



The Sirens Call

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Classic Monsters!

*Short Stories, Flash
Fiction, Poetry,
and Artwork for
Horror Fans!*

*Original Artwork by,
and an interview with,
Judson Michael Agla*

*An Interview with
author D.W. Gillespie,
plus an excerpt
from his novel,
"Still Dark"*

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Artwork by Judson Michael Agla
4, 35, 44, 68, 78, 95, and 103

144 Credits



The Wall Critters | *Joshua Skye*

Freddie knew the Dr. Seuss tale by heart, his mother read it to him often as his nightly bedtime story. Unbeknownst to her, he usually tuned her out, her sweet voice fading away, taking a backseat to his own thoughts. She sat on the edge of his bed, book held in both hands, resting in her lap. But he was looking beyond her lovely, blushing cheeks, downturned green eyes, and curling blond tresses, to the far corner of his room. It was an empty space, shadowed, and the wall was cracked there from an earthquake.

He'd looked into the fissure once, spying into its dark depths with intense curiosity. He saw nothing, but imagined much. He liked the idea that little things lived in there and peered right back at him with an equally passionate inquisitiveness. They were green, whispering creatures with gossamer wings and twitching antenna. He called them Wall Critters, and believed there were hundreds of them in there where they excavated the insides of the house like humans would an archeological dig. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, after the bedtime story was done and his mother had kissed him, the Wall Critters would spill from the crack and explore the room.

He hadn't noticed the story was finished until his mother caressed his forehead, moving a stray strand of his own blond hair out of his eyes. "Goodnight," she said lowly, leaned forward, and gave him a quick peck on the lips. "Goodnight," he replied. When she turned off the light, she was just a shadow in the dark, and he watched her form walk briskly from the room and close the door behind her. Alone in the quiet of his dark room, he looked toward that far corner and imagined the Wall Critters gazing at him with their big, black bug-eyes. A chittering could be heard as they whispered among themselves. What were they saying?

Taking a deep breath, Freddie snuggled down into the softness of his covers, his little eight-year-old head sinking into the fluff of his pillow. Closing his eyes, he imagined them fluttering around the room, darting like dragonflies as they explored it, seeking some previously unseen human trinket. Would they catalog it as archeologists did their treasures? Did they have a bookkeeper whose sole occupation was to maintain the categorized findings? Were the books, like those of Dr. Seuss' own writings, complete with whimsical and stylized drawings? How would a Wall Critter interpret an action figure or stuffed caterpillar?

As sleep was just about to whisk him to dream land, something buzzed by his exposed ear, the sound of an annoying housefly. Sleepy was instantly gone, and replaced with open-eyed attention. Sitting up, he looked immediately toward the crack in the far corner, though all he could see was blackness. Cautiously, he reached over to his nightstand and, as quietly as he could, turned on the lamp. The sudden shock of light burned and he closed his eyes. He waited for the redness behind his eyelids to ease him into the brightness, when the buzz came again. He could even feel it, a tiny wind caressing the top of his ear.

He opened his eyes and was confused by what he saw. It was indeed a common household fly, but it was tethered to the bedpost by a string, tied with a long, billowing bow. The captured insect seemed bogged down by the burden of the string, its circling flight slowing down with

every turn. Had the Wall Critters done this? Had they seeped from his imagination as they would the crack in the wall to give him some sort of gift? He certainly hadn't done such a thing, and he knew his mother would never so much as touch a filthy bug. As Freddie pondered the who and why, he didn't see the tall, gaunt, grinning man on the other side of the bed gazing down at him with glowing yellow eyes.

The boy reached over and tugged on the bow, pulled the tie loose, and set the fly free, or so he thought. The insect made a gallant effort to take off, but the full weight of the string was too much, and it was pulled to the floor. Freddie peered over the side of the bed, his big green eyes barely jutting beyond the landscape of his knuckles. The fly seemed so far away, a black spot on the beige carpet crawling aimlessly around. They didn't live very long, he knew. Maybe the poor thing was on its last legs, death only moments away. Would it die right in front of him, just curl into a little black ball and sigh one last insect sigh? Freddie watched intently, waiting for the fly's inevitable end, but it was taking a long time.

"Turn that light off and go to sleep," his mother's voice boomed from beyond his bedroom door. He flinched, sat up, and fumbled as he turned the lamp off. "We have a big day tomorrow, so you'll need your rest."

"Okay, Mommy," he called out as he wiggled back down into the comfort of his covers, enjoying the way the pillow cradled the back of his head. He still hadn't noticed the stranger in his room, the thin man with the iridescent, buttery eyes.

"Good boy. Goodnight." Her voice trailed away, walking back into the living room perhaps. For some reason he wanted it back, her sweet voice, there outside his door, merely talking to him about nothing in particular. It was comforting, though he supposed all mommies' voices were to their children. For a moment he thought about running out to her and throwing his arms around her, hugging her tight, but he didn't dare. She was a wonderful mommy, but she could be stern, again, as he supposed all mommies were.

He closed his eyes, let out a little boy sigh, and silently called out for sleep to return. His mommy said there was an entity called The Sandman who would come to children and help them sleep if they asked him to. Freddie had asked the night for such a favor, but he'd never seen any man materialize in the dark to sprinkle magic sand into his eyes. Sleep would always come, though, anytime he asked for it, so there had to be some truth to Mommy's story. Thinking about the Wall Critters, sleepy was surprisingly quick to return. As he relaxed deeper and deeper, he wasn't bothered by the weight on the bed. He was glad of it. Sometimes Mommy would slip into bed with him and snuggle and sleep and keep him safe.

It wasn't Freddie's mommy who crawled under the covers with him. It was a tall, half-naked, grinning man with otherworldly eyes. The boy imagined it was her, however, that pulled him into a gentle, oddly warm embrace. Long fingers moved affectionately through his hair, lips kissed his forehead, and a voice told him to hush even though he hadn't said a word. And that wasn't his mommy's voice.

He was jarred awake much more harshly than before, a sudden consciousness like a slap across the face. He opened his mouth to scream, but a hand quickly covered his lips and muted it

before it was even born. Freddie squirmed, but the embrace tightened. The boogeyman hushed him again and something about it was profoundly threatening.

“I heard your imaginings and silent calls in the dark,” he muttered into the boy’s ear, a voice like a tiny wind caressing him. “I have come to answer your requests. I can make you sleep, Freddie. I can make you sleep forever. Wouldn’t you like that? And in that forever sleep I can give you the dreams you’ve always wanted. You can be a Wall Critter, too. I’ll put you into the darkness of that crack, you’ll go to sleep and stay there forever.”

The boy tried to squirm out of the embrace as long fingers slipped around his throat and squeezed so very tightly. It was painful, the new return of sleepy, ushered in by the continued whisperings of the boogeyman. A dream instantly came, though it felt so very real. He was carried over to the far corner of the room, and as a magician doing some impossible feat, the stranger stuffed him into the fissure in the wall.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Joshua Skye is the award-winning, bestselling author of *The Angels of Autumn* and *Cradle*. His short stories have appeared in several anthologies and periodicals. He lives in Texas with his husband Ray and their son Syrian.

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The Faraway Tree | *Evan Baughfman*

Cold, bleak nothingness, and then a flurry of activity in the snow.

Two ravenous beasts fight at the edge of the woods. The vampire, dead flesh starving for luscious life. The werewolf, full of vitality, always ready for a meal. Hungry friends quickly turn into hungry enemies in the dead of night.

The wolf slashes. The vampire bites. The wolf roars. The vampire screams.

The hunter and his son watch from behind a faraway tree. Silhouettes struggle against the backdrop of a vermillion moon. The hunter hands a rifle to his son. The rifle is loaded with silver bullets. It is heavy in the boy's shivery, frail grasp.

"The wolf must die," says the hunter.

The boy hesitates. "But it's my brother."

"And my son," says the hunter. "It is what's best for the village." Indeed, werewolves kill livestock and the occasional vagrant. But vampires steal women and children from their beds.

The boy brings the rifle to his shoulder. He aims, fires. A bad shot. The worst shot possible. He has hit only snow.

The hunter groans. "Who taught you how to shoot?"

"You did," replies the boy.

The werewolf and vampire halt, frozen in the snow. The wolf raises its snout. The vampire tastes the air. The wolf growls. The vampire shrieks. They turn to a faraway tree.

"Give me the rifle," says the hunter. He aims, fires, misses.

The boy asks, "Who taught you how to shoot?"

"Your grandfather," the hunter answers.

"But he was blind," says the boy.

The wolf charges. The vampire flies. The boy cowers. The hunter shields.

The hunter lifts the rifle to the sky. Blood rains from the vampire's jaws. The hunter cannot fire. He now recognizes the vampire as the thief who took his wife two months prior. Surely the creature will tell him of her fate.

Instead, he aims for the wolf. He can now see his eldest son's green eyes on the head of the loping beast. Beautiful emerald jewels, just like his mother's.

"Quick," says the hunter. "We must climb the tree."

The hunter lifts the boy to a branch. He hands the boy the rifle.

The hunter pleads, "Climb higher. I will follow you."

The boy, rifle slung over his shoulder, clambers upward. The hunter jumps, reaches for a branch. His fingertips slip on ice. He plummets back to the ground.

The wolf has arrived. Its fetid breath melts snow. The hunter looks into its eyes. They are all that remains of his firstborn.

The wolf licks its muzzle. The hunter unsheathes a silver blade. The wolf leaps forward. The hunter swings his sword a second too late. The hunter howls, falls, and cries as his son steps over him and begins to feed.

Tears have frozen the boy's eyelids shut. He can only hear his father's cries, his brother's crunches.

The vampire lands on the tree's highest branch. It does not make a sound. It descends to the boy, stealthy, hungry. The creature has tasted this child's blood before. His mother's throat had been warm, filling, sweet nectar. His brother had been bitter. The vampire expects the boy to be succulent and saccharine.

The branch beneath the vampire moves, comes to life, creaks. The boy hears this, raises the rifle, aims, fires. A bullet pierces the vampire's black heart. The beast screams, defeated, aflame. It falls, ashes alongside flakes of snow.

The wolf looks up to the boy, done with his father. The beast's green eyes are now crimson pools, fierce, unforgiving. The wolf leaps.

The lowest branch darts for the wolf, grabs, constricts. The wolf twists, bites, whines, yelps, wheezes, dies. Blood spills onto gaping roots.

Another branch plucks the boy from where he trembles. The boy fires into wood again and again.

The boy drops. He hits the ground running. He cannot see the direction in which his feet lead him, but it does not matter where he goes, so long as it is faraway.

Behind the boy, the tree now sits powerful yet disappointed, eager but still.

It waits.

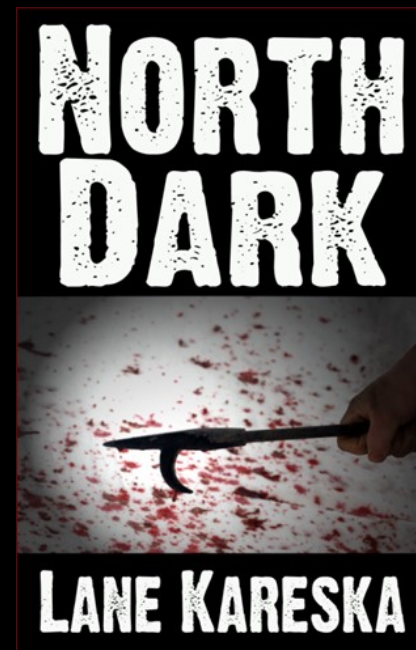
ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Evan Baughfman is from Southern California. His newest play, *A Taste of Amontillado* (an adaptation of *The Cask of Amontillado*), is available through Heuer Publishing. Additionally, Evan's authored the collection, *Twisted Tales from Edgar Allan Poe Middle School*. Many of those tales have also been adapted into short screenplays. "The Emaciated Man" won Best Overall Short Script at the 2017 International Horror Hotel Film Festival.

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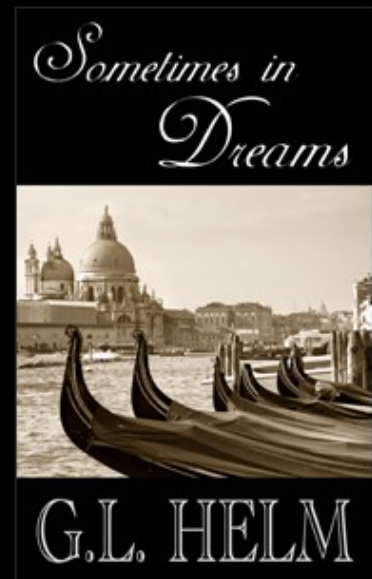
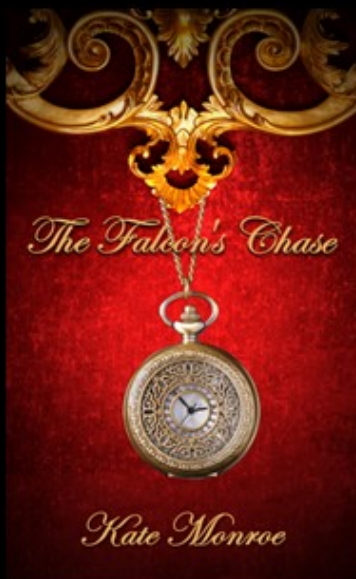
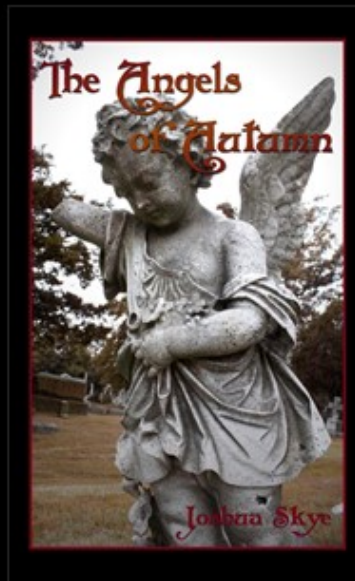
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The Foundling | *Edward Ahern*

Michael vomited again, but Silas trapped most of the spray in a cotton diaper. The other parents in the waiting room ignored the upchucking, focused on their own problem infants.

A short, Aztec-featured woman in scrubs came over and took the soiled diaper, giving Silas a clean one. Michael started to cry, but even reddened and tear-swollen, his face looked gaunt. Silas gently rocked his son in his arms, brushing the top of his head with kisses. Michael was all he had left of Beatrice.

