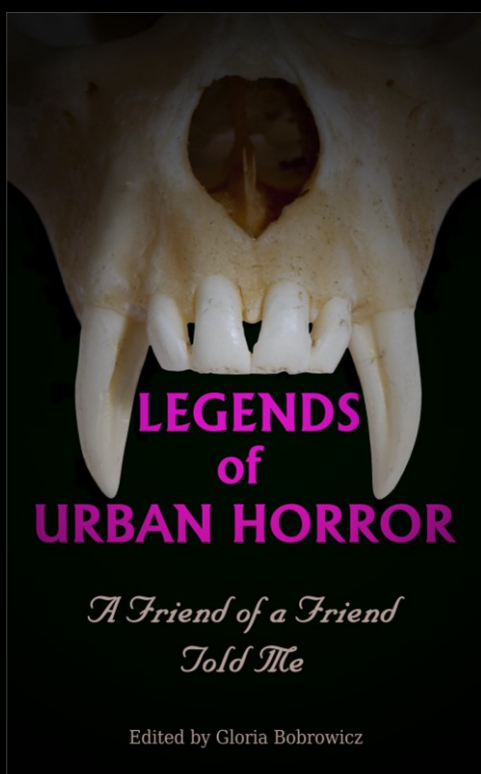
Snippets of events ran through her mind. She saw when she told Steve that she was unable to conceive, and the look of pain on his face. Steve telling her that he was leaving, and that he found someone else—her name was Connie. She saw her therapist in an institution telling her to count and breathe when she felt overwhelmed by Connie having Steve’s child. She saw herself throwing her medicine out the window of her car on the way home from an appointment with him one day with her father’s words running through her mind. She saw Steve and Connie pleading with her to bring their newborn home over the phone, and they would not press charges. They would move away to help her cope. And finally, she saw Steve and Connie standing in the doorway wearing robes when she showed up to bring their baby back.

With some solace, she knew at her death, the pain was all over, and they felt it, too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: T.S. Woolard lives in North Carolina with his wife and five Jack Russell Terriers. For more of his work look for, *Ghosts: Revenge*, by jwkfiction, *Urban Legends: Emergence of Fear and Fearotica*, by J. Ellington Ashton Press, The Sirens Call eZines #17, 18 & 20, and his short story collection, *Solo Circus*.

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What I've Done for Her | Paul Edward Fitzgerald

I've always loved her. I mean, from the first moment I met her in school there was just something about her that made me want her. I longed to be close to her, be near her and have her for my own. I think perhaps that is the feeling we have when the other half of our soul is introduced to us. And she *is* the other half of me.

It's gotten to a point where I cannot even recall life before she was in it. It's as if all other memories have floated away and ceased to exist. Life before her *wasn't* existence. *She* is my existence. My very reason for living lies within her essence. It is an essence I long for her to allow me to bask in so I may worship her, my exquisite goddess.

I say I wish to worship her, I know just how sexual the subtext there may seem. And although I do lust for every inch of her flesh from her plump lips to her painted toes, I wouldn't want it to be thought as mere sexual fantasy and abandon that draws me to her. What we have between us is much deeper than that. We mean more to each other than even she acknowledges. We must. There's no way that this all in my imagination. I wouldn't feel this way if there wasn't some meaningful spark there. She wouldn't feel like my last and only chance if it wasn't so.

I was never like this before I met her. I had female friends that were simply friends. I never longed for them. But then I ended up in her class and all that changed. We became friends fairly quickly and soon after became quite flirtatious with one another. At one point the entire class spoke of how cute she and I were together. I was positive we were headed in the direction of becoming an item. I could actually see spending my future with this girl. And no, I don't buy into the idea of just being young and silly because when love like that hits you, you recognize it. Then, out of the blue, she cut me off completely.

"I just think we're better off friends," she'd said. "I'm just more comfortable with that."

I suspected perhaps I'd done something heinous to make her cut me off this way. Maybe my understanding of love and acceptance of it so soon with her had intimidated her in some way. I then thought that perhaps it was her friends who had turned her against me, one in particular struck me as someone who would have turned my sweet angel. So one day after school I followed this friend and made them go away. But still nothing changed and she remained distant from me. I punished myself endlessly at the prospect of this being my fault and was sure I'd done something horrendous until she announced to me that she had a new boyfriend she wanted me to meet.

I still don't understand it. I don't think I ever will even though she's allowed it to happen almost a dozen times since. How she manages to not see me when I'm just sitting here waiting for her to love me as much as I love her never ceases to amaze and destroy me. And these guys never make her as happy as I could. She always comes running to me for support and comfort when they treat her badly. I know that it isn't just her exaggerating how horrid they are once the break-up finally occurs. I read the emails and correspondence between them every time I log onto her email or go through her phone when she leaves it lying around.

I know my going through her phone and emails may sound a little bit like stalking, but it's really not. I only do it to look out for her and besides that we have no secrets between us. We're always open and honest with each other. And for the Hell she puts me through by denying me and my love but still dangling herself in all her glory before me like a carrot before a starving, rabid bunny; she *owes me* the truth and nothing but. So I do check up on her, and I'm not sorry for it.

The last guy she dated seriously was a real doozy. I just couldn't understand it. And it's like the more he treated her like absolute crap, the better she responded and wanted to please him. All the while I stand by her side and comfort her, longing to lick those sweet tears from her cheeks so that her heartache is not spilt.

It was when she broke up with him and I comforted her this last time that I finally brought up how pointless this painful journey of hers to find the perfect man was when I was right here in front of her just waiting for her.

"I do love you," she said softly through her tears. "And I do sometimes think how much easier it would be for me to just be with you. I know you would treat me right and there's so much in you that I'm looking for."

I felt overcome with euphoria in that moment, thinking that my long and grueling wait for her to be mine was now over. And then she crushed it all with a single sentence.

"But I just don't love you *that way*."

She apologized profusely, turning the waterworks on again, crying that she wished she could change how she felt and that she hated hurting me so. But it all became so clear to me in that conversation what the real problem had been all along. And I was simply too stupid to see it.

It was not her fault that she couldn't see that I was her soulmate. It all came down to a question of qualities. In particular, qualities that I apparently lacked and these other men possessed. I had not matured and grown enough to be deserving of her love. I needed to work hard for her love, more than I already had with my outpouring of constant affection and support. I needed to acquire those qualities she longed for so that she too could long for me. I needed to gain the qualities these men possessed. I needed to *become* like them by any means necessary. And that's when I remembered a piece of ideology I'd read a long time ago.

There are some vegans and vegetarians that have supported their aversion to meat by simply stating that when one eats a piece of meat they are actually taking in the very fear and essence of that animal now cooked and carved up on the plate before them. When you ingest an animal's meat, you are essentially ingesting a part of that animal's very being. I suppose that could be where the saying "you are what you eat" stems from.

Killing the first of her assorted ex-boyfriends was not nearly as hard as I'd thought it would be. It actually came fairly easily to me. The most nervous I felt was about being spotted or detected by him before I took him by surprise. Once he was dead, the rest was pretty straightforward. Anyone who has ever been fishing and skinned and gut a fish would likely have little trouble.

I know I might sound a little bit crazy to anyone reading this by this point, and that's okay. Because for every person who thinks I sound completely delusional and damaged, there's someone else who completely understands that I've simply done what needed to be done. And, oh, how I can't wait for her to see and understand exactly what I've done for her.

The police seem to suspect that she is connected to all of this somehow. She is the common thread between the eight missing men. But I don't think they suspect her or even me for that matter. It simply must be someone with a grudge against her as far as they are concerned. Perhaps a disgruntled ex-boyfriend like that abusive asshole she dated last. It would be fitting for him to be put away for it. After all, I won't be killing him or ingesting any part of his foul spirit.

Eight missing men; it sounds bad, I know. But I'm not a serial killer or anything like that. I'm not getting any pleasure out of what I am doing. There is no uncontrollable urge to kill inside me. And I didn't consume eight of them because of some psycho-sexual reasoning of trying to recapture the glory of that first kill like the Ted Bundy's of this world. I am doing this *for her*.

The only pleasure in my life comes *from her*. The most enjoyment I get out of hunting and devouring the essence of these men is knowing that with each consumption, I am closer to obtaining my happy ending *with her*.

She's coming over tonight, as a matter of fact. She is too afraid to be alone with all that's happened. So she's turning to the one person who can make her feel truly loved and safe; me, her soulmate. And when I make sweet love to her tonight I know that she will finally see and feel all that I've done for her. For when our bodies become one she'll feel every bit of me within her as well as every bit of them. And when she feels that they are now part of me, that they *are* now me, she simply won't be able to resist the truth and we will finally be one.

However, as confident as I am of this, I am also not one to ignore history. I'm fully aware that this could simply be the fantasy of what I want to unfold and perhaps she will still resist me. But that's okay if she does. I really don't mind anymore. For if she does resist me I now know it's merely a sign that an orthodox union between she and I is not our path. If she refuses to see the only way for each of us is as one, then the only way to make it happen is to make her one with me. And *that she will be* if she resists. I will consume her and she will be one with me forever just as the eight men she once loved before her.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Paul Edward Fitzgerald has always had a passion for writing and has always had a flare for tales of the macabre and the darker side of human nature and the world around us. He has always felt the best stories are those that come from a place of truth and writes primarily in the realm of LGBT interest, horror, and suspense.

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ONE BAD FUR DAY

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New-Leaf Time | *Alex Woolf*

The new potatoes were bubbling nicely on the stove. The garlic sauce was perfect; maybe just another few twists with the pepper grinder, a final squeeze of lemon juice. The red snappers were approaching a glorious silver-gold complexion beneath the grill. Miriam fussed over each element of the meal. It was essential to get everything right. Tonight of all nights, everything had to be perfect.

She looked at her watch. 7:30 pm. Any minute now, he would be coming through the door with a grin as large as the bouquet of yellow roses in his arms. She smiled. It was new-leaf time. Time to put to rest once and for all the troubles of the past. She was not the type to bear grudges. If he did a bad thing, then she would get angry. Boy, he knew all about that! But once it was out of her system, she quickly forgot about it. And in any case, Jay was not someone you could stay angry with for long.

It was time to decant her vinaigrette into the salad. She gave it a few stirs and poured it in a careful circle over the lamb's lettuce, wild rocket and red chard, which she then tossed using the large wooden spoons. She glanced at the large iron saucepan on the draining board – a wedding present, given to them sixteen years ago today. Virtually everything in this kitchen – this house – was a reminder of the years she and Jay had spent together. Most of them were good years, she was quick to remind herself.

The snappers were exuding a well-cooked smell. She went to check them. The tail and little fins were a crispy brown and the eyes were milk circles. She switched off the grill. Likewise the potatoes, which she drained in the sink. Then she placed the fish and the potatoes in the oven, turning it to a low heat. Well, he was a few minutes late. No matter. The trains from the City were very unreliable. She knew that because Jay had told her so on numerous occasions.

The wine stood waiting to be opened, corkscrew and two crystal glasses nearby. She made no move towards it, because that was Jay's role. She enjoyed watching his neat, muscular movements as he stripped away the seal, and plunged the chrome corkscrew into the pink corkflesh. This evening it was really important for Jay to open the wine. The reasons were complex and would have been difficult to explain to an outsider. But she had the sense that last night a few matters weren't quite resolved between them. Resolved on her side, but perhaps not on his. It was possible that Jay went to bed with the feeling he had been slightly put in his place. *Emasculated* was too strong a word. Nevertheless, Miriam's instinct was that he should be the one to open the wine tonight. It was the sort of minor ritual that conferred a pleasing sense of normality on their evenings, and might help to restore some equilibrium after the previous night's little altercation.

In the meantime, she had a strong urge for a small glass right now, to ease the understandable nervousness in her stomach. After all, this was no ordinary wedding anniversary, it was a new beginning for them – “new-leaf time”, she had christened it last night, and Jay had seemed to agree that the term was appropriate. Then she remembered the opened bottle of white wine in the fridge. She poured herself slightly more than the half glass she'd intended, and took a deep sip. The crisp, dry flavour filled her mouth and slipped refreshingly down her throat.

7:45. Any second now, she was certain, he'd be coming through that door, full of apologies for his lateness. He would have a big forgive-me grin on his face – that charming face she loved to look at and hold and kiss. She could forgive him virtually anything because of that face of his. Trouble was, a lot of women liked it too. And Jay could be quite generous with his grin and that twinkling thing he did with his eyes. She pictured him at the office with that tart who used to do

secretarial work for him. Deena, with the breathy voice, the common vowels, the patronising tone. Miriam had never met her, but she'd spoken to her on the phone quite a few times. For some reason she always imagined her with fat cheeks, small, calculating eyes and big hair, and a really tarty body, dressed for maximum effect. Deena had been the real heart-breaker, because of being the first, back when Miriam still believed in the perfection of their marriage. The girl had started calling at home, on the weekends, sometimes in tears. Jay had dismissed her as a lunatic. But Miriam got the truth out of him in the end. She had badgered him about it until eventually he threw up his hands and confessed. Her fury that night had been magnificent. She had broken almost every plate and glass in the house, and nearly put him in hospital.

She smiled. Those days were behind them now, thank heavens! She took a triumphant sip of wine, and carried the salad through to the dining room where she placed it on the table. The china and the silverware gleamed in the overhead light. Soon it would be replaced by candlelight – the candles stood at the ready, tall, pink and slim in their silver holders. She had polished the cutlery, candle holders and napkin rings that morning, and they all shone exquisitely.

Where was that man? Surely he could not be feeling sore about last night. Or worse, fearful. He should know by now that she did not bear grudges. She had been angry, sure – furious, even – but she also knew the meaning of mercy. He only had to think back to the morning after that first confrontation over Deena. She had been pretty terrifying that night, admittedly, but the next day she had been as meek as a maid, quietly tending his cuts and bruises. She had forgiven him with all her heart. Well, nearly all. If she was honest, something had gone out of her feeling for him then. Yes, it's true she had been wrong to put him on a pedestal before – but she did that with people she loved. Maybe her friends were right and after that night her love was healthier – that is, more founded on reality. But it could never compare to her adoration of him at the time of their wedding, which had been as pure as – she glanced up at the Good Book on the mantelpiece – as a religious faith.

Miriam returned to the kitchen. Everything was ready now. There was really nothing else for her to do but wait. Her eye fell for the second time on the large iron saucepan on the draining board – the wedding present. What was that doing there? She didn't remember using it in the preparation of the meal last night. She lifted it, feeling her bicep tauten with its weight, and returned it to its hook above the stove. She chipped her nail slightly in the process. Well, that was the trouble with long nails. But they looked lovely under their coat of burgundy gloss. She'd taken care with her appearance tonight. She hoped he would realise the significance of the dress. She had worn it on her first date with him. All those years ago. It didn't fit so well now; she'd put on a few pounds since then. Of course he would remember. Jay, for all his faults, had a brilliant memory for those sorts of details. If she asked him, he would be able to tell her exactly what they'd eaten that night. And the plot of the film.

Perhaps she hadn't been clear enough in her words to him the previous night. She had definitely said 7:30. And he had nodded tiredly as he'd taken himself up to his bedroom. She remembered that tired nod as he had neared the landing. She wished she'd had the chance to remind him this morning, but she'd slept till 9:00, and he must have been long gone by then. It was now past 8:00. The fish was starting to wither in the oven. Rain was spattering the kitchen window. Miriam poured herself some more wine, finishing the bottle. She sat down at the table, trying to convince herself that he was simply a matter of yards away from the door. Any moment now he would burst in, shaking out his umbrella. Perhaps he'd stopped to buy her a gift. It was an extra special evening, after all. Or maybe his train had been delayed. She had to stay calm. He

would be along any minute. And it would still be a perfect evening. Even if the fish wasn't perfect, that didn't have to be a bad omen.

Miriam stared at the lipstick marks on her glass. There had been others since Deena. She knew of three at least. It was when they started calling him at home: that was how she usually found out. And Miriam always felt such a fool that by the time she knew about it, as far as Jay was concerned, the affair was already over. This latest one was different though. No desperate, late-night phone calls from the snivelling girlfriend. The first Miriam became aware of her existence was when Jay had quite candidly offered the information himself. That had happened last night.

The first stirrings of anger began in her. She was sick of living from second to second in anticipation of the key in the lock; sick of making train-related excuses for him. Today of all days you would have thought he'd make a special effort to be on time. What sort of a new leaf was this, when he couldn't even keep an appointment for dinner with his wife on their wedding anniversary? The whole day, virtually, she'd spent in preparation of this event. In a little while she would start to lose her temper. He'd better come soon, or perhaps he'd better not come at all.

Tomorrow will be new-leaf time for us, she'd announced last night, and Jay had nodded his head. He'd looked very tired by then. She tried to remember last night, and found she couldn't very clearly. It was a bit of a blur, in truth. She preferred to think about the early times, when Jay was still perfect, and she was the happiest girl in the world. On their wedding day, she had been beautiful, and barely knew it. But the photos later told the story: dark, bright eyes staring from a white veil, looking up at his perfect profile, the smooth angles of his chin, his cheek, the black wave of his hair. And the words, the words of the ceremony. They were so ancient and wise and gorgeously earnest.

Tonight, for the second time in their lives, they would repeat those words to each other. They didn't need a priest or a witness. The Bible would be enough. They would remake their marriage vows, and this time he would mean it. They would draw a line under what had happened. She sighed again. The stupid man! She could show him such love, such adoration. If he only knew what she was capable of giving him, and would give him...

Without really thinking, she started to uncork the wine. She took a deep gulp, barely tasting it, but conscious of the slow fire in her belly. The wretched man. The coward. She knew suddenly that he wasn't coming home. The words he'd used last night, which she'd tried so fiercely to banish, now returned. They had come out of the blue. "I want a divorce, Miriam. I'm in love with someone else..." If he had used her name, she had forgotten it. "I need a divorce so we can get married." *We*. He had actually used the word *we*, meaning him and somebody else. That was what had caught her like a blow to the windpipe. Her fingers tightened around the stem of her wineglass at the memory, and she felt the anger then, an echo of last night, rise within her like a wave, and she was beautifully out of control. She saw the wineglass being dashed to the ground, and watched the glass shatter on the tiles, and the wine flying and spilling out in all directions, finding the little cracks in the floor to run along...

It was really to stop him speaking. That was why she had done it. To stop those ridiculous, awful words coming out and ruining everything. She had glanced around for something to stop him saying any more. That was when she saw the iron saucepan – the wedding present – hanging up there above the stove. It was big and heavy in her hand. He had been in the middle of this rehearsed speech. "You can keep the house," he was saying. As she swung it, he tried to duck, but she got him anyway, full on the head. She remembered the dull ring it made, like a broken gong. It did the job.

He had stopped speaking then, and had fallen – well, sort of stumbled – back into the chair. After that he was much quieter, thank goodness. Much more co-operative. He let her have her turn. She had reminded him that tomorrow was their wedding anniversary, and she expected him there for dinner at 7:30. We can try to put all this unpleasantness behind us, she had told him. “New-leaf time,” she called it, and he had seemed to agree. Yes, she was certain there had been a definite understanding before they parted for the night. She told him again on the stairs as they went their separate ways. 7:30, she reminded him, and he had nodded tiredly. A little later, she had gone into his room to kiss him, but he was asleep by then. She had kissed him anyway. His cheek was quite cold, Miriam remembered thinking, so she'd fetched an extra blanket from the wardrobe. After all, she wasn't one to bear a grudge.

