The Sirens Call



October 2016 issue #29

Hallowe'en

Short Stories, Flash Fiction, and Poetry that Celebrate All Hallows' Eve!

Author Interviews:

Maynard Blackoak,

author of

Eerie Trails of the

Wild Weird West'

and KL Dantes,

author of

'Mill's Woods'

Featuring the artwork of, and an interview with,

Joe Roberts

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One Last Look Around | Tim Wellman

Stupid Leanna Thomas! Me, I mean. Oh, it started out perfectly normal, intellectually speaking, but quickly took a sleigh ride down a greased coal mine. So, the story is, I got twenty dollars. I won't live to spend it, and really, thinking back a couple of hours, what's the big deal about twenty bucks, anyway? Can't even buy a shirt at the mall for that. Still, when you don't have a penny, mainly because both your parents are stingy bastards... even Mom... two thousand pennies is pretty tempting. Anyway, it's a done deal, now. No backing out. My friends, as loosely as I use that word, screwed the doors shut. Well, screwing me in the process, I'm guessing. See, I decided Jerry Adkins, Melissa Stevens, and Lena Smithers wouldn't really do anything to actually kill me. I'm almost certain that was wrong thinking on my part, still, twenty dollars to stay four hours, eight till midnight on Halloween night, in the old Jones house at the end of Apple Street. Not even my street. And a street that's pretty much as abandoned as the old Jones house. They say it's haunted. I said... again, in hindsight, almost certainly in ignorance and haste... that it was all bullshit and I could stay locked up in the old house for four hours, easy-peasy. Five bucks an hour, not even minimum wage, still easier than flipping burgers. As I stand here, I always thought my life was worth more than that, though.

A quick look at my fake Swatch tells me I've been locked in for almost three minutes. I'm already hearing things. And not like creaking floorboards and the other stuff those ghost hunting TV shows always panic about. Nope. I'm hearing complete sentences in a little girl's voice. And let me tell you, someone should wash her mouth out with soap! Girl's got a mouth on her! Well, at least the walls aren't bleeding... yet, anyway. So, my mind is asking me whether I should run to the door and pound on it, pleading my guts out to be set free, or just jump out a window. I've already explained that I'm stupid. So, I figure, okay, let's just hold on a second, at least until I finish peeing my pants, and assess the situation rationally. Sweet little girl's voice... telling me to go fuck myself with a pitchfork... well, that's what she said, I don't have a clue how to do that, either. So, how dangerous can she be? She's stupider than I am!

"Uh, nasty little foul-mouthed girl?" I say as softly and lovingly as I can. "I don't want to hurt you! I'm just here so my ex-friends will give me twenty dollars."

"Are you that stupid?" she says.

"Absolutely!" I say.

"That's not much for a life," she says.

"Well, I don't have that much of a life, really," I say. Look at me! Joking around with a ghost girl!

Well, until she stepped out from behind the door facing. Peed again!

"I've killed before, you know?" she says.

No, no, I didn't know. "Uh, recently?"

She seems to think for a moment. She is actually a cute little ghost apart from the solid

black eyes... long straight blonde hair, maybe four foot tall, gauzy see-thru... shroud, I guess, but she wears it well, sorta tied around her waist like a toga, a pretty cameo brooch holding it all together. I'd wear it.

"Oh, well, no, not recently," she said. She came closer, not floating, I can hear her little feet slapping on the wooden floor, but you can tell she ain't human. "I'm Emily Jones."

I nod. Like that means anything to me. But wait, it does! "Wait, Emily Jones was the name of the old woman who died in this house way back..."

"That's me!"

"No way, you're like eight."

"I know," she says. "I guess there was some screw-up, or maybe this is Hell. I died at eighty-seven, and woke up like this. If there is a god, he must be a real bastard!"

"But, you're dead, so you've met him, right?" I say. I figure the longer I can keep her talking, the longer I've got to live. And all the time I'm talking, I'm slowly walking backwards toward the door.

"Nope, death is nothing like in all the books about it," she says. "You just sorta wake up dead... no instructions, no one to give you some tips. I don't even know what year it is."

I sometimes forget myself, so I can relate. If you've been dead for like fifty years, it must be a real bitch keeping up with current events. "What is death like?"

"Well, ghosts don't pee all over other people's floors," she says.

"Sorry!" I say. "I'm not really cut out for scary stuff."

She comes closer, and peers up at me. I have this nearly uncontrollable urge to pat her on the head. "I was lying about killing people, shithead."

"Really?"

"How can a ghost kill anyone?" she says. "See?" she takes a swing at my head, and before I can dodge her punch, her entire fist just sorta *swishes* right through me. She sighs and walks away. "Bored!"

"Bored?" I say, still checking my head for blood.

"Fifty years of this cute little girl ghost shit!" she says. "A few times a year someone sneaks in here, I scare the piss out of them, they leave, I get to sit here and watch it dry up. That's it. My life... or death."

I guess I never imagined ghosts could have feelings. It's sad, really. I should make a post on Facebook about it. Ah! I've reached the door! I turn around and attempt to rip it right off its hinges and to my amazement, I do! The damned door opens right up... and falls right on me! Still, minor setback! I roll over, back on my feet, out the door to freedom! No. Out the door, but something's totally not right.

"What the..."

"Weird, ain't it?" Emily says. "I guess I should have told you, you're in my world until I

release you." She turns away and whispers. "Or until you release me." Which I totally ignore, because, as I mentioned earlier, I'm stupid.

There is nothing but darkness outside the door. Nothing. I am still breathing as far as I can tell, but the air around me is as thick as water. I quickly decide to step back into the house. I'm actually getting pissed off, now.

"So, release me then, you little monster!" I say.

"Hey, fuck you, bitch, you walked into my world," she says. "I might keep you forever as a pet!"

"I'd make a terrible pet!" I say. "I'm not even house-trained!"

"Hee," she says. I actually make her smile.

"Listen, this is important!" I say. I try to grab her by the shoulders but fall right through her and flat on my tits. I roll over and jump up. "I've got homework!"

"Maybe I can help you with it," she says.

She probably can. It's math and there are fractions involved. "Yeah, well, let me go home and change my clothes and I'll hop right back over with my book! We'll hang out!" I lie.

"Really?" Emily says. Can she be that dumb?

"I promise!" I lie again.

"You're making a promise with a ghost?" she says. "You understand that?" And maybe I should have glommed onto the tone of her voice or something, but I can't think of anything except getting out of the house and killing my ex-friends.

"Yep! Absolutely. Cross my heart and hope to die! Er, no offense."

"None taken," she says. "But you realize you've just made a contract on Halloween with the dead, right?"

No, no, I didn't until she said I did. But, whatever, I'll soon be free! I'm thinking. "But I can go, right?"

"Yep, walk right out the door," she says. Which immediately catches my attention because just a few seconds ago it was a fish aquarium out there, except for the little guy in the space suit with bubbles coming out of his head. Well, now that I think about it, it's probably not a space suit, but whatever.

"And it's safe?" I say. I turn and look out the door, or where the door was, and see the street outside. No sign of my ex-friends, or a space man for that matter, but it looks like the real world now. "I'm out!" I take off running toward the door and run right out and trip and slip about twenty feet in the yard on my knees. Free! I am free! Pee-covered and my knees are bleeding, but free! I want to kiss the ground, but there are probably worms in it.

"That was scary, huh?"

"Yep," I say, hopping up and starting to brush myself off. Wait, who said that? I slowly turn around and there is Emily. Still obviously a ghost, but she is outside the house, standing

right beside me. "But... you can't leave the house! You're attached to it!"

"Was," she says. "But you agreed to let me become attached to you. I'm by your side forever, now! Besties!"

"I what?"

"That was the deal," she says. "I told you all about it."

"No, no you didn't!"

"Oh, well, I meant to," she says. "As a ghost, I can only exist if I'm attached to something!"

"Go back to the house!" I yell, and point.

"Can't, it's on fire."

And it is. Huge fire, too, whole thing up in flames, smoke everywhere. Oh boy. I'm in deep, deep shit. "What'll I do?! They're going to blame me! If anything, I was making the house less likely to catch fire!"

"Well, my advice is to RUN!" she says.

And it seems like a great idea for like ten steps. Then I realize I'm running down the street with wet pants, bloody knees, and a little ghost girl... who doesn't look as much like a ghost anymore. So, basically, I've pissed myself, and, after a struggle, kidnapped a child. The evening is getting better and better. Don't worry, it gets worse. Our town picked Halloween night for trick or treat. And, of course, I run right into several kiddies and parents who figure the quickest way to get candy from people on Elm *and* Sycamore is to walk down Apple. Stingy bastards!

"Trick or treating?" one woman says. She looks over my shoulder and sees the enormous glow of the house fire. "Is there a bonfire?" I nod. "You're Millie Thomas' girl, right? What are you supposed to be?"

"I'm... uh... a victim in a horror movie," I say. Funny, I'm probably not even lying. "And this is a little ghost girl who is haunting me."

"Ah, you so cute!" the woman says, and kneels down in front of Emily. "How old are you, sweetie?"

"137," she says.

"Oh right, you're a ghost!" the woman chuckles. She nods and proceeds to usher her small herd past us. A couple of the smaller children look our way until Emily's hissing speeds them along. "Let's all go see the fire!"

"So, what happens...?" There is a lot of screaming from behind us. They've apparently discovered the fire isn't a weenie roast. "What happens now?"

"What do sisters usually do?" she says.

"Split up and explore the world alone?"

"Shit!"

"What?"

"I left my passport in the house!" she says. "I guess you're stuck with me."

"Right." It's easy to forget the cute little ghost girl is actually an old woman, way smarter than me.

"This street has changed so much from how I remember it," she says. "My best friend lived there." She points. "We were friends for fifty years, I bet." She points another direction. "Oh, I dated a guy who lived there." The houses she is pointing at are mostly broken down and falling apart. No one has lived in them for years and years. "He had a huge..."

"I don't want to hear about it!"

"Dog, you silly bitch," she says. "A real terror in the neighborhood. I always admired that."

"You've always hated people, then?" I say.

"Oh, yes," she says with a chuckle. "Always!"

"You think maybe that's why you're being punished as a ghost, now?"

She doesn't reply for a few seconds. "Don't you think I've thought about that?"

"Oh, there's a siren," I say. "Guess the fire department is coming to put out your house fire."

"Let's go watch!" she says, and changes directions without me.

And for some very, very stupid reason, I turn around and catch up with her. Well, it *is* a house fire, and you don't see those every day. And it's huge! Flames shooting out of the windows, half the roof already gone. The firemen are milling around like windup dolls, bumping into each other, spraying water everywhere except on the house.

"Was it ever a beautiful house?" I say. I put my hand on her head and pat her.

"Once," she says, and starts walking toward the flames. "Thanks for letting me see the old neighborhood again. It means a lot to me."

"Hey! Emily!"

But she doesn't seem to hear me. She keeps walking until a few of the flames coming out of the doorway start flickering around her, and then, almost instantly, completely consume her. I keep watching as the porch collapses and quickly the entire front of the house falls in. And for a brief moment, just a glimpse, really, I see her walking up the stairway inside. And then she is gone.

"Good thing it was an abandoned house!" a fireman yells. "We're just going to let it burn. Makes a nicer Halloween night for the children." And a bunch of children *are* gathering around, laughing and chewing candy.

"They should torch all of these old abandoned places on this street!" someone else yells.

"I thought I saw someone in the flames!" one of the women we passed earlier yells.

"A little girl?" someone else says. "I think I saw her, too!"

"Yeah, and I see naked women in clouds!" a fireman says. "There's a word for it." He seems to be thinking. "Sensethesia or something like that."

"Pareidolia, I think," the woman says.

"Ghost girl," I say, but not loud enough for anyone to hear.

"If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire," someone says. "That's bible, you know." He smacks his hands together. "Well, just wanted to see what was burning. I'm back to the bar before the two dollar shots deal ends."

"You should be reading that bible more, Larry!" a woman says. "It's all true, you know. God is just and good!"

I hope so... even to a little ghost girl who thinks he's a bastard.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Tim Wellman lives in the hills of West Virginia, and majored in Creative Writing at Marshall University. He has several Amazon and Smashwords bestselling books under a variety of pen names, including horror, children's, and young adult titles.

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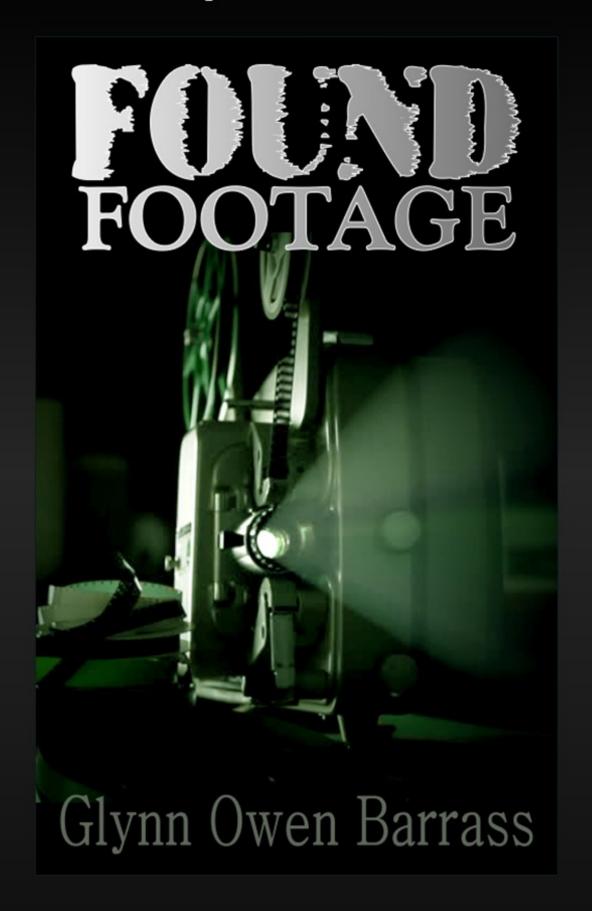
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Twisted Realities: Of Myth and Monstrosity

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Some things are better left unknown...



Available Exclusively on Amazon for Purchase or Borrow!

The Undying Game | C. Cooch

It was the twilight hours on a damp October 31st when they got the message. The biologist and the herbalist couldn't have children naturally but this small hour-old bundle of cuteness was theirs, she was spawned from their combined genes... although, there was a splinter of something else.

Candice held the little child's face in both hands, kissed her on the forehead, pausing to stare deep into her soul, breathed her in and told her she loved her. With a loud crack she felt a static shock. In surprise Candice, by instinct, snatched back her hands from the crib. She looked down at the baby she had named Mabbs to see an anomalous expression on her face. Anyone else might have been disturbed by the whole matter, even if it were from an innocent baby, but somehow this just warmed Candice's soul and the incident was forgotten.

Leaving his wife hugging their new baby, Jose voyaged up the stairs at the end of the candle lit room and then along a short, gloomy landing. He peered through a gap in one of the doors, his nostrils were immediately violated. He couldn't tell if it was new sweat or old that he first smelled but there were other scents and he didn't even want to random a guess at them. He knocked once and pushed open the door. Sucking in the less tainted air from behind him he then turned and took hesitant steps towards the foot of a blood stained bed where a crooked hand twisted like tree roots towards him. He opened his satchel and handed the woody fingers a wrapped package. The limb retracted fast to a dishevelled, grey woman and she ripped and tore at the delicate wrappings. She opened the bottle and sniffed. He didn't want to look at her too closely, it was going to be hard to find a facial expression in such a complexion, but he had to make sure the deal was complete.

He couldn't make out whatever it was that clad her hair into a matted affair on her head and he skipped past the crusted eyes for it was the gaping hole in the face that caught his attention. Thin slug-like lips quivered framing an open grin that exposed broken teeth which seemed to rattle in a gumless jaw. Was that happy? That would have to do for confirmation of the done deal. He turned on his heels, tried so hard to hold back his repulsion but once he was on the other side of the door he could not hold it back any longer. Vomit filled his mouth so fast he only had time to aim at the floor. The bile mixed in with other mess that littered the floor and the sucking, slurping behind him had dulled out the sounds he had made, so he just left it. When Jose was by his wife's side he hurried her and baby Mabbs out into the chill of Halloween night where the sky was filling up with monstrous silhouettes.

Ten years on, Mabbs' mother and father still coo'ed and ahh'ed at her every progression in life. They had home schooled her, taking it in turns to take her to their places of work to learn everything they knew about biology and herbalism, and then employed a tutor to fill in the rest. Such an intelligent girl, everyone complimented. Her birthday party, much like the past birthdays, was bursting with everything and anything a little girl might want, from dolls to

ponies, friends to celebrities. They played games from apple bobbing to a candy hunt, and the grand finale saw overexcited children and adults alike taking place in the annual Halloween chase around the grounds. To start the game they would draw straws to see who would be starting as humans and who would be the Undying. The Undying dress up in spooky costumes and wear latex or card masks and they chase the humans. When the humans are caught they die and then come back to life, quickly dressing up to join the chase. The Undying side won every year that was probably because that was the only way to end the game and everyone loved to dress-up in the costumes plus secretively liking the idea of immortality. The day long events led well into the evening and the same as every night Mabbs' parents would read her a story and then they'd put her to bed. When they felt sure she was asleep and safe they too went to bed and fell into an exhausted sleep.

However their assumptions for the Halloween nights were not true. And this was not unlike any other. The window that was tight shut against the chill of the late October night popped open and an excitable grey woman scooped Mabbs from her slumber. Mabbs felt the wind in her hair and had grown to know this meant her birthday was going to be celebrated for a second time, and as every time, she only woke properly when she arrived at the other party. It was in a small cottage some way out of town, surrounded by scrub fields and woods. Inside was packed tight with the grey woman's friends.

"Yous should call me Aunt now, Mabbs." The woman dribbled as she spoke. "But stills it's all a secret yous ere."

"Okay, Aunt."

With time, Mabbs had noted that Aunt and her friends' obscure faces were their own and not that of latex or card. The potions could only help iron out a few of the deeper wrinkles. However Mabbs found her secret party rewarding. There were different types of gifts here, pots, potions, reptile parts and various road kill. Mabbs kept them all in a room, her room, at the end of a gloomy landing. The walls lined with shelves full of jars, their contents varied and in the middle of the room was a large table stacked with books and apparatus. She liked coming back here every year, picking up where she had left off with her experiments. She enjoyed having time to herself for mixing potions like her father for Aunt and tending to broken animals with help from her biology studies with her mother.

This tenth year she felt different she felt strong. The new potion she had started last year just needed a tweak and it was finished. She had managed to fix all of the broken animals. With one teaspoon of the new potion even the squashed squirrel, he could have looked better, was jumping out of the window to continue gathering nuts. Whilst she was bottling up the last of the potion into vials, pocketing two, Mabbs had missed one animal that slipped through the door of her room.

"Stop bring-in me live vermin." The grey woman squealed.

Mabbs ran out of her room and down the landing just in time to see a badger fly across the room hitting the wall on the opposite side, most certainly breaking its neck with the thud.

Mabbs ran and scooped it up taking it back to her room. She watched the badger's still, dead corpse. Wanting to intervene, but with confidence in her work she waited and soon enough the badger was back on his feet.

"Forever undying now." Mabbs kissed the badger on his long striped snout and lowered him out of the window.

Aunt called out to Mabbs to join them on their version of the Halloween chase. Again Mabbs understood with time, this was different but different in a bad way. There were no picking straws. The humans were oblivious to being part of the game and never seemed to join them after in the chase. Today it was all clear. How vulnerable the human life was.

Two years passed. After this year's birthday celebrations Mabbs' mother and father still made sure to snuggle up on the sofa and they all took it in turns to read the different characters in Mabbs favorite book, choosing funny voices was more of an adult joke now, being as she was twelve years old. It always made Mabbs giggle until falling asleep, except this time Mabbs didn't fall asleep. Her parents felt something odd about the evening but there was also something odd about their near teen girl. Clarice noticed it first, Mabbs giggles were different, her eyes seemed to flicker though it wasn't that her eyelids blinked it was something dancing within the iris. Then Jose paused midsentence when he saw what looked like small purple fires licking at the white of Mabbs' eyes.

"Mabbs are you okay?" they both prudently chorused.

Mabbs continued to giggle and stood up on the sofa with her parents staring up at her in fascinated curiosity. She raised her arms with palms facing the ceiling, a static shower of purple sparks shot from her fingertips, raining down on the two awe struck parents. Their facial expressions remained but their bodies slumped and there they stayed until the police kicked the door in after an anonymous call. They found Mabbs passed out and weak between the two bodies. Before they had time to root around paperwork for someone to look after Mabbs a cloaked woman claiming to be her aunt turned up at the door, they asked Mabbs if she knew her and she just managed a nod.

"Clever child, my child, I knews dis day would come. I've been waiting," she shrieked. The old woman held open her arms, the fabric of her sleeves puckered up to reveal skin that much resembled the bark of a tree.

"I want to see my mum and dad." Mabbs cocked her head to one side.

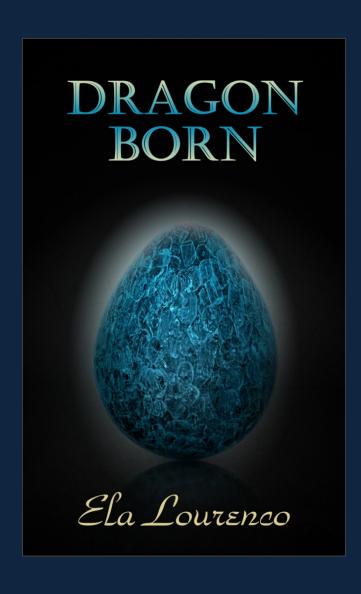
The grey woman shrugged, seeing no harm in this and took her to the morgue where their bodies were.

"Don't be long we've got a party to attend." The woman beamed.

Mabbs felt the two vials in her pocket and confident that Aunt did not know of her new potion. She squeezed through a small window into the morgue leaving Aunt behind, slumped on the ground in a shower of purple sparks. Some need to remain dead and some need to be forever undying.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Claire lives in Devon, UK, with her husband and three dogs. Some thirty-odd years ago a teacher told her to write instead of daydreaming, and she has been doing so ever since. She now hopes her daydreams come alive to entertain others, and is currently working on her first novel that will have you reeling alongside her heroine in a post-apocalyptic realm of horrors.

Twitter: @C_Cooch



Dragon Born *Ela Lourenco*

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo and iTunes

Halloween Hunting | *J.W. Grace*

A quiet street stretches endlessly before a young girl dressed in her Halloween costume: Little Red Riding Hood complete with her frilly dress, a red cape and a basket overflowing with treats. Trembling slightly, she looks around quickly as if trying to pierce the shadows in every recess of the buildings that loom over her. A gust of wind, a rattle of papers, a creaking sound from somewhere unseen—every little noise makes her jump slightly.

With a deep breath and a determined shrug of her shoulders she moves forward, walking quickly, almost on the verge of running. Her footsteps echo around her and she keeps her eyes focused ahead, each streetlight a beacon in the night. She slows her pace slightly as she enters the comforting pool of light before rushing on to the next.

She does not see the eyes watching her from the shadows. They follow her movements, squinting at the brightness of the lights and then widening eagerly each time she moves into the darkness. With every step she comes closer. Clawed fingers clench in anticipation, making a soft scratching sound, like a knife scraping over dry parchment. A cruel smile plays over thin lips which barely cover razor-like teeth. It edges forward, silent and hidden, patiently waiting for the girl to come into reach.

She pauses at the edge of the light. The next streetlight is dark and in the gloom, she can see the glittering broken glass at the base of the black iron pole. Her eyes widen as she looks to the streetlight beyond. A chasm of blackness seems to separate her from its protective radiance.

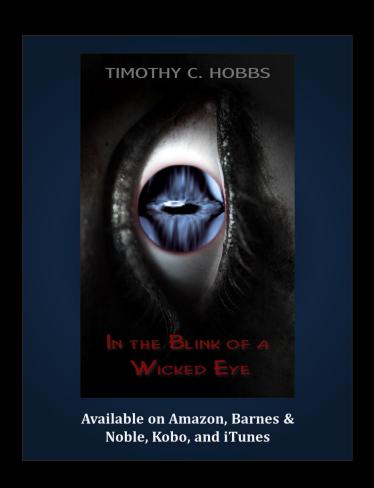
Shivering with dread, she moves forward quickly, plunging into the darkness. With every step, panic wells up within her chest. She surges ahead. Her footsteps echo faster and faster in the stillness. As she begins to run, her breath becomes a ragged gasp. The light seems to retreat from her with every step and she lets out a small whimper of fear. Then, finally, a curtain of light flares up before her, only a few short steps away.

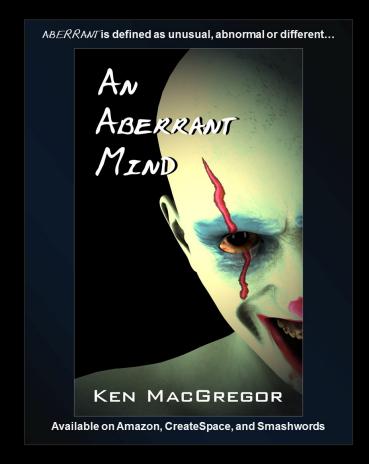
It lunges forward toward its hurrying prey, catching the girl just before she can enter the safety of the dreaded light. The night's calm is shattered by a terrible cry. Then, there are only awful shredding sounds followed by the ripping of flesh, the gnashing of teeth and crunching of bone. The night becomes still once more.

The girl steps calmly into the light, adjusting her hood. Her costume hangs in tatters over her slight form and she is covered in a dark, viscous fluid. She continues down the quiet street with no trace of panic and smiles as she licks the black blood from her fingers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: J.W. Grace started writing seriously in 2009 and self-published two novels in a genre he calls 'Action-Horror'. Based on his work and hobbies, he is a Geek and a Nerd, but he's also a Husband, a Father and a Musician. When he's not writing or spending time with family he's usually gaming.

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Collections from Sirens Call Publications

The Hairy Ones | Terry M. West

Red Hammond knew the consequences of chasing other gods. There was a law, a holy decree, which he was breaking. A sacrifice to the hairy ones was a blasphemous act. But he was committed to the demons in the woods by his very bloodline.

He had made peace with it long ago, but his wife, Nora, still fretted over it all. They had shared a home and life for nearly fifty years, but Nora still loathed this autumn ritual. She had been a Christian before her vow to Red. Nora had abandoned her faith to be with her husband. She had given up on her God and embraced the old ways.

Red and Nora's aged armchairs rested side by side. Red had a newspaper pulled up to his face. Nora bit her lip and stared at the front door. She waited anxiously for the night to end.

The boy started moaning again. Nora rose.

"You know you're not to go out there, woman," Red cautioned. His eyes stayed on the newspaper as he reached for his pipe.

Nora settled back against her chair and frowned. "And they shall no more offer their sacrifices unto evil spirits, after whom they have gone astray," Nora recited gravely.

Red put the paper aside. He took off his reading glasses and folded them into his breast pocket. "We do what must be done. We do what has been done for generations."

"The blood of it weighs on me," Nora confessed. "My faith weakens."

"I don't fault you none. But it is our path," Red told her.

Nora found more pain inside. Her gray face scowled. "You bring these lost children to me and I take to them, because I have none. You do this to me every year. You make me a mother for a month or so and then you tear them away and it breaks my heart, Red."

"I know, Mama," Red said, taking his wife's hand. "Our crops grow undaunted and we do well. But a price hangs on these things."

The boy moaned louder. It was the only noise they could hear coming from outside. There was usually a chorus of coyotes at the river bed around this time of evening. This night, Halloween night, all was quiet and still out there. The hairy ones were coming, and the creatures of the forest hid cautiously.

Only Duncan, the homeless teenager Red had found in Weatherford, faced the darkness. He was naked and tied up on the porch, his arms and legs bound and spread between the wood columns that supported the porch roof. Red had engraved an ancient character onto the boy's chest. Duncan bled from the cut, but Red knew the wound would attract no animals. The boy was marked for the hairy ones.

Nora had adorned the porch with decaying Halloween decorations and freshly carved jack-o-lanterns; but the farm was set so far into the wild that only the forest spirits could

appreciate the display. Red had never greeted trick-or-treaters at the door of the house. He didn't bother with holiday provisions. No one came to his step on Halloween; except the hairy ones.

"The boy was smart and so funny," Nora carried on. Her heartbroken eyes were still on the door. "You never get to know them. But I have to, Red. I have to make a home for them until the slaughter."

"We're kind to the pigs and the chickens as well, Mama. But then butchery comes and we prosper. It is the way of things," Red explained, sucking on his pipe.

They could hear the howls of the hairy ones in the distance. Red turned off the reading lamp, darkening the living room. He smothered his pipe.

"They're coming," Nora whispered, clutching at her blouse.

"It's almost done," Red said, putting his hand on his wife's knee. He felt her tremble beneath his touch. "One last chore and then this is behind us for another year."

Nora closed her eyes and she shook. "The worst is yet to come. I hate it."

"Just let them do what they will, Mama," Red urged. "It offends me as well, to be taken and to see you taken thusly. But it's a part of this, and it all washes off."

The hairy ones came closer. Red could sense them prowling nearby. Nora's hand tightened on his.

Duncan's swelling wails confirmed the arrival.

The hairy ones had the boy. Duncan's screams were rich with agony and terror and they rang through the thick gag that Red had placed across the boy's mouth. Red always gagged them. Otherwise, the children would make frightened pleas to Nora, and this was a torture that she couldn't endure.

The old couple sat in the darkness and clung to one another. They recited a dark and old prayer.

The screams subsided quickly. The torment never lasted that long. The hairy ones were too famished to be cruel.

Red waited for the flutes. They finally sang.

"It's time," Red said somberly.

The two disrobed quietly. They were comfortable with each other in their bareness; neither had a shy bone. Red looked at his wife's old flesh and he saw the flirtatious young girl who had trapped his heart years ago. He felt sad and dread tickled his stomach.

Red knew the orgy would be foul and long. The muddy violations upon the couple would be numerous. Their bodies would be dirtied and mined for pleasure until dawn. But it would appease the hairy ones; for a time, at least.

Red and Nora clutched hands and walked out into the night. They stood on the porch. The cold wind strengthened.

The boy was gone. The ropes that had held Duncan danced.

"Gratias agimus tibi propter liberalitatem," Red proclaimed to the dark. His body shuddered.

Faces crept into the glow of the jack-o-lanterns. The horned things were covered with fur and blood. Their smiles were wet and their black eyes shimmered with a horrible affection.

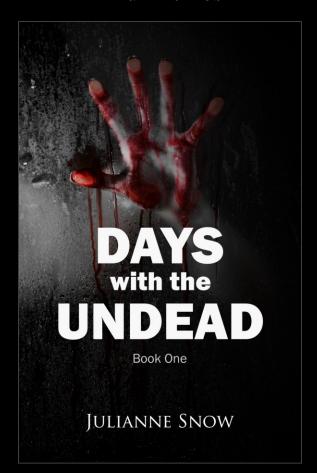
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Terry M. West is an American horror author. His best known works: What Price Gory, Car Nex, Dreg and his Night Things series. He is also the managing editor of the Halloween/horror website, Halloween Forevermore. He was a finalist for 2 International Horror Guild Awards and he was featured on the TV Guide Sci-Fi hot list for his YA graphic novel series, Confessions of a Teenage Vampire. Terry was born in Texas, lived in New York for two decades and he currently hangs his hat in California.

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Days with the Undead: Book One Julianne Snow

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Extreme Halloween | Jill Hand

Gazing at the building, Brittany had second thoughts. She didn't like the look of the place. Amy had said anything might happen inside. "Let's go someplace else," she suggested. "The Vault's having a dance-off and there's a guest DJ, that guy Sammy from *Bad Boyz on the Loose*." That was a reality TV show that had been cancelled after two seasons. Sammy was an affable but none-too-bright young man from Brooklyn whose signature line had been 'Yo, let's beat up the beat!' This was said whenever music was playing, at which point he'd wave his fists wildly in the air, managing one time to give himself a black eye.

"Nope," said Amy. "We came all this way and we bought special outfits and everything; we're going in. Come on, get in the Halloween spirit. This'll be fun." She got out of the car and Brittany grudgingly followed suit.

Halloween was Brittany's favorite holiday. Growing up in the foster care system, Christmas had never been much to look forward to, just some time off from school and a few cheap toys donated by local charities. It was Brittany's bad luck that her foster parents belonged to an obscure Christian sect which believed that a really good Christmas meant spending hours in church praying for the Rapture to arrive ASAP.

Easter had never amounted to much, either. While other kids got new clothes, and baskets of candy, Brittany's foster parents viewed the Easter Bunny with deep suspicion. They insisted the poor old floppy-eared bunny was a pagan symbol of debauchery, and that Easter egg hunts were invented by the Illuminati or some other powerful and sinister cabal for unknown but decidedly unwholesome purposes.

But Halloween! Now there was a holiday! Her foster parents wouldn't allow her to dress up and go trick or treating, but Brittany's classmates brought in candy to be shared with everyone, and she greedily ate her fill. She liked seeing her classroom decorated with construction paper pumpkins and witches and black cats. Instead of making them do work, the teacher would read them scary stories and let them play games. Brittany wished every day could be as much fun.

When she was sixteen, and was starting to count the days until her eighteenth birthday, when she'd 'age out' of the foster care system, as its habitués put it, a miracle happened: Brittany's mother got her act together.

Brittany's mother had been promising to get her act together for years. No one thought she'd ever do it but amazingly, she had. Her court-mandated drug tests started coming back clean, month after month. She got a job and rented a place to live in a fairly decent neighborhood. Then, wonder of wonders, Brittany was allowed to go and live with her.

At first, it was exactly the way Brittany had always dreamed it would be: just she and her new and improved mom. They went clothes shopping together, and ate Chinese food at the Jade Express in the food court at the mall. (Brittany's foster parents never allowed her to have Chinese food, based on their belief that the Chinese were devil-worshippers.)

For two years, life was good. Then Jared arrived and ruined everything.

Brittany returned home one evening from her after-school job at Napolitano's Pizza to find a stranger sprawled on the living room couch, drowsily watching TV. He wore filthy jeans that were torn at the knees and a ratty t-shirt that bore the name of a defunct grunge band whose lead singer had died from a heroin overdose. Brittany could smell his stench from all the way across the room.

Her mother told her, "This is Jared. He's going to be staying with us for a while until he gets his own place."

Jared slowly turned his head and bared his teeth at Brittany in a horrible brown grin. His eyes held no more animation than those of a dead fish.

Seeing Brittany's shocked expression, her mother said, "It's okay. Jared's cool."

But he wasn't cool. Not in the least. After Brittany's mother left to go to one of her AA meetings, Jared did something terrible to her. As soon as he turned her loose, she bolted out the door, taking nothing with her but her backpack with her wallet and her phone in it and the clothes she was wearing.

That was in April. Since then, Brittany had somewhat recovered from the shock of what had happened to her. She'd never gone back to her mother's place and she hadn't contacted her. Let her think I'm dead. It serves her right, she thought.

Her new home was a one-room efficiency apartment above a garage behind a bungalow owned by two old hippies named Travis and Steve. The pair spent most of their time smoking marijuana and they couldn't be bothered with what Brittany did, as long as she slid an envelope with the rent money in it under their door on the first of every month.

Brittany liked her new, independent life. She got a job as a cashier at an all-night supermarket where she made friends with another cashier, a girl named Amy, who introduced her to her circle of friends; club kids who like Brittany and Amy slept all day and emerged at night to spend their money on things like Japanese comic books, clove cigarettes and tattoos. Brittany got a tattoo on her left thigh of a black cat with bright green eyes. It reminded her of Halloween.

And then it was nearly Halloween. Amy had a suggestion for how they should celebrate.

"Instead of going to some lame-ass party, let's do this," she said. She shoved a flyer across the battered Formica-topped table in the coffee shop where they were drinking pumpkin spice lattes.

On the flyer something was written in dripping red letters. It took Brittany a few seconds to translate the text-speak into English. It said: *X-Perience X-Treme Halloween! Can U Take It? Must B 18 2 B Admitted*.

There was a web address, and a drawing of a woman wearing nothing but a pair of black stiletto heels and thigh-high black stockings. She had a hood over her head and was kneeling in front of a grinning ghoul who held a knife to her throat.

Brittany was equal parts repelled and intrigued. She asked Amy, "What the hell is this?"

It was a new thing, Amy told her. The people who were doing it had rented a warehouse off Route 43 and set it up as a haunted house, one that was way scarier than the ones at carnivals. Those were for kids, with their fake spider webs, and people in costumes jumping out at you and shouting *boo*. This haunted house had a real torture chamber and rooms where the people who worked there did things to you, like drench you in pig's blood, and pour motor oil over your head. They were allowed to do practically anything, she said. You had to sign a release before you went in, promising not to sue.

"I don't know. It sounds pretty twisted," Brittany told her.

Amy smiled, causing the little diamond piercing at the corner of her mouth to wink. "I know. Are you in?"

After a moment's hesitation, Brittany said she was in.

Halloween was on a Saturday. Fortunately for Brittany and Amy, they had Saturdays off. They wouldn't have to plead with their boss to be given the night off. Their boss was an embittered, leathery-skinned woman named Rita, who was currently going through her third divorce. Rita almost never gave people time off. Even if they told her someone in their family had died and they needed to go to the funeral, she made them bring in a copy of the death certificate.

"I've been burned too often," she'd say, looking grim.

Brittany and Amy debated what they should wear to X-Treme Halloween. It should be a little risqué, judging by the illustration on the flyer, and the photographs posted on the event's website. They finally agreed that leather seemed like the best choice.

Brittany decided on a black leather catsuit she'd found while hunting for bargains in a resale store downtown. It was skin-tight, and had a big silver zipper running up the front. She had lost her childhood chubbiness since leaving her mother's place, and the leather hugged her curves like a fond lover.