When at home Silas sometimes cried along with Michael—Michael because he was hungry. Silas because he was no longer a husband and unless Michael could be treated would soon not be a father. His name was called.

“Silas Mortinson?” Come with me please.”

The examination room held only two chairs, a high chair with feeding tray and a plastic sheeted crib. Cleansing agents were lined up on a side shelf.

“Mr. Mortinson, I gather that Michael still isn’t able to keep solid food down?”

“Or most liquids. All he can keep down is diluted fruit juices, not enough to keep him alive.”

“When did this problem start?”

“Three weeks ago.”

“Did anything change in his diet at that time?”

“He’d been receiving breast milk from my wife.” Silas coughed roughly. “Until the day before she died.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss, Mr. Mortinson. And you’ve tried the various milk formulations on the market? Soy milk for example?”

“Yes, of course!” Silas snapped, then regretted his outburst and spoke more gently.

“Michael can’t tolerate any sort of milk, nor solid food. He’s starving, he bolts down everything I put near his mouth, but pukes it all back out almost as fast.”

Michael had resumed crying. Silas’ voice was a gentle sing-song. “There, there, my baby boy, my baby son.” He’d prepared a nursing bottle of vitamin laced fruit juice and nudged the nipple into Michael’s mouth.

Michael sucked violently, then spit the nipple out. Silas’ voice was sad. “He knows it’s not what he needs.”

The nurse’s name tag read Helen Quinlan. She looked somehow frightened. “Mr. Mortinson, the results of Michael’s blood and DNA testing were atypical. While your Michael should receive one of our formulations that includes protein, calcium, and sera. You’ll need to remain here for two hours after Michael’s feeding to see if he regurgitates the formula or retains it. Would that be acceptable?”

“Of course, anything.”

Helen left and returned ten minutes later with a nipples bottle containing a thick, rose colored slurry. "Let's see if this helps. Don't be surprised at its warmth, it's pre-heated to body temperature."

Michael took the nipple with suspicion, suckling slowly at the unfamiliar taste. Then he devoured it, leaving an empty plastic liner inside the bottle. Silas, used to Michael's violent spewing, didn't put him over his shoulder for burping, but held him to his chest against a diaper, waiting for the upheaval. But Michael gave a normally soggy burp and went to sleep.

"He hasn't upchucked!"

She waved a cautionary hand. Silas noticed that she was trim but nicely rounded. "The next two hours will tell us the story. If he regurgitates we haven't found the answer. If he holds the food down we'll have an idea of what to do next."

Michael's breathing was easy and slow. Silas felt a burst of relief and joy at being able to hold his son without anxiety, but eventually laid him down in the bassinet. *Maybe Bea, just maybe*, he thought, and as his tension continued to ease he fell asleep in the chair.

"Mr. Mortinson?"

Silas started and lurched toward the bassinet, but Michael was still sleeping. "Yes, sorry, Ms. Quinlan, I fell asleep. He didn't get sick!"

"Call me Helen, please. No, he seems to have held it down." Her voice was calm, but worry lines still crisscrossed her forehead. "I'll prepare a kit with enough formula for the weekend. If Michael's able to hold his food we'll follow up on Monday. If he resumes vomiting, bring him back in immediately."

The ride home, the evening feeding, were blessedly normal. Silas grinned the next morning when Michael pooped, his first solid defecation in days. Silas whispered to him through the feeding and well past the time he fell asleep, nursery rhymes, and how they'd go hunting when Michael was grown, and then resonant sounding babble.

His own hunger gripped him, and Silas realized that he'd been losing appetite and weight along with his son. He thought about a beer, then gave himself a mental dope slap. He needed to be sharp if anything happened. He prepared a sandwich and brought it back into the bedroom to eat. Michael's crib was next to Beatrice's side of the bed, and Silas had no heart to move him away. Her belongings lay about, undisturbed since the day she'd been ambulated to the hospital.

By Monday Michael's coloring had gone to pink, and his arms and legs began to lose their old man flabbiness and reflate toward baby chubby. If he hadn't been carrying Michael, Silas would have skipped into the clinic's waiting room.

When Helen Quinlan led him into the examination room there was a white frocked man waiting. "Mr. Mortinson, I'm Dr. Victor Stregoni."

"Aren't you the owner of this clinic?"

"I am. Michael's case is quite unusual, and I'm going to handle it personally. Thank you, Helen, that'll be all." Helen Quinlan looked as though she wanted to say something to Silas, but simply shook hands and turned around to leave.

“Mr. Mortinson, Michael’s blood and genetic test results, and his positive reaction to our formula confirm an inability to process normal foods and liquids. The formula he has been taking for the past two and a half days is—specially selected so that Michael can digest it. This is a chronic condition, one which he’ll have to accommodate for the rest of his life.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying. Michael’s going to need an artificial diet? Is it available in stores? How much does it cost?”

“Ah, no, this formulation is only available here at the clinic. It’s expensive, but we can make it available at \$1 per feeding if you allow us to see Michael on a regular basis so we can follow his progress. He’s quite an interesting case.”

Silas scrutinized Victor Strigoni. He was not skinny, but sinewy, as if his body fat index approached zero. “Dr. Strigoni, you mean that Michael can have a normal life?”

“We’ll have to verify that his recent lack of nutriment hasn’t damaged any of his functions, but, yes, in all but diet he should pass as normal.”

They arranged for weekly provisions and clinic visits, and Silas walked out. Helen Quinlan was standing outside the front door when he exited.

“Mr. Mortinson!” she hissed.

“Ah. Helen. How are you?”

“Never mind. Get the formula examined!”

“Pardon?”

“Have the food tested. You won’t believe me until you do. Use a lab in another city, and make sure they do complete genetic testing. Don’t tell them it’s food. Call me when you have the results. Here’s my cell phone number.”

“But... What?”

“I can’t be seen with you. Just have it tested.” And Helen Quinlan darted back into the building.

Michael recovered steadily for two weeks before Silas decided to have the food checked. *After all, he thought, I’ve got no idea what they’ve giving my son. Bea would have had it tested two weeks ago.*

Testing services like he needed don’t advertise on Facebook, and it took Silas two days of research before finding an out of state facility. The uninsured cost was almost \$5,000, but Silas finally justified it to himself. He described the slurry as being of unknown origin and composition.

He received an irate phone call four days after the parcel was received.

“Mr. Mortinson, we’re not in the habit of practical jokes, even if they’re paid for.”

“I beg your pardon! The sample was sent to you in good faith, but obviously the results are abnormal. What have you found.”

The lab analyst’s voice slowed and lowered. “Mr. Mortinson, the complete results will be sent to you, but in brief the sample is of human origin.”

“What do you mean?”

“Human. Bone calcium, blood and sera, muscle tissue, organ materials. Human. We’re discussing reporting this to the police.”

Silas’ mental wheels slipped, then got traction. “That’s not necessary. The material came from an authorized medical facility and I’m just verifying its composition for my own benefit. Involving your clinic in a police investigation and press coverage is surely not desirable.”

The voice on the phone paused and hardened. “Please do not send us any samples in future. We accepted your sample for testing in good faith, and will provide the results, but want nothing further to do with you.”

Silas felt vaguely guilty, although he’d done nothing wrong. “Of course, if that’s how you feel. Just send me the results and the matter is closed.”

He hung up the phone and stood next to it for several minutes, thoughts swirling. *Jesus, Bea, I’ve been feeding our son cannibal food. And he’s digesting it! Like he relished your breast milk, but wants nothing from a cow or a plant. Quinlan’s phone number—here it is.*

“Hello, Helen? What the hell is this formula you’ve been giving me!”

Quinlan’s words were strained. “You can’t ever tell Strigoni that I told you to test it! We can’t talk about this on the phone. Can you meet me later this evening? St. Stephen church on Boyle Street?”

Silas sputtered, then said, “All right. 7 p.m.? If Michael starts crying they’ll kick us out, you know.”

Helen Quinlan was seated in a pew next to the confessionals. Silas set Michael’s bassinet between them on the pew and turned toward her.

“What the hell is going on, Helen?”

“I’m going to leave here in ten minutes, so listen closely. Strigoni has been looking for a child like yours for a long time. He’s not going to let go of Michael. And you may want to let him have it. You know what he’s been feeding Michael?”

“Now I do! How the hell can he feed that to an infant?”

“Because it’s the only thing that’ll keep Michael alive. And I think it gets worse.”

“How?”

“Strigoni’s hinted that Michael’s going to develop physical and mental oddities that will make him a danger to others and maybe to you as well.”

“That’s impossible!”

“Like only being able to absorb human flesh? You needed to know, that’s all. I just wanted you to know before Strigoni tied you up too badly. I’m leaving.”

“Helen, wait, I’ve got questions...”

“And all the answers suck. I’m still leaving.”

“But, wait, if you hate this so much why are you working there?”

“Because I can’t get a job anywhere else. And Strigoni knows it. You’re going to find out that he’s already intimately familiar with Michael’s problem.”

He sat in the pew for several minutes after Helen left, Michael still sleeping. *Bea, he's yours as well. What do I do?* But neither Beatrice nor the resident God provided an answer.

Silas agonized, but saw no way to turn down what gave Michael life. Michael and Silas settled into an almost self-contained universe for several more weeks. The rituals of bathing, feeding and clothing. Tending Michael filled a spiritual need in Silas, like a priest treating vestments and chalice and consecrated bread and wine with reverence. He breathed in Michael's peculiar aroma of wilted flowers as if it were incense.

And then Michael began to teethe. His first milk teeth were incisors, and he began snapping at Silas's fingers if they came too close to his mouth. *My son, my boy is a carnivore, a sport. And maybe dangerous?*

Silas mentioned the pointy teeth to Dr. Strigoni, whose lips moved upward without really smiling.

"We need to talk, Mr. Mortinson. Michael has special needs that soon will be beyond your ability to handle. When that time comes we would like to place him in a facility that can accommodate his needs without risk of injury to others."

Silas reddened. "I may be unemployed right now, but he's my son, mine, and he lives with me. I know what you're feeding him, Strigoni, so we don't have to pretend. I had the formula tested. You're making a cannibal out of my son!"

Strigoni walked over, locked the door to his office and returned to his desk, all in silence. "Mr. Mortinson, I'll deny everything I'm about to tell you. You put both Michael and yourself in danger if you reveal this to anyone else.

"Michael, as you've gathered from testing the food, is a genetic cannibal. That is to say he can only digest human tissue and fluids. Not his fault, not yours. Once in every few million births a child like Michael is born. Most die of starvation or malnutrition before they're even as old as Michael. Almost all of the survivors die when those around them realize what's necessary to keep them alive. A very, very few survive to adulthood and are able to fend for themselves.

"These rare biological sports are the source of the werewolf and vampire legends—fanged, blood and flesh eating, feral carnivores."

"Michael's a baby, for Christ's sake, he'll grow up, except for his diet, just like other kids."

Strigoni lost his temper. "You still can't conceive of how bad it will be. Until he's matured and conditioned Michael will rip apart his little classmates and devour their entrails. After puberty Michael will prefer cunnilingus while she's having her menses. He has to be trained like a dangerous circus animal and restrained, Mr. Mortinson. We can provide that here. You can't."

Silas looked down at Michael, still sleeping. And in the silence noticed something. Strigoni had begun sweating while yelling at him. He smelled like Michael did before a bath, a rotten flower smell.

"You're one of them aren't you? Where's your fangs?"

"What're you talking about!"

"I should have guessed. Who else would spend the money and time to get the food and set up this facility."

Strigoni stared at him. "It wouldn't make any difference to your situation if I were, if I'd had dental work done to grind down the incisors. We can provide Michael with nourishment and habitat until he's adult enough to fend for himself. You can't. Sometime soon you'll need to turn him over to our care, for Michael's good."

"I'll go public, you bastard. Once people accept what Michael is he'll be treated well."

"He'll be treated like a side show freak, and put down the first time he maims or kills someone."

Michael had awakened at the shouting and started crying. Silas picked him up and glared over Michael's shoulder at Strigoni.

"Look, Mr. Martinson, Silas, deep down you know that I'm right, that Michael needs our help. Take Michael home with your usual supply of formula and think it over. We'll talk again in a few days. I encourage you to keep our conversation secret, as any attempt to go public would end very badly for you and Michael."

Silas moved with the measured, strained pace of a pallbearer out of the office and into his car. He fed Michael with a peculiar mix of fear and great love. *This is our body, this is our blood, Michael. Eat and live.* After putting Michael to bed he sat down, not to think, but to somehow sense what must be done.

Bea, I can't give him up, I can't. Even the most vicious guard dog obeys his master, and that's what Strigoni wants to become with Michael, forcing me out.

Two mornings later he called Strigoni's private number. "Dr. Strigoni. I know it's early, but Michael has been rejecting the formula."

"That's impossible."

"Maybe, but I just finished cleaning up the puke. Could you stop by and just look in on him? I don't want to wait another few hours, in case it's serious."

"All right, all right, where are you?"

Silas let Strigoni in thirty-five minutes later. Strigoni hadn't taken the time to shave. "Where's Michael?"

"Through there. Go ahead, I'll bring in some more formula."

Strigoni took two quick steps toward the bedroom. At the first step, Silas pulled his shotgun from behind a curtain and fired. Strigoni leaped impossibly quickly to one side and only a few of the buckshot pellets caught him in the ribs. Silas fired again, this time blasting Strigoni full in the chest. Strigoni dropped to the floor, coughing blood and spittle onto the carpet. Silas fired a third time into his back.