An odd thought came to her now, while she recalled all this. She hadn't actually been in his room today. She'd been too busy preparing for this evening. Perhaps... No, it was ridiculous. Jay had never missed a day of work in his life, except of course for that time after the Deena incident. He couldn't surely still be in his room. And if he was, then why had she not seen or heard from him all day long. Slowly, and with a gathering sense of fear and bewilderment, she made her way out of the kitchen and up the stairs to his bedroom.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Alex Woolf is the author of over eighty books, mostly for children and young adults. His fiction includes, *Chronosphere*, a time-warping science fiction trilogy, *Aldo Moon*, about a teenage Victorian ghost-hunter, *Ship of the Dead*, about a zombie attack on a cruise ship, and *Soul Shadows*, a horror story about flesh-eating shadows, which was shortlisted for the 2014 RED Book Award.

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Babe I'm on Fire | *S. Clay*

She came to Trick at night, appearing at the foot of the bed, not saying a word. He would just feel the pressure as she began to climb onto the mattress. She would sit up on top of him, let the covers drape off her head--giving the appearance that she wore a habit--and teasingly grind into him.

He would never say no.

For years she would come, like a ritual. Only appearing when Trick was on the verge of sleep, staying until the sun began peeking through the blinds, leaving him drained in bed, but fulfilled.

It wasn't until she stopped arriving that Trick knew he loved her. He didn't care how little she talked, or about their relationship solely being sexual. Trick could feel it in his heart, he had to have her, forever and always.

The last time she had been with him she had spoken, whispering in his ear what he would need to do to have her. He had felt a cold panic before turning quickly to look at her, only to be greeted with no one with him.

Trick went out and procured all the supplies needed: antique mirror, salt, black candles, and a surgical scalpel. He used old newspapers to black out his Windows until no light entered. On the floor he sprinkled salt in the shape of a circle, making sure it would be big enough to kneel in. He arranged the candles around the circle, lighting them after they were perfectly set. Shadows shimmied around the room from the waving flames. He lifted the mirror, not looking at himself, but directly behind him and spoke the words she had told him, "With my will, I Trick Jostley ask that you take me, of my own free will, with you, wherever it may be."

Still looking in the mirror, he took the scalpel and cut deep across his palm. Blood pooled on the floor, disappearing into the cracks between the boards.

"Take me," he said, rocking back and forth, slowly at first, getting faster and faster as the room became hotter. The floor seemed to vibrate, as if a stampede of elephants were coming.

He did not blink. Only stared in the mirror. The reflection in the mirror shifted between the walls behind him and the ceiling with each sway of his body, until finally, his love was behind him, back to the wall. He stopped rocking.

"I knew you'd come back," Trick said. "I love you. I love you. Please, never let us be apart."

She approached silently and placed a hand on his shoulder.

Trick stood and turned to her. The flames emitted just enough light for him to see the crimson color of her skin, and to look into the abyss that was her eyes.

She lifted her hand, and with the other, she used a talon-sharp nail to pierce the center of her palm, dragging slowly, until a slit appeared, leaking blood so black it could be tar. With her bleeding hand she reached out, extending it for Trick. He did so, feeling their blood boiling together, becoming one. He stepped out of the circle, knocking the candles over as he did. Together they walked into the corner of the room and melted into the blackness.

The fire department was called later when a neighbor noticed the flames. They appeared on the scene just in time to watch as the house caved in. The fire-chief saw what he could only describe as two passionate lovers in the midst of carnality in the center of the flames, though if he were ever asked, he would deny it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: S. Clay lives in Lexington, Ky with his wife. He achieved his bachelor's degree in Psychology from Eastern Kentucky University. Currently, he works in a Behavioral Health facility and writes in his spare time. S. Clay enjoys horror movies, listening to music that soothes the soul, and reading.

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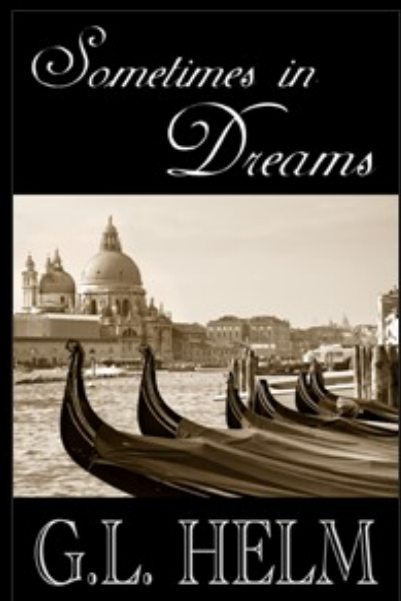
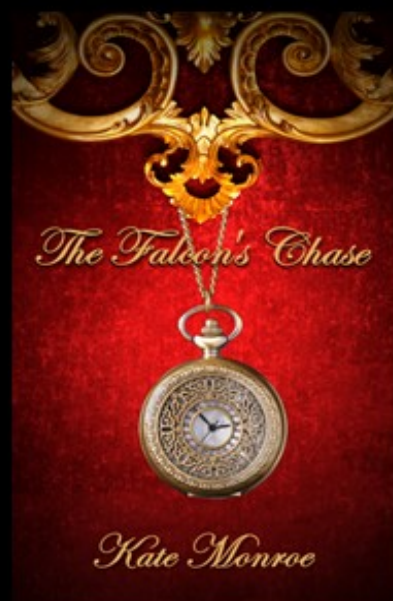
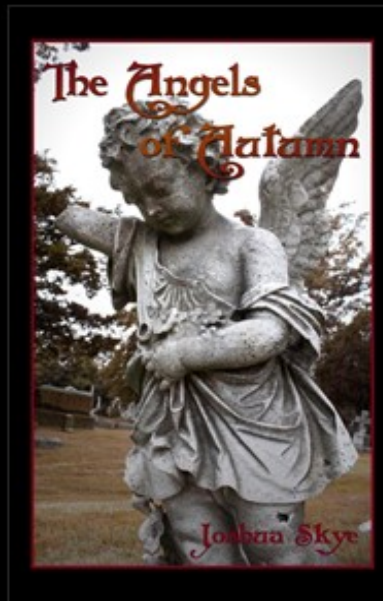


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Prove It To Me | *Ryan McSwain*

The closest thing Flatland, Texas, had to Lovers' Lane was the clump of scraggly trees east of town known as the Woods. For a few years following the 1943 murder of Eloise Potts, police had patrolled the area, terrifying virgins with spotlights and lectures. But that happened twenty-three years ago. It was a cold, cloudless night in late 1976, and the dirt road behind the Woods remained the default location for heavy petting and the inconsistent use of prophylactics.

Janie Lou Sherman and Virgil Hollis were steaming up the windows of her black '66 Pontiac Tempest. The interior smelled of sweat and perfume. She let Virgil drive the car on their dates, but she did the driving in the backseat. As they kissed, their teeth sometimes clicked against each other while she worked on him under an old army blanket. His hand moved up her body toward her breasts, but she gently pushed it away.

"What's wrong?" Virgil asked.

"Nothing." She leaned in to kiss him again.

He gripped her by the shoulders. "No, Janie Lou. We've been doing this for weeks. You touch me, but I can't touch you. It's driving me crazy."

"You're satisfied, aren't you? It's not like I send you home with blue balls. Let's just drop it, okay?" She gazed up at him, smiling sweetly as she squeezed him under the blanket.

"That's not what I'm talking about. I just want to know if we're ever going all the way."

Janie Lou slid away from him on the bench seat and crossed her arms. She sat there for an eternity, but the windows never lost their cloudiness. Finally she asked, "Do you love me?"

Virgil looked at her in the moonlight. He'd met her only a month before at a party, right after she moved to Flatland. There was something about Janie Lou. He saw the way other men looked at her. She burned hotter than other girls, and he could feel it from across the room. He knew that if he had one of those thermal imaging cameras the army was developing, he could pick Janie Lou out of a crowd.

She didn't care that he was just nineteen and still wearing his high school ring. She didn't care that he lived with his parents or worked at the soda bottling plant. She didn't even mind when someone stole his truck when they were at the movies. Janie Lou just laughed and said she liked her backseat better, anyway.

Janie Lou could pose like a pin-up girl, and the things she whispered in his ear in public made him dizzy. She was all he'd thought about since they'd met, and the thought of her moving on to somewhere or someone better terrified him.

"Yes, I love you," he said for the first time.

She uncrossed her arms and took his hands. Her expression was difficult to read. "Prove it," she whispered. "Prove that you love me."

Virgil leaned in to kiss her, but she put her hand on his chest. "Not like that," she said.

He laughed nervously. "Sweetie, that's the only way I know how. I don't get what you want me to say."

"I don't want you to say anything. I want you to show me."

"I already tried to kiss you, Janie. How else am I supposed to show you?"

She bit her lip. "The Crown Prince of Austria shot himself out of love for his mistress."

Virgil rolled his eyes. "I'll bet he did. But I'm not killing myself. You know that. It's crazy."

"I don't want you to kill yourself, silly. That's just an example. Like how Van Gogh chopped off his ear and gave it to a prostitute."

“That’s just as crazy.”

“William S. Burroughs cut off the top joint of his little finger to prove his love for another man.”

“Another man? That’s disgusting. And who the hell is William Burroughs?” Virgil paused. “How’d he do it?”

“Poultry shears. He said that’s the best way.”

The temperature in the car continued to rise. Virgil rubbed his face with sweaty hands. “I don’t understand what you’re trying to say.”

“Then I think you’d better drive us back to your house. Or you can drive me home and walk back to your parent’s house. I don’t care which.”

The mention of his parents stung and the smell of her perfume grew overwhelming. He rolled down his window, and frigid air rushed into the humid car. “Listen. If you want me to prove it, I’ll figure out a way. My parents are going out of town in the morning. Come by tomorrow for dinner. Maybe you can stay the night.”

Janie Lou hugged him and kissed him on the cheek. Before he could wrap his arms around her, the dome light flickered on and off as she exited and climbed into the front seat. A few moments later, he followed and started the car.

The next evening at six o’clock, Janie Lou pulled up at the Hollis house. The sun had just disappeared over the horizon. Her white dress with its intricate red stitching danced in the wind, and her heels clicked on the sidewalk as she walked to the door. She rang the doorbell and grasped her pocketbook as she waited, shivering in the sharp wind.

When no one answered, she rang the doorbell again and knocked on the door, five staccato taps in quick succession. The lights inside were out, and there was no sign of life. She peered into the front window, but the blinds were drawn. Knocking once again, louder this time, she called, “Virgil? You there? You better not have stood me up, buster!”

Checking her watch, she saw five minutes had passed. “His loss,” she sighed as she started toward the car.

The door creaked open. “Hello, Janie Lou.”

She laughed, her hand to her throat. “Virgil! You made me jump. Were you taking a nap? Don’t tell me you forgot about dinner.”

He didn’t seem to hear her. “I think you need to take me to the hospital.”

“What are you talking about?” She tried to push the door open, but the chain snapped tight. A rotten smell seeped through the crack.

Inside, Virgil Hollis swayed on his feet. His white undershirt was stained. He blinked his eyes several times, looking lost.

“What did you do, Virgil?” she asked.

A pale hand reached through the crack in the door. It handed her a small white box, like the kind that held a pendant bought at the department store. Julie Lou looked up at his face, and he wiped his matted hair away with his other hand, which was wrapped in a bandage.

“I did it for you.” His voice drifted from far away. “I think you need to take me to the hospital.”

Her breathing and pulse quickened. Shaking, she opened the box. Inside was his severed middle finger, washed clean and sitting on a nest of white cotton peppered with flakes of dried blood. Around the finger was a high school ring, the rich topaz stone sparkling.

“I did it for you,” he repeated.

Janie Lou took a deep breath. “Virgil, you’re in shock. Wait here. I’m going to clear out my front seat so I can take you to the hospital. Just wait inside until I get back. Don’t do anything else, okay?”

He nodded blankly, and the door closed.

Her heels click click clicked on the concrete. She opened the driver’s side door and climbed inside. Trembling, she removed the finger and dropped the white box in the street. The ring bounced on the pavement and disappeared under the car. She gently closed the door.

Her heartbeat pounded behind her eardrum as the windows began fogging over. With great care, she held the digit between her thumb and forefinger. She traced her lips, leaving a smudge of lipstick on the pad of Virgil’s finger. As the finger trailed down her cheek, then chin, then neck, she violently shook once more.

In the passenger seat was a makeup train case covered with red leather, the kind of case that opens like a tackle box. She flipped the clasps to reveal velvet-lined trays holding dozens of little jars filled with a murky amber fluid. Inside most of the glass jars floated other pale, fraying fingers. Four jars held ears, their shapes distorted from being crammed inside. A few larger containers carried other parts, unrecognizable in the dashboard light.

The woman calling herself Janie Lou Sherman plucked out one jar, accommodating only liquid, from the top row. She unscrewed the lid, careful not to spill the foul-smelling contents. After a final wet kiss on the tip of the finger, she sealed it in the jar. She placed her new passenger in its permanent home and closed the case.

With a smile, she turned the key and waved goodbye to Virgil Hollis and Flatland forever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ryan McSwain has published one horror novel, *Monsters All the Way Down*. Soon he’ll kickstart his next novel about comic books, nostalgia, and the nature of reality. He stays home with his two kids, which is a far scarier experience than anything he’s written. Free short stories in a variety of genres go out every month to his mailing list.

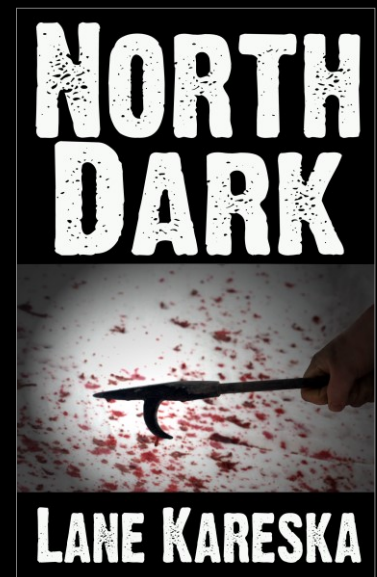
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Zombie Love | *Maynard Blackoak*

Though many had posed several theories as to how it would come about, only a select few on the fringes of society truly believed the zombie apocalypse would ever amount to anything more than fodder for horror novels or B Hollywood movies. In the end, it did happen, just not from any of the ascribed theories. It had not come from a government virus contained in a canister that surreptitiously leaked its deadly contents upon an unsuspecting public. It was not caused by an advanced race of beings hell-bent on taking over the earth. No! As events unfurled, it came from mosquitoes that created a hybrid virus from drinking the blood of wild and domesticated animals infected with many different strains of pestilence.

With deadly efficiency, it spread like wildfire, encompassing the planet in a matter of a few months, after the first cases had been reported in the state of Virginia. Only an estimated one out of every five hundred thousand managed to escape the original outbreak. Of those, most had become the unfortunate victim of a hungry zombie within a few weeks after the epidemic came to an end.

One of the few to avoid being the unwilling snack of a ravenous zombie was Donny Slem, a nineteen-year-old boy from the little town of Cleveland, Oklahoma. A young man few, if any, could have imagined would be the town's only survivor. Before the outbreak, he was often the object of ridicule by his peers. What had spared him from the infection was his tendency to keep himself locked in his room for weeks on end, playing video games to avoid the mockery. While the world outside him was falling prey to the deadly zombie virus, he busied himself killing zombies in his favorite game.

There was one particular girl in town that had captured his fancy during the years he had attended high school, Chelsey Maples. She was the one girl in town who had never treated him with scorn. Even though he never dared to speak of it, his heart belonged to her, even after she became a walking corpse.

Lean with long blond hair and pale green eyes, Chelsey was often ostracized by their classmates, in much the same manner as Donny. While he had normally shrugged off the ridiculing taunts of his classmates, she returned their derision in kind. Her favorite method of retaliation was to flash her middle finger at the offender, and follow that with a string of obscenities.

Since becoming a zombie, she had spent the bulk of her time walking up and down Broadway Street, flashing her middle digit at every zombie she encountered. Her voice forever silenced by the disease that afflicted her several months prior, her single finger gesture spoke for her. Donny desired her love more than ever before. He merely needed to devise a plan to ensnare Chelsey so he could finally have the love of which he had only dreamed.

After a few days of drawing plans and creating a list of items he would need to carry out his scheme, Donny decided the time had come to set love into motion. He walked to the shed in his back yard and, after unlocking the door, retrieved two full five-gallon gas cans from his stockpile. He emptied them into his pickup's gas tank, threw the empty cans in the bed so he could refill them while he was out and about, and drove off down US64 toward the town of Pawnee. There was a hardware store there that he was certain would have everything he needed to subdue his quarry and construct a cage to keep her imprisoned until she learned to love him.

A few days later, Donny sat in his truck ensuring everything was in place to carry out his plan. He had converted a bedroom of his home into a cage to house his intended zombie sex

slave. Everything he needed to bind her for the return trip to his house sat in the seat next to him. Now all he had to do was take a drive along Broadway and capture his love interest. A quick check of his gas gauge told him there was plenty of fuel in his pickup's tank. It was time to begin the search for the love of his dreams.

He sat parked against the curb, patiently waiting for Chelsey to appear as she went about her daily routine of walking up and down a four-block stretch of the Broadway sidewalk. There were several zombies milling about the street. A few of them he recognized as former neighbors, acquaintances, and classmates. They paid him no attention as they mindlessly trudged along their way.

One hour passed without an appearance from Chelsey. While Donny knew from the weeks he spent studying her daily routine she appeared every day on Broadway, he was also aware she did so at no specific time. She was after all, just an unthinking shell of a human that acted more out of force of habit than intelligent planning. In his eyes, that was what made her most desirable. Believing if he kept her caged, she would come to love him as he loved her.

Another hour had passed before he spotted a familiar finger clumsily waving at other pedestrian zombies. The object of his desires was in his sight and slowly moving his way. He grew excited with anticipation as he began to fantasize about the loving moments he would soon be sharing with Chelsey. She only needed to come a little closer for him to spring his plan into action.

When she had come to within a block of his position, he grabbed the straps and duct tape from the passenger seat, and began moving toward her. A few of the zombies that walked in his path made feeble attempts to bite him. He easily dodged their assaults and shoved them to the pavement. Donny was determined that nothing, zombie or otherwise, was going to interfere with his plans for Chelsey, especially now that love was within his grasp.

As he drew near to her, he gazed upon her appearance. Although she had been dead a few months, her complexion remained somewhat unchanged from when she was alive. Her face had become a little more ashen with only a few traces of the black lipstick and heavy eyeliner that had been her trademark in life. There was also a wide gash across her cheek that had become crusted with dried black pus. Her legs had become slightly twisted as her joints had swollen and become malformed. Overall, she was very much like the girl with whom he had become infatuated when they were in school.

She stopped and cocked her head slightly, as if she were trying to study him. Her eyes displayed a hint of recognition as her mouth moved. It was as if she were trying to speak but only managed a few unintelligible sounds.

"Chelsey?" He asked cautiously. "It's me Donny. Do you remember me?"

She opened her drooling mouth and lunged at him. He deftly moved away from her attack and in the same motion managed to get a strap around her arms, pinning them to her sides. As she continued trying to sink her teeth into his flesh, he wrapped the remaining restraints around her. He placed a strip of duct tape over her mouth then hoisted her over his shoulder. Quickly, he darted back to his pickup with Chelsey wriggling on his shoulder. Other zombies looked on in apparent confusion as he tossed her into the bed for the drive home.

When he arrived home, he pulled the squirming Chelsey out of the bed of his pickup by her feet. Though she continued to struggle against him, he carried her inside the house, depositing her in the cage he had built expressly for her. Once her ankles were secured by straps and locks to her cage, he removed the duct tape from her mouth. Again, she tried to bite him to no avail.

“You’re going to have to stop doing that,” he scolded, “or else I will put the tape back on your mouth.”

She made a series of guttural sounds and continued struggling against the straps which bound her. Donny closed the door to the bedroom he had remodeled into Chelsey’s cage and walked into the kitchen. After taking a beer out of the refrigerator, he plopped himself down on the sofa to savor the success of his plan, believing the love he desired would soon be his.