On Halloween night, Amy picked her up in her red VW bug. She wore black fishnet stockings, thigh-high black boots, and a red miniskirt with matching bustier. She kept tugging in frustration at the top of the bustier with one hand while steering with the other.

"I'm going back on Weight Watchers tomorrow. This damn thing fit me when I bought it but now it's too tight," she lamented.

The warehouse where the X-treme Halloween event was being held was located in an industrial park on the outskirts of town. They parked and joined a crowd of eager teens and twenty-somethings converging toward the entrance.

From inside, they could hear pounding rap music and amplified screams. A blinking neon sign over the entrance proclaimed: *X-Treme Halloween! Your Nightmare Awaits!*

A woman wearing a black vinyl bikini and a black domino mask stood at the entrance, holding a whip. She was flanked by a huge guy with a shaved head. What looked like Russian

gang tattoos crawled up his arms and encircled his neck. They took turns collecting admission and asking for IDs. The woman flicked her whip as she robotically repeated, "Under eighteen, no admittance. No arguments."

A kid who couldn't have been more than fourteen had his ID flung contemptuously into his face by the giant doorman, who growled, "Get out of here, and take your little punk friends with you."

When the kid and his friends insisted that their IDs were genuine, they were informed by the woman in her robot voice, "The management has the right to decline admission to anyone it sees fit. Piss off."

Brittany and Amy paid and followed the people in front of them inside. The woman flicked her whip at Amy's bottom as she went by. She said, "Get a move on, fatty." "Hey!" Amy said, stung.

Inside, sinister music boomed and reverberated off the cinderblock walls, the singers gleefully chanting, "Gonna hit dat booty! Ooh, I'm gonna hit dat booty! Gonna tear dat booty up!" Strobe lights flashed, revealing spray-painted graffiti. Among the usual pentagrams and penises, the word PIG was written in dripping red letters, reminding Brittany uncomfortably of a photograph she'd seen in a book about the Manson family murders. She began to feel nervous. Anything might happen in a place like this. Anything at all.

Suddenly, a door to one side burst open, and a young woman ran out. Her hair and face were splattered with a dark, viscous liquid, and she was screaming hysterically.

"Let me out! I'm broken! Oh, my God, I'm broken!" she shrieked, as she shoved people aside, frantically making for the exit.

The coppery tang of blood filled Brittany's nostrils as the woman brushed by her, and her stomach clenched painfully. Amy, standing next to her, asked, "What's that all over her face? Is it paint?"

Brittany said it was blood. "No shit?" said Amy, momentarily impressed. Then her usual cynicism took over and she concluded, "She's probably part of the act."

A pair of men who wore top hats and black frock coats, like Victorian undertakers, approached Amy. Their faces were painted white and they wore bright red lipstick, making them look like mimes from Hell.

"Shall we stuff her in a coffin, my brother?" one of the men asked the other.

"Perhaps we should just stuff her," the other replied. He produced a clipboard and pen, proffering them to Amy. "Sign this form, my dear, releasing X-Treme Halloween LLC from liability in the event you are harmed in any way by the evening's proceedings," he said, courteously.

Amy signed and was led off by the fiendish undertakers. "Meet you back at the car," she called to Brittany.

Brittany was singled out by a tall man who wore a black cape and black eyeliner. He could have been any age between thirty and sixty. His appearance was so dissolute that he made Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones look like an advertisement for vitamins.

He glided up to her and gave her a sinister smile. "You shall be mine, little one," he purred. "Sign this form and I shall become your dark master."

Brittany signed and followed him through the door from which the screaming woman had come and down a black-walled corridor lined with closed doors. From behind the doors she could hear a cacophony of screams, howls and raucous laughter. She was beginning to think she'd made a mistake in coming here.

Opening a door, the man took Brittany by the wrist and flung her roughly inside. She skidded across the concrete floor and hit the rear wall with her left shoulder. *Ow, that hurt,* she thought. Rubbing her shoulder, she told him, "You don't have to be so rough."

He laughed, an unpleasant, high-pitched titter. "I'm about to get rougher." He walked up to her and flicked at the zipper pull on the front of her catsuit with a chewed, black-painted fingernail. Leering, he leaned in close and slowly licked her cheek.

"Yummy," he said.

This was more than Brittany had bargained for. "Stop it or I'll scream," she told him.

The man shrugged negligently. "Go ahead. Everybody screams in here. I bet you taste even yummier when you're screaming."

That did it. Brittany threw back her head. Her fangs snapped down like a portcullis. The man laughed appreciatively. "Nice effect," he said, "You look just like a real vampire. Are you going to drink my blood?"

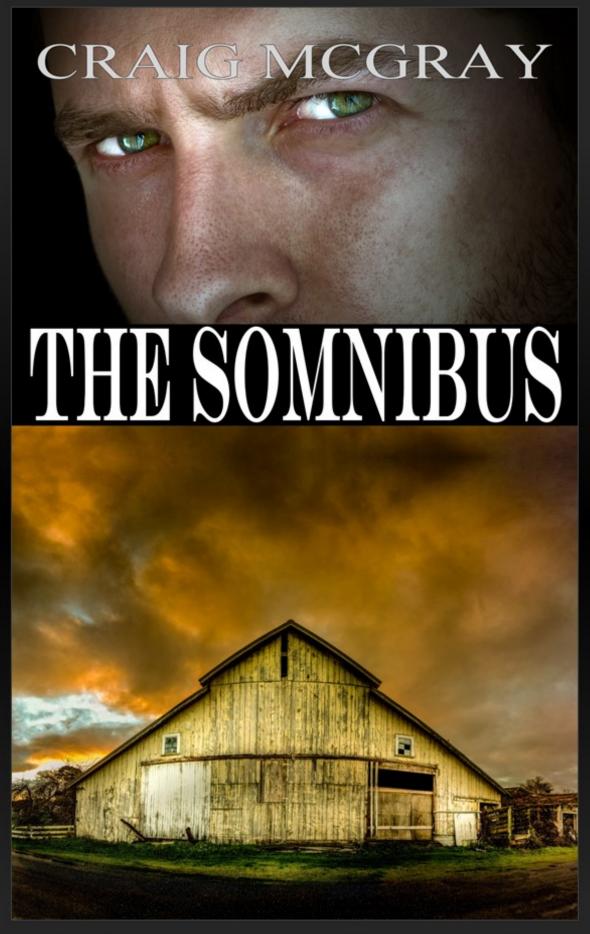
"I am a real vampire," Brittany told him. "My mother's skuzzy boyfriend was a vampire, and he made me one. To answer your question, yes, I am going to drink your blood but first, I'm going to glamour you so you don't resist."

"Huh?" the man said, and then he went limp, entranced by Brittany's eyes. There were beautiful colors and shapes swimming in their brown depths, like gorgeous tropical fish. Smiling dreamily, he didn't even flinch when Brittany latched onto his carotid artery.

She drank, thinking, *now who's the yummy one?* She considered letting him live, as she let most of her prey live, but decided to drain him dry. It was Halloween after all, and she deserved a treat.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jill Hand is deputy editor of *Another Realm* magazine. Her work has appeared in more than thirty publications, including several anthologies, among them *Urban Temples of Cthulhu, Deadman's Tome Book of Horrors* and *Graveyard: A Collective Work.* Her short story, "The Allamagoosalum," is featured in *Windward*, from Level Best Books, to be released in November 2016 at the New England Crime Bake convention.

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Jack | Otis Moore

"Trick or Treat," bellowed from the front of the house as witches, goblins, princesses and superheroes lined up waiting for their surprise from each of the neighborhood homes. Driving around, I could see those that were alone, those that were with older siblings and those that were with parents. Those were the ones that I wanted most of all.

Every year on Halloween night, I stalk the streets in search of the right family to bring back home. Certainly, it would be so much easier to grab up a few of the little kiddies and be on my way; but, the thrill is not in the catch. The thrill is in the fear of what comes next.

This year, a young couple with two small children sporting matching clown costumes is my target. They have circled the same neighborhood twice already doing a double take on the unsuspecting patrons giving out what should be fare shares to each individual. But, no, not this family; They are letting their greed corrupt the holiday spirit that hides all year in a child's heart until that thirty-first evening in October when the tricks and treats are allowed and even encouraged.

There is very little doubt in my mind that this is the way these people are every day, all year long. Nothing and no one will ever stop them from their leaching behavior. That is, until now. They, who have preyed on life as though it were there for their own personal benefit and to hell with the rest of the world, they are soon to become my prey.

People will say that the children are not to blame. They cannot help the way their stupid, greedy parents taught them to live. Why should I takeout on the children the wrath that the parents deserve? Why the hell do I care what anyone thinks of me for doing what I do? I am simply ending a chain of greed and corruption that I am certain even these two young parents were taught by their own guardians. *Life has a way of coming back on you*.

Soon, the time will be right for me to make my move. They will be turning down one last street that will lead them to their demise. I will be waiting for them there. It is such a pity as to how stupid people have become. There will be no struggle with this type. They will willingly get into my van and I will drive away with no foul play suspected from anyone who might see the crime take place.

Alone in the darkness I sit waiting for the family to make their way to me, I am calm, I am ready. Closer and closer they are coming into my view. Finally, just a slight shout away, I make my move.

"Did you have a pretty good haul tonight, folks?" I called from the shadows of my dark van.

Startled by the break in their silent walk, "Yes, we did," the young man answered with a forced grin. "How did you do?"

"Well, I made my rounds; I haven't gotten my fill yet though. The night is still young. Are you calling it quits?"

"Yeah, the kids are getting fussy. This is usually the way this night ends for us. You know, tired kids and cramping legs. I'll likely end up carrying them both most of the way home."

"Where is home? I might be headed your way."

"Oh yeah, we live over on Beacher. It's just about a mile or so away."

"Well, it's not that far, not far enough to say it is out of my way, hop on in and I'll give you a lift."

"Sure thing, buddy. If you are sure you are okay with a couple of cranky kids."

"Hey, this is their night to howl."

Like I said before, no force, no struggle, and no witnesses. The young family quickly made their way into the side door of the van, seating themselves comfortably after a long night of walking. As soon as the door shut, I began to drive away into the darkness.

"It's a beautiful night out, isn't it?" I said, making a casual conversation. "What is your name, friend?"

"Jack, my name is Jack. Yes, it is a beautiful night."

"I love this holiday. A lot of folks don't see it as a real holiday. To most, it is nothing more than a commercialized night created for the candy companies. Lately though, costumes are bought and not made. That just ties into the big money places as well. I see more than just trick or treating. I see this night as a night of giving. It's a night where people give from their heart. You know, something from their soul."

"Yeah, well like all holidays, the real meanings of things just get lost in the legend," Jack chimed in from the back seat. "But, isn't Halloween a night for the devil?"

"That is what some believe. Not me though. I look around at people's homes and see the decorations and such, I see more. Every one of these homes has a story to tell. There is a life in every object we see, everything, right down to the tiniest rock that shuffles beneath your feet. Why, even the Jack-O-Lanterns have a soul. You can look at something long enough and you can see. A man shouldn't take advantage of the life that he has been given. Every aspect of everything is a treasure."

"Yeah, well, the way I see things is a little bit different. I say take what you can while the taking is good. Do unto others before they do unto you. Say, what did you say your name was again?"

"I didn't say. Jack, you, being the good provider you are, brought your family into a stranger's vehicle without even asking a question. In fact, I am willing to wager that you haven't even looked into the rear seat to see why your children are being so quiet," I grinned into the rear view mirror.

Jack turned quickly to see that both of his children were sleeping soundly as though they had been intentionally knocked out. He then looked next to him to find that even his wife was unconscious. Grabbing her by the arm, he gave her a stern shake to try to awaken her. She was completely unresponsive.

"What is wrong with them? Why won't they wake up?"

"Jack, calm yourself. Take a look behind your wife's head. You see there, the pin stuck through the head rest was covered in poison. It only took a slight scratch for the poison to be introduced into her blood. She is dead. So are the little ones in the back."

"Who are you? Let me out of here."

"Are you really that selfish, Jack? You want me to simply let you out after I just told you that your family is dead. Jack, you are dead too, you just haven't gotten the full effect yet."

"Who are you?" Jack said again with an obviously weaker demeanor.

"I am the Great Pumpkin," cheerfully said with a smile.

Jack faded into a final sleep as I continued in my drive to my home. An hour had past when I finally pulled into the farm that the outside world would never touch. Jack and his wife will soon be ground up and spread into the soil of my pumpkin patch. Their bodies will be the food for my field and their souls will reawaken when the carving of next year's Jack-O-Lanterns is complete. The children in their all night slumber will reawaken where they will be easily found. Hopefully, they will be fostered and adopted by parents better than the trash they were bred from.

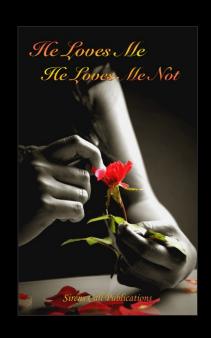
Jack's last thought was that his family was dead. Of course I killed him. Yes, I killed his young wife. But I certainly wasn't going to kill two innocent children. I don't care what people think of me but I do care what I think of me. I am not a monster.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Otis Moore was born in Louisville, Kentucky on November 8, 1979. He was raised In Somerset, Kentucky where he now lives with his wife and their blended family of nine children, tales of tragedy and terror are never in short supply. With such a large family, inspiration for the next book or story is never too far away.

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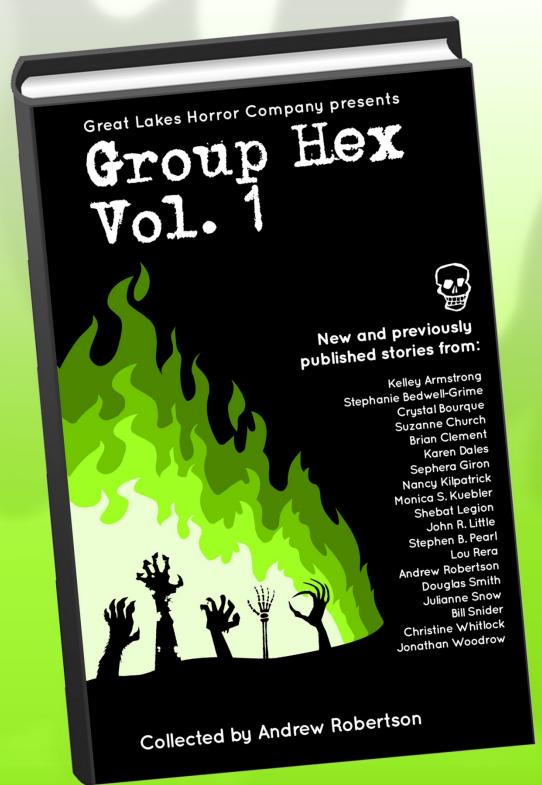
He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not

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Dead Man's Hill | Marlena Frank

A flash of color in the night sky was the signal, and Stevie rushed over to the picnic blanket to get a good view. All night they had waited for this, shivering in the darkness and bundled under layers of clothes. Camp fires weren't allowed of course, which meant no hot meals. Dad had brought him first thing that morning, so they had one of the best spots.

The graveyard was at the base of the hill below, and Stevie could barely contain his excitement. "Where are they?"

Dad put a hand on his shoulder and gave him a squeeze. "Calm down, I'm sure they'll show soon."

Along the edge of the hill, Stevie could see hundreds of others gathering, pushing and clustering together. Silence fell over them and the air felt heavy. Stevie could feel his heart pounding and he bounced on his toes, unable to keep still.

"I don't see anything. What's taking them so long?"

Dad crouched down next to him, "I guess it takes a while to dig out."

He hadn't thought of that. Instead of looking for shambling corpses he started looking at the headstones instead. Sure enough, he spotted movement next to the tallest one down there: an enormous angel statue with wings spread wide.

Stevie pointed down at it, his voice loud enough to be heard by others. "That one—it's moving!"

The ground split open even as he said it and a hand broke through the cold earth. Stevie put on his night vision goggles, barely able to contain himself. He zoomed in and watched the man dig his way out: first an arm, then another arm, and finally his head. He was rather tall and had a long mop of white hair that was now thoroughly filled with mud and grime.

"You're not scared, are you?" Dad whispered beside him.

"Uh-uh," Stevie muttered, staring transfixed as the man pulled himself out completely. His body was so decomposed that Stevie could count each rib that poked out beneath his white collared shirt. His skull was exposed and it gleamed as it caught the moonlight.

"That's grandpa!" A little girl shrieked near him. Someone tried to quiet her, but she wouldn't listen. "My grandpa is the first!"

Stevie, who was still zoomed in on grandpa down below, was amazed to see how quickly the head spun in the little girl's direction. Then in a flash, he was darting toward the crowd, knocking himself into gravestones and stumbling before he began to make his ascent.

"Dad?" Stevie whispered, unable to keep the fear out of his voice.

His father was silent for a moment, then turned to a nearby onlooker and asked, "They going to do something?"

Grandpa was crawling up the cliffside far faster than Stevie would have expected. He didn't even need the goggles now to see him coming closer to them. Stevie reached up and

tugged at his father's sleeve. The crowd was backing away, pulling their children back with them.

Dad picked Stevie up and did the same. He had taken two steps back when grandpa reached the top. Moonlight reflected in dead grandpa's eyes. Stevie was breathing so hard he was shaking. He clung to Dad's shoulder, twisting the strap of the goggles in his fingers.

Others were shouting now, screaming to kill it. Guns weren't allowed up here though, not on Dead Man's Hill. It was the same for cameras and cell phones too. They were afraid it would agitate the undead, though it seemed that shrieking little girls were just as dangerous.

Grandpa was standing directly in front of them now, turning his head slowly as though choosing a dish at a buffet. His white eyes landed on Stevie. He cocked his head to the side, making a bit of drool fall from his mouth that could no longer close, then darted forward.

"Daddy!" Stevie shouted.

There was a loud bang that reverberated across the valley and a splatter of blood splashed out from grandpa's head, streaking up the invisible wall that stood between them. Stevie stared at it with wide eyes as grandpa collapsed to his knees, then keeled over completely. Nervous laughter emerged around them and slowly the crowd moved forward again.

Dad laughed, "Aw, you weren't that scared, were you?"

Stevie shook his head, transfixed by the corpse that lay mere feet away from them.

"We can go home now if you want. Your mother said you might be too young for this. Maybe she was right."

Stevie pulled his goggles on again. "No, I want to see more zombies."

"Alright, alright," Dad sighed and put him down on the ground again. "But if we get another runner on this side, you're not going to get picked up, okay?"

"Okay, Daddy." Stevie grinned as another zombie broke ground, this time closer to the crowd.

The little girl cried out, "Up here, Mr. Zombie!" She was standing beside him now and Stevie smiled.

"Yeah, this way!" he cried.

Pretty soon every child on the hillside was taunting it, eager to lure it up to them.

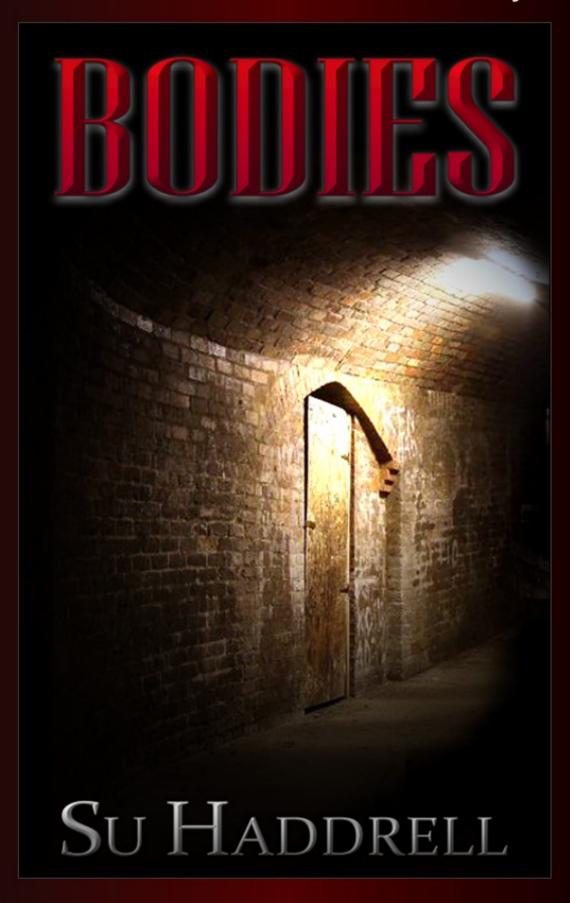
"Kids," Dad laughed and rubbed his back. "I'm glad Halloween only comes once a year."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: A writer of both fantasy and horror, Marlena's work is in a smattering of anthologies. Her stories lean toward weird horror, creature horror, and YA fantasy. She typically thinks up strange tales while sipping sweet tea at her Georgia home, listening to podcasts on her hour-long commute, or while reading a good book with her three cats.

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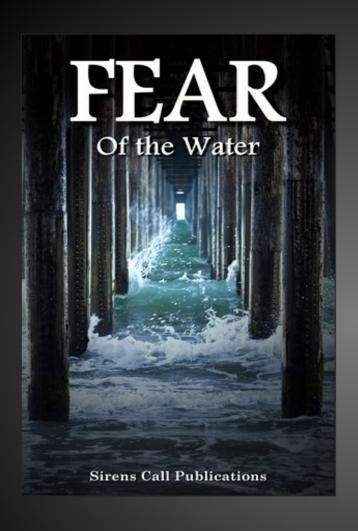
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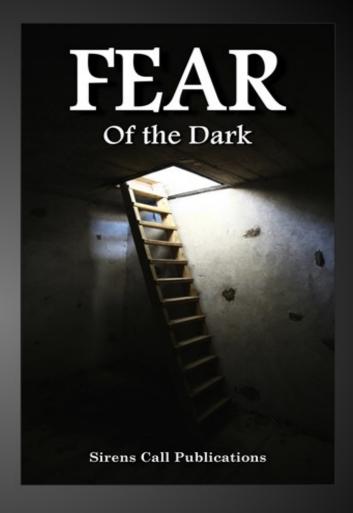
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Spoiled | *Nicolas Rose*

The Halloween party was supposed to be a chance to make some new friends. Get in with the popular girls. Even, perhaps, be accepted as one of them before parents' evening revealed Tara's unpopularity to everyone. She could almost hear Aunt Judith's voice already, declaring that this little social experiment was over, that home schooling was the way forward, thank you very much.

"Is anyone there?" Chloe enunciated each word as if it was a command. The tinsel in her hair glittered and sparkled under the chandelier lights.

The planchette didn't move.

Tara stared at it, willed it to stay exactly where it was. Costumes and make-up she could cope with, quite enjoyed, in fact. That was familiar, home turf, something she felt safe and knowledgeable about. She had been dreading that Chloe might suggest a game like truth-or-dare. There were a lot of truths she would never want to reveal, so it would be dare every time, and that could quickly get out of hand. But in a lot of ways the Ouija board was even worse.

Chloe turned to Amanda. "Your turn."

It was Amanda who suggested holding the party at Tara's house, and it seemed to make sense. The mansion was enormous, and technically the whole thing belonged to her. Aunt Judith didn't look too happy about the idea, especially seeing as she was going to be out of the country on business, but Tara promised her that it would just be the five of them. No boys, no alcohol. In the end, what could she do except agree?

"Is anyone there? We're not going to hurt you." Amanda giggled and put the back of her hand over her mouth. "This is stupid."

"Don't say that! You'll offend them." Chloe laughed and turned to Tara. "OK, your turn, princess."

Tara licked her lips and forced a smile. Chloe didn't like her, and she hadn't made any effort to hide it. Tara didn't know why. She hadn't done anything to deserve it. "It feels stupid," she said, echoing Amanda's words, hoping that the game might be over.

"See!" Amanda started to get to her feet, but Chloe yanked her back.

"Are you saying that I'm stupid?"

Tara felt the hairs stand up on the back of her neck. "No."

"Say it."

"Chloe, don't be nas—"

"Your turn, freak."

"I don't want to..." She tried to smile wider, make it seem like she wasn't embarrassed or scared. She always had a nice smile, that was what everyone said. A disarming smile. "Can we do something else?"

"What are you scared of? Freak."

"Chloe, don't."

"Freak."

Tara willed away the tears, wishing that she had just invited Amanda. This was supposed to be a fun evening, not an excuse for Chloe to make her life hell. She took a breath, then muttered, "Is anyone there?"

The planchette scraped across the board, a sound like shuffling feet. It settled over 'Yes'. She knew that Chloe was moving it, but that wasn't the point. Hannah and Eugenie laughed. They were Chloe's friends. Everyone was Chloe's friend. The only person who had made Tara feel welcome at the school was Amanda.

"Oh look, the freak has a friend. Ask who it is."

Tara hunched her shoulders, readied herself for whatever Chloe was planning. "Who are you?"

She jumped as the wind howled against the window. They weren't alone in the house, but Mrs. Hayes had promised to stay in the East Wing and give them their space to play. At the time, Tara had been grateful.

The planchette moved slowly. M-A-R. She took a sharp breath. "No, stop. This isn't funny anymore." T-H-A. "I want to stop." Tara didn't bother hiding the tears any more. She took her finger off the board and stood up. "I want you all to go home."

"What's wrong, freak?"

"It's not funny." Tara wiped away tears.

Amanda stood and put an arm over her shoulder. "It's OK, look, we've stopped now."

Tara shrugged her away. "No. Go away. I want you all to go home."

"Oh, yeah, that's right. Martha. That was your mom's name, wasn't it? Before your dad shot her." Chloe laughed. "You should ask her what she wants. Maybe she knows where there's some more money you could get your hands on."

"Shut up!" Tara turned. The whole room was a blur. "Just get lost." She pushed Amanda away. This whole thing was her idea, stupid fucking cunt. Why don't you just die, bitch? The thought came uninvited, but it felt right. The psychiatrist said that it was OK to be angry about what had happened. They were trying to work through the swearing. Die, bitch. Die, bitch. Tara took a deep breath, tried to focus her attention, to calm down. She needed to fetch Mrs. Hayes.

The planchette shuffled forward, then started moving around in a circle, taking Chloe with it. Hannah and Eugenie laughed as they were pushed back and forth, but didn't take their fingers away. Hannah's fairy wings fluttered and blew with the movement.

Chloe turned to them. "Stop being stupid," she said, then her breath hitched. "Hey, what's—" She shouted out as she tugged her body away, yanking her arm, but her finger stayed pinned to the planchette as it spun, then shot forward over the letters. D-I-E.

"No, stop!" Tara backed away from the board, pushing Amanda away, holding her at arms' length, unable to stop looking at the Ouija board.

B-I-T

Hannah and Eugenie had started screaming now, pushing away from the board with their feet as their fingers stayed glued to the planchette. Amanda was looking first to Tara, then to the others at the board. Tears were starting in her eyes as she watched. "What's happening?"

C-H

The planchette stopped.

"Get out," Tara said. "All of you leave, right now." *Ugly fucking whores*. "No, no." She shook her head, trying to clear it of the thoughts. The smell of gunpowder drifted to her nostrils. "No, go away." *Die, bitch, die.*

"Tara?"

Tara shook her head. She had to concentrate. She couldn't deal with Amanda's *whining*, *annoying voice*. It was like fingernails down her brain. "Get out!" She screeched.

There was a pop as the first of the chandelier light bulbs blew. A second one exploded, showering the girls at the board with glass, making their screams louder. Pop, pop, pop. Three more gone. The last one seemed to hum, growing louder, deafening. The pressure built up in Tara's ears, turning painful. She started to scream with it as her knees buckled. "No. Go away."

Pop.

The room went black, silent. It would have been a relief if she didn't already know what was coming next. She cried, sobbed. At first, nobody else screamed or shouted. She could almost hear their hearts thumping in their chests, their breath rasping in their throats.

Then she saw the figure out of the corner of her eye. It moved in the darkness, lit by the sliver of light coming under the door from the hall. A silhouette, tall, graceful, familiar. Almost comforting. Almost. Tara stared at it as it came around the side of the sofa, her eyes wide, half hoping to see the face, half hoping that she wouldn't.

Her mother leaned forward, her head almost on Amanda's shoulder, the moonlight just picking out the curve of a lip, the edge of her jaw. "Die, bitch," she whispered, and Amanda's head whipped around at the sound.

The screaming started again as eyes adjusted to the darkness and the others saw what was happening.

"Stop! Stop it, please!" Tara stepped forward, but her mother moved too fast, her hand whipping around Amanda's head, wrapping something long and dark around her throat.

Amanda's shrieks were ear-piercing, accompanied by the thump of her feet stamping against the floor, trying to find purchase. A moment later the only sound she could make was a gagging, choking noise from the back of her throat as the dark silhouette moved backwards, towards the door.

Tara turned away, shut her eyes tight, tried not to think about any of it, to make it go away. She heard the click of the door handle, heard the shuffling of feet. She shook her head, breathing out through her nose as the gunpowder smell drifted away. She just listened to the screams of the others. Hannah, Eugenie, Chloe. She didn't picture their faces.

She heard the gagging, choking sounds, the attempts at muffled screams. Heard the creak and the shuffling footsteps.

Don't look, baby. Close your eyes.

A loud crack cut through it all, and she spluttered, wiped away the tears, sobbed. The tension dissipated, any lingering smell evaporated, and she knew that it was over.

Released from the board, the other girls crawled away, huddled together, crying. Tara ignored them. She didn't think about them, didn't hate them. She wouldn't let herself hate them. It was too dangerous. She felt nothing. But she had to see.

Barely picking her feet up with each step, her head in a daze, she walked out into the hall, her eyes settling on the rope first, tied to the end of the banister. She followed it up, her lips trembling, not wanting to see.

Amanda's eyes stared, fixed on the corner of the hall by the kitchen door. Tara knew what happened there, but she wouldn't think about that, wouldn't remember. She refused. Amanda's mouth hung open, as if she was still gasping for her last breath, or screaming, begging for her life. But the only sound was the creak of the rope as she swung back and forth.

"I'm sorry," Tara whispered. "You were my friend. My only friend." She turned to the kitchen door, raised her voice. "I didn't mean her. She was my friend. Why don't you ever pay any attention?"

Her legs buckled, unable to hold her anymore, and she clutched at the door frame as she fell. *My only friend*. She sat on the floor, leaned her back against the door frame, and closed her eyes, letting the screams wash over her.

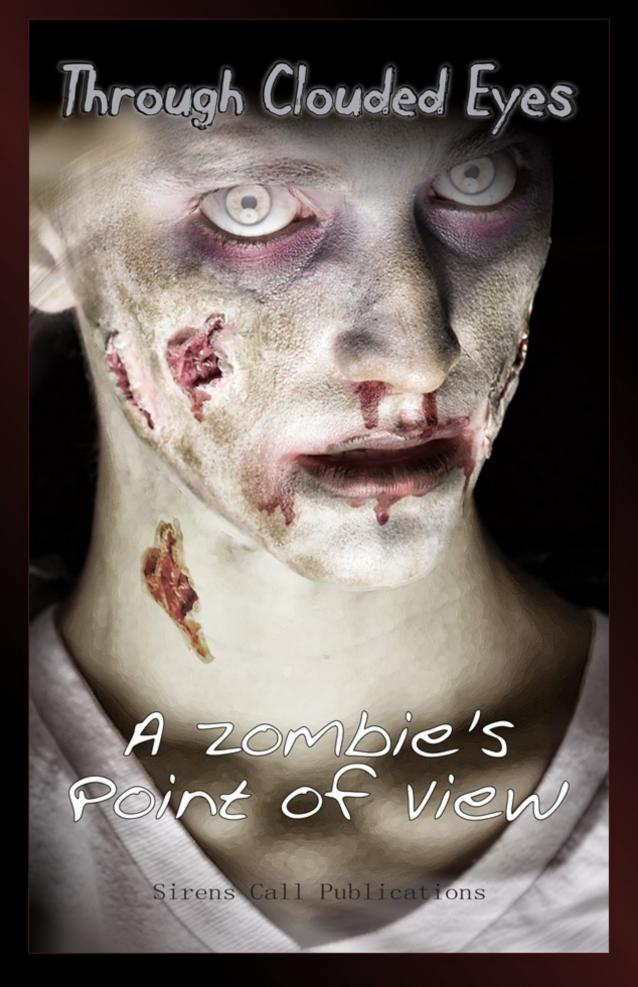
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Nicolas Rose writes horror stories that pit everyday characters against unusual and unsettling events. He lives in rural England, where he works as a freelance developmental editor for independent authors.

Twitter: <u>@Nicolas Rose1</u>

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Leaves | Diane Arrelle

Megan walked home alone.

Again.

It was a long walk through the forest, but Megan didn't mind. She liked the solitude, the sounds of autumn as the wind gently rustled the leaves in the trees and the foliage crunched under her feet, giving off a musky, slightly spicy odor.

As she came out of the woods and crossed Cemetery Road, she re-entered the forest. She walked a few feet between the trees then turned left to walk through the strange circle of trees where nothing seemed to grow. The other kids in her eighth grade class at Harlingtown Middle School had told her the space was haunted by the ghosts of an ancient graveyard. No one else used the old rutted dirt road that had been nicknamed Cemetery Road, except on dares, and by the occasional motorist lost in the Pine Barrens.

Megan walked into the circle. She found it creepy, but in a way, almost comforting as if it was something familiar. She was always surprised that the circle was so cold, colder than anywhere else and sometimes when the winds stopped for a moment, and the squirrels and birds were still, Megan could swear she heard voices calling out to her.

Although she was being brave just in case anyone from school was around, Megan fought the urge to run away. The circle only held a hint of comforting, but it held a lot of disconcerting. Shivering, a chill rushing down her spine to her knees, Megan walked a little faster than her normal pace and as soon as she cleared the bare patch, she bolted through the final few dozen yards of trees to her backyard.

Ella, her cat, was sitting on a tree stump licking her paw, as if she knew Megan would come bursting through the forest any moment. Megan swept past her pet, as she swooped the feline up in her arms, and rushed into the house.

"Megan? Is that you?" her mother called from the kitchen. "You're late."

"I walked."

"Megan," her mother scolded. "I've told you before not to walk along the main road. It is deserted and dangerous."

Megan sighed, feeling a mixture of frustration and total annoyance, "I didn't use the road, I walked through the woods."

"My God, that's even worse," her mother yelled. "Why didn't you take the bus?"

"Cuz."

"Cause what!"

"Cuz, I can't stand it here in hicksland. All the kids are just a bunch of jerks that spend their time making fun of me."

"Making fun of you?" Who is picking on you now? Megan we moved so you'd get away from those so called friends you had back home. I think it is time for you to make an effort to find some nice straight kids to hang out with and to get rid of that chip on your shoulder!"

"Oh, go to Hell!" Megan screamed. "I hate you, I hate this place, and I hate my entire life." She turned and ran outside, back through the woods, back to that place where nothing grew, back to that place surrounded by bent, gnarled Halloween trees. She plopped down on the cold, damp, dead leaves that covered the ground and cried. How was she ever going to survive living in a place like this, she wondered. She couldn't wait to turn 16 so she could drop out of school and quit having to pretend she cared about anyone else. She thought about running away. Even living on the streets of the city had to be better than barely existing out here in the middle of nowhere.

She looked up from her reverie. She thought she'd heard voices agreeing with her, "Yessss" whispering through the leaves.

She got up and studied the trees. For probably the hundredth time she touched the thick, rough, grayish bark that always seemed to have patterns in the ridges. Some even looked like faces, faces with mouths opened in frozen screams. Suddenly the wind howled through the clearing causing the leaves to violently swirl around her like she was in the middle of a mini tornado. The bark grew hot to her fingers as the wind chilled her all the way through.

Pulling at her feet which suddenly seemed rooted to the ground, she broke free and ran back home. Without a word, she locked herself in her bedroom.

A few days later, she started to walk home from school when several of the girls from her class followed her. "Hey Megan," the one called Bethany called. "Wait up, we want to talk to you."

Megan kept walking. She could hear the girls behind her calling and giggling. Then she heard their pounding footsteps as they ran to catch up. They walked alongside her, seemingly unaware that she was totally ignoring them.

"So, Megan," Bethany said. "We see you walking through here every day. Don't you know these woods are haunted? Don't you know that for hundreds of years people have disappeared in these woods, never to be heard from again?"

Megan muttered just loud enough to be heard, "Well, maybe we'll get lucky today and you guys will just up and vanish."

The girls giggled again. "Seriously, Meg, you ought to not walk home this way," the short blond one, Rachel added. "It's true about the disappearances. Why, my mother's cousin vanished one Halloween when she was trick or treating. My mother and all her cousins have told me about it."

Megan rolled her eyes. "Oh just give me a break. I'm not a stupid kid from the suburbs you know. I don't fall for any of that horror zombie-ghost garbage. Go find another new kid to scare. I'm not afraid of anything, especially hick stories from a town of losers."

"Well we were just trying to be friendly," Bethany snapped. "Besides, you are the only new kid around."

"Yeah," the third girl, Sara piped in. "And you're always acting like such a bitch.

Bethany glared at Sara, "Look Megan, it's Halloween tonight and we thought we'd give you one more chance. We were going to ask you to join us for the Halloween Bonfire Party at the lake."

Megan turned to face the three girls. "Another chance? For what, to be your friend? Look, no thanks, it just isn't worth my while at all to even talk to anyone around here. Why don't you leave me alone?"

The other girls stepped back a bit. They started to turn away when Bethany signaled them to stop. "OK, you think we are just a bunch of hicks who make up stories. Why don't you just prove how brave you are, I dare you to come out to the dead place over there through the trees at the stroke of midnight. We'll meet you there and if you don't chicken out, we'll never bother you again."

"You got a deal," Megan said, turned her back on the girls and walked home.