Michael had started crying at the explosive noises. Silas laid down the shotgun and loped in to pick him out of the crib. "There, there, my little boy, my little prince. Daddy's got to go and prepare your dinners." *Don't worry, Bea. I used steel shot, so no danger of giving Michael lead poisoning.*

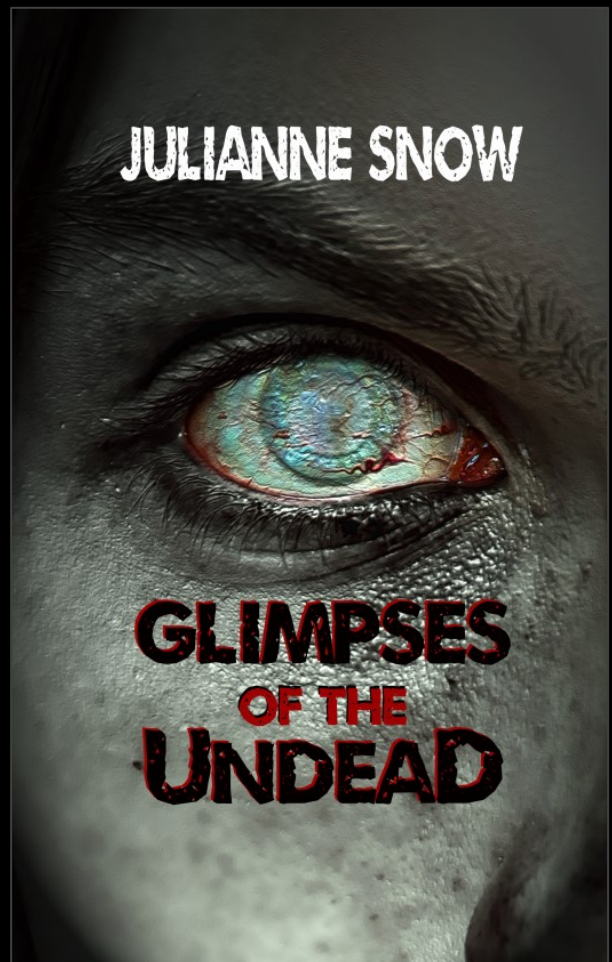
ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had a hundred sixty stories and poems published so far, and three books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of five review readers.

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Count Your Blessings | *Ken MacGregor*

It's the thirst that gets you. Before today, if you'd asked me what the most terrifying thing was about the sea, I'd have said 'sharks.'

And they are. Terrifying. Especially when they breach. You'd think you would focus on the teeth, right? Hundreds of sharp yellow cutting tools, in rows, attached to the only actual bone in the animal's body: the jaws.

But, no. It's the eye. You can only see one at a time, because the head of that fish is too damn big. That endless, ebony orb that stares back into you. It is sizing you up, that look. It is wondering what you might taste like. How many bites does it take to get you all the way down? To slake the endless hunger.

I'm not sure what kind of sharks they are. They're big, gray and scary-looking. Great Whites? Tigers? Makos? How the hell do I know? I'm not a sharkologist.

Yeah. They're bad all right. But, sharks are a distant third to the really scary things about being lost at sea.

Second to worst is the sun. You try to cover up, but of course, when the ship went down, you were only wearing swim trunks and t-shirt. Your head, arms, legs and feet are slowly roasting out here. Mine. Sorry. I've been adrift for a couple days. I get confused. Maybe my brain is getting cooked inside the toaster oven of my skull.

The sun's bad, all right. First, I was deeply red and my skin was sore. Now, I have blisters, second-degree burns. Can the sun cook my flesh all the way? Will I be Cajun Blackened Jeff Sturges?

Which brings us to our winning entry in the 'what's the most horrible thing about being lost at sea?' contest. The thirst. It tastes like agony.

I'll tell you the worst part: all you can think about is water. And, all around you is...yep: water. Only, you can't drink it. The salt content will kill you. I know this, intellectually. But, just look at it, sloshing against the sides of the raft, sparkling in the sunlight. So pretty. Just one little taste can't hurt.

Nope. Not going there. Not yet anyway. Maybe later. Keeping my options open. I'm crafty like that.

My father used to say, "Count your blessings." When I broke my index finger, he said, "Hey. At least it wasn't your whole arm." It was a grim sort of optimism that pretty much defined who he was. So, I'm counting my blessings.

One: I'm still alive. That's pretty cool, considering the other three people who were on the boat are not. Alive, I mean.

Two: I have the raft. This is a big one. If I were just floating in a life-jacket or something, I'd have been shark-food by now for sure. If not, then I'd be dead of hypothermia.

That's all I got. Two blessings. My dad would say, "Hey. At least it's not zero."

Something bumps my raft. Could the sharks be getting bolder? If they bite my inflated craft, I'm screwed. That'd be the end of both my blessings, I bet.

Of course, if I die, I won't be so damn thirsty anymore.

I am reminded of that one guy in Dante's *Inferno*. You know, the one in the water up to his chin, but every time he goes to drink it, the water disappears. Or, as long as I'm on a classic literature kick, that poem that goes on forever—I forget the name. The line I'm thinking of goes, "Water, water everywhere, and not a drop to drink."

I'm betting the two writers spent some time at sea. Maybe a long time, all alone, surrounded by miles of wet, shiny, oh-so-tempting poison.

I could just take a tiny sip. Not enough to do any real damage. Just, you know, wet my lips a little.

No. Bad idea. Stop it, brain.

Another bump. This time, I could feel it slide under me, all the way across the bottom of the raft. Whatever that is, under me, is getting more curious. Or more bold. Or just trying to scare the piss out of me. Well, joke's on you, shark. Too dehydrated to pee.

I miss my phone. Not that I would be able to get a signal out here, but at least I'd know what time it was. What day, too. I mean, the sun has gone down and then back up twice now. So, it's been at least 48 hours since the boat developed that fatal leak and went down to the bottom of the ocean with my \$300 phone and my three friends.

Well, my friends didn't sink right away. They lasted a good while. Constance almost made it into the raft with me. It was damn close. She could still be alive.

If I hadn't shot her.

All the blood in the water is what probably drew the sharks in the first place. Now, they were hanging around, hoping for more food.

I didn't mention the gun earlier when I was counting my blessings. That's because I used all but one bullet already. Eight shots in the clip and one in the pipe. That's the expression, right? Picked that up from movies. So, yeah. I burned seven of them in rapid succession. Three in the bottom of the boat, one in Cliff's head, two in Carla's ample chest and one in Constance's leg. It was a terrible shot, but she was attacking me at the time.

She fell to floor of the sinking boat, clutching her thigh with both hands. She looked more pissed off than hurt. But, it gave me enough time to pull the cord on the inflatable raft, jump in and shove away.

She dove in after me. You have to admire that kind of tenacity. She got an arm over the edge of the raft. She was spitting and swearing, if you'll pardon the pun, like a sailor. I calmly put the barrel to her forehead and she shut up.

"I'm sorry, Constance," I said to her. "No passengers."

I pulled the trigger. She looked surprised and indignant as she slipped beneath the surface. I guess I would be, too.

So, if you're keeping score at home, that's eight bullets. Out of nine total. I have one left. Not really a blessing. More of an unpleasant alternative to dying of thirst. Or to drinking the salt water. Or being shark bait.

The raft is moving. I mean, it's always moving a little, but now, it's more like, um, *traveling*. I grab the solid rubber handles so I don't get tossed over the side. Looking into the water, I see something I don't understand. There's a thing under me. It's not a shark. Too big.

Maybe it's a whale? It could be. I mean, from here, it looks like an endless expanse of gray flesh. If I were forty feet up, I might be able to see what it was more clearly.

We pick up speed, my tiny raft, the monster we ride, and I. Wind whistles in my ears. My sunburnt skin recoils from the sudden cold breeze.

I hang on. What else can I do?

We're going up, rising out of the water. Now, I am forty feet up, but I still have no idea what I'm riding on. It's not a whale. Too big.

I didn't think there *was* anything bigger than a whale.

Something else is breaching the surface behind me. It's even bigger than the beast I'm on. We climb higher. The mind-boggling mammoth behind me keeping perfect pace as more of it emerges from the sea.

Eyes the size of city parks. Nostrils big enough to inhale skyscrapers. Below them, teeth. Hundreds of them. Big enough to eat the world.

I realize where I am. My raft is not riding a separate thing. I ride the monster's tongue.

Okay. So I was wrong. The thirst is not the worst.

I am about to be swallowed whole by an impossible monster. Maybe this is my Hell. My punishment for murdering my faithless friends. Well, Cliff, Carla and Constance, you three cunts, you have your vengeance.

Of course, I had *mine* first, you cheating assholes.

As the mouth closes over the withdrawing tongue, over me and my raft, I think, *Hey. At least I still have the one bullet.*

Laughing, I say it aloud.

"Count your blessings."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Ken has been writing professionally for about six years. His work has appeared in dozens of anthologies and magazines, and the occasional podcast. He has two story collections: *An Aberrant Mind*, and *Sex, Gore & Millipedes*. He is a member of the Great Lakes Association of Horror Writers (GLAHW), and an Affiliate member of the Horror Writers' Association (HWA).

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Wherever You Go I Will Follow | *G.D. Watry*

Van slogs through thigh-high drifts, holding his dead father's rifle high above his head. Ice sheets crunch with each footfall. The powder beneath infiltrates his boots and socks. He's numb, the gnawing cold dull against his skin. He's been hiking through the grove since nightfall. The weight of labor pools at the base of his spine. But he must go on. The cabin isn't far.

He rests against the gargantuan trunk of a redwood, fitting comfortably inside a blackened notch. It'd be easy to stop here, to surrender to the forest's cold embrace. But he isn't done yet.

Above, the full moon cuts through evergreen needle leaves, illuminating the crystalline path ahead. Van shuts his eyes, only for a moment.

Like always, his father waits there.

The middle-aged man materializes, a phantom on the trembling screen of Van's eyelids. His clothes dangle in tatters from his ravaged body. Cartilage and bone peak through a confection of ribboned neck flesh. Blood seeps from a gash running from his navel to his solar plexus. Distended viscera hangs from the wound. His head lolls to the side, as if he's an unbidden puppet.

This is how he died, Van reminds himself.

He clutches the claws on his twine necklace. The trophies click against one another in his grip.

For years, he's followed the scent of dog across barren interstates, zigzagging through a maze of mutilated corpses. Through the violent wake, he's chased distant howls, sifting through the night and sleeping away the day. He didn't choose the hunt. The night his father died, the hunt chose him.

Van sees his father spread-eagle on the floor. A hulking, dark-furred mass feasts on the man's intestines. His father's fingers twitch. His eyes water with awareness. The only sound is the ravaging growl, soaked with saliva.

Flurries dapple Van's cheeks. He opens his eyes and forges ahead, deeper into the maw of the forest, a dark speck against the pristine landscape.

The cabin is alien among its standing brethren. The windows are dark. Wind chimes hang from the decrepit porch, clanging, echoing hollowly into the soundscape.

Perched on a bluff, Van sends the first shot through the cabin's bay window. The glass shatters. There's a moment of whirring white noise, and then the chaos begins.

The naked woman crashes through the front door. She's hunched over like a chimp, the posture feral. Matted hair drapes her face. The den mother bares her teeth in a snarl, focused in Van's direction.

Before she can charge, the moon grips her body, tugging at her blood.

Van loads the cartridge packed with the silver bullet into the rifle's magazine. He presses the bolt forward, the cartridge sliding into the chamber with a satisfying clack. His motion is fluid, like instinct.

He glimpses the writhing woman through the scope.

The den mother's eyes flush lignite in the sockets of her spasmodic body. Purpled veins bulge, shredding her skin like paper. Coarse fur rips through her dilated pores. A howling snout cracks open her yawning jaw.

Van marvels at the metamorphosis. He blesses himself with the sign of the cross.

"I don't know if you're the one," he says, starting his mantra. Something he's repeated many times.

Transformed, the den mother stills herself. The world floods her heightened senses with stimuli.

"But what your kind has taken, you will repay."

She sniffs the air, bats her ears with her claws.

"Wherever you go, I will follow."

She hears his murmurs, begins barreling towards him in a maniac gallop.

"For you are the dark."

She leaps, her claws outstretched.

"And I am the light."

He pulls the trigger.

Corrupted blood sprays against the white.

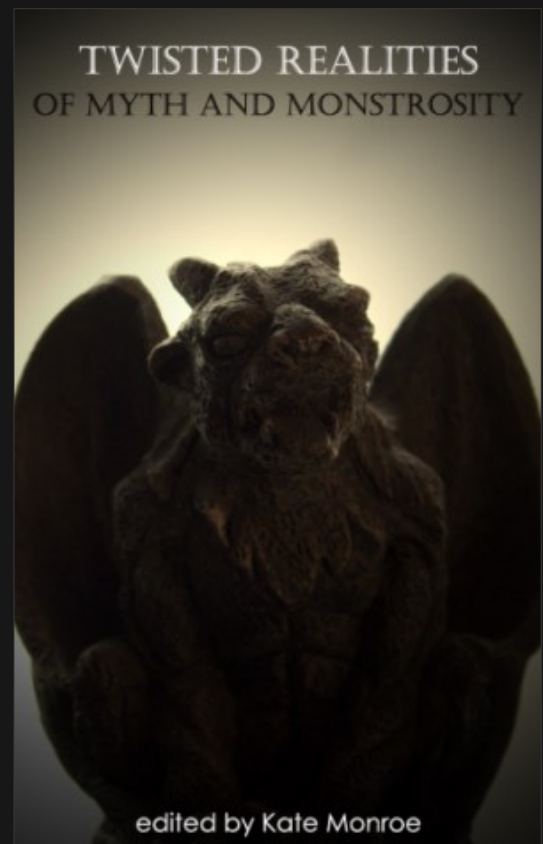
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Accidental Slayage | *Evan Purcell*

Ro the Dark Lord was ancient. Primal. Dinosaur bones. His toenails were older than civilization itself. His hairstyle predated Christianity. He had outlived kingdoms, races, even land formations. The continents shifted under him.

He was the Old One.

The First One.

The man of a thousand age-related nicknames.

Other vampires worshipped him. Most told stories of his greatness.

Unfortunately, I didn't know any of this when I accidentally pushed him chest-first onto a wooden post. In my defense, I was super drunk. "Whoa, man. Crap," I muttered through my beer-soaked stupor... but it was too late.

The Dark Lord had turned to ashes. And I had pissed off the most powerful vampires in the world.

Let me reiterate: I was really, really drunk that night.

You know what? Let's back up a second. I feel like you're judging me right now, and I don't blame you. I can do pretty idiotic stuff. But I think you should at least get to know me before the judgment sets in.

My name's Tom and I usually look better than I do right now. I mean, I'm in a freaking dungeon, completely cut off from deodorant and hair products and whatnot.

Also food and water. I'm cut off from those things too.

But usually I look better than this. Usually I have my hair spiked in a casual, intentionally messy kind of way. Usually my shirt isn't coated in blood, sweat, and what looks like rat vomit. Usually I'm, well... usually I'm handsome-ish.