The next morning Donny retrieved a bloody chunk of raw beef from an old freezer in his back yard. He hoped that would satiate Chelsey’s appetite long enough for him to begin acclimating her to sexual activity. He tossed the meat into her cage and watched as she instantly pounced upon it, tearing away large pieces with her teeth, and swallowing them whole.

After she had gnawed every morsel of meat from the bone, she seemed to become more docile and less aggressive. As he stared at her pallid face splashed with blood, he envisioned the long lasting kisses they would soon be sharing.

“Chelsey,” he said softly as he slowly walked toward her. “I’ve wanted to be with you for a long time. Just be cool and everything will be alright.”

He approached her cautiously as she stood looking at him with her dead eyes in a blank stare. She did not attempt to attack him as he gently started caressing her cheek. His lips quivered with a yearning to kiss her, but he did not dare act upon the desire. In addition to her not being ready for intimacy, there was a putrid stench of death covering her body from head to toe.

“I’m going to have to bathe you. You stink like rotten meat,” he stated, wincing at the pungent odor that clung to her.

Donny left her room and returned promptly with a bucket of water, washrag, and liquid laundry detergent. She jerked away from him when he first applied the wet cloth to her body but soon began to stand calmly as he washed her face and hair. She lowered her head and stared in puzzlement as he cleansed her body with the soapy cloth.

He laid her on the bed carefully, applying gentle caresses to her face. The urge to kiss her became overwhelming. He lowered his face toward hers hoping for a quick embrace of their lips. As their lips neared, her mouth opened and she attempted to bite him. Despite easily avoiding her attack, the horrendous odor of her breath turned his stomach.

“Damn girl! What the hell have you been eating since you became a zombie? Your breath smells like a rotted stiff.”

The next afternoon, he paid Chelsey another visit. This time he came better prepared. In addition to a chunk of bloody meat, he brought soap, water, sponge, toothbrush, and mouthwash.

After she had polished off her meal, Donny began the regimen of bathing her. This time he made it last longer as he took great care ensuring that every inch of her body had been properly cleansed. Chelsey reacted hostilely when he placed the toothbrush in her mouth to scrub away all the remnants of her past meals. However, a gentle hand on her cheek and some soothing words seemed to make her docile once again.

The mouthwash proved to be more problematic than he planned. Each time he poured it in her mouth, it leaked from the corners of her lips. He then decided to dip the toothbrush in the mouthwash as a means of delivering the minty solution. With each stroke, he brushed a small area of her mouth gingerly, making sure he did not scrape off too much of her mouth’s dead flesh. He repeated this action several times before he was satisfied with the end result.

“Now that’s a hell of a lot better than smelling like a hole filled with dead sewer rats,” Donny averred, gazing upon her clean, pallid body.

“Just because you’re a zombie doesn’t mean you have to smell like one.”

With that, he gently laid her on the bed and began caressing her face. Once again, her hostile attitude seemed to wane. Confident that she would be receptive to his advances, he moved his face to hers, hoping she would allow them a first kiss. Just as before, she snarled and attempted to sink her teeth in his flesh.

“Oh well. We’ll just have to work on it some more,” he vowed, undaunted by her actions.

Two weeks passed and Chelsey had yet to allow their lips to meet. Further disheartening his spirit, there existed no spark of recognition in her eyes, only the same vacant stare of a single-minded desire to feast upon his flesh. It was apparent the woman he loved would never view him as anything more than food.

Tears welled in his eyes as the realization of a love unrequited tore at his heart. Casting a forlorn glance away from the object of his heart, Donny began to walk away in heavy footsteps of dejection. He stopped at the doorway, and turned a heartbroken gaze upon her.

The problem, as he viewed it, was the difference in their species. Outside her physical appearance, she no longer held any human traits. The limited reasoning of her mind could only see him as food, and not as a love interest. In order to win her heart, he would need to find a way for her to look upon him as something more than food.

As he regarded her with a studious gaze, the solution to his problem seemed obvious. With a deep sigh, he resided himself to a less than desirable resolution. If she were incapable of loving him as a human, he would have to win her love by becoming a zombie.

With a reluctant shrug, he returned to Chelsey. Shaking his head with a deep sigh, he stared at the desire of his heart gawking into the distance with empty eyes. The supreme sacrifice of his humanity, he decided, was worth the ecstasy of having her love. Outside the initial pain, there did not seem much about which he should be overly concerned.

Bending over, he hesitantly moved his face toward hers. Bracing himself for the pain of her bite, he pressed his lips to hers. At first, she merely offered a vacant stare as if the kiss confused her brain. Then without warning, her teeth sank into his lower lip. Almost immediately, he jerked his head away but her bite had been delivered.

As his hand went to investigate the wound, his eyes glanced the large swath of bloody flesh clinched between Chelsey’s teeth. With blood dripping from his chin, he began feeling the virus speeding throughout his bloodstream. A strange sensation began with his feet and ran the course of his body. It felt as if all his muscles were becoming flaccid masses of tissue, barely able to move or bear his weight. His brain slowly became lost in a haze of incoherent thought, dwelling almost entirely on the ravenous hunger that grumbled in his gut.

Time passed how much Donny did not know. He only knew of the hunger that constantly gnawed at his insides and a compulsion forcing him to follow a curious creature all over town as she persistently offered a single digit greeting to nearly every other two legged creature she encountered.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Maynard Blackoak is an author living in Oklahoma. The greatest influences in his writing are 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.

Touché | *John H. Dromey*

Jay was shocked by the unkempt appearance of his friend Roy who was usually meticulously neat.

Anxious to find out what was going on, Jay decided to make light of the situation. He pointed at Roy's white shirt that was covered with irregularly-spaced black spots.

"Have you started wearing factory rejects? That's an unusual pattern of polka dots."

Roy shook his head. "They're scorch marks."

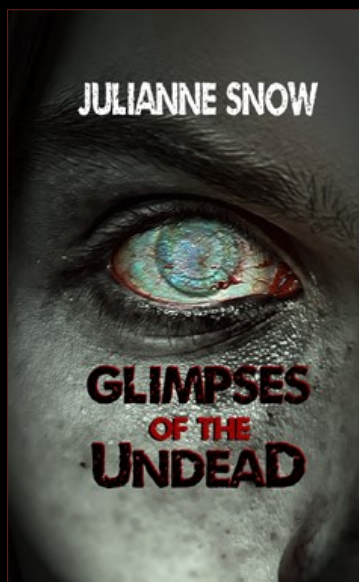
"What happened?"

"My estranged girlfriend took out a restraining order. I'm supposed to stay at least a hundred yards away from her at all times."

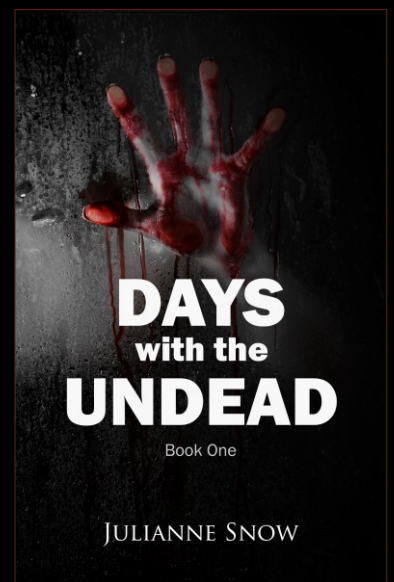
"So?"

"Her bodyguard measures the distance with a military-grade laser."

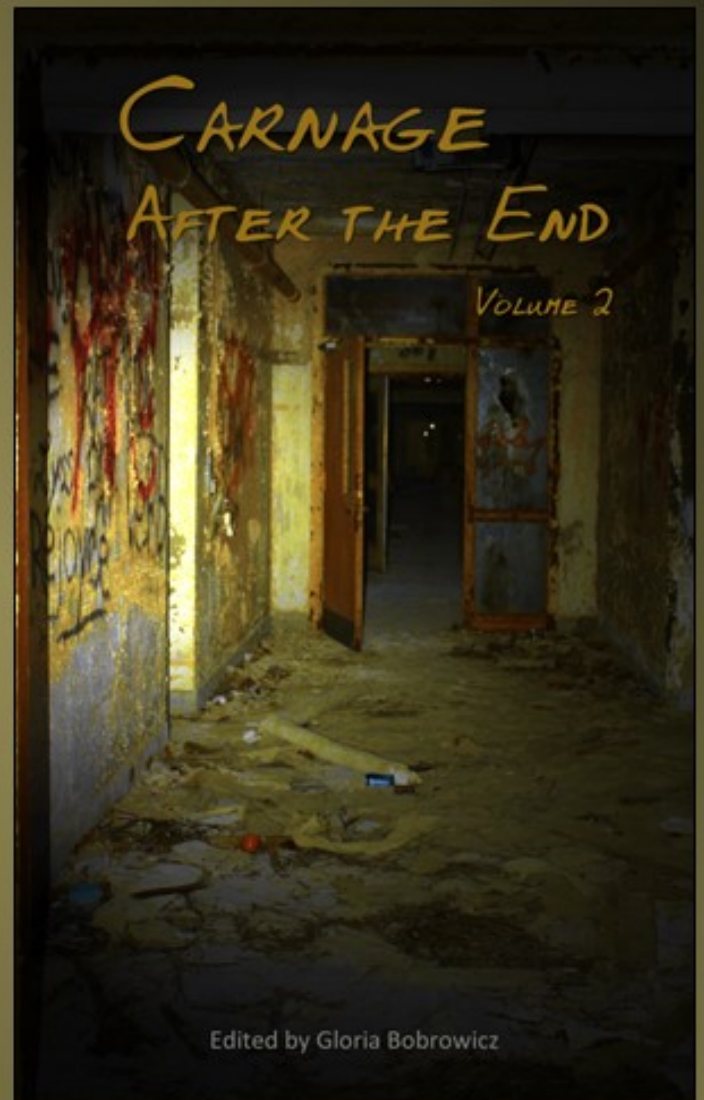
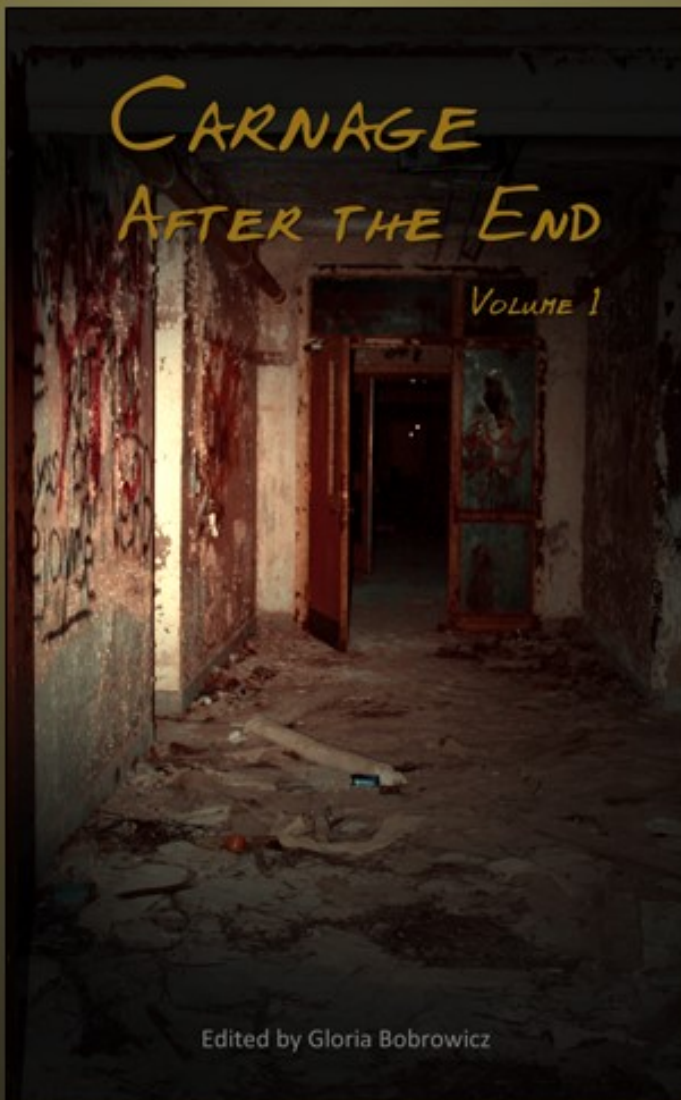
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri. He's had short fiction published in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Black Denim Lit*, *Stupefying Stories Showcase*, some previous issues of *The Sirens Call eZine*, and elsewhere, as well as in a number of anthologies, including *Chilling Horror Short Stories* (Flame Tree Publishing, 2015) and *A Kiss Is Still a Kiss* (Next Step Books, 2015).



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terror lurks around every corner, no one can
be trusted and nothing can be taken for
granted...



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Rumpled Sheets | Nina D'Arcangela

"Okay, I'll keep that in mind," she chuckled out loud as she hung up on him mid-sentence by tapping the disconnect button on her dashboard. *Yeah, like I'd ever sleep with that guy*, she thought to herself. *What a douche bag... Shit!* She slammed her hand down on the steering wheel as she flew past her exit doing nearly eighty in the left-hand lane. She wondered if she should cancel the guy's appointment; after just a few emails and one phone conversation, he'd already proven to be a distraction. Her mind flitted over the playful banter and underlying challenge in his words. She had to admit, she was intrigued. *Stop that*, she chided herself, married guys were strictly off-limits. She'd lived by that hard and fast rule for years, and she wasn't about to break it for some one-and-done suburbanite with two kids and a homebody for a wife. Getting off the next exit, she circled back around.

Lying in a hotel room, staring at the ceiling while he slept, she berated herself for being such an idiot. Sure the guy had a winning smile and eyes that danced around like the hottest tango duet on the planet, but that didn't mean she had to end up in bed with him the first night they met. He was supposed to be just another advertising account. It was supposed to be a no-fuss, no-muss deal. Yeah, right. She should never have taken on his account or agreed to go over the ad proofs while having drinks; and she definitely should never have agreed to have those drinks at a hotel bar—no matter how strong her conviction. Now, nearly four years later, she glanced over at him and knew there was no road back. He had his hooks in her, and she couldn't do a damn thing about it. As she turned to curl on her side, she must've woken him. She heard him get up, shower, dress and leave; all without a word. She laid there in the lingering silence; tears rolling down her cheeks like the quelled mouse she'd become.

Since she'd met him, he'd had a second child; a boy this time, though he claimed the marriage was loveless. He claimed a lot of things: he *claimed* she was his one true love; he *claimed* she was the only woman he'd been unfaithful with; he *claimed* one day he'd take her away with him, that she was his true soul mate, all the while he returned home to a family he *claimed* was pure hell.

On the surface, she believed him. She wanted to believe him, *needed* to believe him; but deep inside, she knew those days away would never come, that he would never leave his wife, that he would never genuinely be hers; but in love and wrapped around his finger, she always smiled and laughed, pretended everything was fine. She fooled herself into the belief that she'd never need to wake to more than an empty bed and rumpled sheets. She wanted so much for it to be true, yet she knew in her soul that it was a lie she told herself to bear the pain.

Shortly after they celebrated their seventh year of infidelity, he started to change; to become distant, more withdrawn. She attributed it to the fact that he said things at home had deteriorated severely, and his eldest had begun to question his absence. The day was coming; she was losing him and she knew it. But again, she chose to turn a blind eye and count on fate to carry them through. Then the fighting began. They'd fought before, but never with such ferocity, with such hateful words, or for such long periods of time. She fought to save them; he fought to break the grip of convenience and the ease of complacency.

Finally, the day came when he told her they were through, that he'd lied for months simply because he couldn't bring himself to admit it was over. That was the day she lost her mind.

She stood in her bedroom while they spoke by phone early one evening as he drove home; he admitted that he'd decided it was over between them the previous April—it was now October. As she screamed back at him that he was a coward and a cruel, pathetic excuse for a man, her voice shifted to a deep guttural growl. Confused and a bit unnerved, he grew indignant, told her he couldn't understand how she could say such things after he'd shown her so much devotion. Hearing his words, her eyes blackened and with an unearthly howl of pain, she slammed the phone down so hard that her clawed hand gouged the surface of the dresser, destroying not only the device, but the bones that clutched it tightly.

As she leapt down the flight of stairs exiting her condo, she gave no thought to her actions. She had one goal, and that was to get to him. By the time she reached his home, full darkness had set in, as had her fury and all that it brought with it. Her bones mended and strengthened; reforming as they did so. Her skin glistened and took on an amber hue from the raging creature she'd unleashed. Her breath plumed from her open maw; both from exertion and her now malformed mandible. She slowed as she approached his house. Inside, though the large front window, she could see his family. The children giggled and ran around the coffee table in circles, capes aflutter behind them as he and his smiling bitch of a wife held hands pretending to make a barrier for the putrid offspring to break through.

Her rage grew colder; a growl escaped her throat. The young boy looked up, shaken and terrified by the noise.

“Daddy! Daddy! There's something outside—it's at the window! Is it a monster?” the boy whined.

“Don't be silly, there's no such thing as monsters. Come here big guy,” the father said as he scooped his son into his arms and carried him to the window, smiling reassuringly. “See there's no monster out there.”

She'd crouched down in the bushes, but could still see inside. She could see enough through her distorted vision to recognize the man she loved happily jostling the squirming child; a child that should have been hers.

Fury overtook her and she launched herself through the pane of glass. She grabbed the child and ripped his torso in two; one half struck a nearby wall, the other landed with a heavy thud on the pristine carpet.

Her harsh breathing the only sound in the room, the other three stared in horrified silence as her claws dripped with gore. The little girl's scream of terror broke the spell. The creature's attention was immediately and acutely focused on the hapless child. Before anyone else could move, her elongated arm snatched the screaming runt.

It was clear on the father's face that he knew who she was, he recognized the abomination she'd become. The look of terror and disgust he wore was almost enough to turn her away, almost, but not quite. She held the squirming spawn firmly by the chin, and palmed the crown of her pretty little head with the other deformed hand; her intension unmistakable. Her lover dropped to his knees and begged her not to harm his little girl.

As tears flowed down her face, his wife turned to him with a look of shock; silent but questioning, not willing to fathom what was taking place before her - perhaps too stupid to comprehend it all. But he wasn't too stupid to understand what was happening, and why. As he cried and pleaded with his adulteress, she gleefully snapped the child's neck; the little girl's body struck the floor as lifeless as the boy.

The man crumpled into a sobbing heap. What would pass for a grin on her grotesque face appeared. Raising her eyes, she now sought the wife. Scenting the air, she realized the woman

was with child. She approached and stood directly before the pregnant woman—a pause ensued as she wiped away a string of putrescent drool. In her slurred speech she said, “No more.” She rent the woman’s abdomen open, tearing the unborn from her gut. Her taloned hand caught the other woman’s chin as the wife began to fall forward, halting her descent.

Again, she garbled, “Not homely... pretty. Too pretty!” She drew the other razor-tipped hand across the woman’s face and smiled a lopsided grin as both skin and cartilage shredded away.

The jilted lover turned her attention back to the man lying on the floor; he’d managed to drag himself to his dead children and was nuzzled amongst their bodies whimpering. This was her lover, her soul mate, the one who claimed to be hers forever. She shook her head violently; spittle and flecks of blood from her split gums added more spatter to the perfectly decorated room. One last glance at him, then she leapt out the broken window and began to run into the night.

A few blocks from his home, she felt a great weight as it struck her from behind. Both she and her attacker fell to the pavement. Each snarled and fought with claws and gnashing teeth. Her fogged mind scrambled to understand what bore down upon her. Transformed as he was, he was no longer the grieving father, but a malformed creature such as herself. She struggled to gain ground, but was no match for his strength.

With both hands wrapped around her throat, he rumbled through jutting, broken teeth, “Not ‘sposed end this way... but like for like!”