After dinner she went to her room and locked the door. At 11:00 she called to her mother that she was going to bed. At 11:45 she opened her bedroom window and crept out. As she hit the ground, something hit her in the legs. Megan fought to keep her balance, and fought to keep her wits. What had attacked her? She looked down pointed the beam of her flashlight into a pair of glowing eyes. The breath caught in her throat until Ella rubbed against her legs and meowed.

Megan blew her breath out and laughed. "Damn, Ella, you scared me."

She stood up and flashed her light into the trees. It was spooky, just like the pictures from her childhood books. The forest was thick and black, but Megan had a point to prove. She knew those wimpy girls were going to chicken out but she was going through with it. Just in case, and besides she wanted to prove to herself she wasn't scared of anything. She wanted to prove to herself that she was tough enough to face anything on her own. Alone.

As she carefully wove her way between the trees, the woods were dead quiet. Almost too quiet. There was no wind, no animal sounds, only her own footsteps. Ella followed, then ran ahead. Megan neared the clearing where nothing grew. She swept her light beam around and saw that someone had swept the leaves out of the middle and into piles all around the circle. As Megan neared a pile, Ella screeched and hugged against Megan's legs.

She bent to pick up the cat, but the wind kicked up and the cat arched its back in terror. Ella ran straight into the nearest pile of leaves just as the wind made them swirl upwards into a wild dance of dark forbidding shadows. Megan couldn't hear anything over the howling wind

and the rustling crunching of the dried leaves. She called out, "Ella!" but the cat was lost to her in the swirling, twirling dancing leaves.

Then as if nothing had just happened, the leaves fell back into their piles and all was calm. Megan flashed her light all around. "Ella?" she called.

Nothing. No cat. No answering meow. Just darkness and silence. And the tiniest sound of crying, so soft Megan wasn't sure she'd heard it at all.

"Ella?" Megan called again. Could the cat have run home, she wondered. She listened hard, straining to hear something, trying to bring that barely audible sobbing into range. Suddenly she heard a soft sad mewing.

"ELLA" Megan shouted, fighting off a feeling of dread in her stomach. "Ella, where are you?"

As if in answer, the moon cleared the clouds and the woods became streaked with shades of gray. Megan listened to the cat's muffled cries and wildly wove her beam every which way. Then she saw it, on the side of one of the gnarled trees. In the bark!

Megan screamed, tears coursing down her cheeks. She went up to the tree and with a shaky tentative hand reached out to the rough gray bark. The shape of the whorls were still moving but as her hand rested on the hot wood, her fingers traced the shape of a cat. A cat caught in mid-yowl. "Ella," Megan whispered then began to back away into the middle of the dead circle. "Oh Ella!"

The cat shaped swirls in the bark stopped moving, solidifying into an eternal pattern and Megan heard a final sad pained cry. As if in answer to the cat's forlorn yell, the wind picked up again and the trees began to sway with a violent rocking motion. Megan turned the light on them and shuddered as they bent toward her, forcing her to the very center of the circle. She couldn't move in any direction, the leaves swirled around and around getting closer to her with every breath. Megan spun around trying to find a break, but the swaying branches beat at her keeping her centered. The leaves swirled higher and spun faster and faster until all the leaves from all the piles that had surrounded the circle formed a spinning wall. Megan screamed and pushed at the branches. She tried to beat her way out but the leaves closed in.

Megan was caught in a maelstrom of crunching brown that reeked of the scent of musk and spice. It was overpowering, she couldn't breathe, she couldn't speak, she couldn't move. Suddenly she realized she was frozen in place.

She was paralyzed, but she found her voice again. "Help me," she screamed as the leaves settled once again on the barren floor of the clearing. Megan realized she had somehow been moved by that leaf cyclone, forced over to the ring of trees. She struggled to move her arms, her legs to take a deep breath, but she still could not move. Even her eyes were frozen in position.

She tried to stay calm, *It will pass*, she told herself, ignoring the recent fate of her pet. *I'm just passed out. This is a dream. I'll be able to move soon.*

She waited, after what seemed like forever, she heard voices. It was the girls and they brought some friends along. *Oh good, help is coming*, Megan thought.

The girls did come and brought friends with them. There had to be a dozen kids shining flashlights all around. Megan heard laughter." I knew she was full of it," Bethany giggled. "A big mouth coward."

"Yeah," Sara agreed. "I knew she'd chicken out. Her kind always does."

"Help," Megan called. "Help me; I'm trapped inside this tree!"

Bethany spun her light around. "Did you hear that?"

"What?" someone asked.

Bethany shrugged. "Nothing, I thought I heard her calling."

"I didn't hear anything," chorused around the group.

"Come on," One of the kids yelled. "It's cold out here. Bet that Megan won't show her face in school tomorrow."

The rest laughed their agreement.

"NO! Wait!" Megan screamed as the kids started to leave. "Bethany, Bethany, help me!"

Bethany stopped and shone her light around the circle one more time. "Didn't you hear that? She called my name."

"Bethany, you're nuts," one of the kids said and pushed her out of the clearing.

Megan was left alone in the dark. Really alone.

It was what she had always wanted. Only, she realized too late, not this way. Never this way. She saw the other faces in all the other trees and realized that she was as she had always been, alone in a crowd.

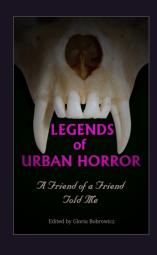
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Diane Arrelle, the pen name of Dina Leacock, has sold more than 200 short stories and two books including Just A Drop In The Cup, a collection of short-short stories. She recently retired from being director of a municipal senior citizen center and resides with her husband, her son and her cat on the edge of the Pine Barrens (home of the Jersey Devil).

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Night of the Witch | *Larry W. Underwood*

Growing up, Halloween was always my favorite time of the year. There was just something magical about it, more so than any other holiday, Christmas included. I've thought a lot about this over the years, and can't seem to put my finger on any one thing that made that event so special. Maybe it was the costumes or the decorations, or maybe the candy, or perhaps it was the scary movies on TV—or maybe it was simply the anticipation of the entire event, built up for weeks. Whatever the reason, I was always one of *those* people—the Halloween fanatics. And of all the Halloweens over the years, the one I remember best is the one back in 1977. That was the year of the Ditch Witch.

That fall had been extraordinarily cold, so the leaves had turned earlier than usual, and were all crimson and orange as we set out on our annual candy quest. I was proud of my costume that year as my parents had been able to afford store-bought costumes, rather than the usual homemade ones we usually cobbled together. Not that I ever minded those either; a big part of the fun of those early holidays was creating our own monstrous masterpieces. But I'd had my eye on a Ben Cooper skeleton costume for some time, and when my mother surprised me with a trip to Woolworth's to pick out a costume I knew immediately what I wanted.

My brother Jimmy surprised me that year by choosing an Indian costume. We both usually leaned toward scary disguises, but for some reason he went with something more traditional. But actually, now that I think about it, he did tend to change it up more than me. One year he went as a hobo, and another as a clown... and one year he simply carved a pumpkin and wore it on his head—which worked great until he tripped and fell and split his head in two!

I almost always went as a monster of some sort. One year I dressed as Dracula, with hair slicked back, a vinyl black cape, and requisite plastic fangs. Another year I was the Frankenstein's monster, complete with a pair of six-inch stack disco boots swiped from my Father's closet, and green face makeup. There was also a parade of zombies, ghouls, and bloody victims over the years; but I recall the skeleton costume as clearly as if it were yesterday.

The box was bright yellow with a cut away cellophane window on the front, through which you could see the plastic mask and vinyl coveralls inside. My costume didn't have bones printed on it like most skeleton costumes. Instead it featured a garish illustration of the skeleton's face, wearing a blood-red hood, glaring wickedly. The mask featured a ghoulish grin, yellowed teeth, and a bloody jagged scar across the forehead. It was glorious.

Randy and Scooter were already waiting for us as we reached the meetup spot, the rickety treehouse in Randy's backyard. Randy was dressed as a mummy, wrapped head to toe in bandages secured with safety pins. Scooter had a rubber werewolf mask that he'd worn three years in a row, and fake blood smeared on a red flannel shirt. Although it was cold out we didn't care, there was no way we were covering our costumes with a jacket.

There was a full moon overhead as we headed out that year. Jimmy and I both carried an old pillow case to collect our bounty, as we'd learned from experience that they held much more

candy than a plastic pumpkin bucket. Plus it was easier to carry when full, as you could toss it over your shoulder like a pirate's treasure sack. We ran from house to house, making the most of our allotted time out. Back then parents let their children roam alone like packs of dogs, and everyone felt safe... unlike today, when parents accompany their kids trick or treating. Hell, I do it myself. Times have changed.

Sweat beaded on my upper lip and the elastic band kept pulling the hair on the back of my head as we knocked on doors, chanting "trick or treat" repeatedly. After a couple of hours our bags were near-full. Randy was the one who first suggested we knock on the Ditch Witch's door. None of us wanted to, but we also didn't want to let on that we were chicken.

The Ditch Witch was an old lady whose house rested on a hill at the end of the cul-desac. It was a large brick house with a fenced-in back yard. The front lawn was landscaped with bushes, flowers, and shrubbery meticulously planted throughout the yard. This extended all the way to the drainage ditch. It was there she seemed to focus the most effort, oddly enough. The bottom of the ditch was lined with large round stones that were perfectly placed in a symmetrical pattern along the entire run. The edge of the ditch was lined with exotic flowers and plants. The ditch fed into a small tunnel under the road, large enough to walk through if you crouched, so it naturally attracted the neighborhood children. And this is where she earned her name—the Ditch Witch.

It was as if she had a sixth-sense about the presence of children, and would come lumbering out of her house the moment a kid stepped foot onto her property. She was an overweight, elderly woman with a shock of unwieldy white hair atop her head. Her skin was ashen grey and she had a perpetually pissed off expression on her face. Her voice was grating and shrill and she always seemed to be yelling, even when speaking normally. She reminded me of Quasimodo, lurching awkwardly, hunched over, her weight resting mainly on her cane.

But there was also another reason she was called the Ditch Witch. Rumor had it she was a real witch, and held ceremonies on nights of the full moon, casting spells to make her plants grow. Tommy Overstreet, who lived two doors down from her for a while, until his family moved away, swore he once saw her burying a dead body in her back yard. We didn't believe him, of course; but then we didn't exactly disbelieve either.

She'd had run-ins with most of the kids in the neighborhood, and even a few of the parents. In fact, my dad had even had it out with her once. My younger brother and his friend had wandered too near her ditch one day, and the witch had come out, predictably, screaming and shouting. My brother and his friend split up, each running home. A few minutes later there was a knock on our door, and my dad answered. It was the Ditch Witch, hopping mad. Things quickly escalated into a shouting match, and she threatened to call the police the next time any kids came near her yard. My dad ordered her off his property and slammed the door in her face.

Another time someone left a note on my dad's truck, threatening to kill our cat the next time it used their flower bed for a litter box. It was unsigned, but clearly written in a woman's handwriting. My dad, who could be a bit of a hothead himself, stormed directly to the Ditch Witch's house and banged on her door, demanding to know if she was responsible for that note. She denied it, but he knew it was her.

So needless to say we were all nervous as we made our way up the cul-de-sac toward the Ditch Witch's house. The lights were off, and the place looked dark and uninviting. We stood at the end of the driveway looking at each other anxiously. Finally, Randy broke the silence.

"So, you gonna chicken out now?"

"Me?" I asked, pointing back at him. "You're the one who thought of it."

"I think maybe you're both scared," piped in Scooter, looking none-too confident himself.

"There's only one thing to do," said Jimmy, gesturing toward the darkened house. "We all have to go."

I nodded in agreement and we slowly started up the drive. The wind began to pick up as we inched closer, and I swear it got darker the closer we got to her house. The temperature seemed to drop as well, and I was shivering by the time we reached her porch.

"Go on," whispered Randy, nodding toward the door. "Knock."

"You knock," I whispered back. "It was your idea."

Cautiously we stepped onto the concrete porch outside her door. Jimmy and I exchanged worried glances, and Randy elbowed me in the ribs. "Go on," he whispered.

Realizing no one else was gonna do it, I reached out a trembling hand. Just as I started to knock the door swung quickly open and there stood the Ditch Witch! The smell of something burning reached me from the open doorway.

"What are you boys doing out there?"

We all screamed in unison and scrambled off the porch as she stepped out after us, waving her hands in the air. She was saying something, but I couldn't make it out. It sounded foreign, weird—unearthly. Jimmy ran toward the drive but the vines in the yard seemed to move of their own accord, as if controlled by some outside force. They twisted around his ankle and he stumbled, fighting to get free. A large crow squawked and swooped from a tree, narrowly missing my head. I noticed a scarecrow in a neighbor's yard twist and turn in the dark, jabbing a pointy finger directly at us. The light inside a nearby jack o 'lantern flickered and flared brightly.

Randy ran and jumped into the ditch, which set the witch into even louder hysterics. He clambered up the opposite side and we all high-tailed it. I chanced a quick glance back and saw the witch stop at the edge of her property, still yelling after us, arms waving wildly.

We ran until our lungs burned, not stopping until we reached the safety of Randy's treehouse. We realized we had narrowly escaped with our lives. That night I don't think I slept at all, fearful of the inevitable vengeance of the witch. I avoided her yard from that night on, and we moved away a few years afterwards. I actually only saw her once more after that. She was standing in her front yard, staring at me with a hateful expression as I rode by on my bike. I

could tell she *knew* I had been there that night and peddled away as fast as my legs would take me.

I'm sure many of you will think this nothing more than the overactive imagination of a bunch of kids, that there wasn't anything supernatural about that night, and she wasn't really a witch. That those vines didn't really move and that scarecrow wasn't really alive.

And perhaps you're right. But then again, who's to say just what's possible under a full moon on All Hallow's Eve?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Larry W. Underwood has had stories published in a number of anthologies, and just published his first collection of short stories, Tales from Parts Unknown. He is a columnist for Scary Monsters Magazine and hosted horror movies on late night TV for close to two decades in the Nashville, TN area as Dr. Gangrene, Physician of Fright.

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Crime Scene | *James WF Roberts*

Flashing sirens. Hurried steps. Screaming and shouting. Police tape across the front door. Blood and chunks of flesh all over the walls. Every crime scene is different—yet, still so much the same. Squashed Jack-o-Lantern buckets for candy and treats, strewn all over the floor. The orange shells imbedded into the carpet, with the muddy footprints leading out the door.

The gated cul-de-sac, cordoned off by flatfoots and squad cars, almost over run with families who'd been trick or treating, only a few feet away.

Flash bulbs and news crew encroach.

"Detective has the Halloween slasher, struck again?"

"No comment!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: James WF Roberts, double honours in Philosophy/Religious studies and Literature, Art and Film, La Trobe University. Currently studying Masters of Communication and Media Studies, Monash University Australia. Writer and performance poet. Has won several awards, published in USA, UK, Australian University Magazines and has self-published several collections of poetry ranging from horror and crime to drug addiction, abuse, sex, philosophy and metaphysics to a full length erotica poetry collection.

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Halloween Memories | L. Page Hamilton

The story found within this report was brought to the attention of our local social worker after it was turned in as a homework assignment by a twelve year old student at the Gramacy Elementary school. Subsequent attempts to investigate it have been unfruitful because the family abruptly left the area. Searches through their abandoned personal effects at their last known address have not provided any information to their whereabouts. Attempts to locate them have been unsuccessful and due to budget shortages, the attempts have been discontinued.

What Halloween Means to Me

Halloween is the most special holiday of the year in my family. It is more important than Christmas or birthdays because we prepare for Halloween all year but not like that cartoon but that looks like a really neat place to live if I didn't live with my family. Sometimes we prepare all year, but everything isn't just right so we can't celebrate that year and have to keep preparing and that is part of what makes it my favorite holiday.

It's just the six of us now; Grandma, Mom, me, my little brother, and the two baby girls. Grandma and Mom are the only two girls in our family and they like to keep it that way. Mom wasn't too happy when my brother was born so I guess she wasn't too happy when I was born either but she's found a use for us now that we're all bigger. She does say having little girls around does make it easier to get men to come to the house but I don't understand why a man would want to hang around a bunch of girls. I like having my brothers around.

Getting ready for Halloween starts the day after the last Halloween if we got to celebrate it. We usually have to pack up the day after and move to another town. Grandma and Mom say it's because it wouldn't be the same if we did it year after year in the same town. We need to meet new people. Mom has already picked out our new home if we get to celebrate this year and it looks like we will because Mom just had a new baby and it's a girl and she's already pregnant with another one and Grandma says it will be a girl too.

So that last town was a good town because she found a man even with my brothers and me making it harder. If it had been another boy, she said she would have had to give it up because she can't keep all these boys. Grandma and Mom complain about all the men she meets that can only make boy babies. I guess Grandma helped her get rid of a couple of them, but now it's getting harder to get babies so she's got to keep the ones that start.

Grandma is really getting crabby with us too because of it. She says she's over 100 years old and soon she'll die and Mom will have to become the grandma but she's got to keep one of the girl babies to do that and that one has to be able to keep the line running. Boys don't carry the line. It makes me sad that Grandma will die someday and

then Mom will too but Grandma says I'll be long gone before Mom dies. So that's why it's so important for Mom to have girl babies. Grandma and Mom need them to survive. I always ask the men who come to the house if they have any kids and if any of them are girls. If they have boys I tell them they have to go.

I get teased a lot at school because I hang around the girls but that's where you find the dads who make the most girls. There was a group of girls at the last school we went to and they had nothing but girls so I told Mom about it and she got their Dad to come over to the house to fix some stuff and then she got a girl baby too. That's how my brother and I can help prepare for Halloween. That's our special job to do, find the men who will give Mom girl babies. It was my fault, sort of, that we have my little brother because I wasn't entirely honest with Mom about that man. But I was tired of all the girl babies and wanted a little brother to play with. I didn't know that Mom would start to get old if she didn't have girl babies and it would get harder for her to find a man. Grandma sat me down and gave me a good whacking for not doing my job right and I stopped messing up after that. Mom looked really bad after my little brother. She could have been Grandma's sister!

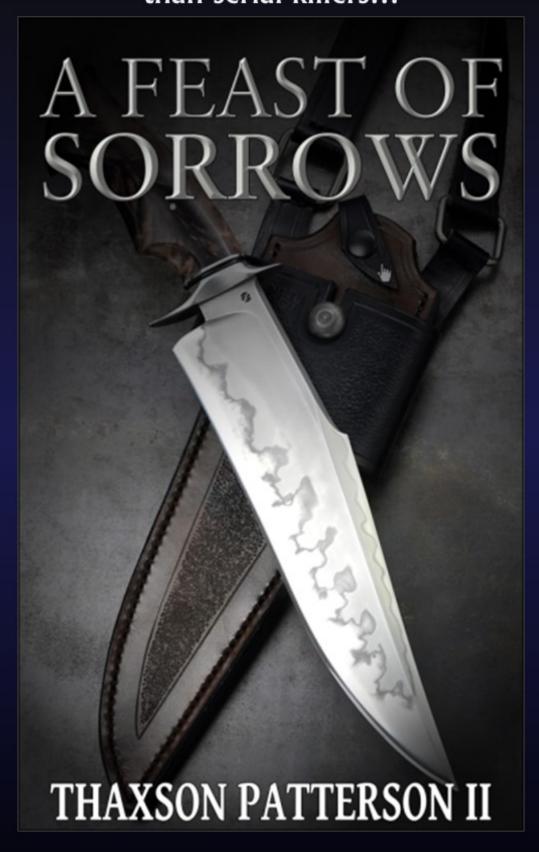
After that the only men Mom could get to come to the house were mean drunk guys. They would come in and drink all day and then hit any of us that got too close. One of them, Derek wouldn't leave. He thought he could just move in and have Grandma and Mom do all the work. But Derek turned out to be good for something. He gave Mom a baby girl and he actually seemed happy about it. We were happy too because we finally got to celebrate Halloween! Derek wasn't very happy after we celebrated but then Mom was strong enough so she could handle him. When Mom got pregnant again right away she and Grandma talked about it and decided to keep Derek to stay. He lives in the basement now which is okay because the basement is creepy so he can have it to himself. That's how Mom got the twin girls so Derek has turned out to be a real keeper Grandma says. Grandma gets to have fun with Derek too she says, it's important to keep him content when Mom is too big to do it.

Now that Mom has two baby girls we can celebrate and I missed that too when she had my little brother. We had to go almost three years with no Halloween and that was no fun at all. Grandma and Mom have bought some baby girl clothes because they will keep one to grow up like Mom did with Grandma and the other one we'll celebrate with. That's good because Mom is starting to look a little bit like Grandma again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: L. Page Hamilton lives near Denver Colorado and keeps herself fed, clothed, and housed through employment in the financial industry. She enjoys reading, writing, and watching Godzilla and superhero movies. Her piece, 'Bone Cruncher', is being read on Flash Fiction Press October 2016. Her social media skills are virtually nonexistent.

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



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The Sexy Cat's Survival Guide | Andrew Robertson

"I've never been to a real sideshow," said Jen with a mix of excitement and dread. She leaned toward the rear view to fix her makeup, pull some knots out of her long blonde wig and fix the cute ears attached to her headband. No one wanted to see a sexy cat with raccoon eyes, and for the past hour she had been bobbing for some pretty big apples in Josh's pants.

Josh pulled his car into one of the last remaining spots in the makeshift lot near a harvested cornfield where the tents had been set up. The car banged and popped the whole time, protesting its lot in life.

"Oh fuck, it's gonna be great bro," he responded. "I can't believe you've never been. I thought you'd seen everything the way you talk. There's a corn maze, Siamese twins, fat ladies, an alligator boy, a real mummy and some other crazy shit." He pulled the keys out of ignition and placed his hand on Jen's knee. "If you get scared, you can cozy up to me. And don't worry, they only sacrifice virgins on Halloween."

He laughed like a real asshole, totally impressed with himself.

Jen rolled her eyes and opened her door. She wouldn't be in this, or any relationship for very long. To her, men were really only good for one thing- making her feel pretty. They had been dating for a few weeks and although she liked what he was packing, he was a pretty tacky dude. Bro? Please. His looks were what kept her around. Nothing like a good-looking guy to make a good-looking girl look even better. The first time she saw him he looked like a dark haired Brad Pitt and tonight he was dressed as one of the Lost Boys, a sexy rock 'n' roll vampire. If only he would keep his fucking mouth shut. His tongue was good for two things- her front and back door. Well, maybe three things, but that was still to be determined.

"I'm sure I'll survive. God, I love Halloween," Jen said, changing the topic as Josh got out of the beat-up old banger. "So who are you related to here again?"

"The guy that runs the show is one of my cousins. He's like the MC for the stage show. He was really happy we could make it tonight 'cause Halloween is like their Christmas, it's a religious experience for all the freaks."

"Oh really, are they pagans or something?"

"Yeah, they are really into the dark side of magic and religion. Who believes in magic? I mean, holy shit, they're crazy. They love Iron Maiden and Sabbath too, but now everyone knows that Judas Priest guy is a queer so who knows what's gonna happen to metal. But for these freaks it's all good, queer or what. I'm sure at midnight they all turn into bats and witches and wolves and howl at the moon." Josh let out a lame attempt at a wolf baying and Jen's skin broke out in an embarrassed flush.

As if realizing how awkward things were, Josh asked, "You want some popcorn or something?"

"No, I don't eat anything like that, let's just get inside, Wolfman," Jen tried to say in her least cajoling tone possible. "And don't forget, I need to be home by midnight!"

"Yeah I know Mother Theresa, midnight curfew."

"I'm not kidding, it's a full moon!" She exclaimed looking at him sideways, but his eyes were already trained on the field of striped tents containing the wicked and weird of the world.

"A full moon! Are you afraid of werewolves or something? So what's your family like anyway, religious freaks maybe?" He asks Jen. "You said they were pretty wild...and I know you are." He laughs and shoots her a wink.

"Oh I don't know if I would call us a family, maybe more of a clowder?"

"What?" He asks laughing. "I don't even know what that means."

"Well, maybe you will someday soon," she sweetly stated, grabbing him and dragging him toward the action.

They walked hand in hand toward the ticket booth at the center of it all where Josh dropped his cousin's name and got them both an all-access wristband from a man with two very proud front teeth and not much else.

Once inside, Jen found the tents were stuffy and rank. They smelled like they had been touring for years and not once opened the flaps leading to the outside. Sweat, dirt, and maybe onions? The last fart of a brussel sprout? Whatever it was, dirty sneakers and a slight waft of garbage rounded it out. The interior was bathed in green, blue and red lights, with dry ice being pumped into the air at regular intervals. Jen knew that red lights hide a lot of imperfections, and the majority of them were saturating the stage in the first tent. The stage was by one of the bars and on it writhed a depressing collection of topless dancers. Outside the banner showed a young, busty goddess riding a sea creature, but inside, this set of toothless hags would need to double double toil and trouble if they were going to make a fiver tonight. The bevy of beauties was a half-dressed congo line at the retirement home. Despite that, Josh's eyes were trained right on their sagging tit flaps.

"Hey sexy," one hissed his way. "Want to get a lap dance backstage? Only five dollars a song and your hands can do what they want to."

"He's with me," snarled Jen, suddenly feeling quite defensive, like a predator staking out a meal and being challenged by an old cat that should just lap up the sour milk it's been offered. The night always brought out her true nature. Competitive. Hungry.

Josh swung around and when he met her eyes he smiled.

"Oh, I like it when you're possessive," he roared above the tiki music while wrapping his strong arms around her small waist. "It turns me on! Just like that black cat suit you're wearing."

"Yeah Josh, well stick with me," Jen purred. "You will find my bark is worse than my bite. Or did I mean that the other way round?" She leaned in and flicked her tongue at his nose before gnashing her pearly white teeth. "Show me some freaks!"

The dancing 'girls' tent ended in a short tunnel of canvas that promised Freaks, Geeks and Oddities on a linen swatch no doubt painted forty years ago. Everything around them was aged, cracking and peeling near the edges. They walked arm in arm into the next tented room awash with green light and containing cages, tanks and pedestals holding large bottles with myriad aborted horrors inside.

The first cage had a sign beside it that announced the 'Alligator Boy, Scourge of the Bayou', and held a thin man in a cloth diaper with large flakes of skin hanging like torn pages all over his body. He stood in silence like an embarrassed kid, and when he shuffled, sheets of dry translucent flesh cascaded down to join others in a horrible nest of skin at his feet. When he blinked, it was like dandruff falling from his face. The patrons gaping in at him were vocal in their disgust, one small child making cartoonish retching sounds as his parents laughed and encouraged him.

The next was a darker-skinned woman sitting on a low and wide stool in another large cage. Her sign read 'Tambor, the Two-Ton Tease'. She must have been 600 pounds and the smell that came off of her was excruciating; body odor and an unwiped ass. Jen watched the crowd, as they stood enthralled with this enormous lady who looked like a living cartoon, a failed dieter's punch line. The air was unmoving and her strange attempt at a French maid's outfit, or maybe a toddler's getup, was soaked with dark sweaty patches. It was hard to determine if the fabric was bright blue or navy. Her act, as much as it could be, involved her coyly waving, her short, chubby fingers up near her cheek with her shoulders turned inward like a smiling infant while patrons threw kibble intended for the petting zoo at her.

"Trick or treat sweeties," she lisped at them, winking one damp eyelid as the crowd cheered at her expense. "Who wants a kiss?" She lifted her considerable mass up and waddled toward the bars, making a duck face the entire time. Men leapt away in mock terror and once Tambor had her hands on the bars, there wasn't a soul within five feet of the cage.

"Don't tell me there are no men looking for a little treat on Halloween," she cooed at the rapt audience.

"Let's move on," Jen whispered to Josh pushing him toward the next oddity.

On the pedestal separating Tambor from what was billed as 'Siamese Twins, One Dead, One Alive' was a jar containing a double-headed kitten floating in an amber brine, it's eyes closed forever. The sight made Jen's stomach drop.

"Poor things," she said softly.

"No these are awesome," Josh announced, looking toward Jen for her agreement. "I've never seen anything like this. It's like something from Dungeons and Dragons. Like Cerebus."

"You mean Cerberus," Jen responded, air escaping in a vast sigh. "And that was a three-headed dog."

"Right," he laughed nervously. "God, you're so smart. How do you know so much?"

"I guess you live long enough and you pick things up," she retorted, sniffing the air proudly.

"At eighteen?" He said, looking at her in awe. "You must have been a bookworm growing up."

"Right, eighteen, who knows anything at eighteen?" Jen laughed. "Let's go see this dead alive zombie twin or whatever it is. Or maybe hit the bar?"

The rest of the night was spent watching bad illusionists, doing shots of terrible vodka and flirting between tents containing more and more bizarre human misery. Jen felt oddly at home, knowing that all these freaks and geeks were just like her, a bit different in a world of mundane everymen. Her difference was just hidden a bit better, most of the time.

Shots blended into shots, and cigarettes became joints at the crowd surged and peaked, the revelry of the night and spirits of the departed charging the air around them.

"What time is it, stud?" Jen asked in her best Sandy Dee. She rubbed against him like an animal in heat, waiting for him to make the next move.

"It's...11:55," he responded with more than a little apprehension.

"Josh I told you I needed to be home by midnight, I don't want to do this here!" Jen shot out of the tent they were in, spilling her drink in the process, and started to run toward the car with Josh right behind her.

He caught up just as she got to the car, the lot almost empty.

"Do what?" He asked smiling, out of breath. "I thought we did most of it earlier."

"No baby, there's so much more. Do you want me to feel pretty? Really, really pretty?" She purred at Josh.

"Yeah baby, anything you want."

She stretched, her arms reaching up as far as her body would allow, her head rolling back as she took a big breath. Each finger was spread far apart, backlit by the full October moon. Jen angled herself so her back was against Josh and she moved up and down, rubbing against his length with an itch she couldn't scratch.

"Ah, the full moon. It makes me feel so much, it makes me...hungry." She smiled at Josh, he noticed her long canines, and then eyes so bright, so green, each with a black slit running from top to bottom, like a cat.

"What the fuck Jen, is this a joke? Did you say it makes you horny? You better have said the moon makes you horny!"

"No baby, I don't tell jokes. But the moon does lots of things to me. I told you to have me home before midnight 'cause I wasn't sure if I wanted to do this yet," she exhaled, the words seductive and feline. She reached out and held his face in her right hand, as Josh stood nearly paralyzed. One long fingernail tore into his cheek like a claw. "And I thought you liked me as a sexy cat? Is this too real for you, bro?"

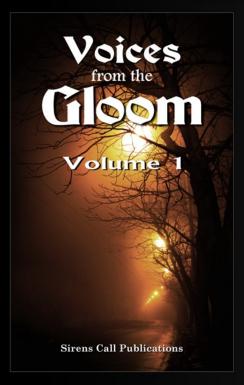
"What? Why do you look like that? What's happening to your eyes?" He almost screamed, shaking so much Jen felt her tail come to life under the taught spandex of her cat suit.

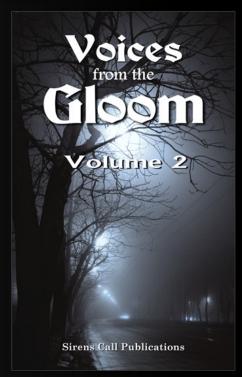
"Too many questions Joshie. Now I'm hungry and you're such a pretty thing, I think I'll play with my food a bit before I eat..."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Andrew Robertson is an award-winning writer who has been published in Undertow, Feeling Better Yet? and katalogue and is the founder and a host of The Great Lakes Horror Company podcast on iTunes. He has also just released a horror anthology featuring members of the Horror Writers Association's Ontario Chapter, titled Group Hex Vol. 1.

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Hunger | J.M. Van Horn

"There are a few things you need to know before we start," Rachel whispered into the ear located a few inches away from her supple lips. Her warm breath tickled the sensitive skin, eliciting a groan from the man. A wide smile was plastered across his face.

She placed a tender kiss on the man's cheek before leaning back. She pushed the red velvet cloak back over her shoulders, displaying the snug peasant blouse and a dark forest green skirt which helped to accentuating her slight curves. Her bright emerald eyes twinkled as she glanced over the scene before her.

The dual fluorescent lights, flickered and hummed, as they generated a warm glow across the room. Soft sounds of the Dave Matthews Band played in the background and worked in harmony with the whiff of Jasmine incense hanging in the air.

The center of the room dominated by a stainless steel table where a man, no more than twenty-five years old was strapped to the table. One inch leather straps secured various points on his legs and arms and a two inch strap kept his neck secured. The cheap Prince Charming costume was discarded in the corner, leaving him in his gray boxer briefs and a crimson blindfold wrapped neatly around his head.

Her chest rose and fell with a deep breathe, "I have not always been a bad person. I know that can be hard to believe." A faint chuckle was quashed as a wide smile graced her lips. "Growing up, I was the ideal daughter for my parents. Graduated high school at the top of my class and received a full scholarship to a premier Ivy League school."

She drifted around the edge of the steel table with a predator's grace, the sound of her heels reverberated with every step. Rachel resisted the urge to reach out and touch the man lying there, instead the tips of her fingernails traced the rounded metal edge.

"It was there I met Dave, who was around the same age as you are dear. Somehow he swooped me off my feet and we were married by the time I earned my law degree." Rachel said. She came to a halt at the far end of the table, her gaze drifted to the desk situated against the nearby wall. The desk was organized; binders stacked neatly, papers clipped together, pencils stored in a holder. The finishing touch was a neatly hung Christmas family portrait from last year.

"Now at the prime age of thirty-eight, I am an integral part of one of the most respectable law firm in Boston. In addition to being the lucky mother of two amazing children. Anyone would be jealous of my life." She responded with a muffled sigh.

"Despite this, I still feel empty inside," Rachel said. She maneuvered back around the table with ease until she was at near his head once more. She glanced back down to him, her solemn expression remained. "There was something that could not be filled with any of these accomplishments." She dragged a pair of her red gloss fingernails along his freshly shaved chest.

The man managed to part his dry lips but could only offer a groan in response. Rachel moved her hand up and pressed her index finger to his lips. "You guessed it dear. I did find something to fill that void." She remained silent for a few seconds before she moved her finger.

"You know I still remember the first time. I felt like a school girl, my stomach was so full of knots," Rachel replied. Her cheeks flushed as she leaned against the counter and shifted a hand down to his waist. Memories of her first time flooded back to the surface with a wave of emotion. "It's funny, sometimes it still feels like this just happened only a few days ago."

Rachel closed her eyes, returning back to that day in New Jersey where it all began. "I was hesitant at first, almost threw up because I was so nervous. But boy, once it was done, it was on cloud nine." Her eyes fluttered open as she came back to reality. "You know, it was ten times better than the best orgasm I ever had.

The man caught his breath as she finished the last sentence. The bonds tightened around his wrists when he tried to move. He twisted his head, trying to remove the blindfold but to no avail. "Can you untie me?" Each word strained and weaker than the last.

"Now why would I go and do something like that?" Rachel dragged her hand down over his breastbone. The man began to shiver under her touch and it only made her smile even more. "I worked extra hard to have my Prince Charming come home with me tonight for some fun. Thought I was going to lose you to that Harley Quinn teeny bopper."

"I need to get home." The man's struggling had weakened with each failed attempt.

Rachel dropped the smile. "No, you don't. I seem to recall how you live alone and haven't talked to your parents in years." She double checked the restraints around his wrists. "Just relax, the medicine should be kicking in soon. You won't feel too much."

A small stream of tears escaped from the blindfold and slipped down his cheek. "Please... please don't." The man said with little strength in his voice.

Rachel leaned forward and dragged the tip of her finger across the salty trail. "Don't worry my dear, just know our time will be even more special. This will be my first time doing this on Halloween." She replied before planting a soft kiss on his cheek.

The time felt right for Rachel.

She stood upright and reached for the nearby white plastic tray that was near her side. Delicately her fingers caressed the various pieces of equipment; from surgical scalpels to sixinch needles. Each one was a tool Rachel used to help remove the empty feeling, even if it was fleeting.

"So many choices," Rachel murmured. Her fingers continued to dance over each tool until they settled on the plastic handle of the X-acto knife. "Oh yes, this is perfect to start with."

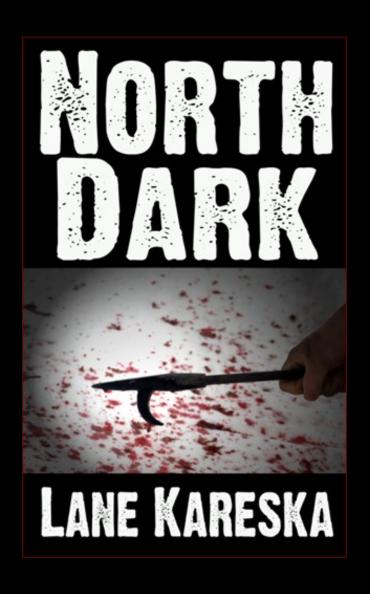
She picked up the tool, her fingers wrapping around the handle. An all too familiar tingling sensation began to build in her fingertips. The sensation sent a shiver of pleasure down her spine and towards her toes. Her gaze wandered over the man's body, contemplating where to begin.

Rachel gave a quick glance to the clock. The glowing red numbers erased the pleasure and forming a small pout on her lips. She bent at the waist and allowed her raven locks to fall down and caress the man's cheeks. "Looks like we shall wait for the fun until after dinner." She turned on her heels and made her way to the door with quick strides. She gave one last look over her shoulder to her Prince Charming.

Hunger filled her eyes as the lights were turned off and the door was closed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: J.M. Van Horn resides in Metro Detroit with his incredible wife and amazing son. During the day he works in the Fraud sector and at night spends his time crafting stories by mixing the Horror and Urban Fantasy genres. Jason Voorhees brought him into horror world but Vincent Price kept him here for good.

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Still of Night | Rory J. Roche

The soft thrum of my pulse behind my ears and the calm inhale and exhale of breath was all that broke the still silence in the moonlit living room. My head felt as if it had been split in two; my eyelids felt like lead over bleary eyes. The Halloween party had been a blast but I was sure it wasn't worth such a strong hangover. I promised never to drink that much again. As I tried to remember the events of the night, a heavy fog weighed over me and I longed to go back to sleep.