That night, though, that awful, awful night when I accidentally killed Ro the Dark Lord... I wasn't really looking my best, either. Sure, there was no rat vomit involved, but I wasn't exactly on my A-game. See, my girlfriend Holly had just broken up with me. She said I never took anything seriously.

So I was on a bender—a *serious* bender, mind you—to take my mind off her. I wasn't in love with her or anything. We'd only been together for seven months. But it still hurt, you know?

Back then, I didn't really understand the meaning of the word hurt. I do now.

Anyway, I was walking home from Mystic Point, which is this bar that I really liked before it burned to the ground. I'd ordered a few too many beers, and they were all sloshing inside me. It was not a pleasant walk home.

Needless to say, I didn't see the five vampires walking toward me. I didn't notice that they all wore black and one of them—the taller woman—held a black umbrella over her head even though it wasn't raining. I didn't notice the moonlight shining down on them, or the way their dead-ish skin seemed to glow like anglerfish.

To their credit, they weren't trying to drink me or anything. They were much too busy running errands. Of course, I found out later why they were in this specific residential

neighborhood on this specific night at this specific wee-hour. But at the time, none of that mattered to me.

I finally noticed their weirdly glowy skin just as we were crossing paths. It took my brain a few seconds to process, and once I did, I promptly spun around to take another look. Unfortunately, spinning isn't the best pastime for the drunk and uncoordinated. I accidentally knocked into Ro, and his body completely pinwheeled away from me. It would've been comical if it weren't so fatal.

I've since forgotten a lot of specifics about that night, but I'll always remember the sound his body made when it erupted into dust. It was the airiest, most anticlimactic sound I'd ever heard. It was like a mummy farting out sand. It was basically a non-sound.

Prior to that night, if anyone ever asked me what a vampire's death sounded like, I wouldn't have guessed mummy fart. I would've expected screaming and pyrotechnics.

Of course, the pyrotechnics came later. Remember what I said about Mystic Point burning to the ground? File that away, okay? It comes back.

At that point, I sobered up pretty quickly. I still felt groggy, and the world still had that hazy, shuttery look that only happens when you're drunk or in shock. But I was mostly fine.

Well, fine is pretty subjective, huh?

I stood about a yard away from four ancient vampires who just saw me murder their leader. They glared at me and crept closer. I didn't see anyone else around. There really wasn't anything for me to do besides scream bloody murder and hope that a few neighbors wake up.

So I did that.

The scream was short lived, however, because one of the vampires—a tall, intimidating guy with flaring nostrils and a unibrow—grabbed me by the neck and raised me off the ground.

"This is when you die," he growled.

And he started to squeeze.

He would've squeezed until my jugular popped open and rained down on him—fun fact: that's what vampires call a 'human spritzer'—but he stopped mid-squeeze once I stabbed him in the eye with my thumb.

Now, I'm usually not a violent drunk, but I'm also usually not two neck-squeezes away from human spritzer territory either. What can I say? Desperate times. So I sort of gouged out his eye. He dropped me, and I ran for my life.

I knocked on a couple doors and screamed and screamed, but no one would answer... Probably because I screamed and screamed at them. There was really only one place for me to go: back to the bar.

Mystic Point is the... well, *was* the kind of establishment that wouldn't turn away a paying customer even if they babbled about vampires and clearly had eye-blood on their thumb. So I shouldn't have been surprised that no one noticed me when I plowed through the front door.

I was a little surprised, though. I mean, come on drinkers! At least pause your pool game for a half-second.

The radio continued to blast bad country music.

“Everyone! Listen! We have to board up the doors and windows. There are four...”

I couldn’t say vampires, not because I was censoring myself, but because the aforementioned vampires already crashed through the front door and drank somebody. I knew they were behind me—because of the crashing and slurping noises—so I spun around.

“Human!” the one-eyed vampire growled at me.

Another vampire, the lady one without the umbrella, stopped Ol’ One Eye with her hand. “Make it quick,” she ordered him. “We only have three minutes before it starts.”

I was almost positive that three minutes would be more than enough time to murder me. In fact, One Eye would probably do his business and still have two and a half minutes of free time in which he could challenge someone to pool. He was probably very good at pool, what with his long, vampire fingers.

By this point, most of the other bar patrons—at least the soberest among them—had already made a run for the door. A few of them were quickly murdered, but most got away with all their veins intact.

I ran through the bar, positioning myself behind one of the pool tables. One Eye casually walked up to me. He grabbed a pool stick and spun it in wide circles. Another vampire (the other male) joined him. “Back off,” One Eye said. “This one’s all mine.”

“Two minutes,” Umbrella Vampire warned.

And that got me thinking. Whatever they were waiting for, it must’ve been a big deal to them. That was probably what brought them all the way out to this random neighborhood in this random town. So if I could just survive for two more minutes, then they’d have to leave... and I could sneak out of here without getting killed.

“That’s all the time I need,” One Eye said. He jumped over the pool table and lunged toward me.

I didn’t even realize I had a pool stick in my hand until I noticed that One Eye had fallen directly on it. More specifically, his ribcage fell directly on it. In other words, I accidentally killed another one. I wished there were more living people in the bar, but sadly everyone within a hundred foot radius was either dead or undead, so no one saw my awesomeness.

Of course, One Eye exploded into a big, ashy puff. You’d think I would’ve been prepared for that, but I wasn’t. Some of him got in my mouth and everything.

The other male vampire was about to attack me, when the two women held him back. “Come, Kristoff,” Non-Umbrella said. “We must go to the coordinates. We have one minute remaining.”

And then they were gone... which left me all alone in Mystic Point. Well, me and some dried out corpses. The only sound was that awful country station, but even that was just some nighttime DJ droning on about that night’s lunar eclipse.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, was when my drunk person logic kicked in. I had seen enough bad horror movies to know that if you get attacked by vampires on the night of a lunar eclipse, then there’s probably some sort of connection. These vampires must’ve gathered together so they could go to some specific point during the exact moment of the lunar eclipse so

they could do some vampire ritual and... I don't know, turn into super vampires or something? Open a hell hole? I never really found that part out.

All I knew was that something really, really bad would happen. Even though there were only three vampires left (thank you very much), they were still super evil. And they were probably still in the general area. After all, they didn't call this bar Mystic Point for nothing.

I had to stop them.

But I couldn't really take on three at once. And I definitely couldn't cancel the eclipse. So I set the bar on fire.

Okay. Now bear with me. Like I said, this was the logic of a drunk guy. I figured that they were harnessing some magic moon power or something. And because they had to gather in a specific spot, I figured the conditions had to be perfect for everything to work... Which meant that the best way to stop it would be to block out the moon.

With smoke.

From a burning building.

You following me?

So I Molotov-cocktailed the crap out of Mystic Point, and boom! Flames everywhere. Who knew I had such a knack for arson? Well, my brother Joe did, but that's a totally different story.

Anyway, I was going to get swallowed up in the flames if I didn't move fast, so I ran straight for the door. The three vampires were just a few feet away from the building, chanting and holding hands. They might have been glowing too. I don't quite remember.

They were in the middle of their ritual when the sky shook and lightning struck the earth. I could hear one of the vampire women scream out obscenities and I knew that their plans had been thwarted.

Now, I totally would've gone back to slay them or whatever, but I could hear police sirens already, so I knew that help was on the way. Besides, I really needed to get out of there. I'd done enough already.

But then I heard screams and gunshots and explosions and I realized that the police really had no idea what they were up against. You'd think the fangs would've been a giveaway.

Whatever. I made a quick U-turn and walked back to the street corner. Apparently, in my two minutes of walk-away time, a lot had happened. The three vampires were riddled with bullets but otherwise ambulatory. The dozen police were riddled with fang marks and otherwise not. One police car was overturned and another was on fire.

Crap.

So the vampires were making a pretty huge spectacle of themselves. Umbrella Lady screamed like a banshee. They were way pissed off, either because a bunch of cops shot them a lot, or because their unholy ritual was disrupted by swirling smoke.

They still hadn't noticed me, so I figured I'd have enough time to find a wooden stake. And, once again thanks to my drunk person logic, I figured the best place to find a wooden stake would be near the flaming entrance to Mystic Point. So I rifled through the crumbling wreckage, but every time I found a halfway decent piece of wood, it was always on fire.

So I kept chucking the fire-eaten sticks over my head. It was honestly getting a little frustrating. Fortunately, one of the vampires—Umbrella Lady—tried to sneak up behind me. I didn't hear her approach, so when I casually tossed a burning stick over my head, it kind of struck her in the shoulder. And her dress kind of erupted into flames. And she kind of disintegrated.

By this point, I was really starting to doubt the whole concept of vampire immortality. They seemed ridiculously killable to me.

Of course, the whole erupting-into-flames thing drew the attention of the other two vampires, so they ran toward me. Fun fact: vampires are pretty fast, even in unnecessarily long trench coats.

They dove at me, and I would've been tackled to the ground if I didn't duck. Holly and I used to do yoga together, so my ducking skills are pretty great. The vampires were going way too fast to change directions, and they both hurtled over my head...

Straight into the burning building.

And that was how I took down a bunch of vampire lords. Crazy, right?

You're probably still wondering how I got in this stupid dungeon, though. I bet you assumed it was vampire-related. Well, funny story.

A few nights after the eclipse, I was out on the town with my buddy Steve. I kept drunk-dialing my ex-girlfriend Holly, so he wanted to distract me from all that by taking me to some new club.

Well, to make a long story short, I accidentally pissed off this mad scientist guy. Something-stein. A real whack-job. There was this whole big thing with a lava lamp. And now here I am, chained up in his dungeon with you fine folks, swapping embarrassing stories. I honestly don't know how I'm going to get out of this one.

And don't get me started on the werewolves.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Evan Purcell is an English and drama teacher working in the tiny Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. He spends most days exploring the nearby mountains and eating way too much of the local food. He also writes romance novels and horror stories.

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Desert. Nothing but empty, boundless desert, stretching for miles and miles. For years and years. It was endless the time he'd spent searching this desolation. The wasteland that had once been the mortals' proud and lofty civilization. He'd seen countless ruins of cities and cathedrals. All tombs now, containing the dust of humanity. He'd spent an eternity walking past them, through them, never ceasing and never returning. One lost, lonely figure in a deserted landscape.

He was the last of his kind, the last on Earth. Maybe even the last sentient creature on the dead planet. The disease that had taken all life had not affected him or those like him. The insignificant virus that had destroyed life more violently and more quickly than the biggest bomb had bypassed his kind. But in a way it had affected all his tribe. Did the lion not starve when the antelope became extinct? Did not the great all-conquering virus fade to nothing once all life on Earth passed into the veil of night? His tribe had starved as the lion had but alas, unlike the great cat, they'd been unable to die. Instead, theirs had been the torture of endless pain, of torment and hunger. All his brethren had finally chosen the Great Sleep rather the pain of conscious existence. The Great Sleep, the dark dormancy where bodies decayed to dust as the spirit faded to nothing. Not death, but close. He had been different, loving the thin shadow of life he still clung to. It was too precious, and he was too selfish and too scared to give it up. And so he wandered the world, hoping that he would find the elixir that would resurrect and energize his weakened muscles.

He came to the sea, powerful and restless. Life would come again, he knew that. As a child of the planet, as a part of nature, he knew that somewhere in the darkest depths life was probably already stirring. But it would be centuries or more until he would find the liquid he needed. He could not wait.

He headed back to the land. He came to the ruins of another destroyed town and took shelter. The cold wind did not affect him, but he still found the sensation unpleasant. A wall shielded him from the worst of the sea breeze. Suddenly his nostrils flared. There had been something briefly in the air. Something he had not smelt for decades. A human smell. The distinct odor of human blood. His heart would have raced, if it had been capable of such action. He stood to try and pick up the scent again. There it was. It came from the land, not the sea. It was far away, but he could follow the trace. He had found what he had been looking for. What he had denied the Great Sleep for. Prey.

It took him three weeks to find the source of the bewitching smell. It was deep in the desert, far within the driest, hottest part. Constantly walking, day and night, he traversed miles and miles of sand dunes and scrubland. His body tissue dried as he traveled; his ancient skin crisped on his head and arms, peeling away to nothing. No new skin grew back. He had long ago lost that power, but he no longer cared about his appearance; there was no one to see him.

He did not feel the sun sear his body with a strength that would have killed any mortal. He felt nothing at all. Only the thought of that wonderful odor filled his mind. Thoughts of the beautiful life-giving elixir drove him onward.

He came across the isolated ruins at night. He found the remains of a wall to rest against. His muscles were fatigued. He had driven himself hard, maybe too much, but it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was the prey. And now he was at the source. The odor was strongest here, somewhere within these destroyed dwellings. He closed his eyes. Morning would be soon enough to search. For the first time in centuries he was tired. Not physically, no, that was impossible. He was mentally drained. He felt old.

The dawn warmed his eyelids, forcing him to open his eyes. He welcomed the light, he could now search with his eyes as well as his nose. It didn't take him long to locate his prey. A brief search through the ruins yielded nothing. It had been a small town, probably no more than a village. It was a dead place now. The source was just outside the town; a metal lid embedded in the sand. A manhole cover with a lever mechanism attached. The entrance to a bunker. He knelt in the sand and put his face to the metal between lid and base. A slight draught from below blew the powerful smell of human into his nostrils. His senses were overloaded by the smell. At last.

The cover bore silver streaks in the otherwise dulled and weatherworn metal. It was obvious that it had been recently opened. It was now just a matter of waiting. He found a spot on a dune about a hundred yards from the entrance and settled down to wait.

It was nearing the end of the day when there were signs of life from the entrance. A quiet, rusty creak woke him from his doze. The lid was being pushed sideways to open. He saw a patch of light colored hair move above the metal lip, but nothing else. The rest of the head eventually poked out. It moved from side to side, obviously checking out the terrain. Despite overwhelming excitement, he remained motionless, knowing that with the sinking sun behind him he would be difficult to spot. After a moment the figure emerged completely. It headed towards the ruins, clutching a bucket under one arm. It passed close to him without noticing and, taking the advantage, he leapt out at the figure. It squeaked and fell in the sand, the bucket's contents spilling. The figure, spread-eagled, used an arm to shield itself.

"Don't hurt me! Please!"