As she began to black out, her left foot rose up and claws that were once toes tore his abdomen open, spilling warm entrails over her dying body.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Nina D’Arcangela is a horror devotee who likes to write soul rending snippets of despair. She reads anything from splatter matter to dark matter. She’s also an UrbEx explorer and professional photographer whose wanderlust takes her to abandoned locations, decrepit buildings, purportedly haunted places and old graveyards. Nina is one of the co-owners of Sirens Call Publications, a member of PenoftheDamned.com, and the owner of Dark Angel Photography.

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DRAGON BORN



Ela Lourenco

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Devilish Love | J.M. Merillo

His smile is so tender and charming
Look into his eyes, bright and disarming
Hear his words spoken so sweet
Listen to his heart, there's no beat
Kiss his lips and feel the flame
He will want your soul to claim
Offers he'll give of love and desire
Until your very essence is burned like fire
He'll wrap you in gazes of opulent devotion
While you're tortured by overwhelming emotion
There is no escape from his want
Like a ghost in your heart he will haunt
The heat of his touch will surprise
But even more will the brief sadness in his eyes
A look so heartbreaking to behold
Until it changes, beaming lovingly bold
Forgetting the memories that pull at his heart
He once again practices his irresistible art
Luring and tempting with his warm kiss
Causing thoughts of unavoidable bliss
A command like the devil he wields
Forcing your body to cross blazing fields
Just as a wraith wanders without thought
Blindly his loving attentions are sought
A warning, before you've been trapped too well
His smile, so bewitching, will have you risk hell
To be held in those eyes of swirling blue
You will never deny him any part of you

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: J.M. Merillo was born in Medina, NY. She fell in love with writing poetry and stories at an early age to cope with the constant upheavals of moving during childhood. *The Immortal Fate: Lillian's Story* is J.M. Merillo's first novel. She also wrote a companion book titled *Immortal Dreams: Poetry by Lillian Gray*. J.M. is currently working on *The Immortal Fate Book 2*.

Facebook: [Author J. M. Merillo](#)

Twitter: [@jimmerillo](#)



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Victory & Loss | *DJ Tyrer*

Appointed hero
Invested by all the gods
Marches to battle
He shines like the summer sun
Drives back forces of darkness

Laid in the cold earth
His wife cannot welcome him
She mortal, he not
Turns his back on holiness
Necromantic promises

Innocence | *DJ Tyrer*

So sweet, innocent
Feels an urge to protect her
Almost fatherly
Surprised to see her smile back
They dance then leave together

Not so innocent
He recoils from fangs that bite
Swallows blood, vomits
He keeps her safe and well fed
Snatches victims, ignores screams

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing*, was placed second in the 2015 Data Dump Award for Genre Poetry, and has been widely published in anthologies and magazines, including issues of *Cyaegha*, *Carillon*, *Frostfire Worlds*, *Handshake*, *Illumen*, *Scifaikuest*, and *Tigershark*, and online on *Staxtes English Wednesdays*, *Poetry Bulawayo*, *Poetry Pacific* and *The Muse*, as well as releasing several chapbooks.

Blog: <http://djtyrer.blogspot.co.uk/>

Website: <http://atlanteanpublishing.blogspot.co.uk/>

KNIGHTMARE Attic Studios

*Artist
Stephanie Knight*



www.facebook.com/knightmareatticstudios

The Will | *Joris Soeding*

he stares at her in the restaurant, she peers back, sitting next to her fiancé
lips to hands of two women, aching to make his sister jealous
she joins the guests and throws the white dishes while dancing
gradual toward anger

he has a weakness for roulette, owes \$173,000
his shirt half unbuttoned, gold chain with a coin of Atlantis
unless it has to do with money, then a navy jacket or tuxedo
“23s a hot number ladies and gentlemen”

he meets the stewardess on a Grecian beach
red bikini and she is introduced to his dog
he rubs American sunscreen on her throat
her eyes close, overcast, she grins

he sits in a white sheet while the stewardess lies bloodied in a bathtub
candle gleaming atop the champagne bottle on the vanity
the incestuous sister cradles his mute face
then scrubs the sink
scrubs away each burgundy and perfect letter of ‘I Love You’ from the mirror

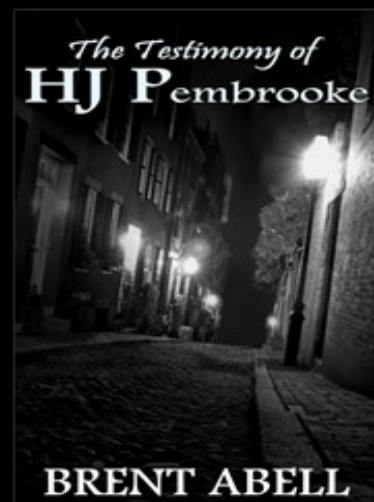
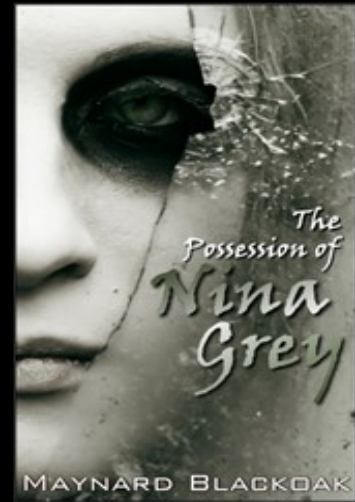
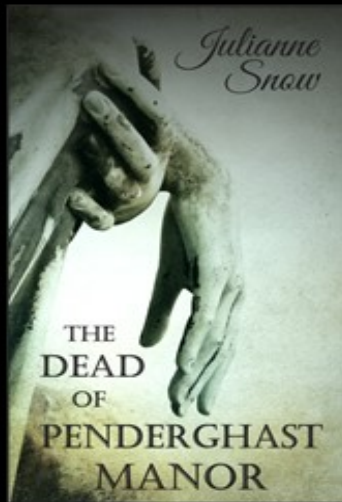
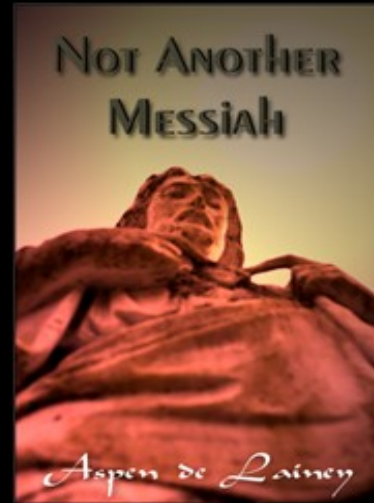
she reminds him, “they’re after us”
wearing a cross on her belted yellow blouse
distancing themselves from sirens, whistles, curious children
all of it for a piece of paper from an unseen man
aboard the Imperiale, “I’ll prepare the royal champagne”
he places hemlock into his own glass
reciting the upcoming symptoms and her engagement
the door swings with tide as they lie in bed holding hands

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Joris Soeding's third and fourth chapbooks are forthcoming from *Lummo Press* and *Myth Ink Books*. His writing has recently appeared in publications such as *Black Poppy Review*, *Chicago Literati*, *HEART*, *Hobo Camp Review*, *The Horror Zine*, *Into the Teeth of the Wind*, and *Scapegoat Review*. He is a 5th/6th grade writing teacher in Chicago, where he resides with his wife, son, and daughter.

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

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EXCLUSIVELY FOR SALE OR BORROW ON AMAZON

Signed, Sealed, Delivered | Rebecca Snow

His name appeared on the screen in a little blue, innocuous window. Billy Kirby. Such an unassuming moniker. An everyman. A guy next door.

Against my better judgement, I pressed the mouse button to accept the call.

“Hello?” I said as if I didn’t know who was on the other end of the line.

“Hey.” A single word in his slight southern drawl drained into my ear through the headset and tried to thaw my resolve.

The last conversation had ended with a broken connection following a question. I didn’t know who he asked about future plans, but it wasn’t me. That had been ten days ago. I could only guess he’d gotten bored with his latest dalliance and had returned to his consolation prize.

“Yeah?” My voice cracked, trying to give away the fact I still cared for him even if I was only an afterthought in his mind. Like a dancing monkey in a department store window.

“I’m jealous of my neighbor.” A slight pout coated his words, and I knew he wanted me to ask him why.

Instead, I wanted to ask why he’d dropped the call when some woman had walked into the room. I wanted to ask about why he told me his parents were dead and then told me he had to pick up his father at the airport. I wanted to ask why he’d said he didn’t care about the fact that I was having invasive surgery when he thought his mute button was working. I wanted to ask why he was still calling me when I knew I bored him to tears. Even if I knew the answers to all those questions, I still wanted to ask. But I’ve been told I’m too nice. And when a person like him finds someone kind and loving and giving and accepting, he keeps her around to use as he sees fit.

“Why?” I asked, staring out the window at the rain.

I could hear his lips pull away from his teeth in a grin.

“He’s got pizza.”

That was my cue to open another browser window and order food for him. If he’d said he needed help scheduling the shifts at work, I would have opened the spreadsheet program. A complaint about online class deadlines would have had me typing in his login and password and watching ridiculous tutorials on how to stay safe by not poking forks into electrical sockets. I spent a week leveling up one of his videogame characters while he went kayaking. They say we can’t choose who we love. I let the silence seep onto the line between us.

“You still there?” he asked. A note of concern filtered through his words.

I waited a few moments and sighed, knowing the distress came from his hunger.

“What’s in it for me?” I asked as I pressed my fingernails into my palm.

“My undying gratitude.” A smirking laugh tickled my ear.

“That and two dollars will get me half a cup of coffee.”

“But I’m hungry.” A petulant whine glazed his voice. “Payday isn’t until next Friday.”

I clicked a few buttons on the keyboard and found the site I’d chosen for his next delivery. I typed a password, and a facsimile of a familiar red, white, and blue logo dripped away to reveal a darker splash screen. The words *Scorned Slices* woven in vines and thorns grew onto the top of the page’s header.

“The usual?” I asked, anticipating his answer.

“Wait a second. I’ll be right back.”

His headset dropped with a thunk onto his desk. A few indecipherable mumbles filtered from a distance before his shuffling feet returned.

“Can I get a 2 liter soda and some cheesy bread with the pizza this time?”

I imagined him fluttering his eyelashes at me and poking out his bottom lip.

“Good grief.” I pinched the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger. “How many people am I feeding?”

The click of a chewed fingernail preceded his answer.

“Just me.”

A door creaked then shut with a click.

“I’m all by myself tonight.” He sniffed. “As always.”

With a raised eyebrow, I perused the menu. First, I chose a traditional crust. The parmesan sprinkles cost extra, but I added them to the pizza and the cheesy bread. As I’d read on the site’s disclaimer, the morsels added an unexpected kick to every order. I glanced through the list of toppings and marked the half pepperoni and half bacon boxes. The starred entry stated that both meats had been specially marinated.

“Do you want dipping sauce for the sticks?” I rattled off the list of choices in the best monotone I could muster while my face was trying to break out in laughter.

“Marinara, please.”

Such proper etiquette. Such good manners. So much veiled sarcasm. I couldn’t help the giggle that exploded from me. The Scorned Slice’s marinara had been advertised as the lifeblood of the company. The concoction had a sweetness no other pizza parlor could rival. And in my research, I’d discovered the secret. The final section on the order page requested a delivery time.

“How fast do you want it to get there?” I asked.

“As quick as possible.” Billy tapped on his keyboard. “Shh. I’m watching a video online.”

I clicked on the option for the most rapid delivery. While the purchase was processed, I drew my lips into a thin line.

“According to the screen, your order should arrive in thirty minutes,” I said.

As we waited for the food, he rambled on about his new work uniform and how well it showed off his amazing body. He told me about using his blood donor card to get out of a speeding ticket. I listened to him talk about how he was almost crushed to death by a massive... Then, I heard his doorbell through my earpiece.

“I’ll be right back.”

The headset dropped again, the footsteps skittered from the room. I imagined take-out containers dropped onto the speckled kitchen counter and slices pulled onto paper plates, strings of cheese dwindling into spider-webs and disappearing into the air. I pictured the orange soda poured into glasses and the cheese bread divvied up between him and the strange mumbling woman.

His voice returned. He breathed as his chair sighed beneath his weight. He took a bite and chewed into the microphone. A distant cough whispered to my ears.

“You’re the best cook ever.”

He swallowed and refilled his mouth. The sound of a clearing throat interrupted his chomping. Perhaps one of the cyanide-laced cheese bits went down the wrong tube, or maybe the bloody marinara was too sweet. A clatter that sounded as though everything on his desk had been dashed to the floor followed. I listened to his thrashing and gasping and wheezing for fifteen minutes until it stilled to silence.

“Your gratitude is dead.”

I pressed the red icon and ended the call.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Rebecca Snow lives in Virginia and writes wherever the mood strikes her. When she's not writing, she's digging holes in the yard, playing video games, cooking, or herding cats. Just don't ask her to order pizza for you.

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

Facebook [Rebecca Snow](https://www.facebook.com/RebeccaSnow)

SUBMISSION CALL – WHAT DWELLS BELOW



For this anthology, we're going urban! We'd like you to spin us a tale of horror describing what lurks below in the city sewers. All sorts of creatures, both real and imagined, may wish to do those who live in the sunlight harm; covet their ability to exist in the brightness above; or perhaps they simply fight for domain of their own patch in the darkness!

Whatever fantastically dark tale you come up with, please do not include zombies, homeless humans, or orphaned children. We want tales of true horror - not the horror of the human condition.

So tell us, the next time we walk over a grate in a city sidewalk, or pass a manhole cover slightly ajar, what should we be terrified is watching us from below?

Deadline: January 1, 2016

Word Count: 4,000 - 8,000 words

All submissions **MUST** be submitted to: Submissions@SirensCallPublications.com

Payment: Each story selected for inclusion will receive a one-time payment of \$25US

Full guidelines can be found on the Open Submissions page at:
www.SirensCallPublications.com

Taranath's Anguish | *R.B. McConnell*

Taranath slipped on his biker jacket, grabbed his keys and headed out the door. Despite the heavy rain he chose to walk. Today was an important day, he had to stay focused. His red eyes glinted as a woman gave him an admiring glance. Then her eyes wandered up to his head and she quickened her pace. He laughed to himself as he ran his fingers through his hair. His hand brushing lightly against his twin horns. As he neared his destination, he pulled up the collar of his jacket and cursed the weather. By the time he reached Zeros bar he was soaked through. With a weary heart he walked up the stone steps, the doors were closed. As he approached them, they opened. Taranath stepped through.

Inside was transformed, candles filled the room. On the stage was an altar. Taranath froze when he saw Stol'as-an'el, "You're late!" He made to speak but Stol'as-an'el silenced him with a raised hand. Taranath was roughly pushed towards the stage. Stol'as-an'el offered him a helping hand. Warily, Taranath accepted. Although Taranath stood at 6' 5", he felt like a child in Stol'as-an'el's presence. Dressed in black robes, it only served to make Stol'as-an'el appear taller than his 9' 8".

"Taranath, I have been watching you. For nearly a year... You have not escaped my attention." Taranath tried to back away, hands grabbed him, forcing him to stay. Stol'as-an'el lazily turned the black handled knife in his hands. His silvery blue eyes darkened, "Taranath, I have an important question to ask of you. One that requires an honest answer." Taranath glanced at the altar before lowering his head. It was all the submission that Stol'as-an'el required.

Taranath felt the tip of the knife over his heart. "Taranath, do you still wish for the love of the human? The love which consumes you." Without hesitation, Taranath answered "Yes!" He felt the removal of the knife, his jacket was pulled off his body. His t-shirt was cut away, revealing a tattooed torso. Stol'as-an'el stood at the altar and cut his own hand. The blood flowed freely into the offering bowl. Taranath accepted the bowl and drank deeply. He screamed as the potion flowed through his body. He noticed a horn fall, tentatively he reached up. A stump was all that remained where his right front horn should have been. Tears ran down his face, his red eyes grew darker. Taranath slumped to his knees, "What did you do to me?" Stol'as-an'el laughed, "Just as you asked. Love is such a dangerous emotion. The love you asked for is forbidden. It will never be and, now you shall pay for your treachery."

The room was plunged into darkness as the candles were extinguished. Stol'as-an'el closed the doors. He laughed as he heard the anguished screams of a demon.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: R.B. McConnell lives in rural Armagh in Northern Ireland and is owned by two cats. She is constantly tormented by demons, angels and humans alike. In an attempt to silence them, she writes their stories.



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Death Comes for the Pickup Artist | *Adam Vine*

They met in the Market Square, in the Old Town of Krakow, where day hides itself with the shadows of brick buildings weeping their plaster shells and night falls to the gentle elegy of laughing girls and the opening of doors, always smelling like coal and never sleeping. She was Polish, he American. They made love the same night after a sarcastically offered rose and a challenge as to who could drink the most vodka without stumbling over the word *Przebrzezín*, all part of carefully-designed routine he'd practiced hundreds of times before.

Now they sat at a small table in the window of a café on a cobbled street corner, him looking like a different man, she the same. Her name was Agnes. His was Paul, but his friends called him Hollywood.

"How have you been?"

"Good. I've missed you."

She swirled her wine and looked around the café. "I remember what you asked me here. Our first date. You asked if I was a beer girl or a wine girl."

"I'm glad you said wine girl."

"So, Paul. Hollywood."

"So, Agnes. Little Bird. What have you been up to since the last time we talked?"

"This could take a while."

"I've got time."

"Nothing much. I don't know. I've been resting."

"Makes sense."

"I need my beauty sleep."

He chuckled. "You do. Ag, can I just get this out of the way? I'm sorry. Okay? I was bad to you."

"I know. Because we weren't just hooking up. I cared about you."

"I know you did, Ag. I was young and stupid."

"You were thirty-four. Don't treat me like some country idiot. It's your state of mind. You haven't changed."

"Okay, fine. Probably not. Am I getting put on timeout?"

"Ugh. You are very rude."

"You used to say I was charming."

"Maybe I did. And what?"

"Maybe. Remember what else you said? You said..."

"Maybe is deep and wide. I'm so happy you remember," she finished, feigning a smile.

"Do you remember why?"

"Yes. Because the words for maybe and ocean in Polish are homonyms."

She smirked. "I knew you did not have memory problems. You lied to me."

"Hey, I wasn't lying. My memory's shit. That idiom just happened to stick. I've missed you, Ag."

"Did you think of me when you were sleeping with other girls?"

"Yup."

Agnes made a face. She hadn't lost any of what attracted to him to her in the first place, the tangles in her autumn-colored hair, the lioness intent of her eyes, or the curl of her words through her cello-like accent.

"You don't look older," Paul said.

“You do. But you’re still handsome.”
 “And better-dressed.”
 “Maybe. At least better than most American guys.”
 “You’re the expert.”
 “Asshole.”
 He winked and raised his beer.
 “Is it getting harder?” Agnes said.
 “Is what getting harder?”
 “Picking up girls, now that you’re old.”
 It was his turn to smirk. “No.”
 “Don’t lie.”
 “Maybe a little bit. But my age is counter-balanced by the fact that my skills have improved. Still, too much of this,” he tapped his glass. The beer was a bright amber color, the same shade of the wintering leaves falling in their soft, scattered mountains outside. He took her hand. “Not enough of this.”
 “I think you’re right. You should drink less. You look fat.”
 He grinned. “I probably put on a few pounds. Sorry. Kilograms.”
 “But your character has improved.”
 “Maybe.”
 “I’m not just bantering. I mean it.”
 “We don’t say bantering.”
 “Serious. You were more insecure when I knew you. You seem sadder now. But you know who you are.”
 “You’re the one who told me you loved me in the first two weeks.”
 “I did.”
 “I know you did, Ag.”
 She was silent for a minute, swirling her wine, tugging at the corners of her hair. “There’s so much I wish I had said before. Words that I can’t say now.”
 “I’m sorry.” He paused to take another swig. Her wine remained untouched. After he swallowed, he said, “Were you afraid?”
 “No. It was too fast.”
 “That makes me feel a little better.”
 “Why?”
 “I was worried that you suffered. I lost a lot of sleep over it.”
 “It didn’t hurt my body. But it was very cold. And it hurt my head. I was thinking about you.”
 “I’m so sorry I put you through that.”
 “Not as sorry as I am. But not for myself. For you. I prayed for you.”
 “Agnes... stop.”
 “No. I won’t. Why else are we here?”
 “You’re not even angry at him? The driver?”
 “I was, at first. But not anymore. Are you?”
 “You have no idea how many times I’ve thought about killing that guy.”
 “Holding onto anger cannot make you a better person.”