The bright white of the moon cast claw-like shadows upon the walls. Empty beer bottles, red solo cups and orange napkins with the jack-o-lantern faces strewn across the room were evidence that I had a long day of cleaning ahead of me. A few pumpkin spice cupcakes were still sitting out on the buffet table at the far end of the room. Just under the window, the nearly empty bottles of whiskey glistened in the silver light. Someone had left their mask in the bowl of cheese puffs and there was evidence that the red punch had been spilled all over my white carpet.

Tendrils of stray fur from a werewolf costume reached towards the light, almost glowing, giving away the silhouette of my boyfriend still asleep in his favorite armchair. I stifled a gurgling groan as I stretched out on my spot on the couch. The cracking of my spine rang out like gunshots in the silence. My entire body was sore and I could feel hunger gnawing at my stomach. Apparently, gorging myself on pumpkin cupcakes, candy apples, and pizza just wasn't enough to satisfy my stomach. Nausea was setting in, though I wasn't sure if it was from the hunger, the junk food, or the sickening amount of alcohol.

With a whimper of defeat, I rolled off the couch. Upon adjusting my clothes, I came across a sticky residue. Probably just the spilled punch, again. As unsteady legs led the unsure path through the room, I stubbed my toe on something soft and nearly fell flat on my face. A whine pierced the silence. I'd tripped over my friend, Kyle. I whispered a hushed apology and continued on to the kitchen. The dizzying haze of intoxication still consumed me.

Repulsion and dismay filled me as I flicked on the kitchen light and trudged towards the sink, across more tacky flooring. It was just more mess that I had to clean up. *How drunk were we?* As I tried to recollect the night's events, the fog grew thicker in my head. It was beyond time for aspirin. Turning from the sink, the pills made the fog fall away from behind my eyes. The coppery smell of blood started to fill my throat and nostrils. I frowned when I noticed someone had left a raw steak on the counter.

"What the—Shit, that's not cool."

As I moved to clean up the mess, I realized that it was no steak. A heart slipped from the paper towels in my hands and bounced off of the slick tiles. I was frozen, staring at the bloodied paper.

"Those sick... This isn't funny, guys!" They knew how much I hated pranks.

Reaching for more towels, I noticed something looking up at me from the floor. Hollowness replaced Julie's always smiling blue eyes and in my peripheral, crimson splatters decorated my cream wallpaper.

A shriek escaped my lips, calling for my boyfriend. I searched the room for a way to ground myself. The bloody clock on the wall told me that it was three in the morning, October 31st.

No. This is a prank, Cal. Hold yourself together. A Halloween prank. They're all in on this! Julie's a makeup artist! That's what this is. A cruel Halloween prank.

I didn't realize that I had stopped breathing until my lungs stung in desperation. Sucking in a sharp breath, I stumbled back into the living room. I lit the room, trying to keep myself together at the sight of this prank that they had taken way too far. My entire living room was a disaster, not unlike the kitchen. The coffee table had been flipped and the glass was shattered. The container of car keys I had confiscated was dumped. Luke's costume was propped up in his chair, and Kyle was a lump on the floor.

"Get up. The joke's over. It's not funny," I said. I kicked him but he didn't respond.

"Come on." Still nothing. I rolled him over to find a bloody gash across his throat.

"Okay, that's *enough*. Seriously, Ky. I'm not kidding!" I had a knot in my stomach. This makeup was way too realistic and I was drenched in a cold sweat.

I hesitated before I felt for a pulse. That was something he couldn't hide... except he *had*. There wasn't one and the blood under my fingers was both too tacky and too warm to be fake. I could feel tears welling in my eyes. My heart and limbs felt heavier than lead. There was no denying that Kyle was dead.

He made a sound. He had. I know I didn't make it up. Did I? Is this a nightmare? A disgusting prank! He'll sit up at any moment, laughing that stupid laugh. Julie will crawl through that doorway.

There's a camera around here somewhere. Has to be. I have to fi-... he's dead.

He's dead.

Julie's dead.

"Luke, this... Kyle's dead. Please, this isn't funny. Where are you? Take that stupid costume off now. I'm calling the cops."

I climbed over Kyle's body and made my way towards the werewolf. I couldn't feel my legs. I faltered when I saw his chest. He was carved from crotch up, like an autopsy. His intestines were spilling into his lap! I gagged, my insides straining to escape me. Crawling across the blood-caked carpet, I took his cold hand in mine. This was unreal. I couldn't stop my body from shaking. My head was spinning and throbbing worse as sobs erupted from my sore throat.

"Luke, no, no... wake up. I- no. Not you, too." I cried out in desperation. With a trembling hand, I plucked that stupid werewolf mask off to confirm it was him.

I saw nothing but muscle tissue. Shrieking out, I scrambled back. His face had been *removed*. My heart pounded in my chest and I was clammy. I wanted to stay with him and I wanted to run. Screaming was all I could manage. My legs buckled in front of his mutilated body and I bawled until no more sound could escape my aching, quivering body.

I wasn't sure how long or how loud I wailed, but the house remained silent and I was still very much alone. It settled in my mind that everyone else was dead too. I didn't want to believe it. I wanted to wake up from this nightmare. I dried my puffy eyes on my sleeve and sniffled, standing on quivering legs. My whole face was numb and swollen and cold. I was swept up in hope and then fear when I heard a noise from the bathroom.

That has to be Stacy or Jess. What do I do? What do I do? I should run. I should call the cops. But... but what if they're hurt? What if I can save them?

But what if they're dead and that's... Cal, get a grip! Check it out. You have to. You can't let another friend die just because you're scared. You got this. You can do it.

The pep talk in my head repeated for what seemed like hours before I finally grabbed a knife and crept up to the bathroom door. I cracked it enough to peer in and saw Jess face down on the floor in a puddle of blood. It was so much darker than in the movies; almost black, but I was too numb to do anything more than suck in a sharp, achy breath.

"Jess?" I just barely managed to call. Slowly on weak legs, I made my way to the body. Heart beating so hard, I swore it would burst out of my chest. I wasn't surprised that my friend didn't answer, but I knelt around the pool of crimson to feel for a pulse I doubted was there anyway.

A creak from the bathroom door broke the silence and I peeled my gaze from one friend to another. The blood-soaked Stacy loomed in the framework, knife in hand.

"Stace?" I choked, searching as quickly as possible to see if she was injured. She didn't answer. "Stacy, are you hurt?"

She simply took a few silent steps forward, hovering over me. I stood to reach her height and was met with a sudden, searing pain. A grunt involuntarily escaped my lips and I looked down to find a knife buried in my side.

"W-why?" I croaked out, screwing my face up in agony. Her dark eyes went wild and she withdrew the blade.

"Hngh—why w-would you?" I implored.

She responded by slashing at me. I felt the flesh of my arm rip open and I shoved her away.

Crazed, she jabbed the knife into me again. I howled in pain. I didn't think before plunging my own knife as deep as I could into her neck. Her eyes widened and she let out a gurgle, then fell at my feet.

My own injuries burned white hot. I couldn't forgive myself, even if it had been in self-defense. I didn't understand. Why had she attacked me? Or mutilated our friends. How had I managed to survive? I wondered if these were my boyfriend's final thoughts, too.

I closed her eyes as a final sign of respect and stepped over Jess' corpse so I could wash the strong iron smell and viscous residue off my hands. My body felt weak and I probably needed an ambulance. I was still dizzy and intoxicated. The wounds burned hotter. I scrubbed my hands of Stacy's blood and washed my numb face after.

With a heavy sigh, I looked into the mirror, only to see Luke's face staring back at me. My green eyes peered from the empty sockets of his eyes. My heart hammered in my chest. I fumbled to remove it, but my trembling fingers couldn't manage. It was stapled to my own. Trying to pry it off hurt almost as much as seeing his mutilated body had. I stumbled backwards in horror and defeat, my bathroom spinning around me. I tripped over Stacy's corpse and fell backward. With a sharp pain to the back of my head, I landed against the tub. Everything went black.

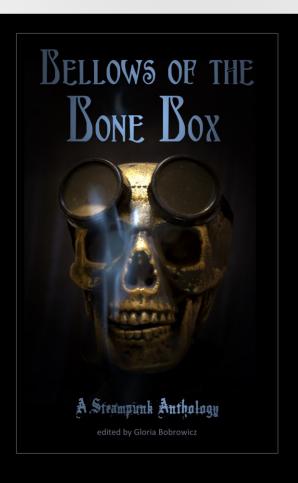
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Rory is an artist and writer from upstate New York. He has a knack for all things creative and finds comfort in darker themes. He dabbles in acting and modeling and takes pleasure in art and photography. He published a vampire novel under a pen name and has plans to add more to the series. He is currently studying German, French, Danish, and Swedish.

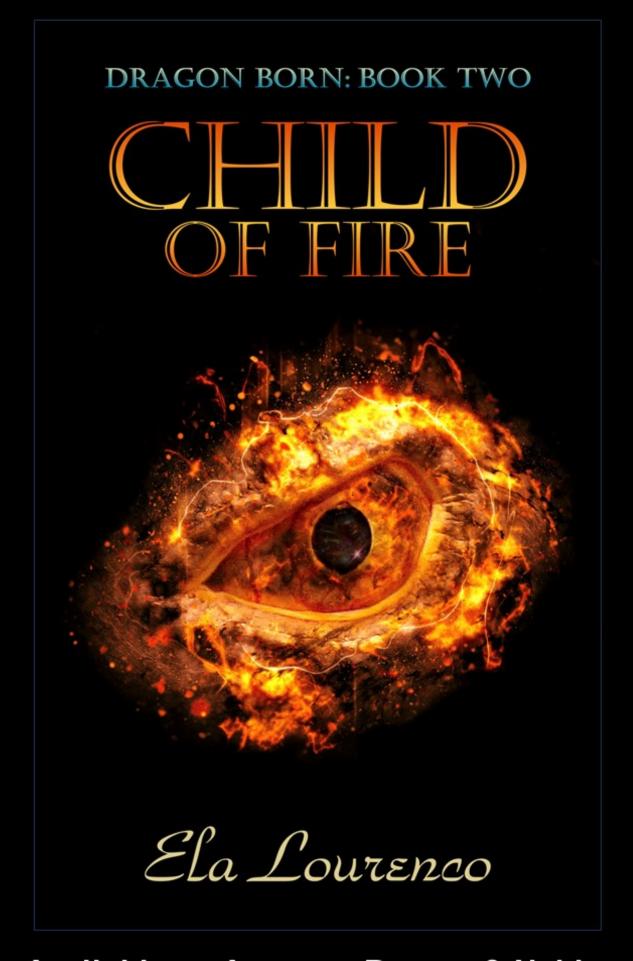
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Bellows of the Bone Box

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

Not Cavities | Patrick Loveland

Little Taneeka Sumner fought back tears as she pulled with all her strength at a carrying strap connected to her blue jack-o-lantern bucket, the thin black plastic cutting at the insides of her clenched fists. Reese's Pieces packs and Smarties rolls dropped to the damp sidewalk from the struggle.

On the other end was an older boy named Richie Jenkins, a mean smile on his skull-painted face. Richie's friend Max looked on, smoking a cigarette and laughing through his own ghoulish face paint.

Halloween was Taneeka's favorite holiday and she'd looked forward to it all year. The dinosaur costume her dad had worked so hard on by himself—because her mom had passed away from breast cancer a few years before—was getting crumpled as she fought the huge boy. Her best friend Nancy tried to pull Richie's hands off the candy bucket—because Max had already taken her orange pillowcase for himself—but he was too strong.

One of Taneeka's feather patches fell off in the melee and she lost it. She kicked Richie in his left shin—he just growled and pushed her. She fell onto her bottom, crumpling her costume's tail. Then he elbowed Nancy away.

Nancy said, "Hey! You're so mean!"

"Give it back!" Taneeka pleaded, sure now that she couldn't fight him.

Richie leered down at her and said, "Hell no! My candy now!"

Max said, "It's bad for you anyway!"

Taneeka said, "You're just... a-assholes!"

The boys feigned surprise.

Richie said, "How could you say that? We're doin' you some good..."

Taneeka stifled sobs in her chest as Nancy re-engaged, but Richie batted her attacks away with little effort.

Richie heard squeaking noises behind him and looked back over his shoulder. Taneeka and Nancy looked too.

Max turned and said, "What the hell?"

A small old woman in dark, threadbare knit clothes approached, pulling a ratty rolling suitcase almost as big as she was behind her by a telescoping handle. Her stringy salt-and-pepper hair was held down by a visor hat.

She eased to a stop and turned her head toward them, raising it enough so that her dark eyes glinted under her visor bill.

"Hello, children."

Richie said, "They're kids—we're older."

The woman looked up at the sky and hummed to herself, ignoring the boy. Taneeka looked up too, through the claw-like branches of trees that had discarded most of their leaves onto the street, lawns, and bushes.

The woman said, "What a lovely night for an occasion such as this..."

Max said, "This weather sucks."

Richie said, "Yeah, worse than you at Call of Duty."

"Hey..."

Taneeka watched the old lady take in all the decorations and costumes of the holiday on the nearby houses and sidewalks. She could've sworn she saw the woman's bag bulge a bit.

"You okay, lady?"

She said, "You boys are quite contrary, aren't you?"

"So what? You could just leave," Richie said.

"You boys aren't in keeping with the spirit of the season. *Samhain* is but once a year... and only just begun. After sun downs once again tomorrow you'll have to wait for the feasts of *Imbolc* to feel as close to the—"

"What's 'sewing' got to do with this?"

Max chuckled and said, "And shit, lady—this is just how we do our tricks!"

"Right?" Richie agreed.

Richie dangled and swung the candy-filled bucket over Taneeka, mocking her and screwing up his painted face for effect.

Richie said, "Yummy yummy..."

Taneeka just glared at him as tears formed at the edges of her eyes.

The old woman said, "Boys..."

Richie and Max looked at her.

"If you eat any of that candy, you'll lose your teeth."

Richie laughed and said, "How? Cavities?"

The woman raised her head enough so they could see her dark eyes under the visor.

"No... Not cavities."

Richie said, "Whatever, Your Creepiness. Let's get out of here, man."

Max followed Richie across the street and they were off down the far sidewalk.

Nancy helped Taneeka to her feet and Taneeka tried to keep her crumpled tail from coming off, but it detached and her tears finally came out. She stamped her feet and groaned.

Nancy said, "Stupid boys!"

Taneeka started walking down the sidewalk toward her house.

"You want to get bags or something and get more candy? Maybe your dad will come with us, since he wanted to anyway..."

Taneeka choked up and said, "I don't c-care about candy anymore! My dad made my costume and he's gonna be so mad at me!"

"Oh, I doubt that," the old woman said behind them.

Taneeka kept going but Nancy stopped and looked back.

She said, "Thanks for trying."

The woman just nodded, her eyes more natural again and her smile more warm than the creepy ones she'd given the boys.

"Goodnight," Nancy said, then started after Taneeka again. She caught up and said, "Hey, maybe there's a good movie on—I saw this real old one last year called *The Worst Witch*. It was super good."

Taneeka sniffled and tried to smooth her breathing out and fight off her sobs.

"Yeah, okay. Oh, and if my dad's not too mad, I think we might have some ice cream."

Nancy smiled and said, "Cookie dough?"

"Or peanut butter cup."

"Awesome."

Nancy looked back and didn't see the old lady down the street anymore. She was a bit relieved—nice as she'd been to the girls, Nancy hoped she'd never see that lady ever again.

Richie held Max's foot, boosting him over the gates of the local elementary school. After climbing over and dropping down, Max reached through the gate and boosted Richie up and over. They reached through the gate and grabbed their stolen candy, then started into the school. It was Taneeka and Nancy's school, and Richie would take particular trollish pleasure consuming those brats' sweets in their own stomping grounds.

Max said, "So, you get nasty with Tricia yet?"

"Nah, she's a bitch, man. She's like Mormon, and won't give it up"

The boys crept through the school's walkways and recess areas. Drenched and soggy decorations drooped all around, the rains earlier having been so sudden and more intense than the scattered showers of the days prior. They reached the outdoor lunch area, a rough trapezoidal stretch of asphalt bordered on its longest side by the locked up school cafeteria and auditorium building.

"Hey, maybe if you go to church or whatever with her she'll—"

"Hell no—she'd just want to wait till marriage then or some shit."

The boys laughed.

The school's teachers and administrators had barely time enough time to cover the Halloween Festival games and booths once the rain had started beating down. In the large open area bordered by pushed together lunch tables that had been moved to make room for the festivities, there were themed prize booths, a Nerf gun monster shooting gallery, a 'Ghost Funk Dunk' tank, and a large apple-bobbing tub—all hastily draped with black tarps.

Richie led Max to one of the rows of pushed together tables and they sat down. Richie turned his stolen pumpkin bucket over, spilling out its contents onto the slick surface. Max did the same with his pillowcase. They sorted the candies by type—fruity, gummy, chocolate, peanut buttery, etc.

"Daaaamn... Those stupid little girls were workin' for it," Richie said and they chuckled.

Max said, "Alright, first one?"

"Kit Kat, for sure."

"Naw, it's all about Witches Teeth."

Richie cringed and said, "What, candy corn? Them shit's will rot your teeth in a hurry."

"All this shit will," Max said and Richie raised his eyebrows and nodded in reluctant agreement.

The boys unwrapped their sweets and dug in.

Richie said, "Damn, dude—close your nasty ass mouth when you chew..."

"Whatever, bitch."

They sat and chewed, Richie making little sounds of appreciation and Max half-heartedly trying to fight his habit of smacking his open mouth.

In-between Max's smacks, Richie heard a squeaking sound. He stopped chewing to hear more clearly. He put a finger over his mouth to silence Max, but his friend kept chewing.

"Max—stop that."

Max stopped but frowned in confusion.

The squeaking was coming from back the way they'd come in at the school gates. Richie dropped his Kit-Kat and stood up, then started toward the front of the school.

Max looked at all the candy and said, "Dude, what if it rains?"

"That's what the wrappers are for, man. Come on..."

Max got up but he took his candy corn with him, chomping on it as they snuck back through the school. Richie started around a corner that was in view of the main gate—

The old woman was there, limping as she wheeled her wheeled luggage toward them. Richie stopped in place, but Max kept going and came around the corner before Richie could stop him with a groping right hand.

Max said, "What the fuck?"

Surprise or sneaking abilities out the window, Richie came around the corner too.

The lady stopped and looked up, enough so they could see those black eyes under her visor.

"You and that mouth..." the woman said.

Richie said, "What are you gonna do about it, bitch?"

"Well, let's just see, shall we?" she said, then set the telescoping handle down on the wet pavement, hobbling around and hunching over her luggage bag.

"Wait... How did you get over the fence?"

"Neither here nor there. This should be your main concern..."

She fumbled with small, weird-looking locks on her luggage bag.

Max looked at Richie, then back at her and said, "Bullshit—what if we call the Po-Po?"

"Police? Feel free to."

The boys took out their mobile phones and activated their screens—the displays were awash with psychedelic distortion, and useless.

"Nothing? Okay, let's continue."

As the boys exchanged a worried look, the woman went back to her locks.

Richie said, "Wh-what's in the bag?"

She finished unlocking her bag and chuckled.

"Not 'cavities'..."

The woman made a strange chirping whistle, and the luggage bag started bulging and straining. She unhooked the locks and stepped away from her bag...

The tattered suitcase flap rustled and broke open—it spilled several humanoid creatures the size of small monkeys out, only they were inky black and gray and almost see-through in parts, lop-sided and warped in all different ways, and had too many piercing, glinting eyes.

The boys turned and ran. Richie looked back just before the lady and creatures were out of sight, and saw a few them jumping onto the roof of the building that ran along to his right—and the woman was smiling, ear-to-ear.

The horrible little things that had come out of the luggage bag made chirping sounds as they ran behind the boys and along the rooftop. They jumped from roof to roof above, staring down at Richie as they sailed overhead. He'd never been as scared as those beady eyes made him.

"How do we get out?" Max called back to Richie.

"Just keep going!"

Richie rounded the next corner into the lunch area with the shrouded Festival booths and games in time to see two of the creatures throw themselves down onto Max ahead. Max yelped and spun, maybe trying to throw them off—but the motion sent him careening into the covered

apple-bobbing tub. It tipped and crashed onto its side, spilling water and apples across the asphalt as Max slipped and flopped down onto his side, hard.

Richie cried, "No!"

The little creatures climbed up Max's body as he tried to fight them off.

Richie tried to get to Max, but slipped in the spilt water and slapped down onto the asphalt too—

Then he felt small hands gripping his ankles and calves like tiny vice-grips He rolled over and pulled himself along the asphalt, but the little monsters climbed around his legs then up his body. Then two others pulled his and arms away, flopping him down onto his back with a splash.

But then that didn't matter.

The creature crawling up his chest opened its mouth, exposing what looked like hundreds of tiny interlaced molars.

"Those teeth have a special purpose, boys," the woman said as she limped up to them.

"Please, don't do this!" Max said.

"No, 'this' is going to happen. You boys imposed your will on those little girls. Because you were bigger—because you were *stronger*. My friends aren't bigger... but they *are* stronger, and they are certainly meaner. They're going to do the same to you."

Richie started, "Don't—" but little fingers clawed into his mouth from top and bottom, holding his jaw wide open. The creature on Richie's chest rested there a moment, then leaned in and seemed to smell his mouth.

The old woman looked down with her black eyes.

"They won't kill you, but they have to eat... There's only one thing they can stomach."

The creature opened its own mouth wide and bit down on one of Richie's lower incisors—its own teeth made short work of crushing it into shards.

The pain almost blinded Richie, but he could see just enough through the haze to watch the little monster chewing his tooth into a boney mush and swallowing it as it made stomachturning sounds of appreciation. He could hear one doing the same to Max and he tried one last time to throw the creatures off with no success.

Then the tooth-loving thing leaned in for another.

Taneeka and Nancy heard a knock at the front door. They were lying on their stomachs on the living room floor, watching *The Worst Witch* and eating their ice cream. Taneeka stuck her spoon into the ice cream and got up, then walked to the front door. She picked up a big candy bowl on a small table next to the door.

Her father approached and gently grasped her shoulder.

He smiled and said, "Oh no—I'm not letting you walk into a trick trap or something." She smiled up at him and said, "Okay."

He opened the door and looked out.

"Weird..." Nancy said from back in the living room.

Taneeka looked back and saw the movie had been interrupted by a news story about two boys having been taken to the hospital due to a disturbing hazing incident. They advised children and teens to be kept inside for the rest of the night.

Taneeka's dad opened the door wide and stepped out.

"Must have been knock and ditch or something..." he said.

He walked down their front steps and looked up and down the streets and sidewalks, but didn't see anyone.

Taneeka set the candy bowl down and stepped out onto the porch.

At the foot of the steps nestled next to their flickering candle-lit pumpkins, was an orange pillowcase and blue jack-o-lantern bucket.

Both full.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Patrick Loveland is a screenwriter and author from San Diego, California. He studied Experimental Filmmaking in San Francisco and worked as a projectionist and student small format film equipment instructor before moving back to his hometown in the early 2000s. Patrick lives with his wife and young daughter.

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Gothic Revival Carson Buckingham

Available on Amazon, and Smashwords



Interview with KL Dantes, Author of Mill's Woods

Phrenic Press, an imprint of Sirens Call Publications, recently published a horror short from author KL Dantes so we decided to sit down with her and ask a few probing questions about *Mill's Woods* and her writing.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome KL, why don't you take a few moments to tell us about yourself?

KL Dantes: Hi, I'm KL, writing under a partial psuedonym that pays homage to one of my favorite literary characters. Born out east to Marine Corp parents I've lived in a few places, but am happiest here in Wisconsin. When I was younger I wanted very much to be Batman; which hasn't changed much, I still love the caped crusader. I share my house with my mom, a friendly ghost, and a motley crew of critters. Writing and reading are, of course, my passions, as are horses. My goal is to write whatever pleases me, regardless of genre. I just want to share good stories with the rest of the world.

SCP: What made you decide to become a writer?

KL: Partially the inability to decide on what sort of college degree to get, and the desire to be everything and anything. I realized that in writing I could be whatever I wanted by living vicariously through my characters so I gave writing a whirl. The more time I spent putting words on paper, the more I discovered just how much I thoroughly enjoyed creating worlds and weaving tales about the people living in them. Aside from my job with horses, I can't imagine myself doing anything else now.

SCP: What is Mill's Woods about?

KL: It's about a string of disappearances in a small town.

SCP: What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about *Mill's Woods* before they read it?

KL: This is one of my first attempts at horror so please go easy on me!

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

KL: Oddly enough it depends on the story, some I plan, others I don't. Most of my writing happens in the morning hours, usually sitting on the couch with one of my cats or my dog. There's almost always a candle burning. Lately with the hours I have to put in at my day job, I've become quite adept at writing on my phone.

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

KL: Getting my first story published. I'd been writing more than a decade before finally succeeding in selling a short story.

SCP: In your opinion, what sets Mill's Woods apart from other short stories?

KL: It's not written by Stephen King. I'm not sure how to answer this question, but I can say that for me, personally, it's different because it's one of my very first horror short stories.

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

KL: I've been reading through the entire Stephen King library starting with *Carrie*. For some reason, I got it in my head that it would be fun to read all of his stand-alone novels in the order of publication. About a month ago I finished up with *Pet Sematary*; which I actually first read back in my teens. Now I felt as though I was better able to appreciate the tale. Of all the books I've read this year, I have to say that my favorite has been *The Lover's Dictionary* by David Levithan.

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

KL: Getting up and writing every day is something I consider a success. With everything else demanding my attention these days, it's a win to get in writing time. Success is finishing every story I start, even if I eventually wind up hating it. And publishing is by far the ultimate success, of course, and though I'm thankful for the ground I've covered, there's certainly more I want to accomplish.

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?

KL: Write, write, write, and read everything. If it's not your normal genre, read it. You can learn a lot from each genre, taking bits and pieces to improve your overall story. Write a sentence, a paragraph, just write. It's easy to get discouraged when getting rejections, remember that every writer faces the same thing. Develop a thick skin, but always remember to listen to and consider criticism. Just because you hate your story doesn't mean it sucks; we're hardest on ourselves. And above all else, just have fun.

SCP: Anything else you'd like to share?

KL: Foster a love of reading. Spread it around. Books are awesome.

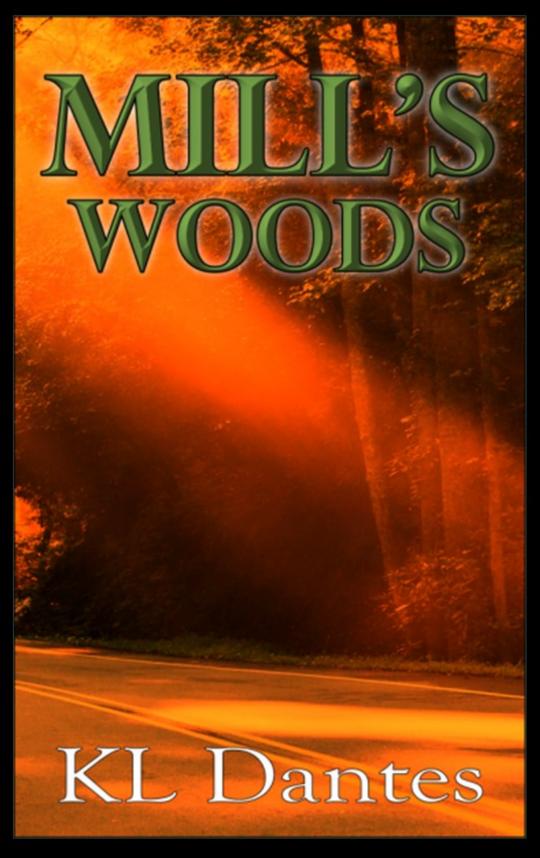
Thank you KL for taking the time to answer our questions!



Sirens Call Publications



No one could have guessed the blood-thirsty horror hidden in Mill's Woods!



Available Exclusively on Amazon for Purchase or Borrow!

Trigger Tree | Carl Palmer

"Shhh. I must be quiet, so very quiet. Listen. Stay very still and listen. I must not attract attention, their attention. Quiet. I must remain so very, very quiet. Shhh."

It's beginning, beginning to happen, happen again, happening again, arising. The Ween.

The Ween is again rising.

Arising from the depths of the desert, from a place once his own.

The quietness of the desert, his home.

This Ween, this, this thing, what can he be? What?
This, this thing. This Ween, the Ween, alive.
But not life as people know. The Ween, once, so long past.
Once there were many. Many Weens, happy Weens,
but people, people came, invaded with houses.
And the Weens, they died. No reason, just died.
Leaving only one Ween, hallowed, this hallowed Ween

The hallowed Ween arises, muttering, remembering, repeating, that noise from people, their noise, this noise. "Trigger Tree." These words he remembers, their words. Why? Why he has to go, must go, to leave his home. And why, why he must go, 'Trigger Tree'.

For close, not far from where he is now, right there stands a house, houses, houses with people, many people. People, the cause of death to Weens. His enemy, people, but, but people hold The Cure. the cure for death, death to Weens, but, fear, fear is present, for the Ween knows, the hallowed Ween knows. He must approach, 'Trigger Tree' to receive The Cure, the sweetness of life, Cure, enough cure to last, to last another year. The Cure. 'Trigger Tree, Trigger Tree'.

As he repeats, repeats faster, he remembers. He regrets, if, if only he knew before, before all the Weensthe peaceful Weens, quiet Weens, the desert Weens dieddied, leaving him alone, so all alone, to, to what? And why? Why must these people, 'Trigger Tree, Trigger Tree, Trigger Tree.'

But again, again the hallowed Ween must make the journey, to the house, to the houses, the many houses, house after house.

As this time last year, the year before, the previous year, the year before that, the Ween, the Ween approaches, approaches the first house.

"Trigger Tree," he hears it. The house is surrounded by running, running and loudness, noises, "Trigger Tree, Trigger Tree!"

People, some large, some small, all yelling, "Trigger Treeeeee..."

Costumed like ghosts, goblins, ghouls, monsters, vampires, some his size, some appearing to be a Ween, not unlike a Ween.

Noises, loudness, "Trigger Tree" screamed in many voices, the hallowed Ween. He hears again, "Trigger Tree - Trigger Tree!"

Loud, afraid. Afraid, yet determined, he, he must, must go to the house, but, but the first is always the worst.

Afraid. He moves, he mutters, "Trigger Tree!"

People, loud, running, he says again louder, "Trigger Tree!"

He moves among, amidst, amongst, with the people.

Closer, moving closer, closer to the house. Noises, loudness, afraid.

The house opens, louder, so loud, in voices, in unison they scream, he screams, together, together they all scream,

"Trigger Tree, Trigger Tree, Trigger Tree!"

The Cure! The cure is issued, the cure for death, the sweetness of life, his. He is saved, for in his grasp, the cure, he has the cure, he is now the

HAPPY HALLOWED WEEN... "TRIGGER TREE"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Carl 'Papa' Palmer of Old Mill Road in Ridgeway VA now lives in University Place WA. He has a 2015 Seattle Metro contest winning poem riding buses somewhere in Emerald City. Carl, president of The Tacoma Writers Club is a Pushcart Prize and Micro Award nominee. MOTTO: Long Weekends Forever

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Barnaby Braxton's Never Ending Smile | Stuart Conover

Barnaby Braxton dressed up like a clown.

This Halloween he'd be the fullest vampire in town.

No one suspected that under such a never-ending smile.

Was a desire for blood that went mile after mile.

He'd entertain the children with laughter.

Though they wouldn't like what came after.

Some carnivores think that happy cows taste better,

For vampires the blood of happy humans was wetter.

It helps that the candy made children sugary sweet.

The entire night was a diabetic treat.

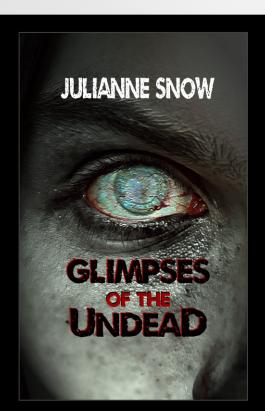
Usually savory was the preferred way to go.

Though for one night a year vampires enjoyed a sugary glow.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Stuart Conover is a father, husband, rescue dog owner, horror author, blogger, journalist, horror enthusiast, comic book geek, science fiction junkie, and IT professional. With all of that to cram in on a daily basis we have no idea if or when he sleeps!"

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Glimpses of the Undead Julianne Snow

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

Childish Fears | Stacy Fileccia

Childish fears are so unreal Yet real enough to them. Vivid scenes fill their minds As alone at night they spend.

Creaking floors and squeaking doors Terrorize young hearts. Shadows racing across the walls Make imaginations start.

Was that a witch? Maybe a ghoul? Storms within their heads. Could it be some evil monster Drooling under their beds?

Perhaps the kids they ran with For candy on All Hallow's Eve, Will all become gross zombies And make their brains all bleed.

Only the healing power of love Can overcome the dark, And if you don't console them, This fear will leave its mark.

Terror's Game | Stacy Fileccia

Floating in nearby shadows, Terror's fiery eyes watched the children beg for candy, while a filigree nightgown danced around her rotting legs.

As lights turned off, one by one, the children headed home.

Terror smiled and followed.

Doubt shouldered up next to the kids, so they walked faster, but Terror giggled as Bravado pushed their chests, slowing them to a crawl.

Terror flew behind them, running her icy fingers across their necks.

They ran.

When they stopped, they laughed at themselves until Terror burst from the shadows, showing them her fiery eyes.

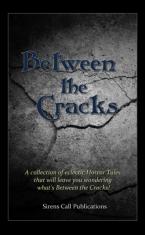
They tore through the streets until they came to the abandoned lot where they fell into the sinkhole.

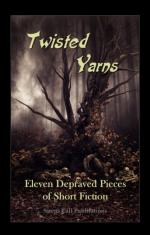
As they fell, Terror stole their last breaths and condemned their ghosts to wander the streets every Halloween night.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Stacy Fileccia, winner of the 2016 Wicked Women Writers contest, is an Atlanta transplant living in Dayton. A technical writer/editor by day, she word smiths fantasy and horror stories while listening to profound pop-punk rock music by night. Her stories have appeared in *Through Clouded Eyes*, *The Sirens Call*, and *Buzzle*. She holds a BA and Professional Writing Certificate from WSU.

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Devils Night | *Megan O'Leary*

When the moon is dark as pitch
And stars put out their glow
When woodland creatures hunker down
And shadows shift and grow.

Beware the devils night, beware. Pray the sun comes at its end Cage your loved ones lying dead Lest they rise and dance again

The deathly lady white and cold Calls the dead to join her fest And dance eternal feather steps Never to return to rest.

Lay your loved ones, guard their grave On devils night their soul to save.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: I am a writer and poet from Brisbane, Australia, currently studying for a BFA in creative writing. I love the dark poetry of Edgar Allan Poe and Tim Burton, and have been influenced by the rhythm of poetry by Roald Dahl. My short story 'porcelain' was awarded a high commendation in the 2016 contact short story competition. I am currently working on my first novel - book one in a three part young adult fantasy series.

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Cradle *Joshua Skye*

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

T'was a Full Moon Night, October 31st | James WF Roberts

T'was a full moon night, October 31st
Sally, 20. Dazed confused, dressed like
Dracula's bride,
mascara running down her cheeks
running, running as fast as she could from the party
from Lisa her now ex-best friend and Steve—what douche bag.
T'was a full moon night
as she ran through the woodsA full moon night—as she lost her way
upon the darkened path
on the way back into town

Poor little Sally didn't know the shit that was about to go down

I've become.

T'was a full moon night as she ran past me in the dark the blood still oozing from my last kill T'was a full moon night as I lost control lost control over my own will. T'was a full moon night October 31st, as I followed her home it was a place I knew damn-well. Soon, soon, soon I'd take her down the very to the very depths of Hell. Soon, soon, soon she'd be mine, all frightened, lost and alone. Soon, soon, soon, gonna rip her apart, flesh from bone. T'was a full moon night as she entered her house mommy, daddy away for the night nothing as sexy, as the gleam of a knife when it takes a precious life. T'was a full a moon night Halloween decorations almost caused quite a fright shower running—what a fucking cliché

Up the stair case I go soon, soon, soon all that lovely bloods' gonna flow.

T'was a full moon night, October 31st
When Sally J, the girl next door's lifeless body fell to the floor.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: James WF Roberts, double honours in Philosophy/Religious studies and Literature, Art and Film, La Trobe University. Currently studying Masters of Communication and Media Studies, Monash University Australia. Writer and performance poet. Has won several awards, published in USA, UK, Australian University Magazines and has self-published several collections of poetry ranging from horror and crime to drug addiction, abuse, sex, philosophy and metaphysics to a full length erotica poetry collection.

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Interview with Artist Joe Roberts

We recently sat down with artist Joe Roberts to talk about his influences and his work. The following interview is what transpired...

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Joe. Why don't you take a moment to introduce yourself?

Joe Roberts: I'm a digital artist based in London, with twenty years experience, specialising in book covers and game art.

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

Joe: I trained using traditional tools, in the early nineties, just as the digital revolution was about to kick in. I think I was born just at the right time to learn and appreciate both disciplines consecutively. I never really conquered oils though and I'd like to go back one day and really explore that. Right now I use a range of kit, including digital-paint, photo-manipulation and 3d. Commercial work, particularly book covers, leans heavily toward the photo-real look but for my personal stuff I prefer a more natural-media feel, like the genre-artists of the 70s and 80s, who inspired me growing up.

SCP: Is there an artist you would love to work with?