It was the first time in decades he had heard human speech. He stood frozen, entranced by the sound. He had forgotten how beautiful a human voice could be. The figure lowered its arm slightly, obviously confused that there had been no attack, and in doing so exposed its face. He stared in surprise. The figure in front of him was a child, no more than ten years old. The child started to weep. He opened his mouth to speak to the boy in front of him, all thoughts of attack and killing gone from his mind. His throat was too dry. He swallowed and tried again.

"Don't cry. I'm not going to hurt you. Please stop."

The figure stopped crying, snuffled and stared up at him in silence. He thought of something else to say.

"What's your name?"

The figure looked suspiciously at him, then spoke.

"Adam. What's yours?"

"Well, Adam, my name is..."

He suddenly realized he couldn't remember his own name. He stared down at his hands. His ancient hands. He couldn't remember his own name. Adam sat up, no longer scared.

"What is it then?"

"I don't know, Adam. I've forgotten"

"My mummy wrote my name down for me. On a tag round my neck," Adam said helpfully. "That's how I remember. Didn't your mummy write your name down?"

"No, I don't remember her," he replied, but that knowledge was neither shocking nor new. A thought came to him.

"Is your mummy down in the bunker?"

Adam shook his head once, side to side.

"No, she is gone, like the rest."

"Gone? Do you mean dead?"

"Yes, she died about a month ago. I looked after them all, but they all died. They were ill. I've been by myself and now the toilet has blocked up and I can't fix it."

Adam started to cry again.

"Then there is no one else down there?"

"No. I'm lonely. Are you lonely?"

He stared at Adam, thoughts of prey coming back to him. Here in front of him was the first living human he had seen in decades. The bunker must have been a survival shelter where Adam's forefathers had retreated to when the crisis started. Adam's tribe would have been too scared to come out of their fortress, preferring to live underground on what they could grow under the earth. But then, some infection had ripped through the isolated group, sparing only the youngest and most helpless. How ironic.

The blood in Adam's veins would taste sweet and rich, but he couldn't do it. He couldn't bring himself to kill the precious life in front of him. Maybe the thing he craved most now was not blood, but company. Someone to share the empty world with. Maybe through Adam he could eventually remember his own name.

"Yes, I am lonely. Do you want to come with me, Adam? We can go exploring. Maybe find some other people."

Adam nodded. He stretched out his hand towards the child.

"Come on, Adam. Let's go."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — R. J. Meldrum is an author and academic. Born in Scotland, he moved to Ontario, Canada in 2010 with his wife Sally. He has had stories published by Sirens Call Publications, Horrified Press, Trembling with Fear, Darkhouse Books, Digital Fiction and James Ward Kirk Fiction. He is an Affiliate Member of the Horror Writers Association.

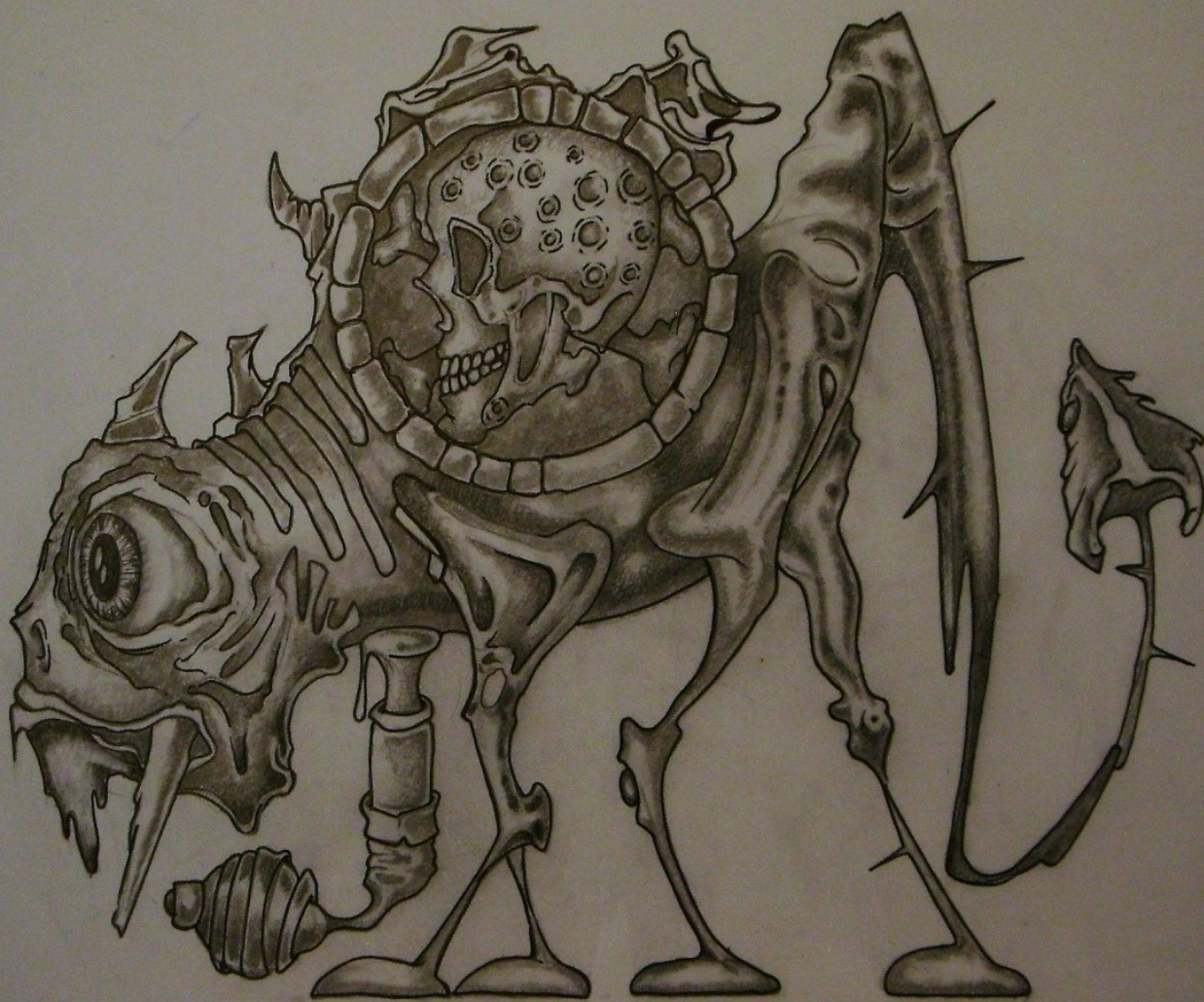
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Carson Buckingham

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They say, just never answer the door. Never? Well, I guess it depends.

First, there's the 'you have a package' kind of doorbell ring. One firm, businesslike press of the button just to let you know the box is there. Then, you can open the door, but not right away—just whenever you get around to it. And then there's the quiet, persistent knock. You see, I actually know some of our neighbors and one of them (for example, Betty, who lives next door) is quite elderly. That polite, timid, repeated knock... you never know. It could be Betty, or someone who wants to talk to you about angels.

I stood there facing the two women through the slightly open door, wet paintbrush still in hand, and adjusted my glasses. The one closest took a step and squinted at me. The porch was a little bit dim this time of day. I flipped the switch next to me on the wall. Still dark. *I keep forgetting to get that light fixed.* "Uh... you said... angels?"

"Yes! Angels!" she said, sweetly. "We're here to talk about the real presence of *angels* in your life." Gnats danced in the cool breeze. The taller woman behind her clutched a clipboard in one hand, absently brushing an errant gnat from her silver hair with the other. "May we come in?"

I have no idea why, but I didn't slam the door in their faces, even though I rehearsed it in my mind several times. You see, I was never the kind of person to harm or offend anyone. *Better to be kind. Better to smile and nod.* I smiled, and nodded. They came in.

The first one was black, heavy-set, in her forties. She shook my hand delicately. Her nails sparkled with some kind of elaborate manicure technique that I never dreamed of having done myself. "My name is Judith and this is Maura." Maura was markedly older, and had one of those drippy, beaded eyeglass chains that kept her reading glasses handy somewhere near her sternum. She handed me a pamphlet, her mouth taut. I took it, barely glancing at the pastel cover illustration. "We feel *so* blessed to speak to you today!" Judith gushed. She looked over my shoulder, searching for a place to sit. Maura shifted her feet uncomfortably, absently toeing aside a scrap of teal felt in the lint-covered carpet.

"Oh, would you like to sit down? Sorry my place is a mess," I muttered, running my free hand through my purple-dyed hair. It was a fair description, the only available surface for sitting being an old La-Z-Boy that was supporting a teetering stack of lidless, used plastic containers. I walked into the 'kitchen' only named thus in its proximity to the magnet-and-doodad plastered fridge. I pulled out a thin, bony-looking chair for each of them and remained standing with my drying paintbrush.

I glanced up at the dusty brass ceiling lamp. It was only a matter of time, now.

Judith paused, eyes roaming over the countertops piled high with fluffs of woolly hair, puffs of stuffing, plastic baggies filled with beads, rusted tools and spools of wire poking out here and there. She cleared her throat, seeming to finally decide on the most appropriate script: "If you have financial problems, know that you have angels. Especially people just like you!"

Thank the Lord, angels are sent to us as gifts from heaven. They are our stewards, watching over us and helping when any need is greatest...”

Maura’s beads glinted in the dusky light through the patio door. The green hand that closed around them was small, lightning quick, and very, very strong. A shriek escaped her as she fell backward, landing on a pile of discarded velveteen. The old chair groaned as Judith pitched herself jerkily backward as well, pointing and gawking up at the ceiling, which was now crawling with colored creatures that spread from the fixture like a drop of ink on wet paper. Beads snapped and tapped across the scuffed vinyl floor, joining the scramble of tiny booted feet. Little paws scraped worn chair legs. The clambering, wheeling, whistling tumult seemed to move in an unnaturally accelerated way. Like jungle ants, they formed an aggregate of struggling manes, tails, and limbs. Before Judith could scramble any further back, they flowed over each other and bridged wall to tabletop. A singular bright turquoise daredevil flung itself at her breast, prehensile tail extended. Another dove straight for Maura, its patchwork ruff sticking out in all directions, bead eyes shining with excitement. *Don’t scream*, I thought, but before my voice could catch up with my thoughts, the monkey-like one had scaled her lower lip and had already darted halfway into her mouth. “Aaaaaaagllph!” uttered Maura, gesturing wildly at Judith, who rolled sideways to face her friend and helplessly raised a critter-covered hand to her aid. She regarded her shaking, useless fingers and screamed loudly at them.

I pulled my hood up to hide my face and perched on the kitchen table. Judith’s low, guttural wails filled the house and sank to the foundation. I turned away a little. I guess I’ve always been a timid soul. I didn’t much care to watch her glittery nails being torn off and carried away by the giggling, wild-eyed horde, but I could hear celebratory chanting and gleeful gurglings that *I* knew meant—here, here, HERE, WE HAVE SHINIES! HERE! *My children, so playful, so lonely, how can you blame them? I never can. Better to be kind.*

I couldn’t really tell if they left with everything...you know, intact? I’m pretty sure some items were lost. Particularly the shiny things. Treasures, you know. They aren’t picky, but ‘shiny’ always counts the most.

I smiled. I nodded. *I really should get that light fixed.*

Anyway, make it a rule—never answer the door.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Leah Jay lives, sleeps, makes things, writes, and eats ice cream in deep suburban California, accompanied by paint, paper, yarn, thread, fleece, clay, wire, wool, felt, and a very understanding husband.

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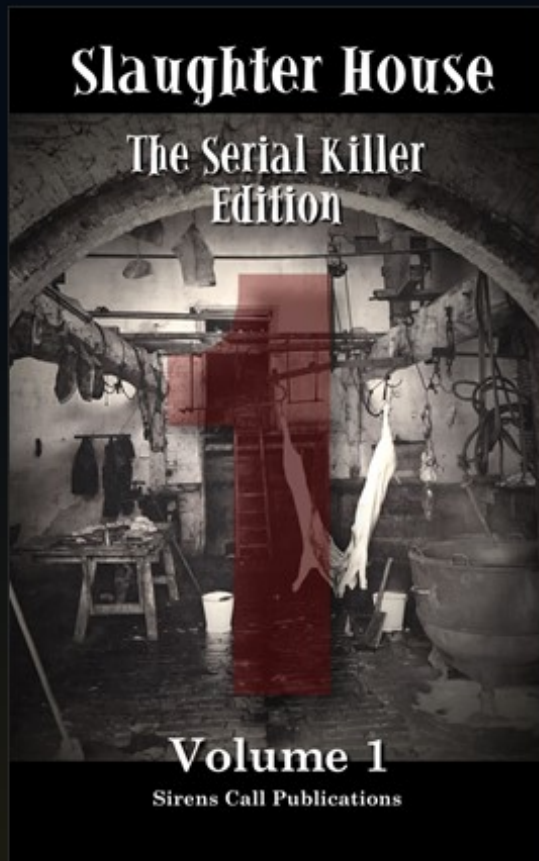
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Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed

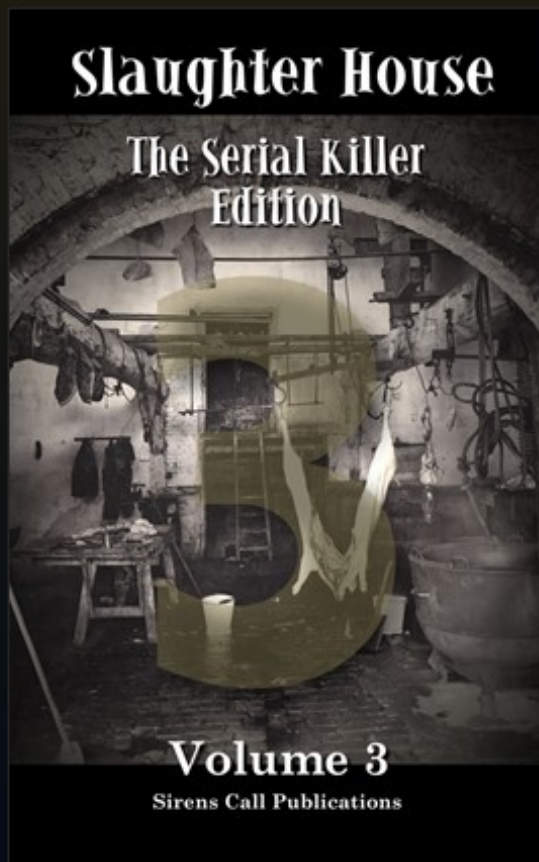
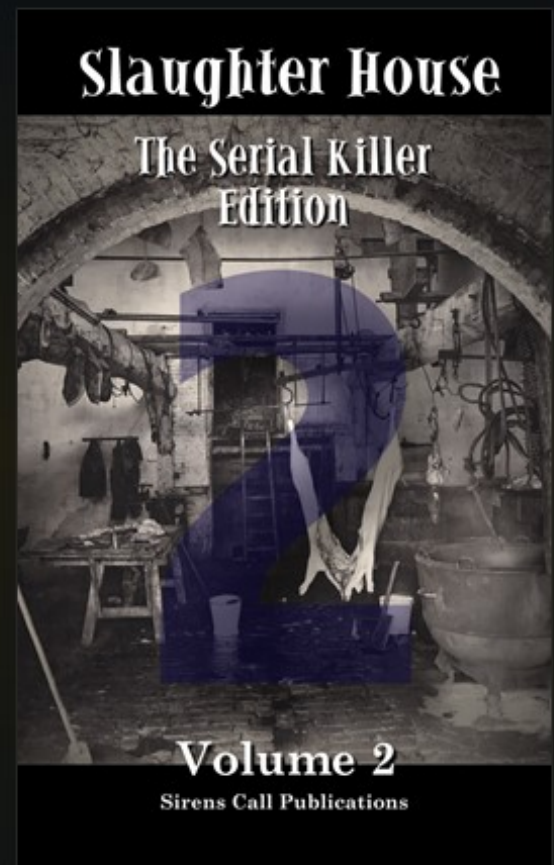
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“Is that it?”