Paul shook his head. Defensiveness seeped into his voice. He almost pointed a finger at her, but stopped himself, thinking it would make him look crazy to the other guests in the café. Some were already looking at him funny.

"You're one to talk. You know what you signed up for," he said in a hushed voice.

"No. But you did."

"You resent me that much?"

"No. I don't resent anyone or anything, because I can't. And that is not your fault. But you promised me something, Paul. Hollywood."

He looked her in the eyes, those dream-puncturing eyes he had thought about every night since she was gone that he didn't spend drunk, fewer and fewer as the days crept on.

"I could never forget you, Ag."

"But you tried."

"It didn't work."

"You didn't even weep for me."

His voice creaked. "You know I never felt that kind of pain before, or since. There's a hole in my life. I had to find out on the news, because none of your friends would tell me. Did the only thing I knew how. I picked up girls. But it didn't work. They couldn't fill the place that you left."

She gave him a teasingly arrogant smile. "Because I'm the prettiest."

"Not just the prettiest. The sweetest. The most thoughtful. You were wife material. I tried not to hurt the others, the way I hurt you. Even tried to be good to some. Even let one call me her boyfriend. But they weren't you."

"Like I said before, your character is improving, from awful to bad." She grinned a little and swirled her wine.

Paul forced a laugh. Then it faded. "Were there other men? After me?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"A guy I met at the square. The night we broke up."

"That was fast."

Agnes folded her hands over his. "What can you change? Even God does not change the past. You can only change what you do."

He nodded. She had said that once before, but he hadn't heard her then.

She went on. "When I was a little girl, my village was very poor, because of the communism. We did not have many toys. So, we often played with kites, which we made ourselves. And when you crossed strings with another kite, you would help the other person so you could both keep flying. We never stole the other person's kite, and just ran off, because that would hurt both parties. You understand what I'm saying?"

Kite lines and narrow crooked streets bleeding lamplight from their old stones. Atoms in gaseous states colliding without rhyme or reason. Agnes and him. Agnes and the tram. He understood.

"Maybe you did feel pain," Agnes said. "Maybe you cried. But not when it mattered."

"When would it have mattered?"

She stared at him, her unblinking eyes boring into his body, but he couldn't meet them. "When they buried me."

Agnes was hit by a tram while crossing the street. She was on the way to work, a new job she was interviewing for the day before Paul told her it wasn't going to work. When he said it, Paul was already sexually involved with three other girls.

The animated GIF of her being struck, falling under the tram car and dying went viral on the Internet. Her picture was played on the Polish news. One of Agnes's friends, who knew what Paul was, emailed the GIF to him out of spite. The knives he felt. The emptiness. That terrible, numbing void.

She reached across the table and took his hand. "Paul. We do not change anymore after we die. Who we are when we die is who we are forever. I loved you with my whole heart when I died. So I will love you with my whole heart forever. I'm here because I want you to be happy again. But I can't make you."

He fought the urge to cry. "I haven't felt a single moment of happiness since you died. Not with those other girls. It became an addiction. It didn't make me feel better. I only felt emptier without it. Sleeping around was the only thing I could do to take my mind off of you. And even then, it was only for... seconds."

She smiled, pursed the bell of her lips, and said, "Because I'm unforgettable."

"Oh, come on," Paul said.

"I have one last question. Then I need to get going. Have you been with any girls during this visit to Krakow?"

Paul took her hands, kissed them, and said, "Would you believe me if I told you no?"

"Maybe."

"Then, no."

Agnes stood. "Goodbye, Paul. Hollywood."

"Goodbye, Little Bird."

When she was gone, and the long silence billowed around him, the waiter approached and asked timidly, "Another beer for you?"

Paul shook his head. "I'm good, thanks. I guess my friend isn't coming. Can I just have the bill?"

"Sorry to hear that, sir. Will you be paying by cash or card?"

He paid and left, following the well-remembered spider-web of streets to the edge of the Old Town, where he climbed a hill. The grass was full of mud and it clung to his fine leather shoes. A freezing wind descended. The headstones with their unpronounceable names watched like the ghosts of the unforgotten dead, silent in their judgment. Red and gold leaves flew past him, clinging together and falling where they intersected.

He found her name, carved on a tiny granite block in an unseen corner of the cemetery, where he knelt and let his knees sink deep into the grass. When his fingers opened, they let slip a rose, not given to a girl, but to a grave.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Adam Vine is an American game designer and author of horror, science fiction, and fantasy. He has lived in Europe for the past two years, and currently resides in Krakow, Poland. His short fiction can be found in *Sanitarium Magazine*, *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*, *NonLocal Science Fiction*, and the upcoming *Ancient Enemies* horror anthology. His first novel, *Lurk* will be published in 2016 by Forsaken Books.

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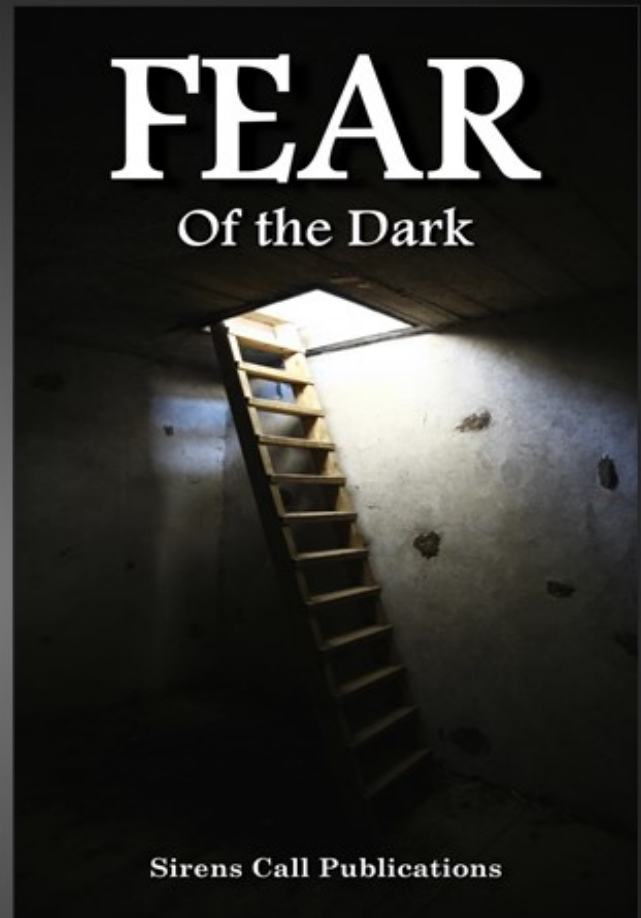
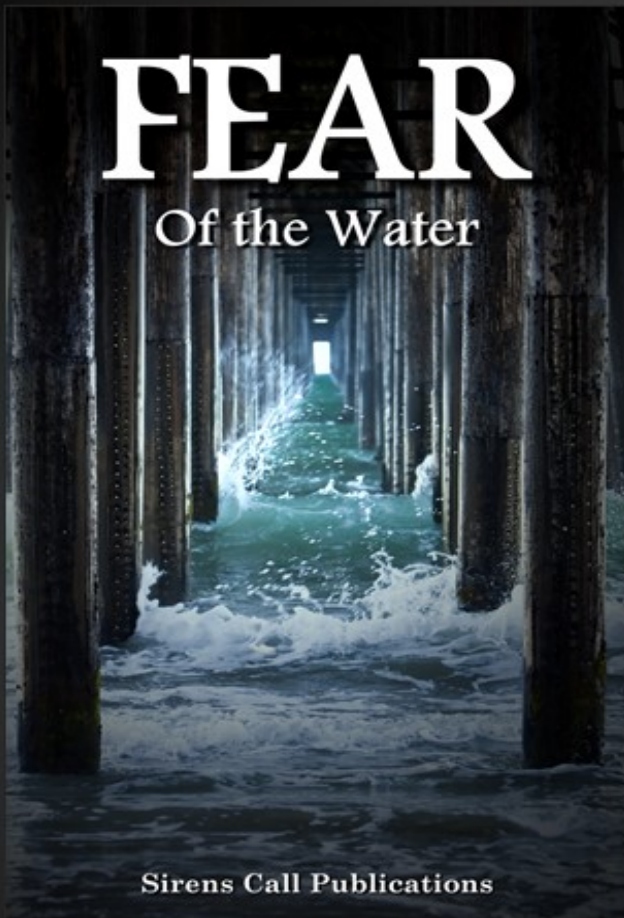
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Love is in the Blood | *Anthony Avina*

Leonardo Parks could feel his heart pumping as he entered the abandoned movie theater. The theater smelled of blood and death as the air wafted into his face, and he had to choke back his nausea so that he didn't throw up. Every fiber of his being screamed at him to run out of the theater, to turn back and go call the police so they could do their job. However, the life of his love hung in the balance, and he couldn't afford to risk it being forfeited.

Leo had been searching for his longtime girlfriend, Sabrina Evans, for over a week. She'd disappeared while on a walk through the downtown area of Los Angeles. No witnesses had been in the area when she was abducted, and police hadn't come up with any leads as to her whereabouts. After the initial questioning he'd undergone with the police detectives investigating her disappearance, Leo had taken it upon himself to look for Sabrina.

Having spent five years as an investigative journalist, the twenty-six year old had exhausted all his contacts, hoping that someone would have the information he'd sought. Sabrina had been his girlfriend for three years, and in that span of time they'd fallen deeply in love. She was a working musician, singing in nightclubs and as a backup vocalist for artists in the studios of Los Angeles. She loved music, and favored a mixture of old jazz and singer/songwriter music.

Leo could picture her in his mind even now, when fear threatened to cripple him in the abandoned theater. Her quirky smile as she listened to her favorite song; her long hair flowing in the wind as they rode their bikes together; the warmth of her smooth legs as they lay together in bed: all these thoughts rushed through his mind at once. One of his contacts had reached out to him this night. A clerk at the courthouse had been hearing rumors of people being abducted and taken somewhere on the outskirts of town, but the police hadn't found anything yet on the abductees.

After looking into the reports and searching for abandoned buildings outside the city limits, he'd landed on the theater. It was far enough out to give an abductor privacy, and the building hadn't been worked on or inspected by city officials in years. It was the perfect hiding spot, and so Leo had set out on his own, determined to simply look around and report what he found to the police.

However, as he'd arrived on the scene, he'd realized he was in deeper than he'd ever thought possible. He'd parked a mile or so out, and walked through the quiet desert surrounding the building, hoping not to alert anyone nearby. As he'd arrived, he heard the piercing screams of women being attacked, and when he ran to the perimeter of the building, he'd discovered the grim reality of the world.

Stepping right out of a nightmare, five big, burly men wearing leather jackets, jeans and black t-shirts were growling and laughing as they dragged a woman through the dirt. Leo had begun to fumble with the phone in his pocket, but as the men had turned towards the moonlight, (the only source of light in the area), he'd seen their horribly disfigured faces. Their foreheads were jutting out, with sharp ridges where their scalps should have begun. Long fangs grew over their blood-red lips, and were stained by what he could only describe as coagulated blood.

At that moment, Leo struggled with the reality that these were truly vampires. They weren't the typical pretty, muscle-bound vampire heroes that Hollywood had made them out to be. These were fierce, demonic creatures, and Leo watched in horror as one vampire ripped the young woman's arm off, letting the blood from her stump drip down his gullet as the others laughed. The sounds of the woman's dying screams were so horrible, Leo could imagine being

haunted by them for years to come. As he was about to turn around and go for help, one of the vampires spoke, and what he said caught Leo's attention.

"Damn boys, what a kill. After a hundred years of picking off the occasional farmer or street urchin back in Columbia, we've hit the jackpot here in America," the vampire who'd killed the girl said, with blood splashed across his face.

"Yeah boss, this is the life. You called it for sure Pablo. Long live Pablo!" another vampire replied.

"Come on boys, bring the body back inside. It'll be good to tease that little bitch inside with some fresh blood," Pablo, (who Leo assumed was the leader), yelled to the group. They screamed and hollered, and all but one went inside. The one left behind went over to a group of motorcycles near the building, and began rummaging through their belongings.

What this *Pablo* creature had said convinced Leo that Sabrina was inside. He looked around, and after a brief struggle with his courage, he gathered all his strength, and began his mission. He snuck up behind the straggler outside, and pulling out a knife he'd brought with him for protection, Leo drove the knife deep into the vampire's head. He hadn't been sure if a knife would work, but the vampire didn't utter a sound. He just fell flat on the dirt, blood dripping out all around him.

His hands shook as he felt the cold blood of the creature seep into his skin, but he shook it off. He wanted to throw up, but he had to rescue his girlfriend, and there were four more vampires inside. Leo looked inside the packs on the motorcycles, and found a large revolver inside. Leo hated guns, but he didn't want to take any chances, and so he checked to make sure the gun was loaded, clicked back the hammer on the revolver, and then made his way inside.

Sliding the now bloody knife back into his satchel and holding the gun out ahead of him, Leo slowly made his way through the theater lobby, listening carefully for any sounds the vampires might make. Trying to remember how the actors looked and acted in each scene of a police procedural show he'd watched over the years, Leo began to clear the room, until he was sure he was alone in the lobby.

"Little pig walked right into the slaughter," a voice boomed above him, and Leo looked up in time to see one of the vampires, its face pallid and filled with sharp teeth, jump down from one of the chandeliers in the ceiling. Leo pulled up his gun and fired, but having never fired a gun before, his shot went wide of the target, and the creature landed on top of Leo. The two struggled as they crashed to the floor of the lobby. Leo could hear the sharp clicking of teeth as the vampire lunged at Leo, but his fear fueled his adrenaline, and Leo instead brought up the gun, jammed it into the vampire's mouth, and pulled the trigger. The vampire's head burst apart, blood splashing the walls behind it with its black blood.

Leo threw the body of the creature off him, but before he could do anything more, two vampires crawled down from the walls on all fours, and then lunged toward Leo, grabbing him by the arms and moving at super speed through the doors leading into the largest of the theaters in the building. Throwing Leo across the room, he landed with a thud against a row of chairs. Shaking his head, Leo brought up his gun and fired, his anger and fear allowing him to aim and fire quickly before the creatures attacked. He fired until the chambers of the revolver were empty, and by the time he was finished, both creatures had been hit and taken down by the large slugs of the gun.

"Impressive," a familiar voice said, and Leo turned to see Pablo, walking up the aisle with a grin on his face.

"Where is she?" Leo asked, struggling to stand up as his body felt broken and bruised.

“Who? Oh, are you the boyfriend that bitch has been talking about all week? God, she would not shut the hell up. It was, ‘Leo’ this and ‘Leo’ that all fucking week. I thought she was making you up half the time, but damn boy, you are one badass Madre capulla! I’ve been with that group of boys for nearly fifty years now, and you come in here, guns blazing, and take them out lickety-split. They were getting soft in their years anyways.”

“Where is Sabrina? I’m taking her home.”

“Are you now? Well, the way I see it, you emptied that gun on my boys there, and I got the advantage here. See, most people who discover us assume the movies are right and we can be killed with wooden stakes and shit. Not you though. You took out that gun and put a bullet in their brains. That’s the only way we die you know. You have to kill the brain. So now your gun’s empty, how do you expect to save your girl? What makes you think she even wants saving?”

“You... you can keep talking, but I’m going to take her out of here. I’ll die if it means she lives.”

“Good to know,” Pablo replied, and in an instant his human face was replaced by a demonic form, and he rushed Leo, picking him up and flying through the air until they went flying through the theater’s screen. When Leo opened his eyes and looked around him, he saw that Pablo was standing next to a bound woman, and he knew that he’d found Sabrina.

Her eyes were open and wide with fear, and a large wound on her neck had scarred over in the week since her abduction. Her pale skin seemed to glow in the light of the theater screen, and her hair clung to her sweaty forehead as she gazed at him in shock.

“Sabrina, I’m here...” Leo began to say.

“No Leo, you can’t be here. It’s too late for me. I’ve...” Sabrina began to say, but then she looked at him with wide eyes, and her face began to contort, until the same demonic features were on her face as had been on Pablo’s.

“Yeah girl, that’s what I’m talking about. Smell that blood. Feel the hunger rage inside you. See Leo, buddy, I turned your girl. It’s kind of a fun hobby of mine, but I’ll turn a girl every few months, and then I’ll starve her, until her mind goes and she’s nothing but a walking death machine. Then I’ll unleash her into a small town, and watch her tear through it like tissue paper. It’s a real fucking kick.”

“You... son of a bitch,” Leo said, spitting out blood and looking at his now vampiric girlfriend with concern.

“Don’t worry Leo, she won’t be far behind you once I kill you. After she’s done her work, I’ll kill her too. Can’t have a rabid animal in my home, can I?”

“I’m going to kill you,” Leo said. Standing up slowly and glaring at Pablo. Pablo began to laugh, and slowly walked over to Leo, until the two were nearly nose to nose.

“Tell me, Chico, how do you plan on doing that?” Pablo asked.

“Like this,” Leo replied, and using all his strength and speed, Leo swung his knife out from his satchel, through the air and stuck it deep into Pablo’s head. The vampire roared in anger and pain, but then he quickly quieted down, and fell face first onto the concrete floor of the theater.

Leo walked away from the dead creature at his feet, and slowly made his way to Sabrina, who had fought her vampire nature long enough to return to her human face. She was leaning as far away from Leo as possible, trying to keep him far away.

“No Leo, you have to go. It’s... it is too dangerous. I can smell your blood. I’m...I’m so hungry,” Sabrina replied.

“Sabrina, I’m not leaving here without you. I’m going to help you.”

“You can’t Leo. It’s too late. There’s no cure.”

“I know babe. I know that. I love you so much. I’d do anything for you...absolutely anything. That’s why I have to do this.”

“Do what?”

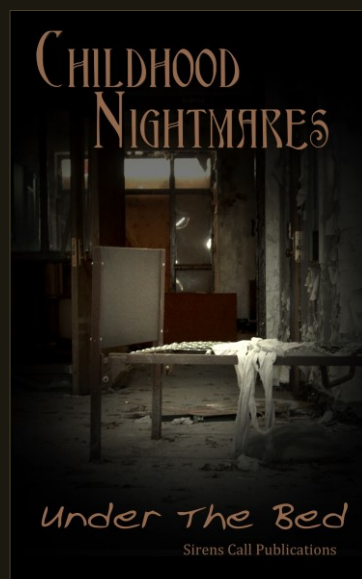
“Together forever babe,” Leo replied, and then he brought up his bleeding neck, and pushed it against her mouth. Untying her wrists as she felt his neck with her tongue, he waited for the inevitable, and as her ropes fell away, he felt her strong grip on his arms as her face transformed, and finally her teeth sunk into his neck. He knew he might die, but there was no greater sacrifice he could think of than to make sure she lived. So he didn’t fight her, but rather closed his eyes, and drifted into the sweet euphoria her bite gave him. Whatever happened next, he was content, and he was happy knowing he’d done whatever it took, all in the name of love.