Joe: I love the company of other artists, and find creative people infinitely inspiring, but I'm not one for collaborations. If anything, right now, I want to go the other way, with less involvement from third parties, and focus much more on personal work,

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

Joe: It depends. If the idea was mine, I'll adapt it, or try a different approach — most things can be persuaded to work. If the brief is very specific though, and the idea is, instead, in a writer or editor's head, it's sometimes good to discuss the matter, and suggest alternatives. I think that writing, as an art, is more akin to film-making, and I find that authors and editors will sometimes ask for things that are perhaps more conducive to a moving image than, for example, that of a book cover.

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

Joe: When I was studying I used to think so, but once the work became real I very quickly learnt to just push through. Over the years you develop a sort of vocabulary, a kind of recipe-book of formulae, and when all else fails, which doesn't happen very often, I pause, take a breath, and turn to tried-and-tested.

SCP: Where do you find your inspiration?

Joe: Everywhere, constantly, old movies (I love Hammer), fashion, cracks in the pavement, something I *thought* I saw on a web page, just before hitting close.

SCP: What is your favorite piece that you've created, and why is it particularly special?

Joe: It's always something current, the thing I don't have time to work on, a collection of notes and rough sketches, and a folder full of references. I have very little time for personal work, and I'm incredibly slow, but I'm always most pleased when one of these rare pieces actually makes it to completion – most recently my re-imagined Wonder Woman.

SCP: What is your favorite piece of artwork created by another artist?

Joe: I could never pick a single image, but there are three that do spring to mind; Ulysses and the Sirens by Herbert Draper, which is beautifully horrific – one of my favourite themes. An (untitled?) Robert Mcginnis, of a redhead at a green park bench, which is just beautifully beautiful, and The Croglin Vampire by Les Edwards – just horrific (and, actually, kinda beautiful too).

Thank you Joe for taking the time to answer our questions. If you're interested in any of Joe's artwork featured in this eZine, or would like to see what else he has to offer, please visit his website:

JoeRoberts.co.uk

Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed

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



Saving Grace | Kevin Holton

Hallowe'en had sold out, or so I thought. I hadn't seen a good costume in years. All anyone wanted to be was the bad guy from the latest shit movie. Now, 2016 had probably thirty people as Diana from *Lights Out*, forty as The Blind Man from *Don't Breathe*, and god knows how many teenagers took the cheap way out by throwing on a hoodie and calling themselves Morgan to get candy.

The only real element of fear in my town came from the Corpse House. This place took the holiday seriously, and I'm not just talking spooky-scary seriously, I'm talking every element of tradition: keeping demons at bay, while still respecting the original sanctity of the holiday. The front yard was littered with 'bodies' made from prosthetics, ballistics gel, and all sorts of break-the-bank material that could be used time and time again, unlike those giant foam spiders that drift off on every light breeze. Some even had animatronics installed to produce ragged gasps, moans of pain, and feeble, repetitive motions, be it pleading for mercy or simply flicking their gaze from person to person as real humans walked by. People swayed from trees, clawed their way out of hastily dug graves, nursed fatal wounds, all frozen in time, a loop of their worst, last moments.

Yet the owner always made sure there were a few non-dying figures thrown in, be it a woman kneeling in prayer, a priest observing from the balcony, or hooded figures gathered around a guttering flame on the porch. These somehow made the scene worse, the bystanders engaged in their own acts, attention consumed, rendering them too busy to help or simply disinterested in what horrible fates befell the men and women scattered throughout the yard.

Yeah, this was my house. No, I didn't use real bodies, I'm not like that. Really, it was my therapist's idea: confront my trauma, resolve my fear of death by taking control of it. But there were still no children in the yard.

For the past few years, I made a point to blend in with my bodies, taking every opportunity to camouflage and, naturally, scare the unholy bejeezus out of those who approached. I always made sure to get them on the way in because my candy bowl was on the porch, and those heathen teenagers will take the whole damn thing if they think no one's watching. This year, my hood was pulled low, my cloak fastened tight. My vigil over the candy offering was an easy one, as I'd taken the part of a druid, head bowed in ritual over the candle just behind the bowl I'd set out.

The night started slow, as it always does. Young kids and their parents came up, snagging a piece or two. No need to be cruel to them—I was young once, and a parent once. I know how easy it is for the little ones to get nightmares. I didn't move when they approached. It would've been nice to give a friendly wave, but that would run the risk of someone gossiping, prematurely spoiling my hiding place. Only one parent picked me out, a single mother named Karen from two blocks north, whose five-year-old barely noticed anything that wasn't sugar. Karen saw, widened

her eyes, just a little, then winked and put a finger to her lips, earning back a slight, sly smile from me.

The little things are easily overlooked, but should be the most appreciated. After all, who are we, if not the unconscious, fleeting, forgotten gestures we make every day? My wife made her character abundantly clear when she left, blaming me for the divorce and everything that preceded it. We haven't talked since, because she didn't ask for alimony, thank god.

Hallowe'en proceeded as usual up until the sun set. Tonight was a real bad omen night—new moon, no stars in the sky, and half the lamps on my street didn't work. Near-total darkness, not counting the house lights.

This day was when, in days past, the veil between life and death was its absolute thinnest, allowing all manner of spirits, good and bad, to walk the human realm. That was more or less still true, given that this is when the teenagers got to roam the streets, free from parents and social consciences. No one gave me trouble until I caught sight of the one who actually looked dressed up.

See, the thing about teenagers on Hallowe'en is that they can be narrowed down to two kinds: those who are running around, trying to recapture the joy of being a child and getting free candy, or those who lump into big groups and walk slow, strutting around and talking loud to try to emulate their ideas of adulthood. Those in between just don't go out. On the sidewalk in front of my house stood a figure in baggy clothes, ripped and dirty like they'd been worn for years, with mottled skin exposed by the holes in its clothing. Its hands stayed balled inside the baggy sleeves, the sweatshirt's hood up, but not like all the Morgans out there, more like to protect from the cold, or hide a face. I couldn't tell if it was a boy or girl. Hell, I hadn't even noticed it at first. The figure seemed to have just appeared, there in an instant without any sign of having approached.

This person stood there, at the T intersection where the sidewalk met my front walk, facing the house. Blood and dirt wafted on the air, the scene of a recent murder, or maybe a grave. The longer it stood there, the more unnerved I felt. Why wasn't the kid moving? I figured they'd at least come up for a Snickers bar or something, but it just... stood there. My stomach began to knot, and I was suddenly very aware of how tiring holding still could get.

At least, it did up until a roaming gang of the almost-adults wandered by, chortling and snorting as only those who are smug about their youth can. Most had the courtesy of sidestepping the unmoving figure, but the last one very intentionally walked into it, shoulder checking it and laughing as it stumbled.

The figure moved so quick no one else noticed. Not even the other teenagers, who were a few paces ahead. The rude one had barely taken another step when the mottled figure sprung, a rattlesnake striking from a tight coil. It moved silent and swift, eating the sound from around it. There was no rush of wind, no scuffle of shoes on the sidewalk, no grunting and scratching as he tried to escape the being. My mind told me to react, to say something. Instinct screamed for me to hold still.

One of the dirty figure's hands pressed over the boy's nose and mouth, the other curled around his throat. It scurried back onto my lawn, closer to me, and pulled two knives from its boots. A dagger finger drew across his throat. When the boy stopped twitching, the figure went to work, slashing across the poor kid, leaving ritualistic markings along his flesh. Muscle pulled away from bone, scraps of skin got tossed around the yard. No one noticed this but me. No one else was around, but if anyone were to walk up after this creature left, I'd be screwed. How could I explain a dead teenager in my front yard?

Now I knew how all the other druids on my porch felt. It was awful being a bystander. The only reason I didn't weep was out of terror. I'd failed, both human to human and adult to child, leaving that poor kid to die at the monstrous hands of the demon in my front yard. Maybe my ex was right—I was a selfish bastard.

The night wasn't over. Maybe a piece of me, the piece that liked too many bad horror movies, thought it would simply leave after the kill, but no. It turned directly toward me. With long, jerking steps, as if learning how to walk again. It approached the porch, climbing the creaking stairs two at a time. The being stopped a few feet away, facing me. I didn't dare look up.

"I can hear you breathing." Its voice was grating and dark, yet soft, like a pound of cold gravel inside a down pillow.

I didn't respond.

"Don't mourn him." A hand flicked toward the yard. "He liked to beat stray cats."

That didn't surprise me. I'd recognized the boy as Darren McAndrews. He'd had a few run-ins with the cops before. They could never make anything stick.

"I'll dispose of him." It was dawning on me that the figure was female.

Still, what was I going to say?

"You can respond." A shaking breath escaped her. "I don't have to hurt you."

But I can, came the not-so-subtle undertone. As well as a hint of But I do have to hurt some people.

"W... Why?" I said, sure that this would be my last word.

"Why him?" I could smell the blood now that she was close. Strangely, I didn't smell dirt anymore. "The veil gets thinner every year. Soon, we won't be confined to one day."

As if my heart couldn't hammer any harder. "We?" If she was here, what other monsters lurked in the other realms? Who even thought that whole 'thinning of the veils' thing was *real*?

"We," she repeated, without explaining. "We all have debts. Blood, death, sorrow... these help repay those debts. Let us escape our bonds a little sooner. Once we're free, we don't have to kill."

But we can. Again, I couldn't overlook the subtext.

"You'll be safe tonight," she said. "That's what he was for. Protection. For you."

"Not paying your own debt?" I probed, still shaking, but now resigned to my death.

The woman shrugged. "Two birds." From the peripherals of my vision, I saw her look to the street. "I have other stops to make. Things I have to do." There was a hint of regret there. Other people to kill, probably. Then, more quietly, she added, "I should go."

I almost stopped breathing. Just like that? She was leaving, without killing me? Offering me protection on the way?

My breathing really did stop when she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around me. I got the impression she didn't expect a hug back, which was great, because I couldn't move. What free reign I'd had of my body had locked up and disappeared. All my nerves focused on remaining rigidly still as she leaned against me. Under the rags, she was bone thin, all skeleton and horrible muscle.

As she pulled back, she lowered down a bit, looking up at me. Both of us were hooded, our faces disguised to those to our sides or far away, but her sunken eyes were familiar. Though her lips were peeling, his face discolored and scarred, her skin spotted by Darren's blood, I recognized her.

"Bye, Dad," she said. "See you soon."

My daughter turned, ready to walk away. She hesitated at the edge of the porch, then reached back and plucked a Snickers out of the bowl I'd set out. Into the night she walked on her uncertain legs, blood-stained fingers peeling the wrapper as she neared the street. Across the road, an impudent girl, sixteen or so, from around the corner threw an egg at my neighbor's house.

Grace watched her go, then turned back, waving to me. My nerves finally released. I gave her a feeble wave back, knowing what was going to happen to the brat with the egg, knowing that I wouldn't stop it. Down in my lawn, all trace of Darren had disappeared. The street lights all around us were going out, making the moonless sky seem blacker for it.

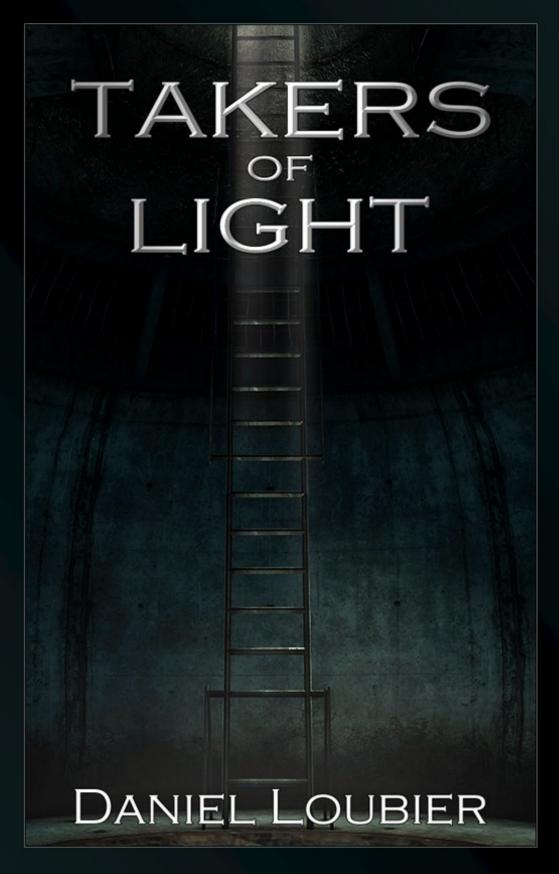
I lowered my hood, too shocked to cry, too grateful at seeing her again to process the horror I'd witnessed her perpetrate. Sitting down on my front steps, I felt the cold wind rush around me as I hugged myself, wishing I'd had the strength to hug her instead, as she walked unsteadily into the night, surrounded on all sides by darkness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Kevin Holton's work has been published or will be published with companies like Fossil Lake, James Ward Kirk Fiction, and Crystal Lake Publishing in anthologies such as *No Sight for the Saved, Voices from the Gloom - Volume 2*, and *Sharkosaurus*, among others. He is a writer, editor, student, voice actor, and amateur Batman who can be found at www.kevinholton.com and Game Time Reviews.

Twitter: <a>@KevinJLHolton

Driven underground by those of the light...

Now known as The Dark Dwellers...



Available Exclusively on Amazon for Purchase or Borrow!

Leftovers | David J. Gibbs

The sky's underbelly was raw, its swollen clouds agitated, full of thunderous unrest. Bare branches stretched ever upward, their jointed fingers tearing away at the sky's rumbling, tinted flesh. A smattering of drops began to fall to earth, marking the neighborhood with small wet circles. Strong winds from the north carried the chilled promise of the impending winter. Leaves skittered over the pavement, while the flickering light of the jack 'o lanterns cast shadows across porches and steps. Dancing ghosts, made of rippling sheets, moved freely about in the stiff, rain dampened breeze. This was the time of year when the dead walked hand in hand with the children of the town. After all, it was Halloween.

"Jeremy? Are you ready?"

He tried his best to ignore his mom. Thankfully, she was downstairs. His fingers struggled to tie the bandana around his head. It was the finishing touch to his pirate costume. He watched in the mirror as the bandana slipped out of place once again. Sighing, his hands immediately began to adjust it for what felt like the fiftieth time.

"Jeremy?"

He didn't answer, wanting to fix his costume by himself. Jeremy heard his mom lumbering up the steps, her heavy body making each step creak. She rattled the pictures hanging in the hallway as she came to his door. The knock came moments later, followed by the sound of his mother's sweaty hands sliding around the brass door knob. He had grown to dread that noise. It always seemed to coincide with a sweaty lipped kiss, one that lingered with the pungent smell of Italian sausage, her favorite snack.

The door slowly pushed inward, his mother leaning against the door frame. Her rasping breath came in jagged gulps as she wiped the sweat from her forehead with the washcloth she always carried with her.

"Mhwat dya hink?" he asked, hating his voice. His slurred speech made him an easy target. Even with all the therapy and his mother's help, his speech wasn't improving. His mouth just seemed incapable of shaping the sounds like he used to.

Pushing those thoughts aside for the moment, he posed, his arms outstretched as if he was walking across a stage. His mother's faltering smile said all that needed to know. He knew he didn't look like a pirate. The bandana slipped down over one eye again.

"Well. My little pirate," she said, coming into the room as he turned toward the mirror.

"Myep," he said, pushing the bandanna up a little higher on his head, trying to appear poised and proud.

"Here, let me help you," she said, her meaty hands tugging gently at the sides of the red patterned cloth.

"Mmmom," he stammered, trying to pull away from her smelly hands.

"Stop your whining and hold still," she said, finally letting go.

As she stepped back from him, her chubby hands nestled themselves beneath the hanging flesh of her throat. He couldn't look at his mom too long in the mirror, it was just too gross. He grabbed the glossy bag he used for collecting his Halloween candy and checked to make sure that the handle was still secure around his wrist.

"Are you going around with Timmy again this year? I know you're almost nine, but I don't think you're ready to go by yourself."

He couldn't tell her the truth. If he did that, she wouldn't let him go. Timmy wasn't going with him this year. The target that Jeremy's speech problem had painted on him, had rubbed off on Timmy and his friend couldn't handle it.

"Wmeetin' at da gorner," he said, hoping she would buy it.

"Well, just be careful," she said, kissing him lightly on his head.

Relief washed through him. She bought it. He held his breath when he walked past her and headed down the steps. Why couldn't his mom just be like other moms?

"Have fun and make sure you're back by nine," his mom called after him, shambling to the top of the stairs as he bounded down them. He didn't look back.

As he headed down the sidewalk, passing other kids dressed up, he adjusted the plastic bag around his wrist. Jeremy wanted to make sure that no one would be able to grab it from him. Two years ago, he and Timmy were jumped by George and Eric. There were a couple of jerks, from the neighborhood. He and Timmy fought back, but the bullies were bigger and stronger than they were. The two older boys took all of their candy and laughed at them. George even stole Jeremy's watch.

He loved Halloween. It was the only time of the year when he could become anyone he wanted; a night when he could readily transform himself into someone other than the stuttering, idiot-child of the neighborhood. From behind the mask, the world looked upon him differently, with untainted eyes. They merely saw him as a trick-or-treater, one of the masses moving through the rain dampened streets of Madison Corners. He felt it was the only time when he belonged.

And, he planned on taking full advantage.

Confident that he had finally distanced himself from his mother's watchful eye, Jeremy walked up the sidewalk leading to the worn wooden steps of the first house. He looked at the stuffed scarecrow resting on two stacked bales of hay, a bloodied axe blade buried deep into its skull. A red trail of blood and gore danced down the face of the figure, pooling within the folds of its clothing. A sneering jack 'o lantern flickered at him from the right side of the porch, the face strained and uncomfortable. Several strange cut out figures moved gently in the hand of the night breeze from their positions overhead.

He noticed that the lower section of glass had been taken out of the front storm door. An older woman dressed up in a witch's costume was sitting on a chair with a large bowl brimming

with a wide variety of candy just inside the door. The wrappers winked at him, their shiny coating catching the light shining from inside the house.

It was time.

She offered a smile as she said, "Hello there. My, isn't that a cute costume."

He closed in on the woman's outstretched hand clutching two small candy bars and said, "Twwek 'r Tweet."

"Here you go little boy," said the old woman dropping the candy into the bag tied to his wrist.

"Htanks," he said, pausing before turning away. He suddenly wasn't sure if he could go through with his plan. He shuffled his feet and continued to head for the steps. Jeremy had never done anything so daring in his entire life. He had always been a good kid. He was the little, unremarkable, sandy haired boy who always sat lost in the back of the classroom with little to say. And, despite his lack of participation, he always got good grades.

His determination suddenly returned in full, remembering the constant teasing. He wasn't about to let his chance slip by. He turned toward the woman and tried to sound as pitiful as possible.

"Mmm hot. Nn I have water?"

The woman frowned, listening carefully. "Getting a little warm in your costume? Well, all right. I'll be right back." She put the candy bowl on the chair as she walked out of the room.

Jeremy's heart stormed through his small chest, as he looked at the inviting candy. He thrust his arms through the open section in the door, opening his bag before dropping a few pieces of candy into the woman's candy bowl. Just as he heard her approaching footsteps, he darted off the porch, his heart still thudding hard in his chest.

He couldn't believe that he had been able to pull it off.

He went to the next house, leaving more candy and continuing until almost all were gone.

It took him a little more than two hours to hit nearly every house in his neighborhood. By that time, his bag was feeling much lighter, and so he headed back home.

It was after nine and he was tired. He looked at the empty piggy bank, a slight tug at his heart, thinking about how long it took him to save up the twenty-four dollars and ninety cents he had spent the day before.

It had to be done though, and he realized it.

His finger absently tapped the edge of an empty cardboard box. His eyes took in all the other empty boxes too. The Nestle' logo was visible along the side of each one. There were nine in all. Jeremy smiled again, thinking about what he had done tonight, relishing the moment.

The company logo had been permanently branded upon his mind. A year ago, he had stared at the silvered razor blade jutting out of one of the candies held in his blood covered

fingers, pain screaming through his mouth. It had savagely taken his ability to speak in one swift bite. They had been his favorite candy but now, he couldn't bear to eat one. All during his recovery, suffering through dozens of surgeries as the doctors tried to repair the damage inflicted upon his mouth and tongue, he hatched his plan.

It was perfect.

Jeremy still often wondered who might have placed the sharp steel messenger inside of the Nestle' Crunch bar he had bitten into. He supposed it didn't much matter in the end. He had exacted his justice on everyone who had laughed at him or teased him or just wouldn't talk to him because he was different.

They would all be the same now.

He grabbed his bag and started to put it away, when two pieces of candy fell out onto his bed.

How did I miss these two?

"Jeremy? Will you please bring your momma some of your candy?"

The thought of heading downstairs and feeling her sticky fingers caressing his face made him almost sick to his stomach. He knew that the Italian sausage stench would be worse because it was later in the day.

It was always worse at night.

"Jeremy? Can you hear me?"

"Hyea!" he called back, a frown stealing over his young face for a moment.

"Well? Bring me some candy. You know how your momma loves the little Nestle' Crunch bars."

Yes, I surely do.

He only paused for a moment, as he grabbed the two remaining candies and headed downstairs to bring his mom what she wanted.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: David J. Gibbs' work has appeared in dozens of publications and anthologies including; 'Sanitarium Magazine', 'The Sirens Call', 'Massacre Magazine', 'Dark Monsters', 'Hidden in Plain Sight', and 'Shadows in Salem'. Later this year, his work will be appearing in 'Broken Bones', 'Grey Matter Monsters', 'Tales from the Near Future', and 'After The Happily Ever After'.

Website: http://www.davidjgibbs.com









Trick | Kahramanah

It was that time of year again. Dead leaves, riding on the back of a cool breeze, danced through the streets. Browning grass engulfed the lawns. A pumpkin sat on the front porch of a neighbor's house across the street, but there were no other decorations in sight. Doors were shut and bolted, window shades were drawn, and the streets were empty—for now.

Our house wasn't looking any better than the mess outside. Upstairs, there was the sound of drawers sliding open and shut and random objects being thrown out of the way. As the noise gradually died out, I could hear my wife dragging her feet towards the stairs. Each step sounded more hopeless than the last. The first thing I could see was her trembling fingers reaching for the banister for support.

I looked down at my hands. One was wrapped in a bandage that had a yellowish hue but the other was steady.

"I can't find any," she said. Her voice was shaking more than her hands were, as she clutched the front of her t-shirt. She pulled the material forward and twisted it while she nervously looked around the room for something that she may have possibly missed.

"There has to be something," I said and walked to the refrigerator.

"I already looked in there."

I opened the crisper drawer to see if we had any fruit left.

"I already looked in there," she repeated. "I looked everywhere."

I stared at the contents of the drawer: a wilted head of lettuce and two tomatoes with fuzzy white spots.

BUZZZZ!

It was our doorbell. That meant it was too late.

"Don't answer it!" She jumped in front of me to block the way.

"I have to." I grabbed her shoulder with my uncovered hand and gently pushed her to the side. "You know what happened to the Wilsons when they pretended they weren't home."

The truth was that none of us knew what happened to the Wilsons. All we knew was they weren't prepared last year. They said they would just ignore it and keep the lights off. They were gone the next morning. That's how we ended up in this situation. So many people were scared of disappearing on Halloween night so they bought their supplies early and left nothing for the rest of us.

"I'll take care of it. Just keep looking. There has to be something left," I said, surprised by how calm I managed to sound. Looking down at my hand again, I wondered if I was able to keep my composure because I was in shock. Either way, it didn't matter. I understood what I had to do and I was ready to do it again.

With a long exhale, I opened the door.

"Trick or treat!" five children simultaneously shouted. One was dressed like a scarecrow, another was painted green, and the three others were wearing white sheets. None of them were from our neighborhood. We never knew where they came from.

"I don't have any treats this year."

"Trick or treat," the Scarecrow repeated.

"Can you wait for tomorrow? I'm sure we can find something then."

"Trick or treat!" one of the ghosts yelled.

"Please, we-"

"Trick or treat," the Scarecrow said. It no longer sounded like a childish mantra. It was a demand. I had to choose but there was no real choice left.

Giving in, I finally said the word they were waiting to hear, "Trick."

No sooner had the word passed my lips than the Scarecrow grabbed my arm. The green child grabbed my other arm and the three ghosts held my legs still. I struggled to free myself but they were inhumanly strong. I looked down as eyes peered at me through holes in the sheets. Their excitement growing as the Scarecrow removed the bandage from my hand to reveal four fingers and one bloody stump where my index finger used to be.

The Scarecrow reached into his back pocket and pulled out a blade. It looked large in his child-like hand. He brought the blade to my wound and began sawing at the next finger in line. I thrashed my torso around but my limbs were held securely in place.

It didn't hurt as much as the first time. I looked down at the little ghosts hugging onto my legs. Their hands felt larger than mine. I supposed they didn't look like regular children under those sheets.

The blade finally made it through and I watched my middle finger fall to the floor and roll down the patio stairs. They immediately let go and ran after the appendage. I fell backwards and pushed the door shut with my foot. As it closed, I watched them fight over which one would get to keep my finger.

"I found something!" My wife yelled as I crawled to the living room.

She rushed in from the kitchen with a grey ball in her hand.

"They're gone," I said. "What's that?"

She held it out to me and responded, "A peach. Or it was a peach. Do you think it'll work?"

"I don't think so."

The rotten fruit fell out of her shaky hand and splattered across the floor. She went back into the kitchen only to emerge again, within seconds, with a dish towel. Dropping to the floor beside me, she attempted to clean and redress my hand.

"Maybe you should keep looking," I said. I knew that we searched the whole house several times but I didn't want her to give up hope.

BUZZZZ!

We looked into each other's eyes. No words were needed. She already knew that I loved her and I knew that she loved me. There was no point in saying the word that would make the moment feel like our last together—even if it was.

I knew I looked bad from the expression on her face. We didn't have any proper medical supplies and the blood loss was taking its toll on me.

BUZZZZ!

She stared at my hand and watched the blood run down my wrist. I propped myself up on my elbow and she laid a hand on my shoulder.

"Don't," she said without taking her eyes off of my mutilated hand. "I'll get it this time."

I fell backwards and grabbed her hand from my shoulder and brought it to my lips. The metallic taste of my own blood was left in my mouth, as I saw that I left a smear of it on her hand.

She looked at her bloody hand with the same solemn stare I had. Just like me, she understood what she had to do and she was ready to do it.

BUZZZZ!

She stood up and walked toward the door. I could hear it open, but I rested my head back and looked away. I couldn't watch.

"Trick or treat!" a group of young voices yelled.

"Trick," she responded without hesitation.

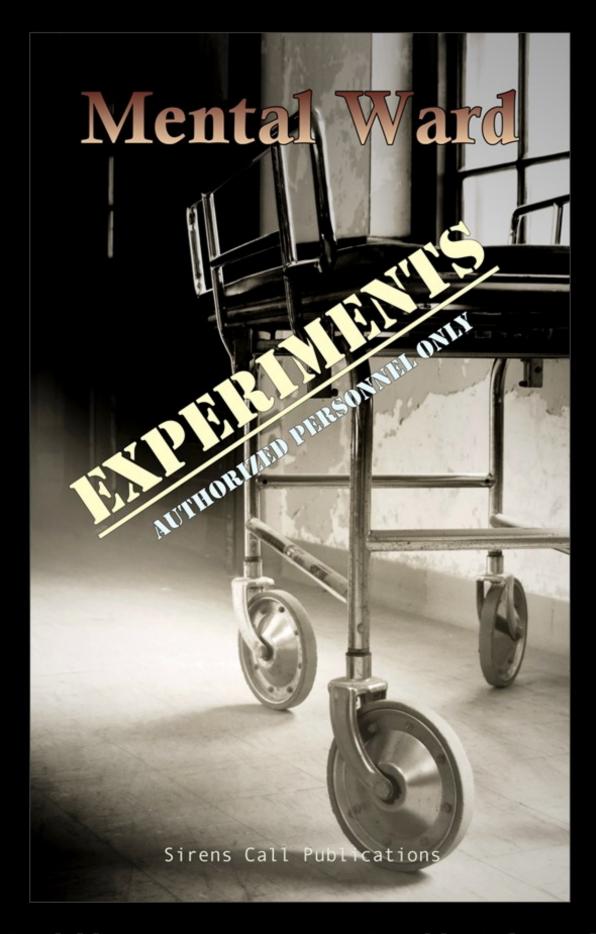
I tried to count the paint chips on the ceiling, or think of anything that would distract me from my wife's horrific screams.

I wondered when the paint first started chipping. I wondered if I would be able to face any of our neighbors without punching them in the face for their selfish candy hording. I wondered if I would have done the same as them if I thought of it first. I wondered if we would be able to find candy for next year. But, mostly, I wondered if we had enough fingers to last us until the night was over.

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The Desecraters of Samhain | Jacob Mielke

We are well into the woods when I double over, gasping. The pain in my stomach is close to unbearable and I am certain I'll throw up any second now.

Dave, who is in infinitely better shape, comes jogging up and stops next to me. He's not even breathing heavily, the bastard.

I don't remember at what point I stopped hearing the sirens but the woods are silent now except for my heavy breathing and the crickets. My limbs shake with the adrenaline coursing through them and the fear in my heart still hasn't subsided. We should have been more careful. The cops are always out in force on Halloween. I don't think they got a good look at our faces, so that's something. The only thing they could have seen was two young thugs beating a bum in a dark alley. There are a lot of thugs around here. It could have been anyone.

"Come on, bud. Pull yourself together." Dave claps me on the back. There's no concern in his voice at all. Of course there isn't. Dave is a hell raiser. He likes to cause trouble and doesn't give a shit about the consequences.

We make it a tradition every Halloween to do some damage. We smash windows, slash tires and kick the shit out of bums. We even robbed a house once. My neighbor lives by himself and he doesn't allow trick-or-treaters at his home. He's always been a prick like that. So we broke in wearing masks and beat him senseless. Broke three of his ribs and took every dollar he had.

I love what we do. We're the hell raisers, the troublemakers. The weirdos your mama warned you about.

I watch Dave pop a small white pill in his mouth. He offers one to me. "Hey man, you want some Mandy?"

I shake my head. He shrugs and pockets it. Lately he's been using more often. I've noticed too that he's been bored with our usual shit. He always needs things to escalate, to be more extreme. Beating up bums and breaking into people's houses is the only thing he gets really excited about anymore. It worries me a bit but not much. If I'm being honest, I have a lot more fun with the hardcore stuff too.

We clear a spot on the ground and sit there for a while, smoking and bullshitting. Then Dave suddenly quiets and cocks his head. "Ryan, you hear that?"

I listen. It's faint, but I think I can hear voices on the air. Dave gets a huge, shit-eating grin on his face. "Sounds like birds."

He marches off in the direction of the noise and I follow closely behind, though I'm still tired from running from the cops. The voices get clearer and louder with every step and soon it's obvious that Dave was right; they belong to women.

There is a clearing ahead through the trees. We've hung out there a few times in the past but never on Halloween. If we had, maybe we would have stumbled on this incredible scene sooner.

There are three women in the clearing, naked as the day they were born. Two of them are really fit looking. One has long, dark-colored hair and looks to be maybe eighteen and another has shoulder-length hair of the same color. She's clearly older, maybe middle-aged, but still hot. She looks so much like her younger counterpart that I think they have to be mother and daughter. The third among them is an old woman, all wrinkles and white hair, way past her prime.

Fucking jackpot! I look over at Dave to convey my excitement but he is fixated on the scene before us. I can feel myself getting hard. Would it be gay if I started jerking off with Dave right here?

The three are sitting on a large piece of white cloth that has a green pentagram painted on it. Candles are placed in a circle around the blanket. They must be into some devil shit or something.

The youngest one lifts up a bowl to the sky and closes her eyes. The moonlight makes her pale flesh glow. I feel an absurd sense of shame and the urge to look away from her nude form. I just beat a man not half an hour ago but this is what makes me shy?

The girl's lips are moving silently. She opens her eyes and lowers the bowl to her lap. When she speaks, her voice sounds musical to my ears, like a singer or a poet. "I make this offering to Gaia, the Mother of the Earth. May she always bless us in her embrace."

The girl puts a green and red crystal in the bowl and continues. "I make this offering to Cernuous, the Horned God. May he always watch over us and protect us from evil."

She puts a pair of antlers in the bowl and all three of the women chant in unison. "We honor our Mother and Father on this day, Samhain, the coming of the new year."

I snicker to myself. This town we live in is super religious, all Catholics and Baptists. I think they're full of shit too but this is a whole other level of weird.

The young girl passes the bowl to the middle-aged woman, who I now identify as the mother.

Mom holds the bowl up to the sky and closes her eyes, same as the girl did before her. I look over at Dave again to see his reaction to this freak show and the look on his face stirs excitement in me. That's the look he has before we do bad shit. The predatory look.

The mother finishes praying and lowers the bowl to the ground. She takes out a huge knife and presses the blade to her open palm. I can't tell for sure but I think she's bleeding into the bowl. "I offer this blood and my life energy to the spirits of the departed on this night of Samhain, when the veil between worlds is thin. May the Mother and Father watch over your friends and loved ones and may you find your way into the next world."

She sets the knife aside and they all start praying again. Dave nudges me and whispers in my ear. "Ryan, get your piece ready."

I stare at him but he gives me nothing. No explanation, just the expectation that I follow his orders without question like I always have. I have a pretty good idea of what he plans to do and I'm not sure I want to participate.

But I'm not sure I want to sit it out either. My fingers close around the pistol inside my jacket. I am prepared.

Mom passes the bowl to the old woman and she puts a stick of incense in it. Her voice is raspy and harsh. "On this night of Samhain, I ask Mother Gaia to bless the new year with prosperity for all of her children. Shower your bounty upon us, Earth-Mother."

"Let's go."

Like what always happens when we pull something, fear and adrenaline race through me. Dave steps out into the clearing with his gun in hand, though not yet raised. "Good evening, ladies! What have we got going on here? A little Halloween party?"

I draw my own gun as I step out after Dave. This night could end badly for everyone. My heart is beating too fast and my mind riding too high to care at this point.

The girl looks scared and she grabs onto Mom's arm. The old lady looks mad as Hell. Or maybe all old people always look mad. The mother is calm, but I am hyper-aware of everything and I can see the way her face twitches as she tries to mask her nervousness. She holds out her hand. "Welcome, brothers. We invite you to join us in our celebration of Samhain."

Dave looks at me, a mocking smile plastered across his face. "Did you hear that, Ryan? They want us to join their little Halloween party!"

I chuckle and he turns back to the women. "Say ladies, maybe you could help me out with something. I heard that these satanic rituals end in orgies. Is that right? I've always wanted to know."

The old woman spits and says something angrily under her breath. I doubt she's telling us her pumpkin pie recipe. The girl whimpers quietly and I see that she's clenching the cloth they're sitting on tightly in her fists. The mother's calm demeanor cracks momentarily but she recovers. "We don't believe in Satan, brother. This ritual is to honor our gods, Gaia and Cernuous. Sometimes we do use sex in a ritual but this is not one of those times."

Dave's expression doesn't change but I see how rock-steady his gun hand is, how ready he is to use it. "Hey lady, why are you all naked?"

"It is tradition to perform our rituals while skyclad, so that we can be one with nature."

Dave slaps his side. "Hell, sex is the most natural thing there is! I think that would be a better way to honor your gods. Hey, I'm honorable! I'm the most honorable fucker you'll ever meet!"

Dave's face has twisted. His bared teeth no longer form a smile. I can barely hold still, the anticipation is so great. He gestures at the young woman with his gun. "I think we should start with her."

Silence blankets the entire woods then. I can't even hear the crickets anymore. We all just stare at each other, the tension high enough to cut through. Something changes then. Cold dread starts creeping up my spine. I feel something terrible is about to happen. But why? There are no cops around here and these women are powerless next to two scary guys with guns. But why don't I feel scary right then? Why am I the scared one?

Dave gestures at the old lady and the mother. "You two, off the blanket. I don't want to get grass stains on these jeans."

The girl panics and looks at her mom, eyes pleading. The mother grasps her arm. "It's alright. He isn't going to hurt you, I promise."

"That's right. As long as you don't struggle too much, I won't hurt you."

Mom whips her head at him, eyes fierce with anger. I am startled by the intensity there. It's a complete change from her nervous behavior earlier. The dread in me grows stronger and my body is screaming for me to flee. Even Dave, for all his bravado and tough guy posturing, flinches. Mother speaks, her voice quiet and deadly. "You boys should leave now."

Dave points the gun at her head. "And you should get off the fucking blanket like I told you. Don't worry, you'll get a turn on it."

I notice the old lady is talking quickly to herself, under her breath. Her eyes are fixed on something in the distance. I look in that direction and ice shoots through my veins. "Dave! Dave, we have to-"

"Would you shut up? Stand there and keep watch if you don't want to fuck her!"

He grabs at the legs of the girl, who screams and kicks at him. She lands a blow to his stomach, driving him back for a moment. He growls and pins her to the blanket. "Guess I'll have to hurt you then."

I turn back and stare at the figure standing across the clearing. It's huge, easily seven feet tall. Taller, if you count the goat horns protruding from its head. The old woman cackles behind me. "The horned god comes!"

I notice that it's getting darker and look up. It's like a black shroud is moving across the sky, blotting out each of the stars one by one. When they are gone, the moon also goes dark and that's when Dave notices too. I hear the girl stop screaming and his confused voice. "What the hell?"

It's too dark now to see the figure. Only the candles break through the inky blackness. I hear the heavy running footsteps just before I see it pass into the light. It's only a brief glimpse but I can see that the figure is covered in thick fur.

I also briefly glimpse the eyes on that terrible horned head. Vertical pupils, like a goat.

The goat creature crashes into Dave and the two of them disappear from my line of sight. I hear three gunshots and then he screams. The old woman cries out: "Cernuous! Protect your daughters from evil!"