Lieutenant Arno Woller lowered his field glasses. He glanced over at the man next to him lying prone on the sand dune, Private Johann Manner. “That’s a pyramid, but not the pyramids. Cairo is still 200 kilometers east. I’m not certain what this is. It’s not on the map.”

Arno looked at his wristwatch. It would be dark soon. He didn’t want to be wandering around the desert at night with British Army somewhere out there. The squat monument of stone was located in a depression surrounded by dunes. He decided this would make a good bivouac site for the night.

“Let’s get the others.”

The two men slid down the slope of the dune. Sergeant Rolf Fritz and Corporal Max Hanno were reclining against the armored bulk of a *Sonderkraftfahrzeug* 232, an eight-wheeled armored car. Both men were smoking and trying to avoid the glare of the sun hanging low in the sky.

Rolf took a long drag from his cigarette, then stubbed out the remains and stuffed it in his pocket. A good reconnaissance man left nothing in the field to give his presence away, he liked to say. “How’s it look?”

“It’s not a firing position. Looks like a pyramid of some sort.”

This piqued Max’s interest. “A pyramid? Are you sure, sir?”

Arno snorted. He knew that before the war, Max had been studying for his doctorate in ancient history. He wasn’t surprised that this ruin would spark his curiosity. “Yes, I’m sure. You can poke around it after we make camp. Okay?”

Max grinned. “Yes, sir!”

“There’s cut in the dunes up ahead about 75 meters. We’ll enter through there,” Arno said. As he watched his men climb into the armored car, he took a moment to reflect on how he wound up here.

He was part of the 33rd Reconnaissance Battalion, 15th Panzer Division. The battalion was scattered across the western Egyptian desert, probing for weaknesses in the Allied lines that Rommel’s Afrika Korps could exploit. Arno had been sent looking for a path around the southern flank of the Allied lines. This morning, the vehicle’s radio had ceased functioning; the only sound coming out of the speakers was a drying hiss. While not completely lost, the combination of fluid lines, trackless deserts and poor maps meant that finding a friendly unit would take patience, skill and a little luck.

Arno’s reverie was broken by the growl of the armored car’s engine. He unslung his MP40 submachine and led the vehicle to the cut on foot, keeping an eye out for soft spots in the sand. When he reached the cut, he held up his hand. Max braked and watched his commanding officer disappear between the mounds of sand.

Arno brought up the muzzle of his MP40 and proceeded into the depression. From this angle, he saw that a fissure ran from the ground level of the pyramid to a point halfway up the 15

meter slope. Arno looked around for signs of recent activity. Finding none, he left the depression and waved the vehicle in. He climbed on top and yelled in through the open hatch, "Over by that opening. We can use it for cover."

As the armored car lurched forward, Arno jumped back to the ground. He walked around the perimeter of the pyramid. The sides were pitted and worn by countless centuries of wind-driven sand and the limestone blocks were poorly fitted. *Like someone was in a hurry*, Arno thought.

When Arno returned to the men, they were already setting up the sunshade and unloading jerry cans of water and fuel. "Okay, top off the tanks. I don't want to be caught dry if the British find us. Rolf, after you get something to eat, I want you working on the radio. We need to get in touch with headquarters."

Rolf spat out a wad of sandy phlegm. "I'll try, but I think that bitch has finally given up."

"Do whatever you can."

Max cleared his throat and motioned to the opening in the pyramid with a nod of his head. Arno chuckled. "After we get set up, you can go play archeologist."

Night fell quickly. In the depression, the men missed the orange-red glow on the western horizon that marked the last moments of the day. After wolfing down a meal of bread, hard cheese and sausage, Max excitedly entered the pyramid. The other men sat around a folding table, drinking coffee and planning for the next day.

"Without the radio, I think our best course of action is to proceed to Point 23," Arno said, "our forces should have advanced to that position by now."

"Lieutenant!" The men turned as Max emerged from the pyramid. He was running, his flashlight bobbing wildly. He stumbled to a halt. "You have to see this."

Arno held up one hand. "Calm down. What did you find?"

"A sarcophagus."

"A what?" Johann said.

"It's an Egyptian coffin," Arno replied. He swallowed the last of his coffee and nodded. "Okay, let's see what you've found."

The four men picked their way through the tumble of limestone blocks. The fissure opened into a small chamber, the entrance outlined by the faint glow of stars. While the walls once displayed colorful hieroglyphics and paintings, the centuries of exposure had worn them clean. The men flicked on their flashlights. A narrow passage led deeper into the structure.

"This way," Max said, leading them into the passage. The walls were barely large enough for the men to pass between and they had to stoop over because of the low ceiling.

Arno was just beginning to wonder how stable the stones above his head were, when he emerged into a large chamber. The flashlights picked out images of animal-headed figures on the walls, surrounded by lines of dull orange hieroglyphics. In the center of the chamber, a stone sarcophagus sat on a raised dais.

Johann walked up to one of the walls and inspected the rows of ancient symbols. “Hey, Max, what does this say?”

“It’s the story of her,” he said, tapping the stone top of the sarcophagus with his flashlight. “Princess Amessis. I don’t understand all of it, but apparently she tried to overthrow her father, the pharaoh. She failed and was brought here to be executed and mummified. According to the writing, the pyramid was to be buried.”

Arno nodded. “That would explain the depression. Why bury it, though?”

Max shrugged. “It seems like they were going to great lengths to wipe out all knowledge of her.”

Johann joined the others. He tentatively touched the ancient stone. “Why go to all this trouble?”

“Because she was still an important person,” Max said, “they gave her the burial rites her station in life demanded. Also, they wanted to avoid the curse.”

Johann withdrew his hand. “The curse?”

“Showing disrespect to the dead always results in a curse.” Max suppressed a laugh.

Arno and Rolf realized Max was teasing Johann. Rolf added, “Everyone knows about the curse of the Egyptian mummies. When those British explorers found Tutankaman’s tomb a few years ago, they all died from mysterious circumstances. Right, Lieutenant?”

Arno nodded and said solemnly, “That’s right. All dead. Very mysterious.”

For a moment, the three men restrained themselves, enjoying the look of panic coming over Johann’s face. Then, they burst out laughing.

Johann’s face screwed up in a grimace of displeasure and embarrassment. “Very funny.”

“You’re too gullible,” Max said.

After a few moments, Johann’s face softened and he joined in with the laughing. When they stopped he lightly kicked the sarcophagus. “We should open it.”

Max shook his head. “This is a priceless artifact. We need to make a note of its location for future study.”

Rolf clapped Johann on the shoulder. “Why would we want to open it anyway? To see some dried-up Egyptian?”

“Haven’t they found gold in these tombs? Max just said it’s priceless.”

Rolf gave Arno a shrug. “It can’t hurt to check it out.”

Max couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “This is a terrible idea. We’re not archeologists. Even if we wanted to open it, we don’t have the tools to do it properly.”

Although Arno was sympathetic to Max’s perspective, he was also curious. He ran the tips of his fingers along the seam between the base and top of the sarcophagus. “If we use crowbars, we should be able to do this without damaging the top. We just need to loosen the seal.” He saw the look of concern on Max’s face. “If it looks like we are going to do some damage, we stop. Okay, Professor?”

“Slide it right in here,” Max said to Johann. He was pointing at part of the lid’s lip that had broken loose sometime in the past. Max had worked the cracked piece of stone free, creating a small recess just big enough for the tongs of the crowbar. Max continued to examine the lip, finding a worn spot for Rolf’s crowbar.

With Johann and Rolf in place, Max motioned Arno over. “When they lift, we steady the lid and help pull it free. Then we all lower it to the ground.” The other men nodded. “Okay, on three. One... two... three.”

The men strained at the bars. They heard the stone begin to grind. There was a loud moan as the seal split and the stale air trapped within spilled out. The tomb filled with a heavy musty odor. Johnna and Rolf let go of the crowbars and the four men lowered the lid to the ground. They then peered into the sarcophagus.

The body of Amessis lay within. The limbs and chest were wrapped tightly in rotted linen bandages. Her head and shoulders were covered by a gold mask with painted blue eyes.

“It’s beautiful,” Max said.

“It’s solid gold,” Rolf blurted out, as he reached for the mask. Before Max could say anything, he had pried it off and pulled it out of the sarcophagus.

The face of Amessis stared up at them. Her skin was wrinkled and pitted from centuries of dry, subterranean air. Her eyes were open, but the sockets were empty. The mouth was slightly open, the teeth showing behind thin, brown lips.

“She’s seen better days,” Rolf said, before looking over their prize. He flipped it over and noticed carvings the inside. “Hey, what does this say?” He passed the mask to Max.

Max examined the writing. It took him a moment to decipher it. “It’s a curse. A real one. It says whoever disturbs the tomb of Amessis will feel her wrath.”

Rolf laughed dismissively. “Hey, Johann, give her a kiss and let her know we’re friendly.”

“No thanks.”

“Okay,” Arno said, “we got what we came for. A little bonus for our pensions. Let’s get back to camp. I want to head out before dawn.”

Rolf laughed. “Not before I get my kiss, sir.”

He leaned in. He wasn’t going to kiss the corpse; he just wanted to give the men a good laugh. In the darkness, he didn’t see the mouth open wide or the head raise up, but he felt the teeth sink into his face. He screamed as blood flowed from his torn cheeks.

The other men froze in a moment of shock. They didn’t move until Rolf managed to push himself away from the sarcophagus and collapse to the ground. In the dull white beams of the flashlights, they could see that Rolf’s face was covered in blood. His cheeks were shredded and his teeth exposed.

Johann screamed and ran into the passageway. Max and Arno rushed to their fallen comrade. “Take off your shirt,” Arno said to Max. He then pressed the dusty khaki uniform on the gaping wounds. “Rolf! What happened?” Rolf couldn’t answer; he had already gone into shock. “Come on, we need to get him out of here. Take his legs.”

Before they could lift Rolf up, Arno—who was facing the tomb—saw the gnarled hand of Amessis waving tentatively in the air, before it found the edge of the sarcophagus. She pulled herself into a sitting position. The skin that clung tightly to her skull glistened black with blood. She chewed slowly on Rolf’s flesh and turned her empty sockets towards Arno.

“Oh my god.” Arno scrambled away, backing towards the opening.

Max, back to the sarcophagus and holding Rolf’s legs, looked at his commander quizzically. “What—”

He wasn’t able to complete his sentence. Amessis leaned over the side of the tomb and sank the exposed bones of her fingertips into Max’s throat. Blood welled up around them and flowed down his bare chest. The only sound to emerge from his mouth was a wet groan. He dropped Rolf’s legs and beat at Amessis’ dried limbs. It was no use. He was hemorrhaging blood. Each blow was weaker than the last. The last thing he saw before losing consciousness was Arno disappearing into the passageway.

Arno wasn’t thinking of his men. He was only thinking of survival. *Get outside*, he thought. *Get outside, get to the armored car, get out of here. Get the air force to bomb this place back to hell.*

“Johann!” he yelled, “get the engine...”

His last words were lost in the metal hammering of the armored cars’ 20mm main gun. Johann was in the turret, mad with fear. He saw a dark figure emerge from the pyramid, pulled the trigger and didn’t stop until the magazine was empty. He poked his head out of the turret and swiveled the vehicles spotlight to where he had fired.

He saw Arno’s body, reduced to chunks of flesh that steamed in the cold desert night. “No,” he groaned, desperately clinging to his last bits of sanity.

Amessis emerged from the pyramid. The bandages that covered her body were red with blood. A dull green light shone in her empty eye sockets. She was grinning, her dried lips pulled back revealing black teeth.

Johann screamed, a hoarse gobble that would be the only sound he would make until his voice was gone. He scrambled into the driver seat and drove out of the depression, heading aimlessly into the empty wastes of the Sahara.

Amessis looked down at her hand. She examined her body with a sight that went beyond that of human. She ran her finger over stones splattered with Arno’s blood. She ran the dried husk of her tongue over the slick fingertip. It tasted sweeter than the finest honey cakes she had known in her first life. As the rising sun set the eastern horizon on fire she emerged from the dunes. She turned to face it.

The gods have given me a new hunger, she thought, and a new world to satisfy it with.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Jeffrey Durkin is a writer living in Arlington, Virginia. After 14 years of Federal service as a computer engineer, Jeff transitioned to full-time writing in 2013. He has published short stories in the science fiction and horror genres and owns and operates a number of movie and pop culture blogs. He published his first novel, *The Age of the Jackal*, in 2015.