Two hours later, Leo awoke from a deep slumber. He saw through revitalized, superhuman eyes that he was still in the abandoned theater. He felt a deep, painful hunger grip his stomach, and he felt his face transform, teeth growing over his lips and his forehead growing larger. Fear coursed through his body, until he saw Sabrina looming over him, wiping a strand of his blonde hair from his eyes and gazing deep into them with her own. The sight of her calmed him instantly, and he knew that he was okay. He had no idea what the future held for them. He knew nothing about being a true vampire. Yet the woman he loved was with him, and they were bound together forever. He’d sacrificed everything, and had been rewarded. Love is deeper than a mere feeling; it runs strong throughout the body, from the nerves in your brain to the blood through your veins. Now Sabrina and Leo shared a bond that could never be broken, and as they now knew, love is in the blood.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Author Anthony Avina has been an indie author for over five years. An avid fan of the horror genre and hungry to showcase the true nature of society, Mr. Avina has always written tales that not only entertain and scare, but also bring out true and heartfelt emotion. Anthony Avina lives in Southern California, and works as an indie author, journalist, and internet personality.

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I've never been a penitent person. Some call it mental derangement, some call it sociopathy, but I just call it love. Some say I'm a victim of that love, but I don't see it that way. I have never been a victim. Every choice I've ever made, I own. I replied to his mysterious email because I wanted to. I continued to reply because there was an undeniable fixation; I never once considered resisting him. I never once questioned his motives, nor my own. So when he called me here so fervidly, I boarded the train with matched passion. Some may never understand that kind of draw to a single being; a being with whom an affinity is so apparent, and so alluring, everything else ceases to exist for you. It's not crazy; it's love. So I let him instruct me here, to the middle of nowhere. Even now, I don't regret it.

"He's not well," she greets me.

I enter the manor, stunned by its beauty, and by hers. His mother is tall; a well-nigh six feet, and she revels in towering over me. Her eyes are condescending, and her glare suspicious. Her glossy black hair is just beginning to dust, but not a wrinkle can be spotted.

"May I see him?" I ask, trying not to let her presence infantilize me.

"No. No, he was stern on that fact."

She leans over me to shut the door behind us. She never breaks eye contact. She sizes me up for a moment or two, and I let her.

"Yes. You'll do." She offers a wry, malevolent smirk, to which I do not reply.

Upstairs, I settle into a dim candle-lit room. There is no electricity out here, and the only sounds are the crickets chirping over a howling wind which forces itself against the windows.

"I have to see him," I say when she brings me a glass of Chardonnay. "I've come all this way."

At first, I think she may give in, or scold me. But then, she chooses to simply ignore my frustrations altogether. "It's late. Do get some rest. You'll have a big day tomorrow."

She leaves the room, and I almost think it will deadbolt behind her. But it doesn't.

Days go by this way, and I am patient and understanding. The only way to have him is to follow the rules. He'll need a proper sacrifice, but that part I already know. I'm waiting for her to tell me what it means, but she never does. She probably thinks I'll lose my nerve; try to run away. I won't.

Finally, I ask: "How do I know he's still alive? How do I know this is not just some sick ploy to get me to perform some sick ritual for your own pleasure?" I've always had a bold heart, and quick tongue.

It's just after midnight. She lets her attention fall to a ticking clock. As it strikes 12:01, she gestures for me to follow her. I take a candle, and do just that. I try to be light-footed; nervous the creaking wood will arouse my senses and make me want to turn back. My curiosity carries me, and my heart beats a tattoo against my chest. I'm not afraid, but I know I should be. The thrill of that knowledge alone tickles my spine. The enchantment is almost too much to bear, and I want to scream with pleasure. But I don't.

We stop at the last door on the left, at the top of the house. It's barricaded from the outside. I instinctively reach out to lift the barrier, but she places her hand atop mine and eases it away. She hands me her own candle.

"I won't be staying for this part." Her voice is as harsh a winter's storm. The coldness that had always resided in her eyes burned to a bitter resentment now. I watched her walk away, hollowed by her willingness to steal the anticipation from me.

When she disappears around the corner, I shake out my limbs wanting to remove her sourness from my energy. Holding both candles with one hand I pushed the barrier up, releasing the latch. Inside, the room is blanketed by a thick darkness that startles me. I let the small glow I'm carrying guide me towards a bed, in which a body is hidden. A relief comes over me instantly, and I hover directly over the shape. Taking a deep breath, I let the light slide across his broadness.

His monstrosity is apparent, but somehow inviting. His weight shifts as a single drop of wax tumbles to his large, low hanging, ear. As it plops onto his skin, he exhales a groan, and lets his eyes flutter open. They are icy blue, like his mother's. His skin is rough and reddened, with patches of fur scattered over his chest. His cheekbones are high and angular; sharp to the touch. His teeth glisten under the light, enlarged by the shadowing. He raises a large hand to me, and I ignore the thorns that covered it. Blood runs down our forearms as we lock eyes for the first time. This is the connection he promised; the connection I knew could not be falsified.

He pulls me down onto him, letting the candles fall to the floor. I would give myself wholly, until we belonged to one another - two parts of one whole. That would be my sacrifice; an eternal bond sealed in blood. I would revel in every moment of it.

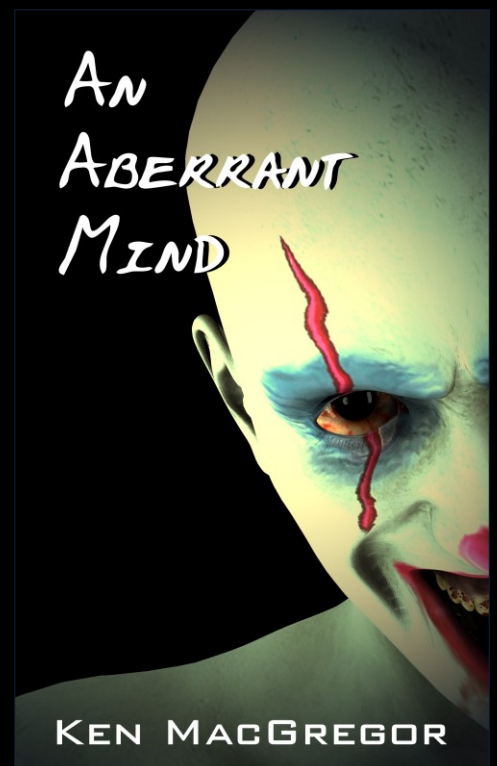
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Shyla Fairfax-Owen holds a Master's Degree in Film Studies and a Minor in Women's and Gender Studies. Throughout her grad school career she specialized in the Horror genre, and has recently decided to follow her passion for writing speculative fiction. Her latest endeavor has been flash fiction, for which she launched a site that is dedicated to sharing those works.

Website: beyondthethreshold.co

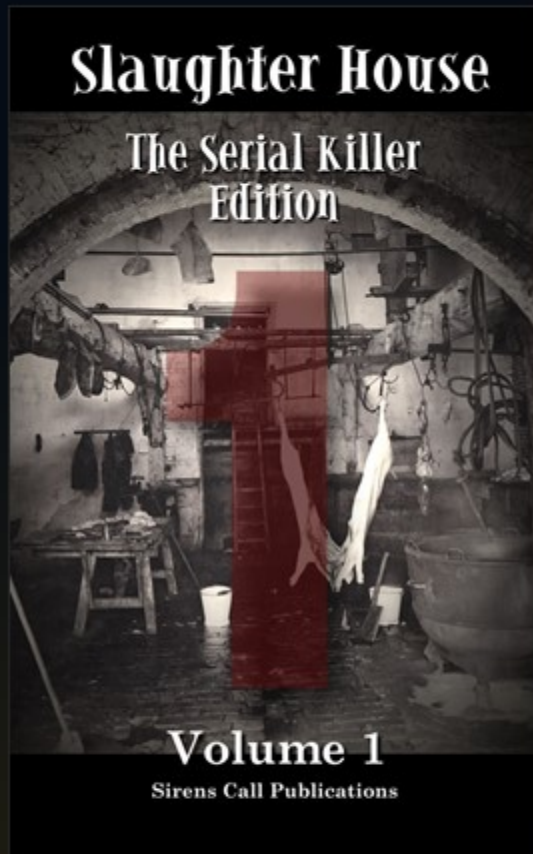
An Aberrant Mind

Ken MacGregor

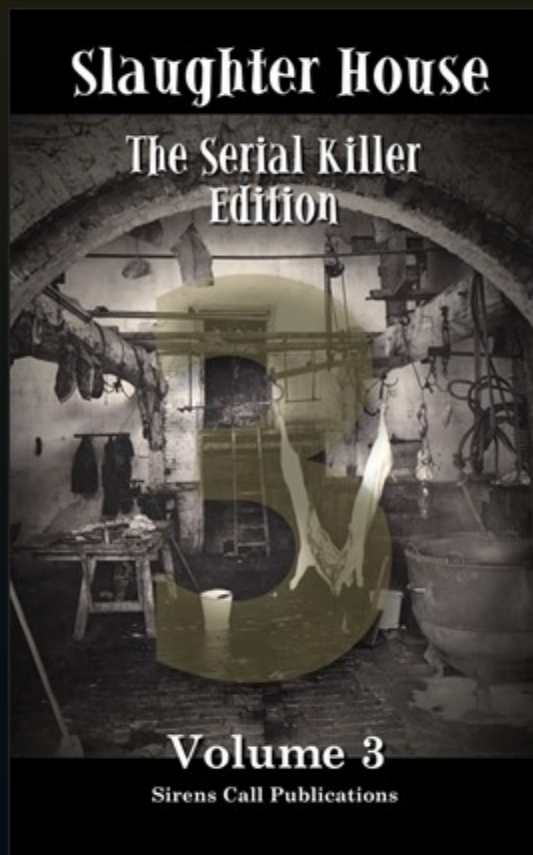
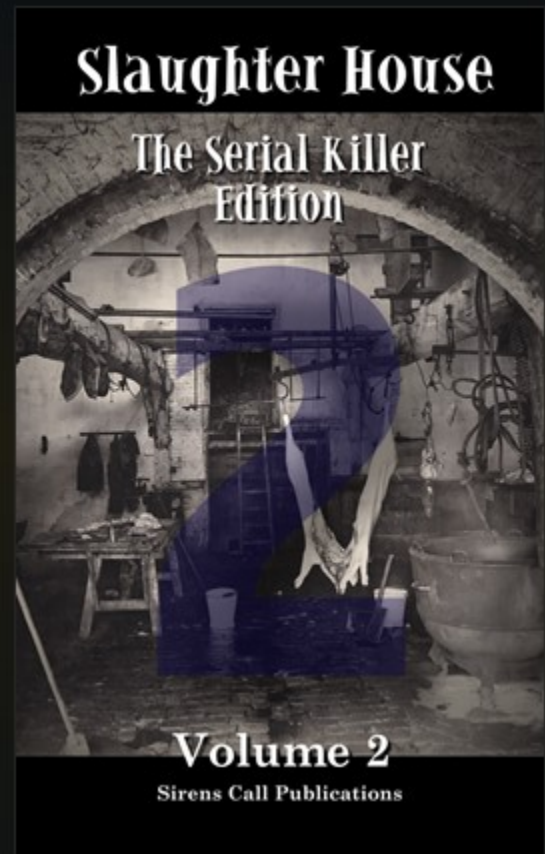
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Hopeless Necromantic | *Ken MacGregor*

Todd sighed

“You haven’t touched your food.”

Georgette glared at him through the film on her eyes. Under sunken cheeks, her jaw clenched tight.

“If you don’t want it, fine.”

He reached across and took her plate. He scraped the shrimp and pasta onto his own plate and took a bite. He smiled around it and swallowed.

“Outdid myself with the scampi this time. You don’t know what you’re missing.”

Holding a forkful out toward her, he raised his eyebrows. When she crossed her arms and turned her head away, Todd shrugged and put the bite in his mouth. He spoke around the food.

“Are you bored? Oh, god, I hope that’s not it. I’d hate to think we have nothing to talk about anymore.”

Georgette plucked a dinner roll from the basket between them and threw it at Todd. It bounced off his cheek, and he put down his fork.

“You’re angry with me.”

She nodded for several seconds.

“Why? Do you think it was better before? Would you like me to put you back?”

Again, she nodded.

“But, honey, we’re together. I’m your husband. You’re my wife. I don’t want to live without you.”

She stood and crossed the room to her easel. It was the first time she’d been near it since she returned home. With pale, stiff fingers, she grabbed a charcoal pencil. Turning to the white dining room wall, Georgette wrote in large, angry block letters.

I HATE YOU. I’D RATHER BE DEAD.

“You *are* dead, silly. And, you don’t hate me, really, do you?”

ASSHOLE

Todd pushed his chair back and folded his linen napkin, setting it by his plate. He held his hands out in a gesture of peace as he approached his late wife.

“You’ll feel better after a hot bath. I’ll rub your feet after. Come on. I’ll clean dinner up later. Let’s see if we can’t get you relaxed and comfy, hm?”

Georgette allowed him to lead her toward the bathroom, but the pencil remained in her fist. Bending over the tub to open the faucets, Todd heard her rush forward. He smiled and glanced up. Georgette was frozen in the act of trying to pierce her husband’s head with the charcoal pencil. Rage and confusion battled for supremacy on her face.

“Oh, honey. I’m a necromancer. I brought you back. You’re not permitted to harm me. Come on. Let’s get you in the tub.”

She stood fuming while Todd removed the dress in which she had been buried. Naked, she climbed in the bath and promptly went all the way under and stayed there for twenty minutes.

He pulled the plug from the drain and watched the water disappear, revealing the dead woman an inch at a time. She lay curled on the bottom of the tub, eyes open staring at nothing. Holding out a green, terrycloth robe, he helped her out. In the bedroom, he rubbed her feet as promised. Then he leaned forward and kissed the corner of her mouth.

“I have missed my wife very much.”

He put his hand on her bare thigh.

She stood up fast. She pulled the charcoal pencil from the pocket of her robe and wrote on the bedroom wall.

YOU ARE EVIL

“Only technically, dear.”

He patted the bed next to him and smiled.

“Come here, my love,” Todd said. “Let me make you warm for a while.”

After almost a minute, her shoulders slumped and she sat down. She glared at him and turned to the wall.

I STILL HATE YOU

“I know. I still love you.”

I'M ONLY DOING THIS BECAUSE I'M COLD

“That’s fine, my sweet.”

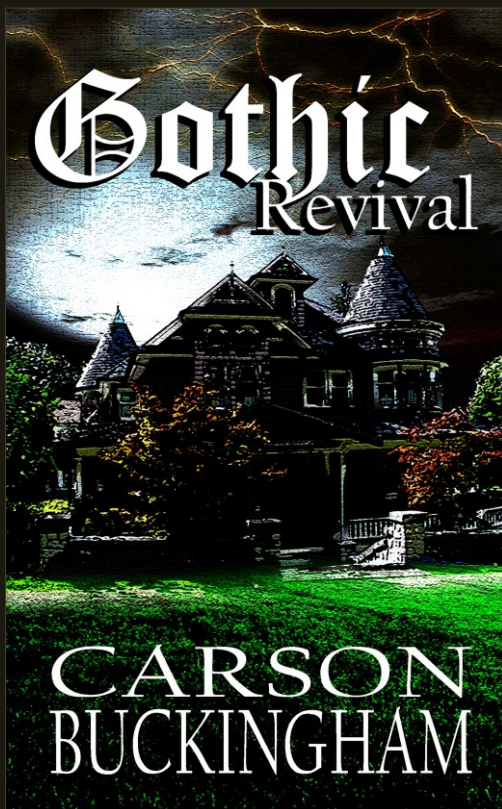
Georgette laid the pencil on the nightstand. She shrugged out of her robe.

Just like before, she didn’t have to put up with it for long.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ken MacGregor’s work has appeared in dozens of anthologies and magazines. His short-story collection, *An Aberrant Mind*, is available online and in select bookstores. Ken is a member of the HWA, edits an annual horror-themed anthology, and he once made a zombie movie. He recently co-wrote a novel with a fellow horror author, and is currently working on the sequel. Ken lives in Michigan with his family and two “domesticated” predators.

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Cradle



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Syd watched, yearned, all he could do. Time carried little weight. Weeks, months, no meaning.

Syd felt the quickening of a heartbeat, for the first time.

No tingling nerves nor dryness of the throat, like others.

Just plain - Love.

He gazed at her stride as she emerged from her place of work, a school in the midst of a busy urban city centre. He soaked up every stride, every turn of her head. Syd moved closer to her car as she approached the school entrance gate. Since his gaze met her face just a few days ago, this obsession only grew stronger with each passing moment.

It felt too strong, too unfamiliar, overpowering. Syd never thought this feeling could ever surface. So many generations of wandering, and now, the flesh and blood of this woman captivated Syd, drowned every other desire.

The deep feelings, as clear as the day he discovered a physical identity, a word taken from a tormented soul, it felt right, his name - Syd.

Syd gazed at her wavy blonde hair as it brushed her shoulder as she entered the car. A quick hum of the engine started then she sped off to meet a busy traffic stream ahead. Syd kept focused on the car as it struggled along in the gridlock, staying as close to the vehicle as possible. Hundreds of people paced the street, some in an ambling gait, others dashing for the tube station, others walking directly at Syd.

He kept his attention on the car, on her.

Inside the car, she lit up a cigarette and punched a call button on a phone gripped by a holder. 'Calling Jake' appeared then a voice.

"Jess. Where are you?"

"Hey," Jess sucked up a lungful then exhaled as she continued, "left work a little later, sorry. More papers than usual to mark. And I didn't want to bring them home unfinished as," she smiled, "as soon as I return..."

"We head off for a weekend by ourselves for a change." Jake cut in with a sigh.

"That's right. Kids ready."

"Why don't I take them to Molly's now?"

"You just can't wait to get rid of them can you?" Jess said as she took a deep breath.

"C'mon. It's been a while since we had a weekend to ourselves." Jake's voice a little strained.

"Molly has offered to take them more often."

"Your sister is cool."

Jess stone-faced for a second in thought. "Yea, suits you doesn't it?"

"Let's not argue."

"Why don't you like the kids?" Jess asked as she carefully maneuvered out of a busy roundabout.

Silence. Jake suddenly at a loss for words. Then he spoke. "I *am* still here. A few before me did not stick around..."

"Talk when I am back. Wait with the kids. We leave as soon as I get back." Jess blurted then rapidly punched the end call button. "Such an asshole at times," she muttered. Jess swiveled the rear view mirror quickly to check her rushed makeup before leaving the school; she quickly swiveled it back into its original position.

In the reflection, Syd, on the back seat, settled, at ease, his gaze on Jess's porcelain skin. Syd's eyes, deep-set blackness, studied Jess.

Craving. Waiting.

Jess stubbed out the cigarette. The phone blasted out Molly's ringtone. Jess rubbed her arm, the bite of a chill for a moment. She hit a button. "Hey Molly."

"Jess. Ummm." Molly could be heard taking a few quick breaths. "You heading home."

Jess sensed something wrong, Molly's tone was off, a tone she knew of old. "Yea, I am, you sound, a little stressed."

Long sigh. "I'm sick Jess, flu, just bedridden today."

"Oh no. Well... erm... how sick?" The question irrelevant, Jess knew it.

"Sorry, the kids," rasping cough, "just can't be left here, sorry, make it up to you."

Jess craned her neck back in disappointment and almost forgot she was driving a road vehicle. "Okay, no worries, we can go in a couple of weeks maybe, whatever."

"Sorry, was looking forward to taking them to school, playing hide and seek, all that."

"They were looking forward to their Aunt entertaining them. Anyway."

"Really sorry, let you down."

"No, no, it's okay." Jess said despite her tone lacking enthusiasm, "we... will do the usual. Will stop by tomorrow okay."

"See you."

Jess checked a road sign before a vacant stare through the windscreen. "No private time with Jake, again." Jess spoke softly.