Terrified, I turn and run. In the total darkness I can't see far in front of me and it slows me down when I reach the tree line. I have to feel for the trees and brambles. In the distance, I hear David's screams stop and then the heavy footsteps getting closer to me.

I panic and try to dart forward. My side glances hard off of a tree and I fall. The footsteps stop. Everything stops. The world except for us ceases to exist. I hold my breath and lie totally still. It's stupid. I know he knows I'm there. But what else can I do?

I can hear the heavy breathing of the thing behind me. Hell, I can feel the heat radiating off of it. Why hasn't it killed me yet? Is there a chance I could be spared?

I have never prayed in my life but I try to pray now. "God, please don't let me die here! I know I have sinned and I deserve this. But please, let me live. I can prove that I can be a good person, I swear!"

The thing behind me doesn't move. It just stands there, heavy breath the only sound apart from my whispered prayers. Who was I praying to exactly? The Christian God of my childhood? Or this pagan deity? The horned god?

Fuck it. This is for whoever's listening. "I'll never hurt anyone again. I'll be a good person! I swear I'll never do anything bad again if-"

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Slugger Saves | Calvin Demmer

It would be Halloween the first time Eric Rivers would see the new next door neighbor. The man had gone undetected for almost two months.

Eric had made his way to the backyard carrying his baseball bat, which had *Slugger* written in permanent marker across the barrel, and a baseball. *Slugger* was also the name his father used to call him when he still played baseball. He intended to try out for the local team again. This was why he found himself in the backyard—he needed to practice. He even decided to dress as a baseball player for the night's trick or treating. Eric wanted to win back his father's affection.

With the sun's rays warming his forearms and cheeks, Eric settled in the middle of his yard. He tossed the baseball high into the air and readied his baseball bat. The pellucid sky made for a perfect backdrop to target the white ball.

Eric swung.

He heard the sweet wooden crack he knew well. In his mind he heard a crowd cheering his home run.

The ball flew high into the air, almost threatening to enter space, and then the frigid chill of reality gripped Eric. The ball had cleared the yard's boundary. It had landed in the strange neighbor's yard.

Eric made his way to the fence, the baseball bat held firm. The fence was covered by intruding vines and was riddled with all sorts of insects. His father mowed the lawn once in awhile, but the fence had been neglected. He had offered to help with the yard work on occasion, but his father had said no, that he was too young. Eric knew of course, the real downward spiral had begun when his mother had left for one of his father's friends.

Eric did see them once in awhile, but they had moved across country. 'Cowards,' his father had called them.

Eric crouched near the fence, alongside a large bush. The spicy scent of plant life flooded his senses, and he braced for a sneeze, but the urge passed. He parted some of the vine's green tentacles, trying to spot his ball. 'He's a bit weird,' he could recall his father saying of the neighbor.

Paralyzed, Eric saw a slender, pale man who seemed to be playing fetch with...nothing. The man would throw what looked like a skull—at least like the ones Eric had seen on pirate flags—across the yard. The skull would then lift, magically, from the ground and float midair back.

It wasn't until the man spoke—"Good boy," he said—that Eric snapped out of the zombie-like state he'd fallen into.

He watched the man kneel down and pat the air in front of him.

Something barked.

Eric couldn't locate where the sound had come from, but by the neighbor's actions, he figured the man thought he saw a dog.

The man spoke again, "One day you will make a killer hellhound."

Hellhound? Eric wondered if he had heard correctly, then thought maybe it was the dog's name or some type of breed. It sounded a bit too ridiculous for a name. On the other hand, one of his own friends had a dog named Alien Invader.

A deep growl—like an old engine starting up—startled Eric.

It was followed by two higher-pitched barks. All thoughts fled from Eric's mind.

The man stood, saying, "What is it? Do you smell something?"

Eric moved back, shut his eyes, held his breath, and prayed that he would not be spotted. This was his usual response to fear since his mother had left. He'd also dive under his blanket, but that was far away in his room now.

When Eric managed to open his eyes again, the man had returned to throwing the skull for the invisible dog. Eric sat and waited until the man grew tired of the game. "That's enough now," he heard the man say at last.

He watched the man return to his house.

Eric sat a further twenty minutes, waiting for his shaking legs to calm. Then he decided to make a break for his own house, his ball long forgotten.

He turned around, yearning for home, only to see his baseball bobbing through the air just a few feet behind him. The sound of heavy breathing filled his ears and a stench of decay assaulted his nostrils.

Eric ran.

As his feet reached the stone path to the backdoor, he heard the heavy thudding of paws behind him. He knew the dog, the hellhound, was no illusion, and it was after him.

He ran straight into the kitchen, almost crashing into his father, who was seated at the table reading the paper.

"Dad! Dad!" Eric shouted.

"What's it? I'm reading."

"The neighbor's hellhound—ah—dog, is after me!" Eric said, turning to look, already knowing he wouldn't see anything.

"Huh? There's nothing behind you. Go away, or I won't take you trick or treating later."

"Dad, please. It's invincible!"

"You mean invisible." His father frowned. "I don't have time for your games, and anyway you're the crazy one with the bat, sort out your own problem."

Eric glanced at the bat in his hands. His father was right. He heard the scraping of claws on the tiled kitchen floor now. The dog was inside. Eric summoned inner courage, forced his shaking hands calm, and found a state of zen.

He swung the bat.

There was a heavy thud and the bat bounced back. A loud whine echoed through the kitchen. Eric readied the bat for another swing. He heard paws fleeing the scene and gazed towards the yard when he heard them hit the stone path.

The hellhound had fled.

He noticed a few drops of blood on the kitchen floor. "See," he said to his father, pointing.

His father stood, eyes transfixed on the blood, his face pale.

He knelt next to Eric. "I...I...s-see."

"I got him, Dad!"

"Yes," his father whispered. "Yes, you did...slugger."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Calvin Demmer is a crime, mystery, and speculative fiction author. His work has appeared in a variety of publications including Sanitarium Magazine, Morpheus Tales, and Devolution Z. When not writing, he is intrigued by that which goes bump in the night and the sciences of our universe.

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The Madness Within | Lucretia Richmond

"Why are you here? You're not supposed to be here!"

She wasn't really there, she couldn't have been. He killed her. Why was she

Doing this to him? Why couldn't she just leave him alone? He got rid of the others, but she wouldn't go away. He couldn't stand still, he knew if he did he would fall.

He would lose his balance because he didn't have control over his body. She controlled him now. His thoughts were hers now. He didn't want to hear any of it. There was nothing he could do to make it silent. She was laughing at him. "Stop it! I don't want you here. Why won't you just leave?"

"You're stuck with me now Billy. You thought in death you could separate us, but I won't let you live without me," she said.

Nothing had changed even now that she wasn't human. She had demands, she wouldn't give him room to breathe. Only four hours left until midnight and Halloween was over, but he didn't think he could make it that long. He didn't think he would have the strength to stay alive.

"I won't do it, I won't give you what you want. You're not going to take me."

"I'm already in your head, you can't get me out. You took my life. I wasn't ready to die either. I was just as afraid as you were. Do it for me."

Billy shook his head again, refusing to let her have her way. He tried not to look at her, tried not to look at the huge bullet hole on the side of her face where he had shot her, she didn't die the first time. She just kept coming back, like now. He had no more bullets. He knew they wouldn't have worked anyway. He was starting to believe she had been dead for awhile now, the moment he met her; she was just a corpse. Fear tickled on the back of his throat. Was he going to die tonight?

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One Bad Fur Day

K. Trap Jones

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The End... | *Mark Steinwachs*

"They did this to themselves. They brought us back and now is the time for them to feel the consequences."

I look from Beleth to the house next door and give a friendly wave. Pastor Tom, sitting on his front porch, pretends not to see it and turns his head from our direction.

"That's not very Christian of him now, is it?" I say.

Beleth continues, ignoring my comment. "Nothing can be in moderation anymore. Everything is to the extreme," the last bit spoken like a commercial announcer. "So, here we are. And soon it will be time to right the ship."

A group of children and parents round the corner to our house. Beleth stops talking and waits. The kids gasp as the motion sensors kick on and our yard comes alive. Fog rolls out from the machines tucked behind our bushes, the lights on our porch flicker on and off, and Beleth cackles as eerie music emanates from unseen places. A couple of children approach unaffected while others hesitantly come up holding their parents' hands.

"Trick or treat!"

Beleth stands up and opens his arms wide. Halloween is the one night he can be most like himself, his feline features muted but not totally hidden. "Wonderful children, just wonderful! Now, before you get a treat, you all must answer a tricky question from me. Are you ready?"

The children nod and some of the parents take pictures. Beleth gets down on one knee. "Who will be brave and step forward to answer my question?"

His grin is like The Cheshire Cat and I can't help but smile and shake my head, taking one more glance across the yard at Pastor Tom, who is scowling at the scene.

A boy, about ten, dressed as a soldier, steps up to Beleth. "Ah, a brave warrior!" (Jeeze, he's laying it on thick this year.) "Now, to get your treat, answer me this: What is... twenty times ten?"

Beleth's grin never faltered. (You write one book on mathematics and you think you are God's gift.) The boy looks around for a second, the question seemingly catching him off guard. "Uhh, two hundred, sir."

"Very good!" he says, and touches the boy on the shoulder. "You can get your treat from my friend Adra right there."

I hand out the full-size candy bars (yeah, I'm showing off, what about it?) as each child answers their math-related question.

As the last one comes to me, Beleth stands back up. "Gene, is that you? I didn't even recognize Timmy in his costume! We have enough for the parents too, don't be shy." He bares his fangs and his cat eyes are alit. Gene comes up and introduces us to the other parents. Beleth

shakes each one's hand. "Thank you so much for bringing your kids and letting them have some fun on this wonderful night."

I know how his touch marks them and I'm not sure if they will thank him or curse him for it later.

The group heads next door to Pastor Tom's. He waits on his porch and hands each kid a pamphlet. I've read it, and it's not very good, all about the evils of Halloween and how you should have Jesus as your lord and savior and whatnot. Really not my style. Don't get me wrong, I like Jesus. He's a good guy and he's a big part of the reason for what's about to happen.

The kids take their 'treat' from Pastor Tom and move on to the next house on our block. Beleth's cackle pulls me back to the task at hand as he gets up from his chair.

"Wonderful, children, just wonderful!" And the scene from moments ago plays out numerous times throughout the next couple of hours.

"Adra, it's ten fifty, you ready to do this?" Beleth asks from the other room.

"You know, it's been a few minutes since I've been myself. I've got a bit more to contend with than you do. One minute." I run my hands down my six-packed torso. It's been much too long since I was my real self and, damn, I look good. (Yeah, still showing off. Deal with it.) "Besides, he lives next door. Not like we have far to go."

Stepping back, I take in the image staring back at me from the full-length mirror. I twist my neck, stretching the muscles. I smile at the sight, but it isn't as... well, charming as Beleth's. In my true form I have the head and body of a donkey. I walk upright on hooves, but I need hands, so while they match the rest of my fur, they are still human form. I flick my long tail and unfurl the peacock feathering behind me. Each of the green feathers has a blue eye in it that I can use to see my warriors across the world. I snap the feathers closed and let my tail drag behind me as I walk out of the bedroom.

Beleth is waiting in the living room. "Marvelous," he says. "Adramelech, you are a sight." He is in full black cat form, and like me, he still walks upright and chooses to keep his human hands too. "What music shall we dance to? Maybe the Valkyries?" From his body the song begins to play quietly in the room.

I shake my head, rolling my eyes, and walk out the front door. "Now who are we waiting on?"

The street is quiet at this time of night and there is a subtle hint of sulfur in the air. I unfurl my train and before I can open myself to the eyes of my soldiers, I hear Beleth's, "Mmmmm." (Told you I looked good.)

Everyone is in place waiting on our signal.

On the road, the two of us walk next door, *Ride of the Valkyries* playing every step of the way. I look across the street at Gene's house. They are marked and will be safe, through this

round. Beyond that, I'm not sure. All the powers-that-be want, is the world to get back to a balance. And once we start, we won't stop until the bosses are happy with their creation.

We look like two well-costumed humans, as do the rest of us all over the world. If anyone is watching, there's no cause for alarm. At least not until it's too late. The motion sensor detects us and Pastor Tom's porch light pops on as we step up to his door.

This is where it begins, with a horribly misinformed 'servant' of God, in charge of a nothing little church in a suburb of St. Louis.

No one could envision it starting this way.

I close my tail, pull my leg up, and am about to kick in the door in when...

"Wait a second," Beleth harshly whispers. "I have it." *Ride of the Valkyries* turns into one of Beleth's favorite songs, the aggressive drums and guitar swelling around us.

"Really?" I say. "Do you think he is going to know this?"

"No, but who cares about him? I think it's great. Over-the-top rock and roll about sex and violence written by a guy that makes horror films too. It's everything they hate." He nods at the door, teeth bared. "Go for it."

I kick my leg out and the door bursts inward. We rush in, heading up the stairs to Pastor Tom's room. The growling vocals and crunching guitar fill the house, 'devil' music announcing our arrival into the bedroom.

Pastor Tom's eyes are wide as he scrambles out of bed. "Wha... what are you? What's going on?"

Beleth steps out from behind me. "We've come for your daughter, Chuck." And he laughs at his own joke.

Pastor Tom screams and pisses himself, then quickly regains some form of composure. "My daughter? I… I don't have a—"

"Really? It's from a movie. It's when—oh hell. Never mind. No respect for the classics." Beleth glances up at me and is about to say more when he's interrupted by an outburst from Pastor Tom.

"Get out of here! The power of Christ compels you! The power of Christ compels you!"

I let my tail free once more, each eye begins moving as I watch through them. Across the world my men are attacking. They fight side by side with the angels. Our time is now, the Vetting has begun.

"The power of Christ compels you! The power of—"

"Give it a rest, man!" Beleth barks at him. "This isn't *The Exorcist* or something. And to be fair, Christ is sick of your shit. You and your kind."

The man of God before us once again tries to control the situation. "Kill me, foul demon, and I will be in heaven with my creator."

"Care to explain things to him, Adra?"

His eyes widen even more at the mention of my name, as it all sinks in, the whole demons living right next door and whatnot.

"You see, Pastor Tom, the world is about to change. We are going to kill you, but you aren't going to heaven to be with God. Oh no. People like you are why God sent us back. You have perverted his word. Twisting everything to make it an evil or a sin. That isn't life. That isn't the way."

"No! No, this is a test. This is my test. You are false prophets. Demons meant to tempt me. You..."

I step forward and slap him across his face, shutting him up.

"And it's not just *your* religion, so you aren't even special there. It's all of them. All the extremists in the world. Things have gotten a little too out of control here for God's liking. He let you pathetic creatures think for yourselves and you fucked it up. Frankly, I'm surprised he waited this long, but I digress. So, he has sent down the angels from heaven and called the warriors from the underworld to fight together and regain control."

Pastor Tom stares at me in silence.

Beleth rejoins the conversation. "Look, man, it's irony." He turns to me. "Irony, right?"

I shrug my shoulders, and he continues. "Irony. God, the good guy, is going to have demons, the bad guys, work with his boys, the angels, to reset this mess of a planet. Those that survive will be a part of his new plan. And all you overzealous, everything bashing, every other religion hating, everything is evil are not part of it."

Beleth lunges forward, cat-like claws slash at Pastor Tom's neck and blood explodes from it. I see him scream, but hear no sound as music blares forth from my partner, shattering the windows throughout the house.

Beleth quiets the music and Pastor Tom gurgles in the corner struggling to survive. "Where to next?" my partner says.

"Are you kidding me?" I say as I receive our next order. "Topeka, Kansas."

"I have just the song." Beleth blinks out of existence and I swear off in the distance I hear, "It's raining men, hallelujah."

"I've been wanting a shot at those guys. This is going to be fun." I say to Pastor Tom, and disappear from the room.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mark Steinwachs is a roadie who retired to shop life and is now GM at Bandit Lites in Nashville, TN. Over a decade traveling in tour buses plus time as a United States Marine, and a rave DJ/promoter has given him a unique outlook in his storytelling. He writes in the wee hours of the morning trying not to wake his wife and two kids.

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The Pumpkin Gallery | Nick Manzolillo

The spirits usually come with the wind, blowing across the husks of recently harvested fields and mingling with the falling leaves as they glide to the ground. This autumn, however, the winds are stilled and the spirits are scattered, alone. Instead of a heaving festival in celebration of life not lost but had, the ghosts of October have become stragglers. The candles of carved up pumpkins flicker and there is silence among their admirers.

While Lauren is an old thing, rival to only a few crumbling buildings in the town, her flesh glows new. She is shorter than she could ever remember being, except for last October. She is a child, mask-less, in her favorite dress that was eaten in its nostalgic memory box by the same fire that licked her bones clean. All is irrelevant to her. She knows she is merely a forgotten idea, one that is allowed to remember herself every October. She crouches over a pumpkin and despite the dampened street and mist still clinging from the downpour the day prior, she feels warmth from the dancing candle within. It is the only thing she can ever feel.

"Pumpkins are supposed to be faces, not portraits," a seemingly older boy's voice mutters from behind Lauren. She doesn't turn right away, she no longer abides by urgency or social expectations. She will not tell him her name, nor will he tell her his. Names only really matter to devils and the living. Lauren holds on to hers because she likes the memory of how her tongue, her old, warm tongue would flop around every time she introduced herself.

The image on the pumpkin that Lauren hovers near is of a creepy tree with a cryptic cat perched on a branch. It must have been carved with the tiniest of knives. This pumpkin is a work of art, unlike the others along the block with their carved out triangle eyes and crooked grins.

"Craftsmanship trumps a mocking salute," Lauren says, at last turning out of curiosity to see the boy, who appears to be dressed as he was for his own funeral. His tie is slung over his shoulder and he could be as old as the invention of the button. She has never seen one of them come back as anything but a child, from three foot tall kindergarteners to moody eleven year olds. Rarely, do spirits deviate. If you could come back as any form of yourself, how could you choose anything beyond childhood?

"Well it strikes me insulting that they don't take this seriously. The decorations are something, at least." The boy jerks a thumb towards a plastic skeleton in a tree, and then another, half buried between a pair of rose bushes. "But they make it too pretty and they're just complimenting themselves, not us."

"They're paying their respects all the same. We're like a travelling graveyard." Lauren smiles at her own wit and wonders if this rather simple minded man or boy will be her only companion for today. This town seems like it's the sort to have a festival and perhaps they could join the crowd as a pair of unpatriotic kids who didn't dress up.

On the contrary to respect, when Lauren and other spirits venture into public, people mock them, because they're not in costume. Lauren is often called a dumb kid with 'no enthusiasm,' until whoever's running their mouth gets a good look at how pale her skin is. Then

they ask if she's feeling well. Lauren doesn't mind, though, she likes watching the others celebrate, like Tom Sawyer listening in on his own funeral. Across time, the traditions remain cute and the candles behind triangle teeth remain warm.

"This Halloween is going to suck." It is a boy after all, maybe that's why he looks like he's thirteen or maybe even a little older. He doesn't sound like a newcomer, maybe he's only been dead a few years. When the winds blow and more of their kind gather, the browsing of Halloween tradition only goes on for as long as the true children are out in their costumes. Then all of the spirits go to the woods and hollows and empty manors. Among the legions of the dead there is dancing and laughter and the idea, just the idea, that they are alive, once more.

"You're going to dismiss it just like that?"

The boy snickers. "No, but, last year was so much fun."

"This goes on forever, you know." Lauren crouches before another pumpkin. The eyes are spirals on this one. Whoever carved it had to use such a fine, delicate blade.

"Well, would you like to walk together, see who we find?" Yes, the boy is young, still full of pointless objectives and intentions. When is the last time Lauren was in the company of a newcomer? Decades...which are nothing when they're narrowed down to a simple number, ten, as in ten Halloweens, just once a long, dark year...

"Sure but, I would like to stop, and see each pumpkin we come across." There is sadness in things that do not come back. Each of these laboriously molded pumpkins will become sunken with rot and they will fade, completely, robbed of all the Octobers and Halloweens left to come. The boy agrees, with a great and drawn out sigh, and Lauren isn't even going to try and educate him. Death is a do it yourself kind of thing.

In this neighborhood, the spirits appear to be early. For in this unofficial time zone, it is a few minutes before midnight. This means it is the Devil's Night and unlike the spirits of the dead, the devils plague and inhabit the living.

In the shadows between neighborhoods, they encounter the rule breakers. As Lauren and the boy approach a collection of figures in the distance, something arcs through the air and explodes before their feet in a splatter of orange skin, yellowed guts and the shattered teeth of a maniacal grin. "I think there's somebody over there!" one of the figures on the opposite side of the shadows says to his friends. Without a need for light and possessing no fear, of anything, Lauren and the boy have crossed the thin and isolated road to the next neighborhood as little more than ghouls.

"Hey!" the pumpkin smasher says again and how must Lauren and the boy look to them, silently walking side by side through the perfect chunks of black. The moon is but a wisp of a crescent and believers or not, the vandals know this is the time of year where all odd things roam free from dreams, and nightmares.

The gang of four have backed up a ways but show no signs of retreating when Lauren and the boy appear in the glow of the streetlight. Between the spirits and the vandals, there is a heap of crushed pumpkins beside a dull red wagon. The vandals have been out doing a form of

harvesting of their own. Youth against the dead, hope and invincibility versus the long twilight of the afterlife.

"What are you doing?" The boy speaks up but all Lauren hears is the same ignorance that's no better than the hooded teenagers before them, who surely snuck out of their rooms to destroy the hard work of others. To extinguish the warm glow that aligns the roads.

"Nothing," one of the vandals snickers, their fear lost. Another vandal, fat and smoking something Lauren can't smell, moves across the pumpkin carnage to retrieve the wagon as he pulls it by a squeaking handle. Its wheels bump over the guts of the fallen.

"Aren't you kids a little young to be walking around at midnight?" One of the vandals asks and Lauren remembers what it's like to be angry, but there is so little time to walk among the decorations, to admire the pumpkins. She moves to the opposite side of the street, intent on walking on. No group of four punk kids can destroy every pumpkin in town, now can they?

The boy lingers behind for a moment, wide eyed as he takes in the destroyed pumpkins; scattered chunks of orange amidst snuffed candlesticks that stick out like abandoned lighthouses. When the boy reappears by Lauren's side, he mentions that people like the vandals 'are part of the ritual, too'.

"They could be left out just fine, I think," Lauren replies. Having made their wide circle around the vandals, the pumpkin smashers are heading in the direction Lauren and the boy just came from. She thinks of that meticulous carver with the unwavering little knife that made the pumpkins with spiral eyes and cat's adorning skeletal tree branches. Lauren remembers sadness, more than anything else.

The next few houses they wander across are indeed empty of pumpkins but one of them has an elaborate display of orange and black blinking lights. The next pumpkin Lauren finds is tucked away on a porch, directly by the glass window along a front door. The pumpkin is so carved up it's essentially a top and bottom with a little connective tissue in between but, the in between is taken from Lauren's memories. It's an elaborate carousel with horses on poles and the lid of the pumpkin is propped up by toothpicks. "I've never seen anything like this." She says as she peers at it, sitting on her knee's as the boy crouches beside her and together they raise their hands to feel the pumpkin's glow. Something moves from beyond the glass of the door.

There is a click from a lock and a man peering out at them from the safety of his doorway. "I think you guys have the wrong night," he grumbles and then probably notices how young they look. "Where are you guys from? Are you lost?"

"No." The boy looks up to him and the familiar association with spirits kicks in as the man's eyes go wide for a moment. He takes in both the boy's and Lauren's pale faces and sinking eyes that don't reflect the shine of the porch light. The man's arm hair stands up and, it is that time of year, as he slowly backs away through his door. Soon he will dismiss the idea there was anything strange at all about two kids ogling the pumpkin on his porch in the middle of the night.

Both spirits are unaware how long they stare at the carousel, until the boy says that it'll be hard for any other pumpkin to top this one. Lauren tells him "You'd be surprised."

The boy goes beyond feeling the candle's warmth as he drags a finger along one of the carousel's horses. "I feel it. Slimy, like I remember."

"I wish we could smell them, fall does smell the best but, I still remember it. It's as good as any."

"Hey, look." The boy picks the pumpkin up. "It doesn't weigh anything." He holds it above his head, like a crown and then he drops it. The pumpkin cracks across the top of his skull and the carousel erupts into tendrils of goo and patches of skin as the candle is extinguished and the boy's face is colored by pumpkin guts as he rubs them into his skin. "I can feel it," he giggles and neither he nor Lauren need to breath and so that giggle seems to go on and on until Lauren speaks up.

"Why would you do that?" She's done with him...this goes beyond rule breaking. This is downright blasphemous, satanic.

"I can feel it! This is magic, I can feel it!" The boy goes on once more, his face has become a true, ghoulish mask of dripping orange that oozes between his lips and hangs from his chin.

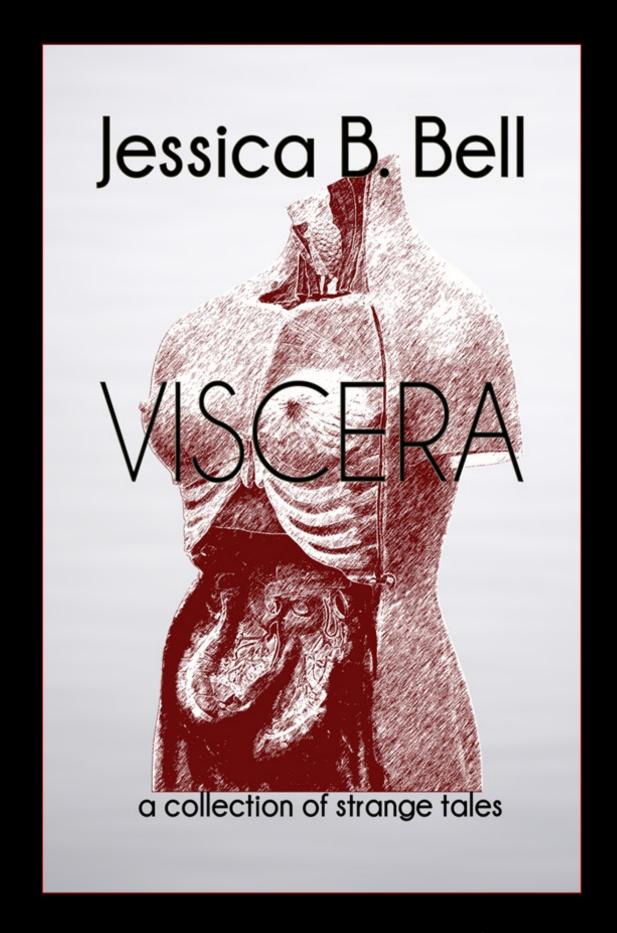
"It's a gift they make for us and you ruin it." Lauren marches away from the boy, leaving him in the porch light that begins to dim as his cackling continues. She hears a whoop of laughter from down the street where the vandals went. Worse than witches and more incomprehensible than vampires and other monstrosities, there are people, diluting their love.

A sudden wind gushes the leaves across the street as if it's channeled by just a single, blowing funnel as Lauren, alone, steps into the swirl and she is pulled up into the night, soaring above the soured neighborhood below. The boy is chasing the vandals, now, throwing pumpkins at them and shrieking with laughter. The wind seeks him out, too, but the goo clinging to his essence weighs him down as he continues to coat his skin in pumpkin blood while launching orange orbs at the vandals.

Lauren is pulled mercifully away as an updraft brings her past a fluttering bat that nosedives into the trees below in search of straggling summertime insects. She gets a good look at the town now, centered by an old church with a tall spiral. The pumpkins below are burning orbs akin to the stars above, except here, below, she can feel them and faintly trace their carvings. With a deep and endless breath, she could blow them all out with one swipe of the wind. But she doesn't.

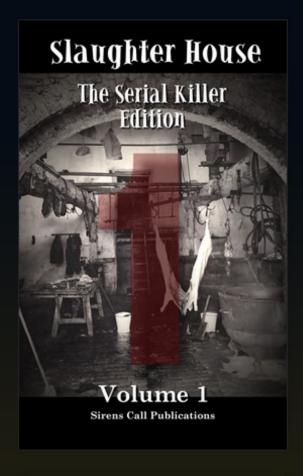
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Nick Manzolillo is a twenty-three year old Rhode Island native who finds himself living in Manhattan. His writing has appeared in Thuglit and The New England Horror Writer's publication: Wicked Witches. He is currently earning an MFA in Creative and Professional Writing from Western Connecticut State University.

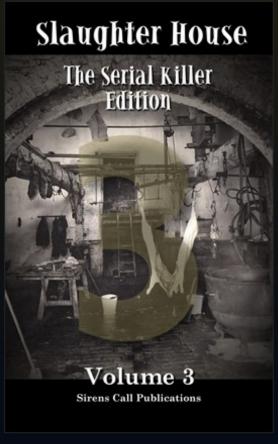
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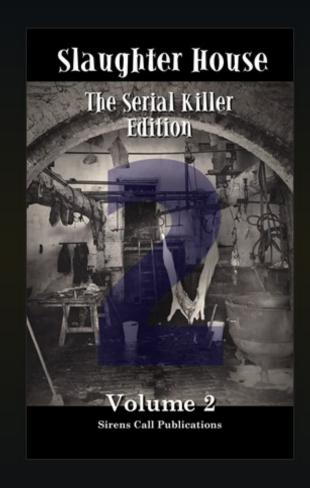
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Superstition | *Patrick Winters*

"It's only superstition to the foolish."

While my Grandma Bonnie had a compendium of sayings ranging from the wise to the downright strange, this one wound up sticking with me more than any other down through the years. It's what's kept me tossing salt over my left shoulder every time I stupidly spill it at restaurants. It's what's made me very wary of wandering black cats—aside from my allergies, of course. And, yes, I never hazard walking under ladders or dare to smash any mirrors I look into, all because of this phrase that repeats itself in my mind almost daily, and always in the voice of my dear old, Scottish grandmother

"It's only superstition to the foolish"—she said it proudly and often back in my youth, in that single year when she lived with me and my parents, right before she passed in her increasing age. After she'd had her accident—falling down the stairs of her home one day, and landing with a broken hip—my father knew she couldn't live on her own any longer. So we gladly took her in. But she didn't come without her challenges.

My grandmother was... adamant... in her beliefs and her ways. The only thing was, to others, those beliefs and ways were a little 'out there.' In short, she was superstitious, taking stock in practically every obscure and odd wife's tale and practice that had some supernatural bent to it, and which seemed best left to a century or two past. Of course, if you ever called her habits superstition to her face, she'd whip out that classic phrase on you. Her way of saying: "I'm right, you're wrong—and you better start getting it right."

I loved my grandmother, but I never understood her eccentric ways any more than other people did. And like other people, I often came under her superstitious scrutiny. One time, I remember leaving for school in the midst of an early morning drizzle. I got out an umbrella and opened it up—inside the house. Before I could make it out the door, my Grandma Bonnie came out of the kitchen hollering her Scotch admonishments. "Ye cannae open an umbrella indoors, boy! It's bad luck!" she had carried on. I had rolled my eyes at her worries and promised to keep the rule in mind. Another time her brand of curious beliefs came to bear was on my eleventh birthday; her gift to me, of all things, had been a weird old rabbit's foot. Grandma Bonnie had insisted I always carry it with me, no matter where I go. More often than not, I just left it on my dresser.

As odd as all these rules, tokens, and ideas were, none were ever odder to me than the one she came up with that Halloween, when I finally got to go out trick 'r treating all by my lonesome.

It was the first time my parents had ever agreed to let me go out on my own during Halloween, and the only reason they had allowed it was because I'd begged and begged for the opportunity all October long. I wanted an adventure; to enjoy the night on my own, among the other pint-sized witches, ghouls, and assorted candy-seekers that would be darting through the streets. I was going to be too old for trick 'r treating soon enough and I wanted one All Hallows' Eve to myself before it was said and done. I managed to sell my parents on the idea, so long as I kept close to the neighborhood and was back before 10:00, at the absolute latest.

So, dressed as a classic ninja, and with a deep, soon-to-be-filled bucket, I got ready to leave the house and start my expedition for sweet sugar. As I started out the door, Grandma Bonnie stopped me, waving her arms about as she pled for me to wait. Her wrinkled face seemed to have extra wrinkles that night; it was scrunched up in genuine worry, and as she spoke, it was in a far more serious tone than I'd ever heard her muster up before. In her hand, she held a piece of baguette. She held it out for me to take.

"If ye must go out tonight," she said, her eyes wide and stern, "ye should have this. Keep it in yer pocket. It's an offering—in case ye see a ghost!"

I remember looking to the bread in my hand, to my grandmother, and back to the bread. "Uhm... thanks, Grandma," I'd said. What would a ghost want with bread? I thought. Dead people don't eat. This is just stupid...

But I wasn't about to say any of that to my grandmother, so I awkwardly stuffed the scrap of bread into the pocket of my costume and went out into the night.

The streets were filled with costumed kids going house to house, ringing doorbells and squealing with delight at the sights and sounds of Halloween. I was beside myself with glee, feeling some young, smug pride when I passed kids who had their parents in tow while I walked freely about. It was exhilarating, and soon I'd covered the block and more, my bucket filling up with what I swore was the biggest haul I'd ever pulled in on a Halloween. I didn't have a care in the world, save one little thing: my haughty confusion over my grandmother's beliefs.

Bread for ghosts? And they called me the child? I came close to pitching the bread several times on my walk, feeling it against my leg and feeling silly for having it. But I kept it, all the same, wanting to show it to my grandmother when I returned home. See, I'd say, no hungry Caspers out tonight, Grams.

All was well and fun, until I decided to stretch the boundaries of our 'neighborhood.'

With room in my bucket and time left to spare, I decided to cross old Jones Street and cover a little more of the town. Now, for those who don't know, Jones Street is the oldest avenue in town—a brick-paved stretch of road smack in the middle of town, a little chunk of the past preserved for historical reasons and a bit of a claim to fame for the community. There aren't any houses along the road, no streetlights, either—just a stretch of wild-growing trees to either side of the way. Stepping onto it is like stepping back into the 1800s, where you can take a block-long trip through the past, until you come back out into the present over on Gooding Avenue.

When I reached the edge of the brick avenue, I stopped and stared down the dark stretch. Streetlights at my back and those down on Gooding provided some dim light, reaching a short ways onto the road before the darkness of night claimed the rest, shrouding it with black. Nobody else was on the street, and as a fall wind set the trees about me to stirring, I was tempted to dash right back home. My sense of adventure was crippled some at the creepy sight of the street; still, I was determined to get more candy and get the most of my night.

The bulge of bread in my pocket became more noticeable in that moment, and I found myself slipping it out and looking it over, thinking: *This looks like a place where ghosts would be...*

Then, in a quick flash of anger, I threw the bread onto the road, feeling foolish for my worries. Ghosts weren't real and my grandmother was a kook. That was that.

I started walking down the road, my strides quick and sure.

I slowed my pace about halfway down the road—the moment I saw someone step out of the trees before me.

A woman in some sort of old white gown crept onto the road, her pallid arms hanging loosely at her sides, her long dark locks covering her face. I heard airy, feminine whispers picking up on the breeze, coming from her way. She slowly advanced in my direction. From the way she was walking, like a barely erect rag-doll, I thought she was a reveler coming from some nearby party, who'd maybe had too much 'grown up juice' that night.

But then I noticed—I swear I noticed—that she wasn't walking; she was floating, the tips of her toes scratching along the bricks, neither foot rising or falling in step. The realization made me halt.

As she drew closer, the night grew colder. I was immediately shivering, and I felt fear gripping my gut. The whispering grew louder along with my heartbeat.

I turned and ran, unable to stand there any longer. I wanted to get away from this woman, who or whatever she was. My legs carried me off quickly—until I tripped on a bit of loose brick and fell.

I landed with a huff, my hands and knees scraping against the road and my candy spilling wildly out of my bucket. I gave a horrified moan as I started to get back up, crawling along and refusing to look back for fear of seeing the woman approaching. My hand smashed something soft—and I realized it was the piece of bread my grandmother gave me. Without hardly thinking, I grabbed it and whirled around, keeping my teary eyes to the ground as I desperately held out the bread, not knowing what else to do.

Take it, not me, I remember thinking.

The whispers grew steadily louder as I waited. I shut my eyes tight in fright when I sensed that the woman was lurking over me.

I don't know how much time passed as I knelt there, praying and scared. The cryptic, wordless whispers kept up until they faded with the wind. Eventually, I uncurled my fingers—and the bread wasn't there. I worked up some nerve and gradually looked up... to see that I was alone.

The woman had disappeared, along with the bread.

I wasted no time in questioning the matter. I grabbed my bucket and fled Jones Street, heading straight for home without pause. I didn't stop to catch my breath until I'd reached my front porch, heaving heavily under the safety of the porch light.

When I finally went inside, I stumbled along to my grandmother's bedroom, giving tired grunts of greeting to my parents as I passed them. When I reached my grandmother's room, I looked in and saw her sitting on her bed, reading a book. She looked up, staring at me silently, gravely. She must have had an idea of why I was so pale, quiet, and trembling, because she finally said to me: "Halloween is for much more than children."

Thirty years have passed since then, and it's Halloween once again. I cannot help but think back to my grandmother. If it really is only superstition to the foolish, then I suppose I'm now as wise as her. I think back to all the things she warned me of, and I take my measures to follow her ways. I think back to the strange woman I saw on Jones Street, who I fully believe was some forlorn spirit wandering through the arcane night. And, above all else, I think on whether or not I'll ever see her or her like again. Perhaps even tonight.

Luckily for me, I'm writing this in the local Panera Bread. So, when I leave, I'll pitch the crumby piece of Sunbeam stuffed in my pocket and replace it with a fresh bit of bread from my sandwich.

If I should happen across any spirit on my drive home, I hope that it'll like Asiago.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Patrick Winters is a resident of Jacksonville, Illinois, and a recent graduate of Illinois College, with a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing. He's had several works published in various magazines, have self-published a collection of short stories, *Gravedigger: Six Feet Deep*, and will soon be releasing his first book, I *Was a Teenage Gila Monster*, with Frith Books.