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The Vampiric E-Vasion | *Melissa R. Mendelson*

I just wanted fresh air. I wanted the wind to touch my skin and feel the sun on my face. I wanted to remember what the grass felt like under my toes. I wanted to be outside, and we were allowed out on the lawn for a short time. Then, we would have to go back inside, inside to that four-walled prison, which felt more like a coffin than a home, but I wanted to be outside. And they were timing me, and then I crossed the street. And the moment my foot touched the other side, the alarms went off.

The drone arrived quickly with a whoosh of air. I felt it before I saw it, and then my shoulder burned as it fired a warning shot. The next would strike me in the chest, so I hurried back across the street toward the house. But then I stopped. The thought of going back in and staying in made my blood run cold, and then my leg burned. Another warning shot. I was lucky the drone didn't just kill me, but why did it spare me? Then, I realized that an Evaluator had been contacted, and that was far worse than a simple kill. And this wasn't my first attempt. It was my third, and the drone refused to leave until I not only closed the front door but moved further into the house. Damn infrared. I wondered who was really watching me, but it didn't matter. Before the next day, I would be visited, evaluated, and then, maybe, erased. All because I wanted to go outside.

I made dinner at six. Spaghetti. I was trying not to eat meat, even though I could have ordered it with a simple push of a button, but with the hot tomato sauce, I was good. The dinner wasn't. It was like a rock in my throat, and I glanced out the window. The sun was starting to set. Soon, it would be dark, and my online friends warned me that the Evaluators only came at night. This way, if anything were to happen, if I were to fail the evaluation, it would be too dark to see anything, and when the next day came, nobody would ask any questions. Nobody wanted an Evaluator to show up at their door, and the stories told made them seem like ominous monsters. But the Evaluator that knocked at my door at nine p.m. was not a monster. He was a little, old man.

"Call me old-fashioned," the little, old man said. "But could you please invite me in? I always feel rude just walking into someone's home."

"Please, come in," I said, holding the door open for him, and a ringing sounded from my television set. "Could you give me a moment? I need to answer that."

"As long as you don't mind me going into your kitchen and getting a glass of water?"

"Please. Make yourself at home," and I watched him walk off in his black attire, holding a gray fedora in his hands. I then quickly moved into the living room and stood before the television set. "Answer," and the black screen snapped back to reveal my older brother wearing jogging pants and a t-shirt with a beer in his hand. "Jimmy, I'm kind of busy," I said. "Can you call back later?"

"Mom and Dad asked me to call you," and I sighed at that. "They heard through the webvine that an Evaluator was coming to see you. Did you go outside again? Man, we talked to you about that. Nobody goes outside anymore."

“Yeah. Because they don’t let us,” I snapped at my brother.

“Look, with a push of a button, you can have whatever you want, and with a million channels, you can watch whatever you want. Or you can go online and play video games. You can order books or comics and read in the living room.”

“Jimmy?”

“Look, I’m trying to help you, and now the Evaluator is coming.” He took a long slug of his beer and then paused. “He’s there now, isn’t he? Shit, and you’re making him wait? Dude, you’re going to fail the evaluation. Shit. What am I going to tell Mom and Dad?”

“That it’s your fault?” I laughed at that, but my brother did not. “I’m trying to be funny.”

“Well, don’t be. I’ve heard the stories too. Look, I’ll let you go, and you meet with him. And you keep your damn mouth shut. Yes. No. Those are your only answers. Call me when he leaves,” and the screen went black.

“Shit,” I now said and looked over my shoulder toward the kitchen. I was making him wait. He seemed like a sweet, old man, but what if he wasn’t? What if he was taking notes right now? What if I had already failed the evaluation?

“Everything okay?” The little, old man watched me walk into the kitchen. “You look pale. There is no need to worry,” and he patted the seat of the kitchen chair next to him. “Oh, where are my manners? I am Grayson, and you are Roberts. Correct?”

“Yes,” I answered, swallowing hard as I sat in the chair next to him. Then, I noticed the blue glass left in front of me, and I looked up at him, almost melting into his dark brown eyes. “What’s this?”

“Water. If you get thirsty,” and he licked his lips before reaching for his glass of water. He took a long gulp and then turned my way. “Shall we begin?” I nodded in response. “Okay, Roberts. Should I call you by your last name? Is that okay?”

“Why not,” I replied. “Sure. Yes.”

“Okay,” and Grayson turned to a small briefcase that I didn’t realize he had been carrying. He lifted it up onto the table and pushed it open. Inside was a large, manila folder, and on the front was my last name, Roberts. “In this society today, everyone is classified by their last name,” he said. “Some people like hearing their first name, and some don’t. As long as you remember your first name.”

“I do. Johnny. Jimmy and Johnny.”

“That was your brother that called?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t your parents call?”

“We really haven’t spoken in a while. My marriage only lasted a year, and my wife at the time said that one reason was because my parents would interfere. They would call a lot, which they did, and then they would go online and review our orders to see what we were doing, watching, eating. They could be a little overprotective, which was why I asked for my space after the divorce, and we really haven’t spoken since.” Maybe, I should not have told him all this.

Maybe, it was too much information. My brother did say to keep it simple, but there was no simple answer for that question. "Sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to drag on."

"Any kids with the marriage?"

"No."

"Any kids at all?"

"No."

"And are you close with your brother?"

"He's a pain in the... Um... We're a year apart, but we were never really close." I had to stop looking into his eyes. Every time I did, I felt like I was disappearing. I felt like I had to answer deeply because he wanted me to without even saying it. "What does my family have to do with the evaluation?"

"Just background," Grayson responded. "You know that this is your third strike, and for those with three strikes, they go to the Cube."

"No," I cried. "I mean... I won't do it. I won't go outside again, or maybe for the given time. But then I'll go back inside. I'll stay in the house," and he touched my hand. A calm fell over me.

"The Cube isn't such a terrible place," and he said that so sweetly that I almost believed him. But in today's world, the Cube was nothing more than a glass prison, full of third strikers, criminals, and the homeless. "You can look outside all day and enjoy the sunlight, and you like enjoying the sunlight."

"No," but then I fell into his gaze again. "Yes," I said.

"Nothing wrong with that, but rules are rules. And those rules can be tough on some," and he pulled his hand away. When he did, I felt cold, vulnerable. "Some need to find other ways to survive because if they don't, they die," and I looked at him in confusion. "There aren't too many like that left, especially with everyone in closed boxes today, and they have to adapt to survive."

"I'm sorry. I don't understand," I said.

"Will anyone miss you, if you're gone?" He stared deeply at me.

"No," and I almost enjoyed the sensation of disappearing into his gaze, of not worrying or being trapped in what he called, a closed box. "If only I could be free." I didn't mean to say that aloud, but I did.

"What about your parents, your brother, and your ex-wife?"

"I told you. My parents and I haven't really spoken, and my brother and I are not close. And my ex-wife is remarried with kids."

"And work?" He leaned in closer, licking his lips, but this time, he didn't reach for his water. "You seem to have many jobs. What are you doing right now?"

"Freelance stuff," I answered.

"And friends?"

“Friends,” I repeated, leaning closer to him. “They’re all online, and I don’t know if I should consider them friends. I’m always contacting them, and nobody contacts me. I feel... I feel lost, lonely like I don’t exist.”

“You don’t exist except to give us life,” and the little, old man opened his mouth, revealing a pair of fangs, and before I could respond, he sunk those fangs into my neck. And I shivered, almost enjoying the sensation of being drained as darkness settled over me, and then I heard him say, “Thank you, Johnny. Thank you.”

Grayson jumped off his seat. He gently leaned the body back against the chair. He then reached into his briefcase and took out a small, black cell phone. He flipped it open and listened to the beeping on the other end.

“Evaluation complete. He failed,” Grayson said. “We can set the nest up here. Send them over,” and he closed the cell phone. Then, he looked once more at the body. “Well, can’t let it go to waste,” and his fangs extended. “Besides, who knows when I will eat again?”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Since high school, Melissa R. Mendelson has been writing both Horror and Science-Fiction Stories. A lot of her writing has been published over the years by Gadfly Online, Bartleby Snopes Literary Magazine, Antarctica Journal, and now Sirens Call Publications. She has a collection of novellas available on Amazon Kindle and Amazon called, Glass Skies Over Home as well as a Science-Fiction novella called, Waken Dream.

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ABERRANT is defined as unusual, abnormal or different...



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Mausoleum of Fear | *George Lee Grimsley*

I heard the sound of birds and insects. An old iron gate squeaked open.

Should I be here? I thought. There was still time to exit where I had entered.

The wind sent a chill through me, so I buttoned up my coat and knocked on the door. no one answered. I looked around before going in. It was cold outside.

This place was a mausoleum. It was after dark and I was lost. How did I find myself here?

There was grass growing in the cracks and broken places of the sidewalk stepping stones.

Statues and religious writing were everywhere. Nobody was around. I pushed the door open, and then stepped inside.

The name is Nathan. Age 23. I have lived here in the area my whole life, and often in my own world. I worked at the rec center nearby. Well that's about it. I did not feel a day older.

Inside there were urns and cremation pieces—of the life weary—and the dead. The placing of the moonlight shining through the window made a flickering candle mood setting. The quietness was unread of life's final resting place.

I looked around and noticed a beautiful woman sitting on a bench.

Was this real? Maybe I was getting tired. My eyes were not falling asleep though.

She spoke.

"Please excuse me if your misguided passion for me has failed," she said.

Under unusual circumstances, I felt nothing. Why should I? The moment was left without envy.

Nothing at all finally seemed mournful.

Remaining silent was my only choice. She disappeared before me. Where did she go?

Quietly, I stood up.

"I'm over here," she giggled.

I followed her. She disappeared again. This was a hide and seek game. My footsteps were calm.

"My name is Catherine. Won't you find me?" she said playfully. Her voice was as soft as a piano.

This seemed to be some kind of fantasy-like dream. Almost like being in love, one could not conclude the fact, that I was actually somewhere else. I never wanted to lose this feeling.

Things were misled indeed. I didn't care. I wanted this to go on.

"Catherine, wait." I remarked in a friendly manner. Was I leaving myself open?

The vanishing left no trace of whereabouts. There was only a female whisper. This must have been the romantic side of darkness—elapsing in time—a carousel of fate.

The room held a secret of shadows in the corners. I turned around and there was a casket. It was beautiful and closed. I could almost hear the quietness inside. I could see it perfectly at the shadow's edge.

This surprised me completely. I had no idea why I was even here in the first place. My fingers ran alongside the surface of the box.

I opened it. There was a motionless sleeping man. He did not awaken.

Suddenly she came up from behind me. Her fangs looked sharp as she kissed me on the neck.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — George Lee Grimsley is a new writer, screenwriter, songwriter musician. He is now published twice with a high school diploma, and has recently competed in the Austin Film Festival short screenplay competition with a horror script entitled Hallways and Rooms. From the Austin area he is a native Texas resident.

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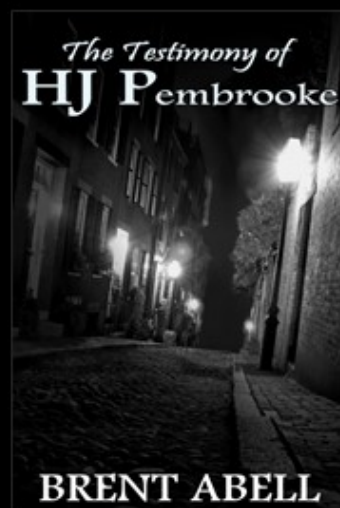
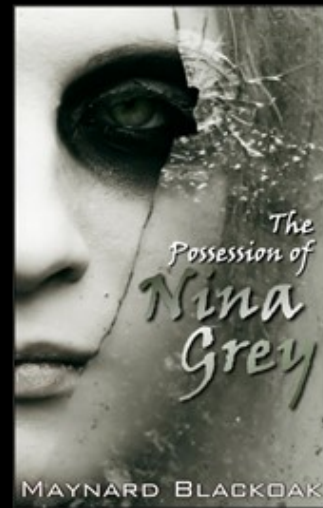
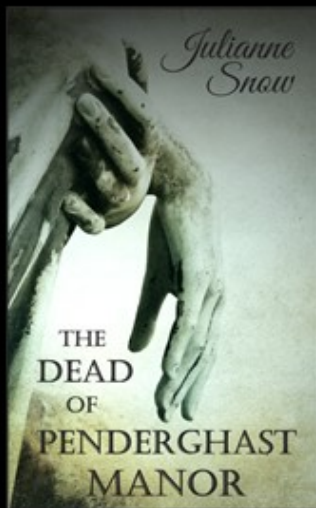
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He's My Boogeyman | *Kahramanah*

My childhood room was exactly the way I left it. A small desk sat in the corner with faded crayon marks along the top. I did my best to clean it off when I got older, but I couldn't seem to get it all. My favorite bedspread was smoothed out over the mattress. It was my first *grown up* bedding that wasn't decorated with cartoons or princesses. The wall was covered with posters of terrible bands that I had grown out of since I left for college.

And then there was the closet.

I sat on the bed with my eyes fixated on the closet door. It was a familiar feeling. I spent many nights watching, and hoping the door wouldn't open; most of the time it didn't. When it did, I cried and screamed for my parents. They never came.

It was risky to leave the room because the closet door was right next to the exit. I only ventured out once. I begged my parents to let me sleep in their bed. I told them that the Boogeyman was real and he was in my closet. They refused and there was nothing I could say to change their minds. They wouldn't even come into my room to check my closet to ease my mind.

I hadn't been back in my room for more than a minute, but the noises had already started up again. He was still in there. I closed my eyes and listened carefully to the sound of scratching on the door.

It reminded me of a blade scraping against wood. Like the time I stole my father's knife to whittle a thin tree branch I found in the yard. I thought I could make a pretty wooden doll. Eventually I gave up and decided to make a potato. It wasn't as nice but it was easy enough to make. I never would have guessed that childhood event would be symbolic for my life.

I tried to make things work out—college, friendships, relationships—but I never seemed to be good, smart, or pretty enough. I always settled for whatever I could get.

Martin, my almost ex-boyfriend, followed me into the bedroom. He sauntered in with a smug smile that I once found so attractive. He scoffed at the posters on the wall and a drawing I once made of the Boogeyman. It was, admittedly, an awful drawing; it didn't look anything like him.

"So, I suppose this is where the magic *doesn't* happen," he said in his casual mocking tone.