Syd, now in the passenger seat, same transfixed stare, same yearning.

His razor-thin lips wanted to open and speak but he knew the shock would terrify her. Barely any flesh covered his skeletal physique mostly hidden under torn rags.

Syd stared at his reflection in the mirror. It disgusted him. Centuries of roaming around, picking out victims to torment, all of it just descended into boredom when his dark eyes feasted on the frustrated lady talking to herself just to think straight.

A lustful look from a gaunt face, cheek bones pushed through thin pale skin.

The need to touch, just feel, if just for a moment.

He reached out, a bony hand clasped Jess's right hand on the wheel.

She flinched, and wrenched her hand from the wheel.

Syd withdrew his white hand quickly.

Jess felt something as cold as an eel rest on her skin. "What was that?" Jess shook her hand before resuming a tight grip on the wheel.

She threw the empty passenger seat a curious glance.

For a moment, she felt Syd's unseen presence.

Syd seated there, a still stance, black eyes never leaving her face.

A quick head shake, and Jess punched up Jake's number.

Syd's gaze moved away from her face to Jess's driving license vibrating in the middle pocket between the front seats, black eyes on the address.

Wandering aimlessly across a wooden floor, an impatient Jake stomped from one wall to another. Nothing impressed him anymore from the period fireplace to the lush sofa where he and Jess snuggled up to each other. Those nights when Molly took the kids, and Jake soaked up the chance to share the one thing he wanted from Jess.

In a play room a few paces away, two kids played a game on their tablets, lost in their digital worlds. Locked in childhood fun, and oblivious to Jake throwing dagger eyes at them.

His phone buzzed and buzzed.

Jess Calling.

“Hey,” Jake forced an enthused tone, “You back soon?”

The voice of Jess. “Yea, er, look, weekend is cancelled.”

Jake’s thoughts elsewhere as he replied. “Okay, I see.”

A brief silence. “Yes, my sister is ill. We can... do other stuff... I will get time off again soon. You, me and the kids can head off for the weekend maybe. Thought you might be quite pissed off.”

Jake covered his face with his hands and returned a muffled reply. “Okay, let’s do that. I... will... chat with you shortly.”

“Okay, you, not too miffed I hope.”

“No,” Jake hid a bitter smile, “um, see you shortly.”

A pause for thought from Jess, the call terminated.

Jake tapped his mouth with the phone, thoughts, plans. He plunged the phone into his pocket and headed upstairs. His suitcase packed for the weekend just needed fastening. His eyes moved to another empty suitcase which he grabbed and hurled to the bed.

His phone rang.

Sarah calling.

“Hey there babe.” Jake replied in a loud voice, a beaming smile.

“Don’t fucking babe me, have you left that bitch yet?”

“Told you, was finishing it this weekend, was gonna tell her while away and just not come back. Weekend away not happening now, but babe, don’t worry.”

“No need to hang about, just get outta there,” a sigh, “honestly don’t know why you stuck with her, how much you hate kids for a start.”

“Yes, I am leaving right now.” Jake snapped.

Her voice cracked as sniffles commenced. “Sorry, just love you, you said you would leave her a few months ago. I can’t keep seeing you like this...”

“Babe, babe, I am leaving,” Jake tipped his head back, closed his eyes, “right now.” He ended the call.

He paused for thought, then continued. Garment by garment, he filled the case until it could barely be shut tight. Jake checked the window view of the driveway and empty street. The afternoon glare of the sun glinted off the window glass. He smiled. “I am doing the right thing. Time to go.”

“Leaving her are you?” A husky voice bellowed from behind Jake, startling him.

Jake swung around, the bedroom - empty. “Hello.” He strode to the door. “Kids, hey, who was that?”

The door slammed hard, almost splintering the frame.

Jake flinched then an angry grin. “Kids, not funny, wise up with the games,” his voice quietened, “Jake not playing anymore.”

“Coward.” The deep bellowing voice spoke again, “Like so many.”

Jake broke into a sprint for the door. Something clutched his neck. He rose a few feet off the floor. He tried to shake himself free as his neck strained.

“AGGHHHHHH!” His muffled scream barely leaving his lips.

“Cheat. You were about to leave her, no words, just a sad excuse for a man.”

The unseen grip on his throat lowered him down, his heels gently rested back on the carpet; still a tight throat clasp.

Then it showed itself, the form, a shape materialised.

Syd.

The blackest eyes, pallid skin wrapped around a humanoid shaped cranium, barely any flesh. Even Syd's skull managed to twist with rage.

"I came here just, for a glimpse, before resigning to hopelessness. What do I find? A worthless man, with a wonderful woman."

Jake burst into a hysterical fit, shaking violently, screams leaked through Syd's grip.

"I had no idea we could be just like you. Be able to love. I wandered for generations, feeding off your kind. But now. I would rather live, she...has changed...me, in a way I thought no human could possibly do."

"What... what... are you?" Jake whimpered.

"The last thing you will ever see. Or feel. Or remember."

Jake forced a squeal again.

Syd pulled Jake closer. "You are... an... empty... vessel."

Outside the door, curiosity, the two kids had crept up the stairs upon hearing Jake shout.

Silence.

One of the kids swallowed hard while controlling some quick breaths, and let out a stutter. "Ja-ke."

They froze, wide eyes on the door.

The door swung open.

The kids yelped.

A smiling Jake emerged, arms outstretched. "Kids, what is wrong." Then he rolled his eyes. "Oops, the shouting, sorry, just got a little frustrated at the... erm... packing as... we are not going to erm... Molly's."

"We are not going to Aunt Molly's?" The elder kid spoke.

Jake crouched and beckoned the kids for a hug. Reluctant, they edged towards him, Jake never came across as the hugging type, not for the kids. Jake smoothed their heads, his face contorted by a wide Cheshire cat smile, eyes watery with delight.

The front door opened. In strode Jess. She peered up at Jake and the kids seated on the top stair. Jake rose, strong eye contact with Jess, that yearning look, barely a blink.

The kids leaped two stairs at a time towards Jess. "Jake says we are not going to Aunt Molly's."

Jess still eye to eye with Jake, his expression one that felt different, something pure and comforting in his smile. "So, you are not disappointed?"

Jake, one soft step after another, walked down to Jess. He moved close to her face. He rubbed her arms softly. Words felt a struggle, rapture had sealed his tongue.

Jess peered into his eyes, and felt something - different.

Jake stroked her cheek. "Why don't we do something, as a family, the four of us? Bring your sister, oh, she is sick." Jake stumbled from one word to the next unaware of his silly grin and a nervous lip.

Jess smirked, a flutter in her stomach as she appreciated this new Jake. "Well, was not expecting you to be so great, got me relieved."

Jake embraced Jess, euphoria, the pleasure of her touch and closeness no longer a nomadic dream. He whispered softly. "There are going to be a lot of changes, promise."

Jess smiled and headed off upstairs ushering the kids to follow her. “C’mon, let’s get ready, we are all off on holiday.”

The kids leapt up with joy. “Where to?” The young one asked.

Jess felt lost in Jake’s eyes. “We will think of something shortly.”

She headed upstairs.

Jake turned his head to a hallway mirror; he studied his new self, the birth of a physical existence. With raised prominent cheek bones from smiling, he spoke.

“My name is Syd. And I am happy.”

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. Stephen currently works on creating a collection of short tales.

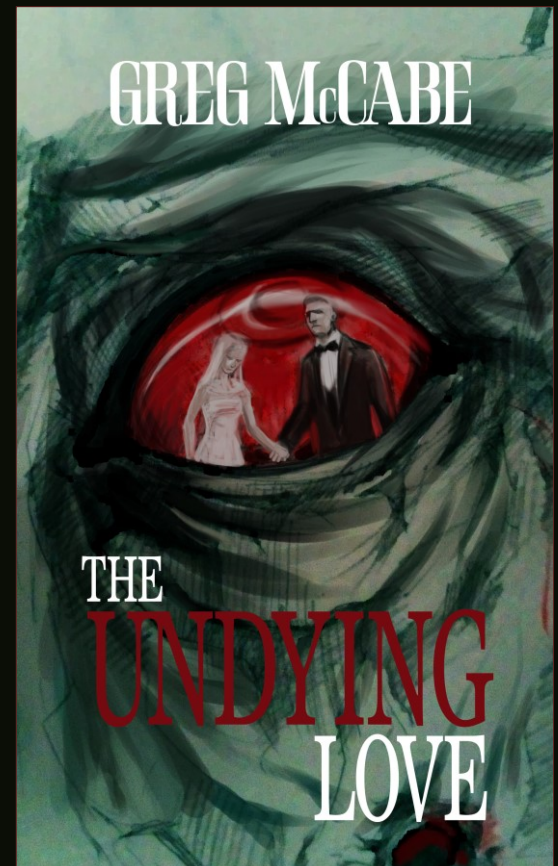
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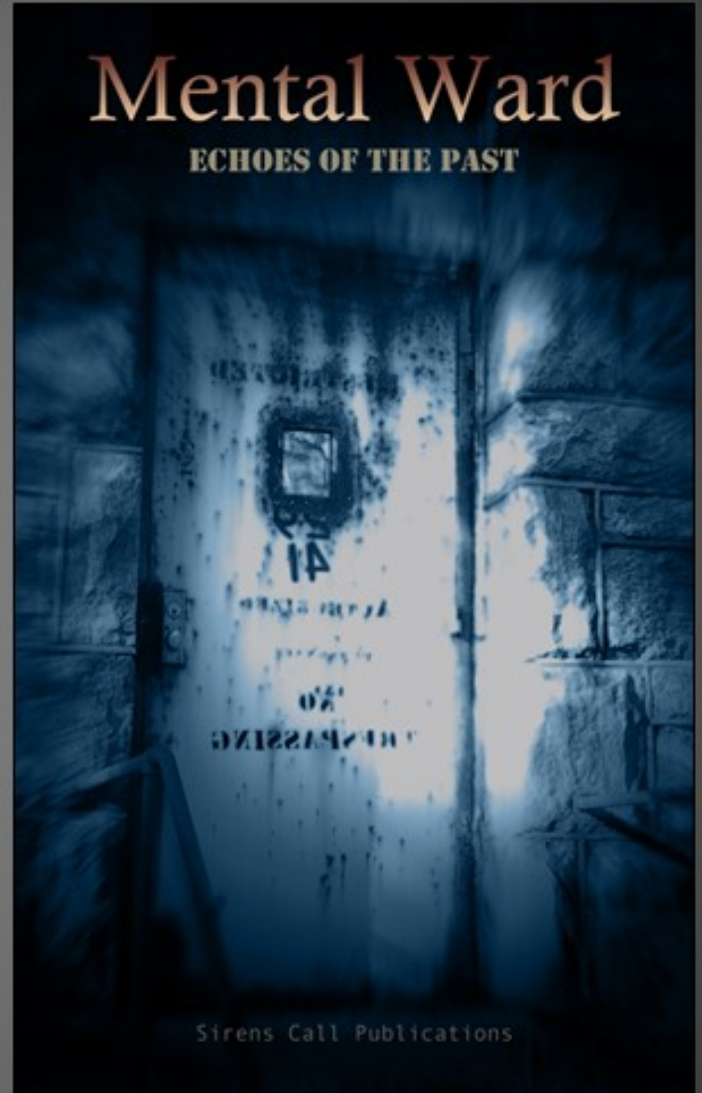
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The One That Got Away | *Dani Brown*

I watched her sleeping; my sweet angel, a kiss sent from Heaven that had wandered out of my dreams and into my bed. Her dull yellow hair spread over her pillow, the knots combed so I could run my fingers through it in the middle of the night when her back was to me.

Despite the tattoo of wings on her shoulder blades, she did not resemble an angel to anyone apart from myself. There was a burning desire to show the world how angelic my precious darling could be. Actual wings would show the world her beauty.

There was no shortage outside my bedsit window. The bin men were on strike and had been for weeks. Birds - seagulls in particular - were attracted. Ripe pickings to be found a few miles inland. The trick was to catch one in silence and sew its wings to her shoulder blades.

My darling angel seemed self-conscious and was convinced no one much cared for her. She never left the closed quarters of the bedsit flat. With feather wings, everyone would see how wonderful she was. They would come from miles around to catch sight of her standing at her one window to the outside. One day she would open it. And the next, leave hand-in-hand with me to a soundtrack of cat-calls and wolf-whistles.

The curtain net made a decent enough bird catching net once a coat hanger was threaded through, with a thin rolling pin as a handle. It only took fifteen minutes of my time to construct; time not spent staring at her beauty.

I waited with baited breath and patience for a gull to land on the ledge. My darling angel slept on, oblivious to it all. Worry that their squawks would wake her danced across my mind. Deep inside, in the back where reality dwelt, I knew it could not happen. Not yet, anyways. I shut that part off.

Never before had the seagulls woken my darling angel but I tended to keep my window shut, lest one fly in and defecate on her. The street noises travelled up to my bedsit; a noisy city street, regardless of the hour of the morning, with people going about their business.

One silent seagull perched on the ledge. They were known in this city for their mutant size and abnormal levels of violence directed towards man and each other. Seldom did I venture out, yet every time I was chased by at least one of the large birds.

I would only have one chance at this. If the creature were to escape, it would alert all its friends and send them to peck at the double glazed glass of my window until it shattered. A flock would enter and my darling angel and I would be found two weeks later due to lack of rent.

The net swooped over the bird despite the unsteadiness of my hand. Knowing it was trapped, the noise it made was loud enough to wake a dozen slumbering junkies lost in delirium's embrace – yet my darling slept on. I pulled it inside and shut the window before more gulls were attracted by its squawk and came to stage a rescue mission.

Its neck crumbled beneath my grip with minimal pecks to my hand and only a little torn flesh. It was worth every risk of infection for my darling sleeping angel. In the modern world, antibiotics still occasionally worked and if the worst was to happen, my hand would be amputated before the infection could spread.

The wings required scissors for their removal – they could not be ripped at such close quarters with so little strength. Once they were gone I plucked the rest of the bird; extra feathers to stick to the stitches on my darling angel's shoulder blades - a disguise to make them appear more natural.

She did not wake as I sewed the wings into her dusty skin, stretched thin over her shoulder blades. One day she would. Once she was complete.

I gave her a kiss on her painted red lips. One day, those lips would kiss me back and her arms would wrap around my neck. For now they were cold and still – the wires that served as bones were movable but I had other stuff to attend to today. I left her in bed tucked beneath the blankets with her hot water bottles and the snoring CD set to repeat.

Tonight might be the night I source a heart for her, which would be one heart more than the one she was modelled on. I needed to be ready. She was nearly complete. One final ingredient and I would have myself a perfect wife. I could not have just any heart; it had to be the right one. My days were spent with binoculars at the window waiting for the right woman – the one that most resembled the one that got away.

The girl that got away all those years ago I still pine for in the middle of the night when my darling's hot water bottles have gone cold and the CD skips. Reality is a cold unforgiving mistress. But not as bad as the one that got away.

This likeness was a present to her. A way to impress her enough into loving me back. My presents of flowers, chocolates and theatre tickets were wasted on her. She sent back every card I ever sent and changed her address after serving me with a restraining order.

The likeness I spent many reclusive years constructing now. She was nearly ready. The girl that got away grew older and sicker with each passing day. Her husband mistreated her (or so I was informed). It aged her something terrible. My darling angel would be forever young and never file for a restraining order.

My darling angel became more than a present, a quest for something real when the girl that got away ripped out my heart and roasted it for her lover. My darling angel was my life and a better wife than I could have ever hoped for.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dani Brown is the author of *My Lovely Wife* and *Middle Age Rae of Fucking Sunshine* (both out now from Morbidbooks). When she isn't writing she enjoys knitting and thinking of the finer points of invading Finland with an army of chavs mounted on dingoes. She has an unhealthy obsession with Mayhem's drummer and doesn't trust anyone who claims Velvet Underground as their favourite band.

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Careless I became, night after night, due to my aging eyesight fading rapidly...I think she sensed it too.

Revisiting those dark allies that I promised myself to avoid, but she begged me at her almost last breath to do it just one more time

As she's done 1,000 times before, and I did it without a hiccup...

Vicious thoughts tumbled over and over in my mind every time I closed my eyes to recall all my hideous crimes, which I committed for her in order to kiss, caress, and hold her again and those thoughts just

Erased my evil deeds for only a moment...

I guess that's why I didn't mind cutting out hearts from the ones who've been long forgotten on the streets. Slicing and sautéing hearts with garlic/onions/peppers to satiate her cries and moans...

I'm not sure if I can continue much longer, but I must in order to keep her alive. My nightmares trigger my mind to rewind.

I despise closing my eyes because I know what waits for me in the darkness. I hear the screams and smell the metallic splatters of blood flying onto my face and landing on my thick lenses, as I finished another innocent victim.

Some were so very young.

It's all worth it because her life and beauty would be fully restored once again, and I could hold her in my shriveled up arms at least for another night, before she figures out that my travels will soon cease.

I knew when that hour arrived what would happen next.

I saw it 27 years ago, when she spotted me peering in that fogged up window that Halloween night at the Annual Ghouls and Freaks Masquerade Fest in New Orleans.

I'll never forget how she shape-shifted from such a beautiful Egyptian Queen in costume and exotic make-up, who I fell for.

She then began to transform into a jaw-dropping beast that I've never seen in my life. I wanted to run, but my feet were stuck to the ground, as someone had poured a bucket of glue over my shoes. I desired to see more.

She stood tall with ripped mammoth, pointy opaque dragonfly wings. She possessed a scorpion tail, long spiky fangs, razor claws with multiple spikes standing on top of her knuckles, and piercing, pink eyes.

She jerked her head around and stared at me with a sinister grin that pierced my inner soul and shot her hand right into that guy's chest. She ripped out his heart with veins dangling down to the ground, as blood gushed out like a rapid waterfall.

She wasn't prepared for the allergic reaction.

Thank goodness my background was in medicine, but I dropped out of med school my third year to help my mom, due to Dad leaving her. I knew just enough what to do to save her that night.

I've loved her ever since seeing her that first time, before I knew she was a murderer who would also transform me into the same. Her beauty nearly made me forget her beast.

She made me a promise that night to be her mate, as long as I hunted for her because sightings of her kind were getting too risky.

Once I became too feeble to continue, she told me she would take my life, as she did her

ex-lover and victim that night.

I've been preparing myself for a while now.

So, when that day came, I would be ready.

She shape-shifted into that horrid beast I first saw years ago because she knew and needed to pass on the hunter baton to someone else before she grew weaker.

Her tail dangled back and forth as she towered over me. Acidic droplets oozed out onto my chest, which felt like flaming fireballs.

I looked into her eyes for the last time. She wrapped my entire body up with her tail, held me up almost five feet in the air, and placed her puffy, blistered-like purple lips onto mine to suck my insides out slowly.

Before she could finish, she dropped me to the floor and started gagging.

My drooping eyes struggled to look up.

"What did you do?" she asked bent over in a heavy snarl. She brushed her mouth with the back of her claw and noticed an indigo crystal-like powder.

"I'm finally setting us both free..."

She looked at me with those eyes, stumbled down to the floor, and transformed back into whom I fell in love with for the last time...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Miracle Austin is a YA/NA Cross-Genre author who works in the social work by day and writer's world by night and weekends; she loves horror/suspense. Her debut releases include a novella, *Doll*, and an eclectic, short story collection, *Boundless*. Miracle enjoys attending diverse book festivals and comic cons. She resides in Texas with her family.

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In the Blink of a Wicked Eye *Timothy C. Hobbs*

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

A sepia-toned photograph of a person wearing a dark coat and a fedora-style hat, sitting in a white wooden chair at a window. The person is seen from behind, looking out the window. The room has patterned wallpaper, a bed with a metal headboard on the left, and a wooden bed frame on the right. The title 'Nora's Wish' is written in a green cursive font across the top of the image.