Website: http://wintersauthor.azurewebsites.net/Pages/Welcome

Concealed | *Madeline Mora-Summonte*

Hell arrives on Halloween.

Larissa stumbles, falls. Dirt mixes with the blood streaking her skin. Behind her, the creatures gather.

Hushed voices slip from the tree house. It's smart. The creatures can't fly, and only the few, prized females can climb. Larissa hurries. Her family is new, the neighbors known only by sight. Still, she hopes.

"Help! The creatures are hungry."

A rope ladder unfurls. Larissa scurries up.

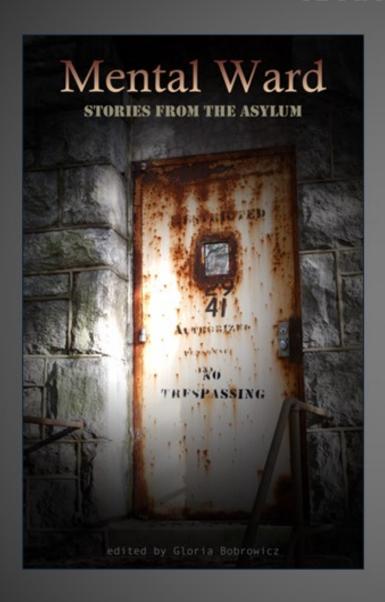
Inside, she hunches, growls. Her spine twists, legs shoving through its knobs of bone. She skitters, fangs ripping into flesh. She pushes the writhing, bloody bodies below. Her family will feast tonight.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Madeline Mora-Summonte is a writer, a reader, a beach-comber, and a tortoise-owner. She is the author of the flash fiction collections *The People We Used to Be* and *Garden of Lost Souls*.

Blog: http://madelinemora-summonte.blogspot.com

Sanatorium, mental ward, psychiatric hospital - they're all the same.

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All Hallows Eve | R. J. Meldrum

It was the end of October. The summer season was over in the sleepy seaside village of Foreness. Chris checked his watch. Four fifteen. He had driven from the final, insane argument with his now ex-girlfriend, stopping only to pack a small suitcase before he left their home for the last time. He walked down the promenade towards the pier, but it was closed. Standing on the edge of the promenade, his hands resting on the green painted metal fence, he looked out to the grey ocean. He was totally alone and that suited his mood. The whole town seemed deserted, with 'Closed' signs up in most of the shops, arcades and hotels on the front. He hadn't seen a single person since he had arrived. Lost in his own brown study, he remembered he had been brought here by his parents three times in his early teens. He had loved those holidays in the dim and distant past. Holidays that seemed to last forever, full of adventure and joy. And now he was back. He needed somewhere to escape and he had instinctively chosen Foreness, this place of childhood happiness, memories of a time when there was no pain, no sadness.

He walked down the nearest steps down onto the beach, finding a discarded deck chair to sit on. Sitting near the concrete wall, he looked out to the sea as darkness fell.

Waking with start, he rubbed his eyes, not quite believing he had managed to fall asleep. He guessed the stress of the break-up and the dash in the car had wiped him out. He checked his watch. It was seven thirty. He supposed he better find somewhere to sleep for the night. Climbing the steps from the beach to the top of the seawall, he was amazed to find the promenade was now crowded with people. There were about fifty, all staring out to sea. It was an incongruous sight. There was no buzz of conversation, no one was talking.

He walked up to the nearest person, a man of around fifty years old.

"Hi. How are you doing?"

The man didn't immediately respond, his attention focused out to sea. It took a few moments for the words to register.

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"Um, yes. Hello. As well as can be expected, I suppose."
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"I'm Chris."

"Philip."

"Nice to meet you Philip."

Philip was staring back out to sea. Chris did the same, trying to work out what these people were looking for. He couldn't see much, just the beach and the edge of the sea. After that the darkness was complete. Away in the distance he could see a tiny speck of light from a fishing boat or ferry.

"Can I ask what you are looking for?"

Philip looked at him in amazement.

"What?"

Chris was suddenly aware he had said the wrong thing. Philip shook his head.

"I thought you were one of us."

"No."

"It's normally only this group who come here on this night. The locals leave for the night, to give us space."

"I'm not local, I just arrived this afternoon."

"That would explain it."

Philip lapsed into silence, continuing to stare out into the darkness. A few moments passed, then Chris knew he had to ask.

"Why are you all here then?"

Phillip spoke without taking his eyes off the shoreline.

"Have you ever heard of the H.M.S. Forstall?"

"No, sorry."

"No surprise. It was sunk by a U-boat in 1942. All hands went down with her, a total of two hundred and thirty-four souls. October the 31st, 1942."

"Oh, okay."

"Seventy-four years ago tonight. And it happened just out there, just off-shore. It's a war grave now."

"And you're here to mark the occasion."

Chris glanced at the other people. Some were old, some were young. Most were middle aged. Chris realized they were the families of the lost sailors.

"I am the grandson of one William Henry Partridge. Able Seaman, aged twenty-five years old on the night the Forstall sank. My mother's father. She is getting too old to make this pilgrimage, so now I do it. My boy will take over in a few years."

Suddenly there was a shout from further down the line of people.

"They're here!"

The people starting moving, down the steps to the beach. Philip turned to Chris.

"You may not want to see this."

"Why? What's happening?"

Philip smiled. A dark smile without happiness or humor. He gestured at the other people.

"We come here, on this night, not just to remember, but to meet them. The crew returns to shore, once a year. Every year, on the 31st of October. I think it's because they died on All Hallows that they are able to return the world of living. After all, this is the night when the veil between worlds is the thinnest, when the dead can return. All we, the living must, be here to greet our families and pay homage to their sacrifice."

"That's not funny. What a horrible thing to say."

Philip smiled the same smile.

"Why do you think the town is deserted? On this night, the dead return and we must be here to greet them. Come with me, if you think I'm lying."

Philip walked down the steps. Chris stared at him for a moment, then followed.

Later on, in the daylight and well away from Foreness, Chris tried to piece together that night. Those few hours when he saw the dead emerge from the sea to be greeted by their extended families. But it wasn't a complete picture. His mind had blanked out a lot of what he had seen, almost as if he had been drunk or drugged. He retained some memory, but only brief flashes. Memories of darkness, of white faces, of naval uniforms and of figures stumbling through the waves back onto the land. Memories of the dead returning from the sea. He didn't remember making his way back to his car, after, but he guessed Philip had helped him. He vaguely remembered driving out of Foreness, tears streaming down his face. He remembered begging his girlfriend to take him back and she agreeing, just as tearful as he was.

As he grew older, he always remembered the night at Foreness on the 31st of October. Those broken fragments of memory never lost their clarity. He always wondered if those families still met on the promenade to greet their long lost relatives. He guessed they must, but one thought often kept him awake at night; what would happen on the night when the families no longer gathered to greet the crew of the Forstall? When the new generations of the families simply forgot or no longer cared or believed. What would the sailors do, where would they go, when that day inevitably came?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: R. J. Meldrum is an author and academic. Born in Scotland, he moved to Canada in 2010 where he now lives in splendid isolation in rural Ontario with his wife, Sally. His interest in the supernatural and ghostly is a lifetime obsession and when he isn't writing or teaching, he is busy working to increase his collection of rare and vintage supernatural books.

Facebook: Richard Meldrum



The Undying Love Greg McCabe

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

Danse Macabre | B. David Spicer

NOW

Lily turned as Phillip reentered the room. He smiled at her, weakly, but she didn't smile back. "They're on their way." He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "For what it's worth Lily, I'm sorry. Really, I am." She turned away from him but didn't speak. He shoved his hands into his pockets and stared at her back. "I guess it's too late. I mean, I *know* it's too late. I don't understand how things went so horribly wrong between us, so quickly. I realize now how much you wanted to work things out, even after all the horrible things I said, after everything I put you through. You were willing to work it out, but I didn't see it. I guess I didn't want to see it.

"I hate that I've hurt you so badly that you can't even to talk to me. Not that I don't deserve this silence, I know I do. I earned every second of it. I don't expect you to say anything to me, but I really wish you could." He licked his lips nervously, but she didn't even look at him, she didn't even try.

"I'd do anything for just one more of your smiles! Anything!" He watched her, but she didn't smile for him. After a moment he released her hand and watched her turn away.

He sighed. "You always had such a beautiful smile."

THEN

Phillip elbowed his way through the crowd until he stood close enough to her to be heard. "I thought you were wonderful. You dance beautifully."

She laughed. "Oh do I? You could see me all the way in the back, behind the scenery?" She watched his grin, a crooked half-manic thing, stretch across his face.

"Of course I could. You were the best dancer on the stage!" He stuck out his hand. "I'm Phillip."

She put her hand into his. "Just Phillip?"

He chuckled. "Yeah, just Phillip."

"Nice to meet you just Phillip, I'm just Lily." She smiled at him.

"My God, you have such a beautiful smile!"

She squeezed her lips together. "Really? You think so, just Phillip?"

His crooked grin made another appearance. "Yeah, it's really amazing. Smile like that while you're dancing and you won't need a spotlight."

She laughed. "I think you're hitting on me, just Phillip."

"I absolutely am."

"What should I do?" Her eyes widened in mock fright.

"You should let me take you to dinner later. But right now, I think you should give me one of those amazing smiles."

She did.

NOW

"I know I wasn't a good husband to you, but did things really have to end this way?" He sat on the floor beside a plastic jack o'lantern and hung his head. "I never thought it would end, not like this anyway." He looked up at her, into her brown eyes, but saw no tears. "I want you to know that I never intended to hurt you. I realize how stupid that sounds. Looking back it's hard to believe that everything I did wasn't designed to hurt you." He ran his fingers through his hair. "My God! I was so self-absorbed, how could I have let that happen? How could I not see what it did to you? I've been blind, totally blind. I'm so sorry for that, Lily."

She didn't say anything.

Phillip shook his head and sighed. "You loved me once, and even if you can't remember that now, I do. You loved me, and I loved you. We were so perfect together! It was gonna be forever. It was supposed to be forever."

THEN

Lily squeezed Phillip's hand as she peered around the curtain at the crowd. "The place is packed!"

"They've all come to see you dance. You'll be the best Princess Aurora any of them have ever seen." He kissed the tip of her nose. "You're gonna knock their socks off!"

She bit her lower lip. "I wish I had your confidence! Opening night, and my first time in a role as big as Aurora. Anything could go wrong! My whole ballet career is riding on the reviews of tonight's show!"

He took her in his arms and squeezed her tightly. "Sweetness, you'll do fine, just like you always do!"

"I hope so! I'm a nervous wreck!"

"I know Lily, I know. I have something that'll make you forget all about those horrible critics in the crowd." He burrowed into his blazer pocket and drew out a little velvet box, opened it up and dropped down to one knee.

She covered her mouth with both hands.

He grinned up at her. "Told ya!"

NOW

Phillip wiped his sweaty palms on his pants and stood up. "I know you wanted a family as much as I did, I mean, you might have wanted it *more* than I did. I've finally realized that

you'd have given up your career if you had to, and believe me, I understand the magnitude of that kind of sacrifice, and I appreciate that you'd have done that for me. I didn't figure that out for a long time though."

He turned away from her cold shoulder. "I told myself that it was for the best, that you'd never really be happy as a mother or housewife. You were meant to dance, and you'd only ever really be happy when you were on the stage, soaking up the adulation of the crowd. You needed that, you *lived* for that. I even told myself, after...after...you know, I told myself that you'd done it on purpose. I lied to myself to justify my own hurt, my own anger. I came to resent you, Lily. I'm ashamed to admit that now, but it's true. I resented you for being good at something, for being able to shine at something, for being loved for something. Mostly I resented you for wanting something different from what I wanted." He spun around and found that she still had her back turned to him. "Dammit, Lily! It gutted me, but I couldn't see that it gutted you too." He stepped close to her and touched her back. "Despite what I thought before, I don't blame you now."

THEN

A nurse spotted Phillip surging up the hallway and intercepted him, chattering something that he didn't hear. Finally she grasped his arm and forced him to stop. He threw her a scowl and tore his bicep out of her fingers. Her eyes bulged as he stormed down the hallway. He found Lily's room, and lurched inside.

She reached for him, gasping through her wracking sobs. "Phillip, oh Phillip! I'm so sorry!" He held her shuddering body close to his own. "I'm sorry, oh God I'm sorry!"

Phillip stroked her hair and made soothing sounds. "It wasn't your fault baby. You didn't do anything wrong. It wasn't your fault."

She clutched manically at his back. "I lost... I lost... I..."

He squeezed his eyes closed, gritted his teeth. "I know, sweetheart. I know."

"I'm so sorry Phil! I know how much you..." Her voice trailed off in an anguished wail.

"Lily, hush now, baby. It wasn't your fault. These things just happen. Sometimes these things just happen. Hush now."

"We'll try again!" She clutched at him manically, holding him close to her. "I'm so sorry, so sorry!"

He pressed his cheek to hers and stroked her hair with his fingers. "Lily, calm down. It wasn't your fault, so hush."

She bit her lip as their eyes met. "I was at the studio. I'm sorry I went there, Phil! I never meant... I never thought..."

He closed his eyes and placed his head on the mattress beside her. His shoulders shuddered as he gasped for breath.

Lily covered her face with her hands and together they wept.

NOW

He took her hand and she turned to face him. He smiled at her. "I loved to watch you dance, I knew when I saw you that first time that you were gonna make it big time, and I was right." He took her other hand in his. "Will you dance with me Lily? Just one last dance before we part ways forever?"

He pulled her close and together they began to sway. Tears wet both their faces, but the tears were all his. Lily didn't cry for him.

"Ah, darling. I wish we had some music. Of course, I'm not the dancer you are, how could I be? But I always loved to dance with you."

He spun her across the floor, her toes barely seeming to touch the floor as she moved. "How many performances did you star in over the years? A dozen? Two dozen? A sellout crowd every time. Tchaikovsky and champagne every night! Well, tonight it's just you and me, no Tchaikovsky and no champagne. Then again, I always liked champagne more than you did."

THEN

Phillip sat at the bar staring up at the television mounted above it. He closed one eye, opened it, then closed the other one. He shrugged and tossed back the last of his bourbon. He waved over the bartender. "Another double, Teddy."

Teddy took away his glass and frowned. "Hitting it kinda hard tonight aren't ya, Phil?"

Phillip waved that away. "You pour, I drink. That's the arrangement. So make with the pouring."

"Right." Teddy sighed and set Phillip up with another bourbon. "Wife trouble? Is that it?"

Phillip knocked back the bourbon in one huge gulp. He gestured for another. "Is it that obvious? I tell ya, Teddy, women are more trouble than they're worth!"

"Why is that? Your wife's been in here a time or two. She seems like a great gal."

Phillip poured himself another shot from the bottle on the bar. "Oh yeah, she's great. The best." He quaffed the bourbon and made a face. "I'm an old fashioned guy, y'know? A guy who wants old fashioned things. A big house, nice car, beautiful wife, and a brood of snot-nosed brats. The usual stuff." His words slurred as he spoke. "Know what I got? None of that!"

Teddy shook his head. "Wait a second there Phil, your wife's gorgeous."

"Is she? You want her?"

"That's not what I meant."

"She dances. She's a dancer, you know? So, we have to live in the city. No ballets in the country, it's a rule or something." He laughed and pounded on the countertop. "So no big house for me. No car, it'd just get stolen in this dump." His breathing hitched. "And she can't have... she can't have any..." He didn't finish that thought, collapsing into a gasping heap on the bar-top.

Teddy grimaced. "Damn man, I'm sorry." He poured him another double bourbon. "Here Phil, this one's on me."

NOW

Phillip pulled her close and placed his cheek against hers. He ran his fingers through her silky brown hair. She didn't protest, but neither did she display any enthusiasm. He tucked a lock of brown hair behind her ear. "I've never loved anyone but you. I know you don't believe me, but it's true." He put his lips close to her ear. "Even now, when I've lost you, when there is no chance of salvaging our marriage, I can honestly say that I love you." He pulled his head back to look at her, but she didn't meet his eye.

"Those other women, they never mattered to me. They were just a way to distract myself, y'know? Like a diversion, to help me forget you." He squeezed her hands in his as they swayed together. "I got everything so twisted up in my brain, that I felt like I had to forget you, that I had to leave you far behind me and move on. Something always kept me from just walking away. I didn't know it at the time, but I was still madly in love with you.

"I'm not making excuses, Lily. There can be no excuse for why I did what I did, other than I forgot how much I loved you. It seems strange now to think back, even I can't understand why I strayed. I can, however, understand how you felt, how I made you feel. I can't claim to know the depth of your pain, but I can understand why you hurt. I did that to you, and I'll be sorry for the rest of my life."

He lifted her chin and kissed her then. She didn't stop him, she didn't even try.

THEN

Neither of them had spoken for several minutes. Phillip twisted his fingers into complicated knots on the tabletop and studiously avoided looking at her. Lily sat facing him, a single tear coursing down her cheek. Finally she spoke. "How long?"

"Six months. Maybe a little longer." He still didn't look at her.

"Who is she?"

"It doesn't matter, Lily."

"It matters to me."

He rubbed his forehead with shaky fingers. "I don't see why it should."

"She's gonna have your baby, Phil. I think it matters."

He finally met her eye. "Grace. It's Grace."

She sat in silence, unable to speak for several minutes. She covered her eyes with her fingers. "It had to be Grace? You know how I feel about her."

"Yeah, I know. You hate her."

"You couldn't have found a worse way to hurt me."

"I'm sorry, Lily."

Her voice rose to a shriek. "Don't say that! You don't mean it!"

Phillip stood up and stomped out of the kitchen. "I'm not doing this!"

"Where are you going?" She clutched her throat with one hand.

"Out."

"To see her, or to get drunk?"

He shot her a dirty look. "Both. Neither. Whichever I want."

"If you walk out that door, Phil, I won't be here when you get back!"

He frowned. "Hey, you do what you have to do." He slammed the door behind him.

NOW

Phillip hummed a lively little ditty as they danced. Lily's head rested on his shoulder and her fingers intertwined with his.

"Mr. Mayhugh?"

Phillip looked up at the men standing in the doorway. "Ah, hello officers! I didn't hear you come in." He smiled broadly. "Darling, the police are finally here."

The two officers glanced at each other for a second before one of them spoke. "Uh, Mr. Mayhugh, we'll need you to fill out some paperwork about what you found. Maybe in the kitchen?"

Phillip nodded. "That'll be fine." He turned to Lily. "I'll be back in a jiffy!" He kissed her again. She didn't stop him, she didn't even try.

One of the officers went into the kitchen with Phillip, but joined his partner a moment later. They watched Lily until she turned away from them.

"Why does the weird shit always happen on Halloween? What do we do with her?"

"What else can we do? Get a ladder and cut her down."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: B. David Spicer lives in Ohio, where he earned a BA in English from Ohio University. His first name is Brian, but thinks B. David Spicer sounds more artsy and pretentious. He's a member of the Horror Writers Association who writes horror stories, science fiction, crime fiction and scripts for independent comic book publishers. His short fiction has appeared in several short story anthologies.

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The Melancholy Raven | Jessica Curtis

All Vincent could say was thank God that the music changed with the decades. As much as he loved the sound of an orchestra, hearing the same songs repeated over and over for millennia would be torture. Although he had to admit, he couldn't quite understand the newer music. It just sounded like mindless noise to him. He sighed and adjusted his mask.

The mansion was filled to the brim with people, from all walks of life and from all time periods. No one was entirely sure when the Halloween ball had started, but it was clear that it would never end. And it was already another Halloween, according to the large clock at the head of the ballroom, which was ticking merrily away. Vincent sniffed. The hands on the clock remained frozen through the rest of the year.

"Vincey," a young girl approached him and tugged at his sleeve.

He let out a groan. He detested that name, but he turned a smile to the girl regardless. "Hello, Olivia. What can I do for you?"

Olivia's bright eyes blinked up at him. The inquisitive 8-year old had just joined the eternal party the year before. She was dressed as a creature apparently known as 'Ziggy Stardust'. Vincent still wasn't sure what that was. "Are new people going to come this year? Edgar said there might be."

A yawn caught Vincent off guard. Apparently it had been a long time since the last time he had rested. He shrugged. "Well. We've had several years with no new additions. Anything is possible, Dear."

Olivia shifted from foot to foot. "When can we leave?"

He snorted. His head was starting to ache. "That, however, is not possible. I have been trying to find a way since 1903. No luck. Surely others have told you the same." Olivia's shoulders slumped and she slunk off without so much as a goodbye. Ah well. No sense in withholding the truth from her. It would sink in for her eventually as it had for all of them. He weaved through the crowd, greeting old friends as he went. His sister, Mary, was hidden somewhere amongst the crowd.

Their timeless prison appeared to be beautiful, if nothing else. Each room appeared to have been built in a different era. The ballroom was built in a Baroque style with gold-gilded touches. Vincent knew there were a few Georgian rooms and several Elizabethan. But the beauty only existed at first glance. Looking at one section for too long revealed a thick layer of dust, or heavy cobwebs, or signs of decay.

Most people were trapped in the costumes they had chosen for the fateful night. Everything from demons and angels, to animals, to monsters that Vincent had never bothered to learn the names of filled the hall. Vincent himself was cloaked in all black, with a long, beaklike mask covering half of his face. There were worse things, he supposed, than spending an eternity dressed as a raven, never aging.

He perked up as he caught sight of Mary, dressed as a witch, and rushed over to her. "Mary," he waved to catch her attention.

Mary looked up and smiled as he reached her. "Vincent," she pulled him into a hug. He returned the hug and sighed. "Where have you been? It feels as though it's been ages since I've seen you." He couldn't bring himself to answer and instead rested his chin on the brim of her pointed hat. "Vincent? Are you alright?" She frowned, pulling back to look at him.

"I'm fine," he nodded, flashing her what he hoped was a convincing smile.

She studied him for a long moment before shaking her head. "You melancholy raven. Must you stay in character so well? No one else does."

The clock struck one in the morning. "Call it a quirk, if you will."

Mary narrowed her eyes at him. He knew she did not believe him. "What's bothering you?"

"Boredom, mostly. I'll get over it. I always do. Everyone does," he assured her. A small child brushed up against his leg. "Have we had any new arrivals? Olivia was looking for them."

She shook her head. "No, not yet. I'll let her know if I see any." Vincent dipped his head in understanding and started to back away. Mary grabbed his sleeve and cocked her head to the side. "Stay. Enjoy the few hours of good food we have every year."

A small smile twitched at the corner of his lips. "It's been too long since I've slept, Mary. I will be asleep on my feet before three if I stay down."

She held onto his sleeve for a moment before releasing him. The skepticism never once left her eyes, but she saw that there was no point in arguing. "Alright. Get some sleep, but come find me when you've rested."

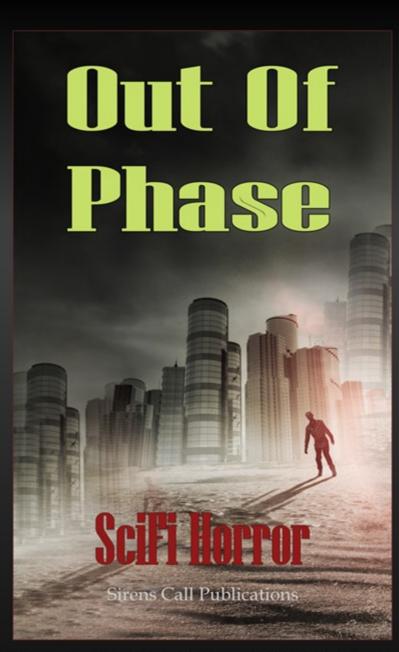
"I will," he hummed, squeezing her shoulder before turning away. He struggled back through the crowd. It was thickening. Those who remained hidden away for the rest of the year had shown themselves for the only lively night. His chest tightened as a sense of claustrophobia closed its claws around his lungs. There were too many people and no way to escape.

After several crushingly long minutes, he managed to squeeze his way into the hallway. It was much easier to breathe in the hall. Vincent shook his head and made his way through the winding hallways, making his way up two flights of stairs before finally coming to a door. He pushed it open and stepped inside before closing it behind him. As far as he knew, it was the only room built in the Victorian style. It was familiar. Warm. If he could ignore the underlying stench of decay, it almost smelled like home.

A chandelier hung at the center of the ceiling. Taking a deep breath, Vincent dug out the length of rope he had gathered a few days before from the table and climbed onto the chest at the end of the bed. If he stood on his tiptoes, he could just reach high enough to tie one end of the rope around the chandelier. His fingers trembled as he fashioned the other end into a noose to slip around his neck. He tightened it until the knot was snug at the back of his neck.

His hands were sweating. He swallowed thickly, feeling the coarse rope rub against his windpipe as he edged forward. Closing his eyes, Vincent stepped off the chest, and the rope squeezed his throat until he could no longer breathe. He felt his feet twitch frantically as he choked. All he could hope for was that it would not be Mary that found him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jessica Curtis is an avid writer and short story author. She has work appearing in *The Haunted Traveler*. When she's not busy writing, she's probably singing along to musicals or scaring herself watching horror movies.



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The Seed | *James S. Austin*

"Mom, hurry up! We're going to be late!"

She let out a loud sigh as she tapped the steering wheel impatiently. "Corey, calm down. There's traffic."

I scooted up in the backseat to see a line of cars stretching before us on the single lane road. The sun was going down outside my window and I needed to get to Thorston's Halloween Fair, fast. Jared should be there and I don't want to miss out.

I reached for my backpack, checking to be sure that my werewolf mask was still inside and hadn't decided to crawl off. For whatever reason, I needed to reassure myself that I hadn't forgotten it... because I've checked about four times since Mom picked me up and am not yet convinced all is good. It was pretty sweet looking. The hair almost looks real.

"Mom, did you get the batteries?"

She looked at me through the rearview mirror. "Sorry. I knew I forgot something today." She glanced over her shoulder, "Did you leave your controller on? You know it drains them quicker. You should take them out every time you are done playing. They would last longer and Mom wouldn't have to keep going back to the store."

I was about to try to explain how it works but just stopped mid-thought, too distracted with tonight's treasure hunt to care.

Jared, Shawn's brother and my best friend, told me in class he heard the *high school crew* had plans to run off into Halloway's cornfield for the hunt. As much as I want to scurry around the fairgrounds grabbing up candy, I don't want to miss out like last year. The stories were epic... from what I was told.

The road out to the fairgrounds was a slow and steady creep through the countryside. Everyone from Franklin was heading out there for the Halloween festivities.

When we arrived and parked, I gave a quick wave bye to Mom and sprinted off looking for Jared before she could stop me, with my backpack over my shoulder. The carnival was a tangled mess of twisted metal, brilliant lights, and odd odors. I dashed back and forth through the shifting throng of bodies, blasting out 'excuse me' almost every step as I made my way through the packed entrance.

I raced over to the spinning cars, where I was to meet up with Jared. He was nowhere to be found. Looking from vendor to vendor, I spotted Nicki and Christina over at one of the ball game tents. A pair of snobby girls from one of my classes. They stared down at their phones, lost in the blue glow of the screens, oblivious to the non-digital world. They didn't even take the time to put on masks or make-up for Halloween. Go figure.

A zombie girl came running around a corner screaming, pushing past me, with a Jason impersonator holding a plastic machete close behind.

Note knowing what to do, I walked around the ride's barricades to see if he was in back. Nope. I rejoined the busy thoroughfare and leaned against an empty table when Jared finally came strolling over from the food trucks, taking a large bite of an oversized hot dog. He was dressed in a store-bought pirate costume, eyepatch flipped up.

"What the hell?"

He gave a mustardy smile, "I didn't eat lunch or dinner, and so Mom gave me twenty bucks to get some food. You want something?"

"Nah. We need to go. Shawn's probably gone."

"It's okay, I know where they are starting the hunt. It just got dark. We have time."

"Well... Where?"

"At the edge of Halloway's, by the fire tower."

We headed off to the far end of the fairgrounds. I dug out my mask and pulled it over my head. I left the fake claw nails in the backpack, no need for them yet. "What are they doing tonight for the hunt?"

"Shawn grabbed something from Ma's den. The museum basement got flooded the other night. They made her bring home some of the stuff they didn't have room for." He took the final bite of his hot dog. "Shawn has this wood thing, looks kinda like a large football. He called it the *Seed of...* something or other. He hid it in the cornfield," Jared said with muffled words.

We used the back-alleyways among the rides to avoid the crowds. A group of carny workers paused in their smoke break to watch us pass. We found the spot to be behind the House of Mirrors. The area was littered with crates and piles of folded up tarps. An old post fence ran along the length of the property, separating festival from farm. The wash of light from the fair touched the edge of a haze that blanketed the cornfield. No one was here.

"Shit!" I pulled up my mask, rolling it up to my brow, to get a better view.

Jared popped me in the arm and pointed. Just on the other side of the fence, close to the base of the fire tower, the tops of a couple stalks waved. Someone was still nearby.

Jared gave me a look, "Shawn said he put the seed by a tree in a small clearing, where Halloway keeps one of his trackers."

"He told you that?"

"Well, no. Heard him say it to June on the phone."

June was Shawn's girlfriend, so guess it should be true.

We climbed between the fence rails and pushed between the first rows of corn. The stalks reached pretty tall, clear above my head. I looked up as we got close to the fire tower but the mist made it difficult to see too far above that, with no moon out to help.

Jared stopped in front of me, and put a hand up for me to stop as well. Standing only a couple feet in front of me, I could barely make him out in this faintly glowing mist, painted in

the various colors of the nearby lights. We listened. Something sounded like it was moving up ahead.

"Come on." Jared quickly struggled ahead between the next line of stalks. It felt like minutes went by without seeing or hearing anything but ourselves, until we came out onto a small trail. To the right, I could make out a dark silhouette of someone barely visible against the ethereal backdrop. The head turned towards us, red pinpoint eyes looked right at me. I froze as it started our way. Jared grabbed my arm in a death grip.

"Jared? That you?" came a boy's voice.

"Ah...," was Jared's weak response.

"Hey, you seen anyone? I lost sight of them." It was Zach. He lifted a pair of 'spooky' glasses off his nose and looked back over his shoulder. Scared the crap out of me.

"No," we both said together.

After a breathful pause, loud crashing came at us from the other side. A boy in a Superman shirt spilled out onto the ground in a full tumble.

"Rabbits! Rabbits!" He jumped up and ran headlong into the next row.

We looked at each other for answers. Blank stares all around.

The answer came in a wave of fur. Four large rabbits, the size and build of mangled pit bulls, came to a halt on the trail, peering in our direction. They stood there sniffing the air, with tufts of hair sticking out in awkward patches and elongated limbs clawing at the ground. The night suddenly filled with an ear-piercing screech as they launched themselves at us.

This time there was no hesitation. Jared and I ran past Zach in a full sprint. I could hear Zach fall into a heap as the deranged bunnies pounced on the surprised teen.

I turned left into the corn and kept running, Jared close behind. We broke into a small clearing. At its center, an old wooden structure stood crooked in the high grass. I ran up to the door and pulled it open. A decrepit pump house.

Jared closed the door behind us. The sound of our fighting for breath filled the small space. An aged cistern sat in one corner with a wheeled pump in another, pipes running along the walls and into the ground.

A raucous thump outside held us in place, still as the dead. Something outside passed by the building. Slivers of misted light slipped through the rotted planks of the walls. A thin shadow crossed the front.

Jared looked at me, darkness hiding most of his fear. I know I looked no better.

A crack resounded overhead. Then, something else hit the back wall, splintering boards. A long arm made of corn stalks broke through a hole in the side of the building. A human-sized corn doll began pulling the back wall out, its head a clump of corn husks twisted into a ghastly knob.

We ran out the front to find the pump house was covered in these corn effigies, pulling at the overly weathered boards. Without faces or eyes, their head swiveled toward the two of us standing there in fright.

Without a word, we raced back into the thick of the field. My body and face was pummeled by leaves, husks, and stalks as we took flight.

Clip... and I fell forward into a pile of forgotten compost. Jared sped past in a blur, not seeing me in the rough. Husk-feathered blurs zipped closely behind and then out of sight, beyond the next blockade of corn. Jared let out a smothered cry.

I laid there in silence, waiting to be discovered... but it never came. I could hear them moving away from where they must have grabbed Jared. My head was spinning from all the running and craziness, tiny stars swam before my eyes.

I crawled towards the direction I last heard them. It felt like forever as I quietly crept through the cluttered field. I pulled off my backpack, it kept snagging on leaves and making too much noise. I didn't want to draw any unwanted attention.

Eventually, I spotted an iridescent glow up ahead in the sky.

The leaf-blinding path gave way to an open meadow, which climbed to a small hill at the center. A tractor sat between me and the rise, where a bare-limbed tree sat at the peak, its branches disappearing into the unseen heavens. The area pulsated in a blue phosphorescent glow. Not seeing any movement, I crawled underneath the tractor, hiding behind one of the large, rear wheels.

I could now see the base of the earthy mass, something you would expect out of nightmares. Roots spread out from the tree, an intertwined carpet of spindles and fibers, extending across much of the ground. Three corn people placed the motionless Jared on the knotted earth. Thin, stringy roots began to creep out and snake over his body.

Dominating the scene, an oblong shaped orb sat on a twist of roots that extended upward like a pedestal. The thing beat a faint blue light that then traced down into the root system and out towards a number of lumpy rises circling the tree, fading in intensity the further it went out. That was when I noticed a hand sticking out of one of the mounds, fingers curled and still.

Out of a shadowed hole at the foot of the hill came one of the beastly rabbits. It hopped around in a circle, paused to stand on its hind legs to look out into the darkness, and then jumped back into the dark confines.

After dumping Jared, the corn people wandered about the meadow, not seeming to have any purpose until, as if a silent call whispered to them from some distant world, they stopped in unison. All heads turned towards the fairgrounds. With a quiver and jerk, they whisked off back into the field.

My attention was drawn again to the orb. That had to be the *seed* Shawn brought out here. It looked like the thing was feeding out energy or something, like something in a video

game. Just then, all I could think of was my mother telling me to take out the batteries so they wouldn't be drained so quickly.

With that, and not seeing any crazy monsters, I stalked up towards the *seed*. Something moved. I dropped to a knee, waiting. Rabbits flew out of the hole, looking about in a frenzy.

"Damn!" I breathed. I looked to the *seed*, back to them, and then to the *seed*. I could make it... maybe. The race was on. After a couple of hasty steps, I lunged for the *seed*. Just as my hand touched the hard surface, I could feel a fury body smack into my face... and then a blinding flash.

All was still in the sudden darkness.

The fluffy mass, a small rabbit, hopped off my chest. My right arm ached from how I landed. Hit it pretty hard on a thick bundle of roots. I looked around but no rabbits or corn people were nearby. The blue pulse was gone.

It took some time to pull Jared out. He then helped to free all the other kids as he kept asking what happened. The last thing he, and later everyone else, could remember was walking into the field. Then they woke up here. I tried to explain but no one seemed to believe me, but they also couldn't argue.

Afterwards, Jared and I went back to the fairgrounds and had some funnel cake, no more talk of the *seed* and what happened.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: James S. Austin is the owner/editor of Tacitus Publishing. He has edited two anthologies, 'It's a Grimm Life' and 'Haunted by the Past'. He was published two stories and writes for a number of blogs, to include the serial 'Chronicles of Ballidrous - The Tales of Devryn'. When not writing or editing, he spends his time as a traditional and digital artist.

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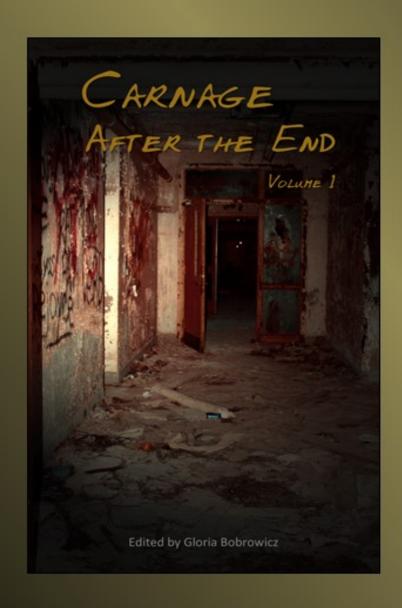


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In a world where society has collapsed and terror lurks around every corner, no one can be trusted and nothing can be taken for granted...





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Still | *James WF Roberts*

Don't blink. Keep calm. Breathe. Breathe. Stay still. Hide. Keep low. Don't move. Don't move. Just breathe. Slow deep breath. Just breath calmly. Slowly. Louder you are, more chance of it hearing you. Be cool. Just fucking chill. The others are screaming-running. They've forgotten the rules, "Run, run, run and hide. If Jack O' Lantern looks you in the eye, you die".

Just stay in the wardrobe. Just hold out til dawn. Keep calm. He only collects the souls of the wicked for one night. Just hold out. November 1st's about to dawn. Dust everywhere. Achoo! FUCK! Door slowly opens.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: James WF Roberts, double honours in Philosophy/Religious studies and Literature, Art and Film, La Trobe University. Currently studying Masters of Communication and Media Studies, Monash University Australia. Writer and performance poet. Has won several awards, published in USA, UK, Australian University Magazines and has self-published several collections of poetry ranging from horror and crime to drug addiction, abuse, sex, philosophy and metaphysics to a full length erotica poetry collection.

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Halloween Monsters | Matthew Wilson

"You're not going to *that* house," Helen Kingdon shouted at the zombie in her kitchen.

Zack removed his bloodied mask and looked like he might cry. "But, Mom, its' the Halloween dare, all the other boys-"

"If all the other boys jumped off a bridge, would you too?"

Zack wished he had James' guts—he'd tell her to jump off that darn bridge, or be pushed, but Zack had been deprived Christmas presents before, Mom wouldn't hesitate in grounding him from this holiday too.

"O-okay," he said and jumped when the bell rang. It was too early for Dad, hopeful, Zack ran to the door and ducked when a plastic devil's trident pushed through the letterbox like a postman checking for Dalmatians.

"Give us your soul," sang the boy on the other side of the door who was yanked off his feet when Zack pulled the door open and the trident came with it.

"You're early," Zack praised the three monsters that had come to eat his brains and any spare candy he had.

"Well we wanna get ahead of the other groups who might venture into the unknown," James said, straightening his mother's stitched red devils cape. "I'm amazed your old lady let you do this, where is the old—hey, Mrs Kingdon."

James' stomach went cold beneath his plastic intestines poking out the front of his shirt when he felt his mother stand behind him.

Please don't embarrass me.

"Let's just leave," Zack tried to walk away but Helen already had her hand on his shoulder and her concern on his conscious.

"What *your* mothers let you boys do is your own business, but I've raised my son better and won't let him get in trouble... do you understand?"

James' mouth dropped open and it was then Zack realized who'd been pushing dog muck through his mom's letter box after she criticized his long haircut. Apparently, better mothers kept their boys smartly dressed with trim bowl cuts.

James must have been high on candy as he raised his trident, but Zack had already wrestled free of Helen's apron strings and pushed them back into the night.

"You be back by nine," Helen yelled at them. "And stay away from that house."

"We will, Mrs Kingdon," James crossed his heart, but when they turned the first corner, he suddenly lost all conviction and opened a bag of sweets he shared out between all.

A final meal before they gave their lives for glory.

"All right," he said, "who wants to be as awesome as I and do some breaking and entering?"

No one had completely gone through with it—not with all the terrible stories that hung around the place, but the reputation had bought down the surrounding house prices and Helen considered that a silver lining when she was home hunting.

Zack looked on the house as a poison gas, he could survive it in small quantities, maybe even build up a resistance to it if he dared turn his head toward the ugly Victorian building, but even by day the sight of it quickened his heart and made him fearful.

"We're not gonna burn it down, right?" Frankenstein said when James rummaged in his backpack but thankfully only came out with torches.

"Remember, we only gotta stay in there fifteen seconds and our street cred will go through the roof. I heard that two years ago some lucky punk made it through the door before chickening out but this year there's too many of us to fail—one of us has to stay the course, even if we have to nail their boots down."

Zack laughed nervously. "You haven't got a hammer and nails in there, have you?"

James smiled disarmingly but quickly zipped his bag before anyone could look at the contents. "Course not," he lied. "Now let's be heroes."

Though he put his mind to it, Zack couldn't ever remember seeing the occupants of 103 Meridan Road. No car had slunk back late from work, no dogs had barked and no children

dashed out to go to school, but there were lights in the house, horrible, dim lights that allowed no silhouette to fall on the thick drapes.

James licked the light fog from his lips and realized he and his fellow adventurers had back tracked and stood uselessly at his neighbors front garden for thirty seconds.

"Um, are we gonna do this?"

James twiddled his fingers like they had appeared from nowhere. "Yeah, go on, then."

"What? Why me?"

"You're the eager beaver who spoke up first."

"This whole thing was your idea, I wanted to go to the pictures."

"Huh, as if your old lady would give you money to watch a scary movie. Get out my way, you chickens and let a real man show his guts."

"Yeah, all over the kitchen floor," Zack watched but still no one moved. "Go on."

"Give me a minute, my legs have stopped working," James said, hoping no one would mention that part when he recited tomorrow how he'd personally killed the werewolf kept in this torture dungeon to protect the witch inside.

Zack thought of his mother, how she ruled and ruined his life, how the other kids laughed and called him mommy's boy.

"I'll do it," Zack said and gingerly walked through the front gate.

"Are you nuts?" James reached for him, but once Zack was beyond the safety of the front gate, he may as well have been on the dark side of the moon.

"Come on, James."

James thought the moon too low, it threw too much light on this evil place. "Maybe we can come back later."

Zack thought of his mom who would phone the police if he was a minute late coming home, who'd embarrassed him when he'd bought home the good news that a girl in school had talked to him and mom had forced his teacher to change his class so there could be no further contact between them.

Not this time, Zack thought, this time I'll do what I want.

Every step forward was an act of defiance against his mom, he tightened his fist to regain control over his body but still his teeth chattered loud enough to blot out the screeching crows breaking backs of tiny mice in the overhead branches.

"If you're going through Hell, then keep going," James quoted. "Don't stop, tomorrow we'll be gods for doing this."

Zack blinked and nearly lost his footing. "We? What did you do?"

He was almost at the porch when the front door opened.

When the old woman dressed in rags dashed forward and dragged him back into the house, Zack almost had time to scream, but when the door slammed, there was only watching crows cawing, hungry no longer.

James didn't have friends, not after he stole computer games out of Gerald's bedroom and sold them for this Halloween costume, not after he used Brian's comic books as toilet paper and not after Sean caught him shaving his hamster.

Some people couldn't take a joke.

Only Zack had stuck with him, the mommy's boy who had no one else. James didn't react when the witch slammed the front door, nor when the other children screamed and fled.

Children didn't call the police in desperate times for fear of being in trouble. They ran back to mother and said nothing. No, nothing had happened tonight, Mommy.

Numb, James stood where he was, hoping the reek of ammonia was the air of this foul place rather than him.

"Don't be a wuss," he said when his legs still refused to stir.

"Come on, come on," he said and somehow his feet moved.

Forward.

Where you going? James thought his body's direction interesting as he should be turning and running for his life. There would be other friends, other people who'd talk to him tomorrow.

Briefly.

Only Zack had stood by him and called him blood brother.

"Don't be a wuss," James said again and went forward. Somehow his feet held him and he continued on as the house got bigger.

Please don't let me die, James thought and bared his pathetic plastic trident out before him like a knight challenging a dragon with a lance.

Do I ring the doorbell? I'd rather walk in with a machine gun.

James had never sensed such cold as when he reached the front porch steps and the house seemed to devour the moons power.

Silently, he opened the door, and headed inside.

James' heart hammered in his chest and though he didn't trust himself to look down as he came into the ugly green hallway, he was quite unsure if his feet even touched the dirty carpet.

Thirteen... fourteen... fifteen he thought and wished he had the nerve to cheer.

See, I am brave, I can do this.

But he couldn't call out.

Then he realized he didn't have to when he heard the low rumblings of conversation.

Light beamed under the kitchen door but James' couldn't hear any torture screams of Zack's.

Maybe she's put a terrible silent curse on him, James thought.

"Back off, you ugly cow!" James screamed when he kicked open the kitchen door and

saw James sat at a table eating jam sandwiches.

"What are you doing?" Sarah Kipling asked, horrified.

"Zack!" James shouted. "It's okay, we were wrong, put the trident down."

James did, dazed. "But—the kidnap—the witch," he muttered like a drunk trying to trick a cop into handing him back his car keys.

"A witch?" the house owner laughed and threw off her rotten cape. "Oh, honey, do you know how silly that sounds," Sarah beamed. "Everyone wears costumes on Halloween."

"I'm touched that you came to rescue me but I'm fine—better than ever actually."

"Oh," James said, limply and looked at the damaged door. "I can steal some of my dad's tools to fix that, maybe you can sell them and--"

"I think we've had enough adventures," Sarah said and gave a dramatic impression of a witches laugh. "Such a shame, I never would have made a decent witch. Come on now, your mothers must be wondering where you are and hopefully I'll be scaring more children tonight—it does me good to have visitors, for some reason they're so rare. I think everyone around here is scared of me."

Well they're gonna be if you act like a hermit, James thought but didn't say, she seemed like a nice woman after all and James helped himself to two jam sandwiches—a small reward for his bravery.

Still shaky, Zack got up with James' help and together they headed for the door.

"Remember to tell your friends there's no witches here," Sarah said. "Please tell your mothers I'd like to invite them for coffee."

"Zack's mom?" James laughed. "That'll be a barrel of laughs --ow, don't hit the guy who saved you, man."

"Let's just go, sorry again, Miss Kipling, and don't bother to wait for our mothers to come to you—please visit us."

Sarah stiffened like she'd brushed a live wire. "You—you really mean that?"

"Of course, well, goodnight."

"Good night, boys," Sarah waved and watched them go.

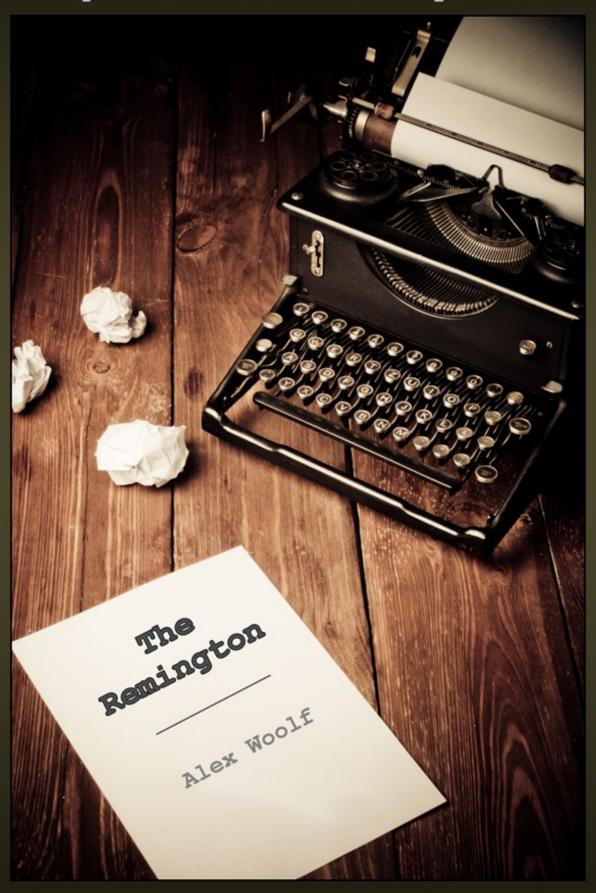
Witches, she thought... how silly, but now she had been invited into her neighbors home she could spread her wings and pop round for coffee. Turning her back on Halloween, Sarah went back inside to get something still living from the fridge.

Vampires were always hungry.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Matthew Wilson, thirty-three, has been published over one hundred and fifty times in such places as Horror*Zine, Zimbell House, Star*Line, Alban Lake and many more. He is currently editing his first novel.

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"...A splendidly comic tale that taps away at the keys to the creative process, whilst juggling parallel plots with a brilliantly deft touch..."



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Money or Your Soul | Stephen Crowley

Paul's eyes gleamed at the skeleton; its long dead sockets where eyes once stared back. While fear lay carefully concealed from Paul, every bone chilled Simon as he readied himself for the dare.

Paul nudged him.

"Enough," Simon just batted his fingers away.

"You said you would dare refuse her," Paul flapped his elbows and muttered, "cluck, cluck, chicken."

"I still don't believe a word you say, just one of your Halloween night pranks."

Simon's security guard father allowed the boys to wander the museum while conducting his patrolling duties. The boys asked many times before finally allowed to wander the shadowy corridors and museum floors filled with artifacts from the town's history. Usually, the kids just embarked on a night of trick or treating around the neighborhood. Paul though grew bored with creating costumes for just one night and craved for a more visceral, scarier, Halloween experience.

And the museum offered up a true fright for the evening.

So, the lads were only interested in one exhibit.

The witch's skeleton, the dried remains of Morgana Mortem: the infamous deceitful witch who killed local townsfolk in the 18th century if they refused to give her money when she begged at their doors. She feigned poverty to cover the costs of many deadly charms and spells. Many refused, and all died. The town believed sorcery killed the villagers as they all died in their sleep within hours of each other. Families found lifeless loved ones in cold beds, ashen faces scorched with terror.

"She would knock on doors, beg for money, killed anyone with black magic who refused. Morgana found herself tried for witchcraft after the town soon believed she practiced evil spells, and..."

Simon cut in.

"And hung till dead in 1786. I can read the notice there."

Paul continued. "You are standing in a museum, in one seriously cursed town. And all because of a witch."

"So what."

Paul clutched Simon's shoulder, his voice bounced off the walls in a drifting echo along the deserted floors.

"Many people who came here died in their sleep, those who did not drop a coin in that box."

"Still not really buying it all," Simon almost failed to hold his gaze on the skull, the broken jaw and neck, the terrifying glare of scrutiny from its long dead eye sockets, "you reckon, if I refuse to drop a coin..."

"She will come for you. You just stared her in the eyes, so have to drop a coin. If you approach her, you have to drop a coin. But you don't believe. So, fine, just refuse to pay her."

"This is nuts. The money goes to the museum if I drop money." Simon studied the old wooden coin box, definitely seen better days.

On the front, the words *Pay Me* etched into the aged cedar wood.

"Ha. Many must have tempted this errm curse. My dad never said anything about this. Just that she was a murderer, thief and witch, and got hanged for her heinous crimes. I am not dropping a coin, just bull..."

Creak.

"Did you hear that?" Simon spun.

Paul chuckled. "Not scared are you. If you bothered to look up the curse online and read about it, you would know about more recent events. Right here. This town. Visitors over the years who didn't pay, died, soon after in the same way. But, only one way to find out. Remember, it's your funeral if you don't pay the witch. And it happened every year, on..."

"Halloween. Fine. Got it. Yea, yea, yea. Okay. I don't believe it anyway, it's just nonsense. You don't believe it either. You dropped a coin?"

Paul shrugged. "Well, yea. Last time I was here, and a few times before. Always wanted to come on Halloween though. No one else around. The silence. Plus, I am still alive. But, if you keep your money," Paul crooked his eyebrows, "it's your soul."

Simon sighed. "Someone invented that curse, stuck a box there, sicko like you to scare people coming here, just bull for tourists, or stupid teenagers," he paused and threw a harsh squint at Paul, "I am not one. If I don't drop a coin, so what. Just a little extra cash for the museum, and not - her."

"Phew, fine, dice with death mate," Paul dropped a ten pence coin, a chink meant many others had left some cash; he studied the skull, "this witch deceived, used trickery to steal fortunes. Told people she was homeless, poor, begged for money. But... many refused. She went door to door on All Hallows Eve, knocked just three times. Soon, folks knew the money was for her black magic and so they refused her. She sneaked into their bedrooms at night, whispered the words 'Pay Me' and claimed their souls."

Paul switched his steely eyes to Simon's heavy breathing, for someone who claimed to lack fear here.

"Amazed museum got her. And why their souls, why not just steal money."

Paul stared at Simon incredulously. "Because souls give witches great powers. Anyway, just drop a coin and you are safe, that will keep her from visiting you."

Simon sniggered.

"You two rascals up to no good."

The voice bellowed down the corridor, the boys flinched.

"Don't go touching anything." The stern voice of Simon's dad barely heard as the boys gasped.

"No touching, Dad." Simon held his hands up.

His heavy footsteps echoed as he approached the lads. "Learning anything."

"She was a sorcerer. Right? Cursed the town." Paul nodded hoping for support despite the elderly man's impatient grin.

"Stop scaring Simon, stupid curse baloney."

Simon threw Dad a scornful face. "Not... scared... though... why here?"

"Museum was given her carcass when it opened in the thirties. That's all I know."

"Bet no one touches that box knowing the money is hers." Paul studied the witch's neck fracture.

Dad mumbled back at Paul, "charity Paul, and whatever," his voice louder, "okay you lads can stay for another five minutes or so then it's time to skedaddle, got it. Don't make me throw you both out. No one should be here but me," a sigh, "until 2am."

With that, he strolled off towards the long corridor to the reception desk, his footstep echoes faded slowly down the hall.

"Okay, so what, I just... walk away," Simon readied for the challenge, cracked his knuckles and stared into the long dead sockets, "No money for you evil witch."

Simon spun on his heels, back to the skeleton, and walked to Paul's eager face.

"So," Simon's voice hushed with anticipation, "how do you know about this curse? The writing here says little about that. It just says about her death, how she was tried as a witch, executed, and to drop a coin to keep the witch rested. A little history. That's it."

"I told you. I read about it online," Paul grabbed Simon's shoulders, "those people after her death, the ones who refused to give her money, all received a visit... the same three knocks on the door... and if answered... she would enter... and not even... God... can... save you..."

Paul held a stone face for a moment.

He then burst out with laughter and slapped Simon on the back. "Dude, you are easy."

"Yea, yea, how about I kick your ass. Don't be thinking I believed a word."

Paul shrugged. "Still, the part about deaths over the years is true. Did read about that online, all found dead in their beds. Various local folk. But, could be nonsense."

"Really, believe everything you Google," Simon smirked, "Paul. Just a legend, nothing more, something to scare boys like us when we want to sleep. It's sick bullshit."

Paul glanced at the CCTV camera and the darkened corridor where Simon's dad walked. "Can't hear any footsteps. Your dad won't be checking the cameras, we're the only ones here."

Paul snatched the coin box, jangle of coins as he grabbed it.

"What the hell are you doing?" Simon quizzed under a hushed breath.

"What does it look like?" Paul showed a lockpick.

"You picking that lock?"

"Yep, thanks to my old man, easy, swiped it from his shed."

Simon gasped as Paul twisted the lock. "Shit, Paul. Be quick. My dad will be here soon."

"One of the perks of having a locksmith for an old man."

Click. Click.

Paul sent Simon a smile. "Split, want half."

Simon's face filled with shock. "What, half, no, no Paul."

"Fine." Paul opened the box.

For a moment, a chill, one able to cut through bone. Simon shivered; breath like puffs of fog for just a few moments.

Simon's eyes darted to and fro. "Am I the only one thinking that was weird?"

Paul shook his head and emptied the coins into a shoulder bag. "Sure you don't want some. Can get my cigarettes with this. Must be about twenty dollars or so."

Simon waved his hands. "Nope, all yours."

"What's wrong," a sigh, then a quieter voice, "do...you...think...Morgana will come for you?" Paul's eyes bulged, mouth wide open, then broke into a chuckle, "c'mon, have some. People are stupid enough to drop coins here. Let's go and see if we can grab some beer at the shop too."

"Guy knows we are under age Paul. And no," Simon bellowed back.

"Okay, fine, don't bite my head off. All for me then."

The echo of footsteps grew louder like a series of clomps. Dad on the way to kick the boys out.

"Put that back quick!" Simon hissed.

Paul seated the box in its original position - he peered up for a second, at the gaping jaw of Morgana.

"Get over here mate." Simon kept his voice low.

Dad approached. "Okay, time's up. Make your way out so I can have peace here."

"Thanks for the free entry."

"Yea, great Dad." Tremors in Simon's voice.

Paul and Simon headed off.

As the museum doors shut, and darkness shrouded every space but the lit exhibits, one exhibit emitted a low hum, Morgana's skeletal remains.

A rattle.

The money box shook for a few moments, just danced on the spot.

The lid flipped open.

An acrimonious roar, louder and louder, until a shrill wail filled the museum.

That night, Simon lay pondering on the evening. The bed sheet pulled tight, masking half his face.

He just couldn't sleep.

He flicked off the lamp, the room immersed in darkness. Something normally comfortable but not tonight.

Discomfort as Paul stole the money, or, the fear of a dead witch's curse. Simon felt unsure.

Something chilled him, bad feelings, foreboding.

"Should have gone trick or treating like other boys. No, no, no,"

Simon just brushed off silly thoughts of a phantom visiting locals. He closed his tired eyes.

"Paul is just full of shit."

Skype lit up his phone. "Paul. It's past 10."

"Yo dude, got the place to myself. My sister will be back later, and you know who she is bringing."

Simon paused for thought. "Mate, my mum will never let me..." he paused,"Amy."

"Oh yea. Get your ass over here. Found some beers in Dad's stash. Plus found a use for that money, wink, wink, know what I mean."

"Don't you think your folks will smell that when they get home."

"No. We will sit in the garden. My sister and Amy will be drunk when they get here. And for me, I am hoping Liv is coming too."

Simon, sleepy, shrugged half-heartedly.

"So what. She has not actually showed any signs of liking me. Besides, can't just walk out without Mum giving me question time."

"C'mon mate. I hear she just never says no."

"Oh great, so she's a slut."

"And, so what. Wanna get laid or not. Folks away. Spare room. Got me."

"Dunno. Let me call you back in a few minutes."

"Okay Simon. Just don't dither too lo..."

Bang, Bang, Bang.

Resonating door knocks almost as clear in Simon's bedroom.

"Who the hell... wait a second." Paul dropped his phone on the bed giving Simon a still view of the ceiling.

Simon dwelled on Amy.

Paul probably just shitting me to get me over, he thought.

A scream emitted from the phone.

Terrified.

Desperate.

Simon bolted upright. He glared at the lit phone screen, just a static Skype view of Paul's bedroom ceiling.

"Paul," Simon softly spoke, then a raised voice, "What you up to asshole. Still considering coming ov..."

Another scream, more strained, choked.

Blood drained from Simon's face.

A shadow clouded the camera view.

Then a black screen.

Skype disconnected.

Simon called Paul.

Rings.

No answer.

Simon held on the call.

Then the voicemail message kicked in. Simon ended the call and leaped off the bed, clutched his hair and paced the room.

He halted as though a pane of glass stopped his paces.

Trembling fingers twisted sweaty hair; he fidgeted. A pained and watery gaze into thin air as he recalled the earlier evening events.

"Morgana," Simon muttered, then he slapped his forehead, "Paul, you asshole."

He tried to call again. Still no answer. He typed a text: Okay, Paul, that won't get me over yours. Amy is all I needed to hear. Give me an hour and...

Bang, Bang, Bang.

The thumps on Simon's front door, hard.

He dropped his phone, a blanched face, then a whimper.

"She knocks three times."

A light seeped under the bedroom door from the hall, Mum began cursing. "Bloody trick or treaters. Late you lot."

Simon extended his arm, an attempt to shout do not answer it muffled by fear.

He could hear the front door open and Mum yelling Hello to an empty street.

He heard the front door close before burying his head in the pillow again.

A shadow passed the foot of the bed, unseen by Simon who had rolled to one side and shut his eyes.

Simon dragged the comforting bed sheets over his shaky body, lips and chin trembled.

He lifted his eyelids slowly and searched the room with wide eyes.

Something chilly and rotten brushed over him as though a cold breeze had just blown the sewers through the window.

He swiveled his head.

Enough to face it.

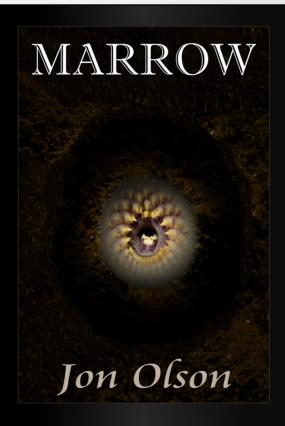
Face whitened, Simon's scream grew with intensity.

A flow of chilled rancid air paralyzed him as he heard the words.

"Pay... me..."

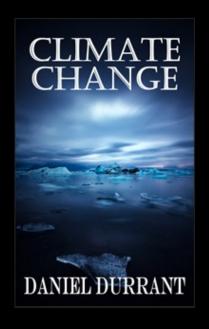
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Stephen Crowley writes horror stories from micro-fiction length to novellas. He is based in Leeds, England. Inspired by early horror movies and great authors including Stephen King, Dean Koontz and James Herbert, Stephen has entered global short story competitions and has short tales published in a popular horror ezine.

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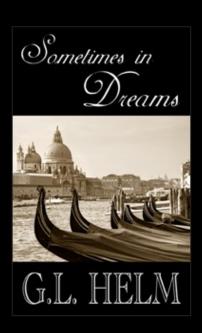












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Interview with Maynard Blackoak, Author of Eerie Trails of the Wild Weird West

Sirens Call Publications recently released the debut collection from Maynard Blackoak titled Eerie Trails of the Wild Weird West. In an effort to learn a little more about Maynard and his writing, we sat down with him and asked him a few probing questions...

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Maynard! What made you decide to become a writer?

Maynard Blackoak: It goes back to honors English class my junior year in high school. Creative writing was one area I seemed to excel. In fact, my teacher encouraged me to pursue writing for a living. I laughed it off as a pipe dream and didn't write at all for twenty years. Then one day, when I was feeling burned out and tired of my career path, I picked up writing as a creative outlet. I had a few things published here and there. About twelve years later, I decided to attempt to get paid for my writing. My first endeavor, *Under the Black Oak Tree*, was accepted as part of *The Endlands Volume 2*. It took a few more years before I sold another story, but I stuck with it.

SCP: What is Eerie Trails of the Wild Weird West about?

Maynard: *Eerie Trails* is my attempt to combine two genres I've always enjoyed—westerns and horror. It's a collection of stories I hope gives the reader a taste of the Wild West with a side of ghosts, demons, demigods and monsters. To give it a more unique flair, I used many actual people from that period of time.

SCP: What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about *Eerie Trails of the Wild Weird West* before they read it?

Maynard: Like I said before, there are many actual people used as characters in the stories. For instance, Dynamite Dan Clifton was an outlaw with a hefty price on his head. The bounty was so high, it influenced several people to make false claims about killing him. That's how he earned the reputation of The Most Killed Man in the West. Another aspect of these stories, I used character names from old television westerns as minor characters in my stories to pay homage to those shows.

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

Maynard: My process is that I have no real process. I just let the story tell itself as I write it. I come up with a general idea and let the story go where it goes. Sometimes even I am surprised by the ending.

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

Maynard: How about me playing the main characters? I'd like to think there's a little of me in all of them. Well, maybe just in the scoundrels. Seriously, we'd have to raise the dead to allow me my choice of actors. Clark Gable, Spencer Tracy, Gary Cooper, John Wayne, Randolph Scott, Maureen O'Hara, Yvonne De Carlo, Ida Lupino, and Jane Russell would be my first choices. Come to think of it, Sam Elliot and Kurt Russell and the rest of the cast of **Tombstone** wouldn't hurt my feelings at all.

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

Maynard: Writing stories that would appeal to a large audience. I know what I like, but that style seems to have gone out of favor in today's world. I'm something of a dinosaur. I like to be challenged as much as entertained when I read, but not so much as I write.

SCP: In your opinion, what sets *Eerie Trails of the Wild Weird West* apart from other books of the same genre?

Maynard: I don't believe there are many books out there that combine actual elements of the old west with the supernatural. Plus, having had a little experience many years ago working cattle and a couple of times wrangling buffalo (something I hope to never do again), it gives me a something of a perspective into cowboying.

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

Maynard: I recently reread, *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair and *1984* by Orwell. Given the current political environment, I think both stories still have merit today.

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

Maynard: I love the darkness of Poe and his use of obscure words, the way in which Dickens painted pictures with his words, the intellectual nature of Conan Doyle, and the way in which Hemmingway turned a phrase. *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *War of the Worlds* would be a few of my favorite novels. My favorite tales though, were the Sherlock Holmes short stores. I began reading them at ten years of age with a dictionary handy. I have loved them since.

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

Maynard: Success as a writer to me means having many people enjoy your tales. Nothing would please me more than to see groups of diverse people talking about my writing. I'd love to see thousands of likes on my Facebook author page or subscribers to my blog page. I still get excited when someone likes my page or messages me out of the blue to talk about my writing. I'd love to hear and reviews, whether good or bad, about my work. So far, I cannot call myself a success. Maybe someday, success as I define it will come my way. Either way, I will always be excited and humbled by every person who enjoys my work.

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?

Maynard: Be persistent. Be thick skinned. Take the good words and the criticisms with the same enthusiasm. After all, someone took the time to read your story and was considerate enough to give you feedback.

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

Maynard: I hope everyone comes away thinking they had just read something unique, well written, and entertaining. I hope they experienced a range of emotions, and maybe a few surprises. Most of all, I hope they could feel the heat of the west Texas sun, taste the dust of the cattle trail on their lips, and imagine themselves in the old west.

Thank you Maynard for taking the time to answer our questions. And now for your enjoyment, here's an excerpt from *Brethren*, the first tale in *Eerie Trails of the Wild Weird West...*

Brethren

The searing heat of the blazing sun bore down on me as I slowly crawled, on my three good limbs, across the seemingly endless prairie. Sweat dripped from my filth covered, haggard face, falling onto the crisp, dry brush. Blood seeped from gunshot wounds in my side and leg. My blood soaked clothes left a trail of crimson smears on the ground behind me.

It had been several hours since my horse, water, provisions and nearly everything I owned was stolen by a trio of ruthless outlaws. The men shot and robbed me, before callously riding off, leaving me to die in a desolate stretch of lonesome prairie.

Pulling myself along the dusty ground, I felt the scythe of the grim reaper gradually ripping life from my exhausted, pain-ridden body. The odds were stacked against me as I struggled to keep moving. I knew my only chance would be to stumble across assistance, before I became just another anonymous pile of bleached bones littering the prairie.

Gazing desperately out over the mile after mile of rolling prairie grasses, there was nothing appearing on the horizon, except the cold, harsh reality of death. A sudden rush of peace came over me, like a cool breeze on a hot summer's day. I began to entertain thoughts of simply laying down on the grass, giving in to the utter hopelessness of my plight. In my fractured state of mind, I could not see the dishonor in graciously bowing to defeat before a greater foe.

My decision having been made, I crawled under a large, shady maple tree to spend my final moments basking in its shadow. The slight breeze rattled its leaves, creating a tranquil melody that soothed my aches and pains into distant memory. Peace ruled over me as I leaned my back against the tree, and closed my eyes, waiting to die.

Sleep followed quickly with dreams of many faces standing over me, their sympathetic eyes gazing down on my piteous form. Perhaps it was only a dream. I have yet to determine. For the next thing I recall was awaking in a nice comfortable bed, with the beautiful face of an angel sitting in a chair at my side.

"Welcome back," she said to me, her broad smile illuminating the room.

"Welcome back?" I inquired, my face wrinkled with confusion.

"We almost lost you several times over the last few days," she explained, her smile fading slightly. "But Doc Jessup kept pulling you back. How was it you came to be on the prairie without a horse and two bullet holes in you? Mister... uh."

"The name's Wesley, Willie Wesley... And I was bushwhacked by two men who stole everything I had 'cept the clothes on my back," I quickly replied, wincing at the memory. "I don't mean to be ungrateful, but where am I, and how in hell did I get here?"

"You're in Brethren... in Oklahoma Territory," she replied.

Just then, a diminutive, elderly man walked into the room. "I see our patient's awake, Clara. Has he told you his name and what happened to him?" He asked, a grin spreading across his face as he walked over to my bed.

"Yes he has, Doc. This is Willie Wesley. He met up with some bad men out on the prairie. And right now he's full of questions."

"Well we'll just have to see about giving him some answers," Doc offered in a friendly tone, pulling back the bedding to examine my gunshot wounds.

As Doc changed the dressing on my wounds, he and Clara began revealing the circumstances of my presence there. They told me I had hobbled up to a tree at the edge of town, and collapsed. It was there that I was spotted by a handful of Brethren's townspeople, semiconscious and babbling about dying. They carted me to Doc Jessup, who, along with Clara, had been caring for me over the last three days.

Though what they told me conflicted with my own hazy recollection of the situation, Doc explained my diminished condition rendered my memories of that day unreliable. Despite an uneasy feeling, and disregarding what my mind recalled as fact; I accepted his explanation along with the new reality of events that had been told to me.

Convalescing over the next several days, Clara and I spent countless hours talking and getting to know one another. As it turned out, we held much in common. We shared similar

roots, both having been born and raised in Texas, and then gradually making our way across the Red River. Also like me, she had no living family, only her friends and neighbors in Brethren.

Being a cattle drover by trade, I never established a hometown or friendships. Since the age of fifteen, my life consisted of going from one cattle drive to another with the occasional temporary job as a ranch hand during the winter months. I had never spent sufficient time in any one place to establish ties or feel a sense of belonging. However, the more I absorbed the friendly atmosphere of Brethren, the more I began to feel a longing to be a part of a community, their community.

Not only did I begin to experience an attachment for the town and people of Brethren, so too did my feelings for Clara grow deeper. Her infectious smile could penetrate and brighten my foulest of moods. Just the simple touches of her hand on mine set my heart aflutter. The sound of her voice set my mind adrift in undreamt fantasies of life with Clara as my bride. Every moment she spent at my bedside became a precious treasure.

Once I was able to walk, Clara and I took short strolls about town. Then, as my leg grew stronger, we began venturing into the countryside, just outside of town. It was during one of those walks to a nearby stream I finally decided to divulge my feelings for her.

"I've got something I really need to tell you, Clara," I stated, staring uneasily into her eyes.

She smiled, asking in a sweet voice, "What's that, Willie?"

Living the life of a drover offered me few opportunities to meet women. Outside those who worked in the saloons and bordellos in towns along the cattle trails, women were few and far between. To be perfectly frank, the women I had met were not the type of women with whom most cowhands sought to build a lasting relationship. Consequently, professing my feelings to a woman was treading new ground for me. It felt like I was trying to climb a slippery slope with banana peels on the soles of my boots.

The pressure to put those feelings into the perfect words mounted, as I gazed into her big, beautiful, emerald green eyes. The words I sought to speak became jumbled inside my head. No matter how I tried to slog my way through the disarray of my fractured thoughts, I could only stand there in distress, feeling very much like a steer stuck in mud.

"You don't have to say a word, Willie. I feel the same way about you," Clara offered with a broad, understanding smile, rescuing me from my own frustration.

A feeling of relief rushed over me. She had spoken the words my bumbling mind failed to send to my paralyzed lips. What's more, she professed having those same deep feelings for me. I pulled her into me, kissing her sweet lips. With the sound of the flowing waters and birds chirping merrily, she agreed to be my wife.

Hand in hand, we walked back to town, happily ever after sparkling in our eyes. There was an extra bounce to our step, keeping pace with the swaying of our interlocked hands. A crisp newness to the sights and sounds around us made us look upon our surroundings with more profound appreciation. Everything seemed right with the world as we reveled in our recently professed love for one another.

Back in town, we sought out Doc Jessup to tell him of our plans to wed. Clara seemed apprehensive about telling him of our intentions. I overlooked it, thinking it merely a case of her worrying over his response. Still, I confessed to finding it a little bothersome that the gleam in her eye diminished slightly.

"So you two are going to marry," the old doctor said with a grin, looking at us over the tops of his round lenses as he sat at his desk. "I couldn't be happier for you."

"Thanks, Doc. And don't you worry none. You won't be losing your nurse. We ain't talked about it, but I reckon me and Clara'll be settling down here in Brethren," I offered, nodding with a smile directed at Clara.

Doc and Clara exchanged dubious glances. Uncomfortable expressions covered their faces. The doctor's gaze remained fixated on her, while her eyes lowered to the floor. I could tell there was a secret they shared that needed to be revealed. The air in the room became ripe with tension, as their reticent demeanors continued amid an agonizing silence. I felt a sense of dread creeping over me, wondering of the dire mystery they shared.

"Willie needs to be told, Clara," Doc averred, breaking the uneasy hush.

"Tell me what?" I interjected, worry showing on my brow. "What the hell is going on here?"

"Before... you can be permitted to live in Brethren... so we can be together... You'll have to complete a task," Clara answered after a few lengthy pauses, with tears forming in her eye.

"What kind of task?" I asked with a confused deportment, thinking of their secret.

"You'll have to go to the town of Submission, a three day ride from here. There you will have to retrieve a wooden chest. Bring the chest to Brethren, and your heart can forever reside with us," Doc explained, a sickly grin sliding across his face.

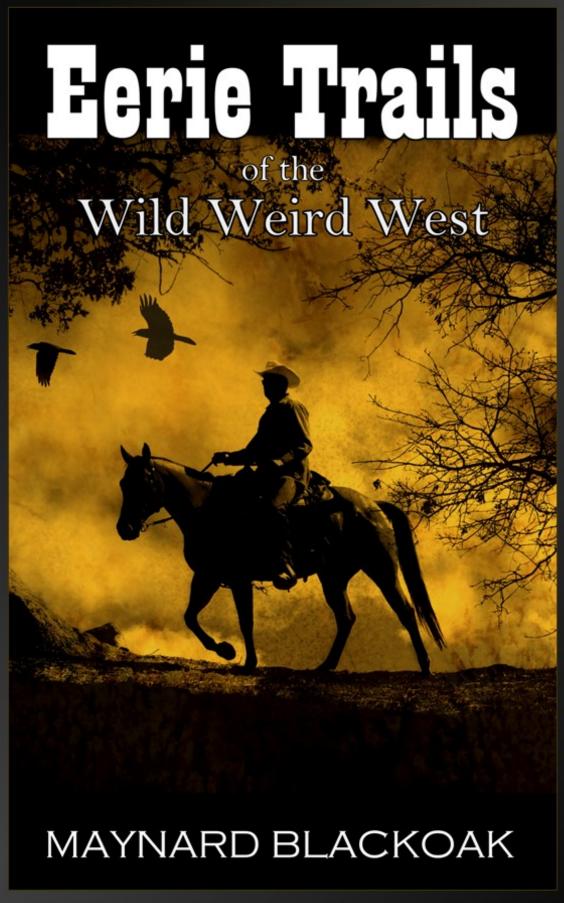
"That don't sound bad a'tall, Doc," I reacted with a smile, somewhat relieved. "Saddle me up a horse, and I'll be on my way."

My relief proved to be premature. Clara and Doc looked at me with sullen eyes. Once again, there existed an uneasy feeling there was more remaining to be revealed, a piece of information that would make this seemingly simple task more perilous.

"The people of Submission will know you are coming. They will not let you just take the chest. They will stop at nothing to keep it and you with them. You will have to be clever about your thievery," Clara expounded in a grim tone.

At the break of dawn the following day, I sat upon the back of a strong steed. Doc and Clara stood at my side, each wearing an expression of encouragement. Looking into her eyes of untainted love, I bent over in the saddle, and pressed my lips to Clara's. With the taste of her kiss on my lips and a confident smile, I spurred my horse into a gallop, and began the journey to fulfill my mysterious task...

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