Nora's Wish

JOHN MC CAFFREY

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON, BARNES &
NOBLE, KOBO, AND iTUNES

An Interview with Author John Mc Caffrey

Sirens Call Publications recently released *Nora's Wish*, a novella by author John Mc Caffrey. As we like to do with all of our authors, we took a few months to probe his grey matter in search of some tasty tidbits and tempting morsels to entice readers. The following interview speaks to the fun that transpired...

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome John! Why don't you take a moment to tell our captive audience about yourself.

John Mc Caffrey: I grew up in and around Chicago, and currently live in northern Indiana with my wife and two dogs. I began writing seriously about five years ago and since then have appeared in various anthologies and magazines. *Nora's Wish* is my first novella released through the fine folks at Sirens Call Publications.



SCP: What made you decide to become a writer?

John: I've been an avid reader since the second grade. Books and those who write them, have always held a fascination for me. I would spend hours not only reading, but mentally taking apart what the author did with the words in the book. The phraseology, the mood, the characters. I knew even at a young age, that one day, I would sit down and try and write myself. I considered seriously pursuing writing while I was in college, but there always seemed to be a distraction that kept me from actually sitting down and doing

it. It wasn't until I got older when I realized the only thing holding me back was the resolve to make the time required that I actually began.

SCP: What is *Nora's Wish* about?

John: The inspiration for the novella came from my late father. Although his life was nothing like the lead character's, being a widower for more than twenty years, I saw how lonely he was regardless of how often his children visited him. When we were together talking over coffee, he often shared with me his many regrets, and how he wished he was able to do certain things over. The decisions he would have made, the paths he might have taken, made me think of how we all

would like to do certain things differently if we were given the ability. I took that notion and expanded upon it. *Nora's Wish* is about the second chances he wished he had, and the belief in hope.

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

John: I'm more of a planner. For short stories, when I get an idea, I immediately jot down a few key lines in a notebook I carry with me. Later, I transfer that to a larger notebook, adding to it as the idea evolves. It is during this time that I flesh out the characters, breathing life into them. I then allow a good deal of time to pass before I actually take my notes, and write my first draft. I allow enough time to pass to distance myself from what I've written before I begin initial edits. I employ the same process for a novel, but rather than a first draft, I write an outline. When I feel I'm done, my wife then pulls out her yellow highlighter, a cup of tea, and proves me wrong. Her input and support has been enormous in my writing.

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

John: That's a tough one. For the part of Ben, I would have to go with Robert Duvall. I feel he would be able to convey the wide range of emotions Ben goes through as the story evolves. For Nora, I would say Helen Mirren would be perfect. She has poise and a certain dignity that is appealing.

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

John: Self-doubt, self-doubt, self-doubt. No greater demon exists when it comes to any form of creativity. I finally decided I would write for myself and ignore the self-doubt that still comes to call. It's an emotion I'm sure all writers face, and only when you push it aside can you begin the process. I decided that if people enjoyed what I wrote, good. If they didn't, perhaps not as good, but I had to write for myself first and foremost. When you write what you feel and to hell with self-doubt, you come to realize that there within resides the muse.

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

John: I've recently finished reading *NOS4A2* by Joe Hill as well as *Hell House* by Richard Matheson. Since I'm currently working on another novel, I don't have time to get involved in anything long, so I read various anthologies when I need a break.

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

John: Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*, *The Stand* by Stephen King, *Ghost Story* by Peter Straub, would be at the top of my list. Also, pretty much everything from Dean Koontz, James Herbert, Lovecraft, H.G. Wells and Matheson.

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

John: When I'm reading something, I feel the author is successful if they bring me into the world they've created. If they make me care about the characters, the situations, and the eventual outcome, then they are successful. I strive to do the same, and whether or not I'm successful, well, that's up to the reader.

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?

John: Read, and read a lot. Read what interests you, because that is more than likely what you will want to write about. Then start writing. I equate learning to write like learning to play a musical instrument. When you first start out at either one, you are a novice, the more time you dedicate, the better you become. Very few musicians put out a record after just learning to play. It requires practice, patience and dedication. Don't be discouraged by initial rejections, because all writers receive them. Put time aside, with no distractions and write whatever comes to you. You also will want to learn the art of editing with a vengeance—that was probably the hardest part for me when I began. And most importantly, enjoy what you're doing. If you don't enjoy it, chances are, you will never be good at it.

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

John: That love is a powerful magic, and doesn't only exist for the young.

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

An Excerpt from *Nora's Wish* by John Mc Caffrey...

The night noises on the ward never fully receded to a level that allowed fitful sleep, Ben decided as he looked toward the clock on the nightstand. The bright L.E.D. read four-thirty A.M. The day nurses would arrive soon to make sure the residents of the ward were awake, and that none had passed away in their sleep during the hours of darkness. The former would receive their daily medications and breakfast, the latter would be whisked away like the leaves of autumn. At seventy-five years old, Ben sometimes watched the sheet-covered gurney that occasionally trundled down the hallways with more than a bit of envy. This fact he never shared with the nurses or the young social worker at his weekly appointment. They already thought he was depressed and angry. He didn't want to be under constant watch and medication like Mr. Chaise who lived a few rooms down. His soporific plodding pace down the hallway holding onto the safety rails seemed to Ben to be the most pathetic existence imaginable. Better the gurney ride to Shady Valley Cemetery than the slow shuffling death of semi-consciousness afforded by the staff of Willow Manor Retirement and Convalescence Home.

Ben listened to the crepe soled shoes of the day shift echoing dull squeaks in the hallway as they arrived for work. The ticking of the baseboard heater behind him seemed to mark time on some mysterious genealogical clock, reminding him he didn't have much left. He pulled the thin covers up to his neck. He always felt cold, unable to stay warm regardless how many shirts and sweaters he wore. He felt especially cold at night, as if the darkness brought its own special chill in remembrance of those who passed. He rolled over and looked out the window into the lightening sky. There was a time before 'The Home' when he'd liked sunrises. He'd looked forward to each day's beginning, but that seemed so long ago now that it may as well have belonged to someone else's life. Now, each new day did little more than shed the grayish light of commemoration on an existence of regret.

He watched the skeletal branches of the small tree outside his window rustle in the cold October wind. He hated the fall, it heralded the coming of winter which he despised even more than fall. The festivities and silly holidays so many looked forward to were little more than an irritation to him. The nurses had decorated the ward with cardboard pumpkins and scarecrows, as well as a banner announcing the end of month Halloween Dance that would be held in the day room. That was going to be one grand old time, he thought. A community of somatically fossilized and unwanted people shuffling around the day room in their slippers and housecoats. He'd made a note on his calendar for that date; he sure didn't want to miss it.

The soft snores of his roommate, Mr. Curtis, deepened to a baritone rumble, and not for the first time since they began sharing a room did Ben consider a pillow-over-the-face nightcap as a good idea.

"Turn over William," he said loudly.

Mr. Curtis snorted once, then did as requested, the quiet of the room resuming as the ticking heater finally clicked on. Ben's stomach grumbled its agitation at being empty as he lay in the semi-dark waiting for the day to begin. He passed a hand over his head, pushing back the few strands of white hair that still covered the top of it. He gripped the blanket tight as he closed his eyes and tried to doze. Another new day struggled to arrive outside Ben's window as the small tree waved its limbs around in a parody of the Halloween dance The Home had scheduled. Ben drifted off into a light but troubled sleep, dreaming of his dead wife.

Ben considered the doleful food tray before him. The oatmeal had long since congealed into a mass of gray paste, the toast was cold, as was his single egg and the coffee. The only thing that was warm was the orange juice. He picked up a piece of toast and dunked it into his coffee before chewing it. The other people that sat at the table with him in the cafeteria were silent, eating their breakfast with a mixture of quiet resolve and innocent wonder. They were for the most part in varying stages of senility, some unsure of their names, others unsure of where they were. A few muttered to themselves occasionally, but Ben still preferred their company to the rest of the residents of The Home. At least here—amongst the mentally infirm—he found peace and solitude. He chewed his toast absently, barely noticing the cardboard taste in his mouth. The

dull buzz of the many voices in the room had long since faded from notice after so many months of eating here, as did the smell of the many medications rubbed on the aging bodies.

He'd given in to William's incessant request last night to play cards with him today, and he hoped his roommate had forgotten. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose as he gazed around the cafeteria looking for him. The numerous conversations washed over him as he sat stoically searching for William. The cafeteria was a large room with numerous support pillars running up its center. It amplified the multitude of voices as they vied and sparred and echoed around the cathedralesque room, each speaker seeming to ignore the other. He finally spotted him sitting at one of his two usual tables, chatting lively with Mrs. Thompson. Or was it Mrs. Eichenburg? At this distance it was difficult to tell. Either way, as long as William was busy talking, he wouldn't have time to remember the promised card game.

"I'm going to my daughter's house today."

Ben turned to look at the speaker, a small gray haired woman, blue of eye and large of toothless smile. Her hand shook spasmodically as she looked at the man on her left, who obviously had no idea what she was saying or who she was.

"My daughter's house," the old woman said louder. The man she spoke to nodded his head as he chewed his breakfast, then reached onto her tray, took her toast and began eating it.

Ben lifted the warm orange juice to his mouth and drank the remainder in a single swallow before standing to leave. He took a piece of the dry toast from his tray and put it in his top shirt pocket, to feed to the ducks later. He then took the remainder of the toast and placed it on the old woman's tray.

"My daughter's house," she said, looking up at Ben.

"Yes, you'll be going there today," he said, smiling at her as he began the slow walk to the tray receptacle. The receptacle was a large chrome cutout in the wall that a white conveyor belt ran on. Ben set his tray on the conveyor and watched as it disappeared through the hole in the wall into the noisy kitchen. He could smell the disinfectant and strong soap that emanated from the hole and felt the deep vibrations under his feet from the dish-washing machine deep within the kitchen. Like dragons breath, the steamy vapors rose from the hole the trays entered and Ben wondered if some great and terrible Kitchen Beast had crawled inside and made its nest.

A tall skinny kid with a blue hairnet on—marking him as one of the kitchen staff—glanced at Ben, then at the conveyor belt, as if Ben had done something he shouldn't have. The kid had a contemptuous look on his face and Ben wondered for a moment if he had enough strength left to pick up this sneering punk and toss him on the conveyor belt. He could trundle along the conveyor toward the bowels of the Kitchen Beast's lair to be consumed along with all the inedible fare The Home served. Instead, he nodded at the youth and hobbled off toward the hallway that led to his room.

He passed other residents in the hall on the way. Dead eyes and stooped shoulders carried the burden of futility as they shuffled slowly by. He saw the Grim Reaper in their faces as he moved slowly down the hall. Gray skin drawn tight over bone, eyes glazed with something between drug-induced wonder and rheumatic indifference. Willow Manor, Ben decided, was

nothing but a weigh station between a life that was, and an eternity of nevermore. He was surrounded by the neglected and the omnipresent smell of antiseptic. He saw his own reflection in the many faces of the Army of the Doddering, and cursed his own physical shortcomings that had interred him in The Home. He continued down the corridor, resisting the urge to hold onto the wall mounted safety railing as he did. His inability to walk properly was what finally resulted in his having to come to The Home. He'd been forced to stop driving nearly two years ago after his third accident in as many months. He'd become a hazard to himself as well as others when he was behind the wheel. It was a fact that depressed him greatly. The old Buick had been more than his means of transportation; it had been a declaration of his freedom. With it he'd been able to do his own shopping, pay his bills, and get to the library. He'd finally hung the keys by the side door, and covered the old Buick in the garage. He wound up having to depend on the generosity of the local church that sent someone over twice a month to drive him to the store. His inability to fend for himself shamed him, but he accepted the goodwill with quiet ire. There were no relatives who lived close by to ask, and he wouldn't have asked even if there had been. The indignities of old age seemed to conspire against him all at once. Bad eyes, bad hips as well as a bad knee left him helpless, and so he had wound up here in The Home. All he needed to finish the *faux pas* of his old age was to lose his mind. He and Mr. Chaise could then shuffle down the hallway, mumbling to one another.

That would be just dandy.

He passed the nurses' station on his right, nodding to the three young women who were the primary day staff for his particular wing. They sat going over the resident's charts, as they did most of the day. He'd often wanted to steal a few of the charts when they weren't looking so he could see for himself what was so interesting in them that could keep three people busy all day long, but he was never able to find an opportunity to do so.

"Good morning Mr. Jameson, how are we feeling today?" asked Nurse Ratzer. She was a small efficient woman, who always found it necessary to speak collectively in any question regarding a resident's health. Ben always thought she had a squashed look about her, as if someone very tall had leaned on her head, mashing her down a foot shorter than she should have been. Her dark hair was pulled severely back, and kept tightly bound in a ball at the back of her head, giving her face a pinched look.

"I reckon we're doing okay. How about yourself? How're you doing?"

"I'm doing quite well. Mr. Curtis was here a few moments ago asking about you. He wanted me to tell you to meet him in the day room to play cards together."

"Thank you for the message," Ben said as he continued on toward his room.

"Mr. Jameson?"

Ben stopped and turned around, "Yes?"

"The day room's this way," she said, pointing down the intersecting hallway.

"So it is. Have a nice day Nurse Ratzer," Ben said as he continued on to his room. He wanted to grab his jacket and walk out to the duck pond. He didn't much care for ducks - dirty nasty things always making noise and shitting all over the place - but he needed to get outside.

To know there was still a real world out there, even if it were only a short walk to the duck pond. He needed to know he was still capable of doing such a trivial thing.

He entered the room he'd shared with William since arriving here in his son Edward's car almost nine months ago. The car ride had been a dismal two hour source of irritation for his son that he did little to hide. They had difficulty finding a retirement facility he could afford on his pension, and Edward had advised Ben strongly against using any savings. Everything closer to his hometown had been too expensive so Ben had to choose one further away than he would have liked. Edward had taken a few days off from work to help him sort through the old house before turning it over to a real estate agent to sell. They'd left all his furniture as well as the keys to the Buick with the agent, who had arranged for an auction. He hadn't wept at his wife's funeral, but on the day he last saw his house he'd come close. His whole life reduced to two suitcases in the car trunk of a son he barely knew as he was driven to a retirement home he didn't want to go to left him feeling old and useless.

"You'll be okay," Edward had told him on the drive. "This retirement home is a nice place and you'll be with people your own age. You'll get the kind of care you need. They told me on the phone they have activities all the time, as well as a small library on premises. You love to read."

"Yes," he said. "I'm sure it'll be thrillsville."

They had stopped for a small lunch along the way, eating in the car because Edward was in a hurry to get back home and begrudged sitting inside. He'd dropped him off at The Home by one that afternoon, and after making sure they were in the right place, had told him he would call later in the evening to make sure he was all settled in. Edward had left Ben in the office signing paperwork as he hurried out of The Home. He'd never even taken off his coat.

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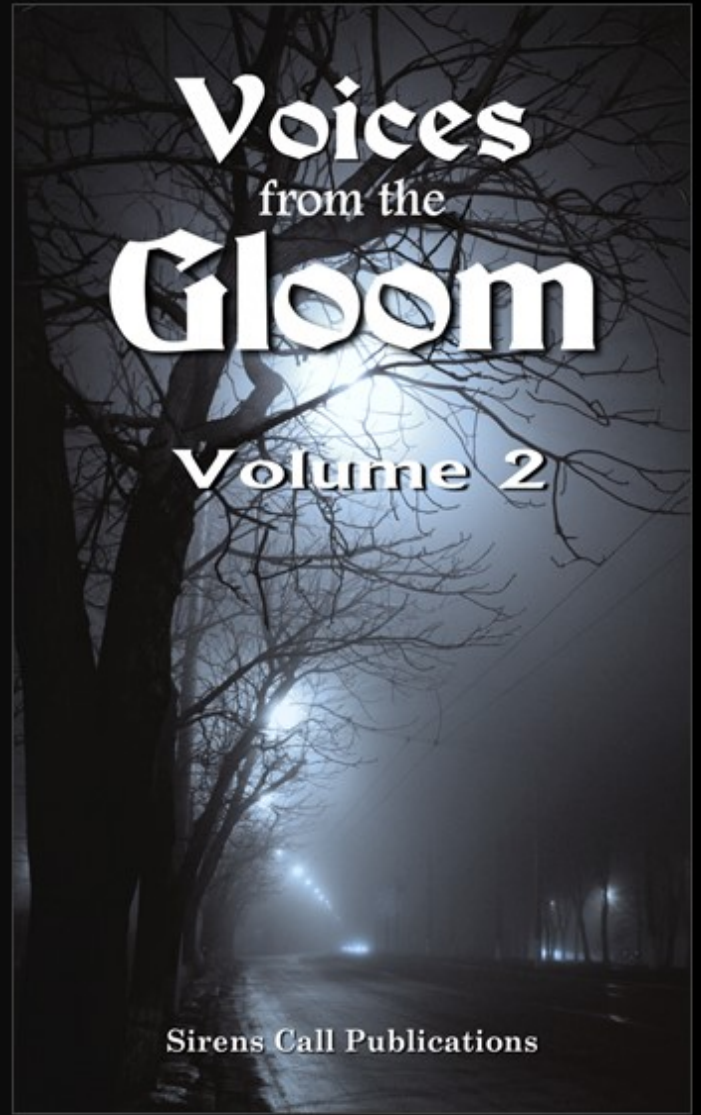
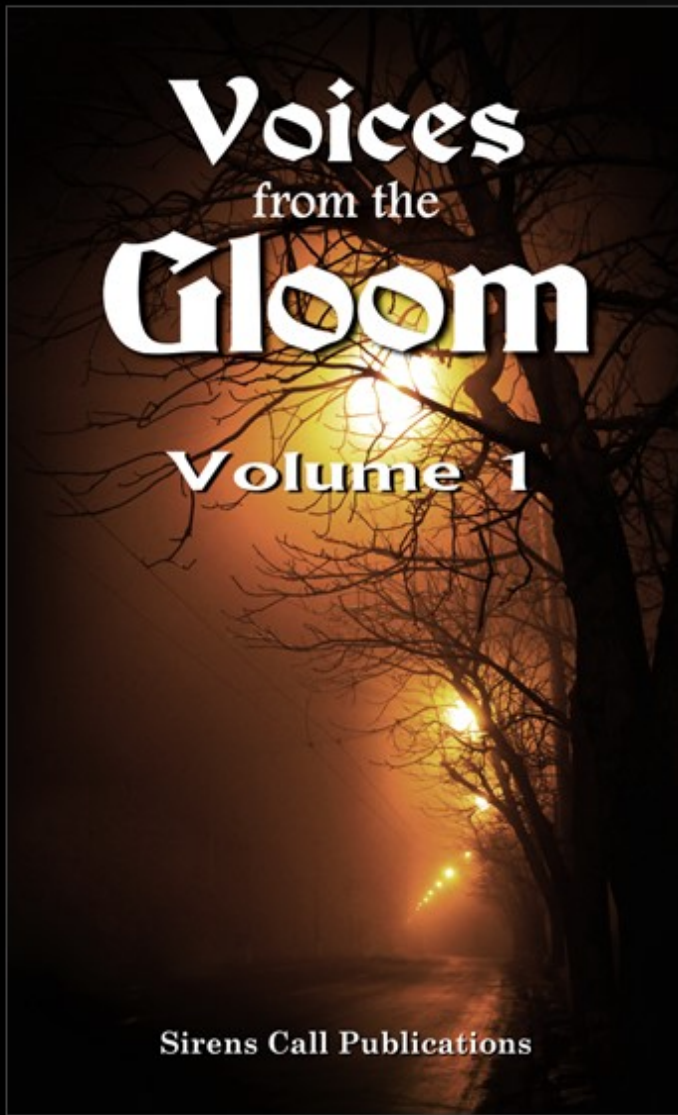
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