"Yeah, I wasn't a cool kid."

"Ha! You're not a cool adult." He laughed until he finally looked at me. "Whoa! What do we have here?"

He walked over and fell backwards onto the bed beside me. I stared at his stupid grin. It was probably the same grin he used to win over all the other girls. But I wasn't jealous anymore. They could have him. He wasn't a pretty doll. He was just another potato.

The scratching at the closet door hadn't stopped but Martin didn't notice. It was easy to ignore if you weren't looking for it.

I walked over to the bedroom door, locked it, and came back to the bed. Taking that as a positive sign, Martin sat up and lifted his shirt to take it off.

"I don't want us to be interrupted since you said you had something important to tell me," I clarified.

"Oh. Okay. I thought you actually wanted to have some fun." He put his shirt back down.

"If that's what I wanted, we could have done it back at the dorm."

"I doubt that. I don't think you're capable of having fun. You said your parents aren't here. So we have the place to ourselves and you still don't want to do anything."

I looked at the floor. I planned on letting him finish his little speech. I'm sure he worked so hard on it.

"Look," he started, as I had expected. "I think we just want different things."

He reminded me so much of my parents. They wanted different things as well. That was obvious from all the hateful glances I got every time one of their friends would talk about some fun party or vacation. Neither of them cared about me. I bet they hoped the Boogeyman would take me away.

"I mean, I'm a senior so I'm already almost over the whole college thing," Martin said.

I looked over at my wooden potato on my desk and remembered the day I made it. My father came home screaming about something. That wasn't unusual, so I didn't pay attention. That is, until my bedroom door flew open and he stood there with his belt in hand.

"Where is it?" he demanded.

"What?" Despite what they would tell everyone, I didn't enjoy being difficult. I genuinely didn't know what I did wrong.

"My knife! I know you took it, so where is it?"

I sheepishly pointed to the desk where it sat next to the wooden potato. He grabbed the knife and I took the opportunity to slide under the bed.

"Get out here!" he yelled while swiping the belt at the floor in front of my bed. "How many times have I told you not to play with this? I said get out!"

I cried for help. I have no idea why. The only person in the house was my mother and she would never help me. After a few more snaps of the belt hitting the floor, I heard the closet door creak open. Long thin legs stepped out and towards my father. He turned around and let out a short scream before it was cut off. There were a few choking sounds as his feet were lifted off the ground.

The skinny legs turned around and tossed my father's body. He hit the back of the closet and slumped down. His head rested flat on his shoulder and his eyes bulged out of his head. I wondered if he could see me.

Then the feet turned back towards the bed. I closed my eyes, not wanting to see what was coming. I heard heavy footsteps accompanied by the tapping of his long nails that curled over his toes and reached the floor. The sound got closer to me before fading away. I opened my eyes in time to see the closet door swing shut. I looked down and saw he had left my father's knife in front of me.

They never found my father. When I finally worked up the nerve to open the closet door, he wasn't there. Neither was the Boogeyman.

"You know what I mean?" Martin said.

I wasn't paying attention, but I nodded.

"Great! I mean, the whole label thing is for little kids. Adults don't need titles like 'girlfriend', ya know."

He brushed my hair out of my face. I waved his hand away and said, "Stop."

"Why do you always have to be like that?" he grabbed my shoulder and squeezed just enough to feel uncomfortable.

It was the same type of uncomfortable grip that my mother had on my shoulders as she shook me as hard as she could, which, honestly, wasn't that hard. I told her I was going to stay in a dorm for my first semester at college and she finally let all her feelings pour out.

"You drove him away! It wasn't me," my mother cried. "He couldn't stand you anymore and he left us. And now you're leaving too."

I didn't deny her claim because I did feel a little responsible. It was my Boogeyman that took him. Upset because she wasn't getting the desired reaction, she slapped me. I fell back onto a stack of clothes on my bed that I was getting ready to pack. The shirt that my face landed on was stained with blood from my lip.

My mother continued to shriek about all of the missed opportunities and unhappiness I had caused her. She was so loud that I couldn't even hear the closet door open. I turned around and saw him standing behind her. I wondered if I should ask him not to hurt her, I wondered if he would listen.

I didn't even try. I watched as the Boogeyman wrapped his large hands around her head. The pointed nails dug into her face. His head peeked out, above my mother, to look at me. With a long pointed nose, that extended far enough to cover two of his jagged teeth, he smiled at me. It was the widest smile I had ever seen. His mouth stretched from ear to ear. It looked like he could fit my mother's head inside his mouth.

I stared into his eyes. Without lids, they almost didn't look real. I didn't realize until that moment how dead eyes looked without the ability to blink. The Boogeyman tilted his head and let out a rumble that was loud enough to be heard above my mother's whimpering.

"Get... get... help," my mother stammered out.

He looked down at her. The wide smile dropped into a frown, and then back into a smile when he looked up at me again.

I smiled back at him.

A quiet giggle came through the low growl. It was quickly covered by my mother's screams. Her eyes were almost as wide as my father's the last time I saw him. He dragged her backwards, as he crushed her skull. Once they reached the closet, he gave one last smiling nod before closing the door.

I ran to the closet and opened it but they were gone.

Martin leaned forward and kissed me. I probably would have enjoyed it a week ago, when I still thought he actually liked me. Pushing him away, I repeated, "Stop!"

"You know what," he said, jumping to his feet. "You're an asshole. And that's why no one wants you. You're lucky I wasted some of my time on you."

I would love to say that didn't hurt my feelings. But there must have been some truth to what he said. I was never popular in any circle at any school. No matter how hard I tried, I was always the outsider.

Martin walked to the door and turned back one last time to get in one more dig, "You're not special, ya know?"

"I'm—"

A particularly loud scratch at the closet startled both of us.

"Who's in there?" Martin asked.

I stared at him blankly.

"Seriously? I was actually feeling bad for you for a second and you've already got another guy hiding in the closet?"

"Something like that," I shrugged.

Not one to miss the opportunity for a brawl, he marched to the closet door and threw it open.

Martin wasn't sure what he was looking at. A tall gray body, with pulsating blue veins running through it, stood in front of him. Long arms dangled beside its gaunt torso. Slender shoulders were at the top of the door frame; his head was out of sight.

He looked back at me for an explanation, but turned back in time to see the Boogeyman hunch down to get through the doorway. He tried to run out of the room but the door was still locked.

The Boogeyman looked at me and I smiled at him. Nodding his head, he grabbed Martin's arm and yanked him away from the door.

"Help me! Help me! Help me!" Martin repeated, as the Boogeyman lifted him by his arm.

He dropped Martin right in front of me. I clapped encouragingly to let him know he was doing a great job. He clapped along with me in excitement. Martin looked back and forth at us dumbfounded.

"What the fuck is that thing?" Martin screamed at me.

The smile dropped from the Boogeyman's face. His long fingers curled into fists. I gave him an approving nod before his large hands rained down. Each strike left a dent on Martin's body, until he began to focus on his head. With punch after punch, it didn't take long before Martin's head was completely flat.

I thought about Martin's last question. I wasn't quite sure what he was, but I knew what he was to me. He was the only time I got the pretty doll instead of the potato.

"He's my Boogeyman," I answered with a smile.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Kahramanah is an American-Egyptian horror writer that currently resides in New York. She's a lover of all things terrifying and an avid supporter of every form of indie horror. Her first story was published in the anthology Manifest Reality released by Hair Brained Press.

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Chicago, 1958

Andy Franco cringed under the dining room table, drawing his knees up to his chest and clamping his hands over his ears. His parents were arguing again. Their voices resonated from the den, his father bellowing like a monster, his mother shrieking like a witch.

“What was I supposed to do? It happened right outside my damn shop. Was I just supposed to ignore it? The police asked...” the monster.

“You should have asked *me* before you went in there and just...” the witch.

“I can’t just stand around and let...” monster.

“You put this whole family in danger by...” witch.

“If I didn’t say anything I’m helping the people that...” monster.

“You could have testified anonymously or...” witch.

All at once their voices were cut off by a soft knock at the door. Silence fell for a moment, and then the knock—three raps in quick succession—sounded again. The low rumble of his father’s voice. His mother sucking back tears and retreating to the kitchen in her purple bathrobe, one room away. A pause. Andy looked out through the three rooms, past his retreating mother to see the bulk of his father standing before the door, peering through the spyglass.

His father opened the door to the staircase of their third-floor apartment. A thick coat was draped on the banister. A pair of dress trousers hung over the guardrail, with a set of snow-crusted boots below them in a pool of spreading water.

And something was in the air just in front of his father, barely there at all. No, a pair of things. Thin. Shining.

“Oh fuck,” muttered Angelo Franco. He tried to close the door. A force struck it from the other side, driving it back into his face. The big man fell onto his back and then grabbed at his own throat, letting out a pained choking squawk. Then Andy’s view was obstructed by his mother, who raced into the den screaming her husband’s name.

Sheila Franco tried to kneel by him to offer aid. In one savage motion she was thrown across the room, tumbling over the coffee table with a crash. Angelo sucked in a deep breath and rolled over, fighting to get to his feet. Then his hands rose into claws just before his throat. Andy saw his father’s eyes go bloodshot and his face turn purple. The big man tumbled into the kitchen, reaching for the cutlery drawer. Something crunched in his neck.

Sheila burst into the kitchen, swinging a poker from the fireplace at her husband’s back. But the swing ended early with a wet crack. A third voice shrieked in the kitchen, and then Angelo was gasping for air again. Sheila looked across the room wildly with raccoon mascara lines running down her cheeks, holding the fireplace poker in both hands like a broadsword.

“Where... where is it?” she cried out. “Where is...”

A gravy boat flew in from the right and shattered across her face. She went down in a heap as Angelo pulled open the cutlery drawer.

As soon as it was open a butcher knife rose out of it by itself and hovered in front of

Angelo. He stared at it in disbelief as it plunged into his chest. An arterial spray rained across the space in front of him and seemed to freeze in thin air. The knife came out and went in again. Angelo gurgled and fell.

Sheila rose with her face a crimson mask, still clutching the poker. “Angelo!” she cried. “Ang—” The butcher knife flicked down in one motion and sliced her throat. More blood, and much of it clinging to the space between Andy Franco’s parents, running down to the kitchen floor like raindrops on a glass window.

The knife came down again and again, red on silver, turning the kitchen into an abattoir. Andy couldn’t move, not even to open his mouth to scream. A wet warmth spread from between his legs.

Some time, long after his parents were dead the knife clattered to the floor. The wall of splattered blood rose into the rough profile of a human body. Above the shelf of the jaw, those two peculiar lights flickered. Began to fade. Disappeared.

“Shit,” said the third voice. Husky, male.

Soft, bare footsteps headed back to the den. The crash of something colliding with the sofa, followed by a string of curses.

The door to the apartment still yawned open to the empty stairwell. As Andy watched, the outline-in-blood blindly stumbled against the guardrail. It hissed yet more profanity as it patted down the coat on the banister. It took a vial out of one pocket and unscrewed the top. Eye-drops.

It lifted the dropper, tilting the bloody outline of its jawline back, and then those shimmering lights returned, one behind the other with each drop. The form returned the eye-drops to the pocket of the coat and touched its side where Sheila had struck it, letting out a pained groan. It walked back into the apartment, quietly shutting the door behind itself. It advanced through the den and then through the kitchen, stepping right through the sea of coagulating blood and leaving bare footprints behind on the linoleum.

It passed within three feet of Andy’s hiding place and went into the hallway bathroom. A moment later, Andy heard the hiss of the shower.

I have to run, thought the boy, even as he began to shake with the onset of shock. *This is my only chance*. But his legs wouldn’t move.

The shower cut off abruptly after about thirty seconds. It was followed by the momentary ruffle of a towel, and then those quiet cat-footsteps passed by Andy again, accompanied by pained, wheezing breaths. A dark towel floated like a ghost and then fell across the spreading blood. A pair of squelching steps as the phantom moved back into the den. The front door opened. Andy waited for it to close.

It didn’t.

Andy peered over his parent’s bodies. *Is it gone?* The boy only saw empty air between his hiding place and the front door. He tried to will his limbs to run through it. Get out, scream for help. Then he saw the dresser by the door. On top of it—a glowing lamp and a framed picture. A family portrait.

“A kid,” whispered the raspy voice. “You sons of bitches. Never said anything about a

damned *kid*.” The phantom let out a low, ragged sigh, and then the door slammed shut and locked. Those two shimmering blue lights—*eyes, those are its eyes*—turned back to the apartment. Hovered. Focused under the table.

On Andy.

The phantom began to advance, passing through the den and over the slaughter in the kitchen, pausing only to reclaim the knife. It stopped before the dinner table, looking down at the boy, leaving the impressions of two bare feet in the carpet.

Its eyes were crystal blue, mesmerizing. Andy barely noticed the knife drawing back for a killing stroke. As the blade slashed down, all at once Andy remembered how to move.

He darted to the right, hearing a whistling sound as the blade cut through the air an inch to the right of his head. As he rose to his feet something struck him in the side of his neck, a flat, weak, slapping blow that only served to send him off-course as he made for the kitchen. The knife danced in the air in front of him, cutting him off, still dripping with his parents’ blood. The phantom’s blue eyes shone in narrowed slits, half-concealed by invisible eyelids.

The boy turned and bolted down the hall and cut into the bathroom. He slammed the door behind him, punched in the lock. A moment later the frightful weight of a full-grown man crashed against the door. The hinges warped as wood splintered.

Andy ran past the bloody bathtub to the window and wrenched it open. February air blasted his face with diamond dust snow. He pulled himself over the sill as the bathroom door splintered to pieces behind him.

Three empty stories yawned under Andy, ending on the cold, hard concrete of the back alley behind the apartment building. A hand grabbed for his feet, claimed one of his shoes. He could hear the sharpness of the blade slitting through shower curtain. With no other recourse the boy pushed himself through the window and into open air.

It seemed to take forever to hit the ground. He tried to shield his face with his hands. When he landed he heard his bones break, heard his spine snap, but felt no pain. He lay on the pavement, trying to will himself to at least crawl away into the sub-zero air of night. But his limbs betrayed him for a second time, and for all time.

He lay on the pavement freezing for what seemed like hours. And then heard it: the heavy crunch of treads on frozen slush. He strained his eyes to see, tried to will his voice back through his throat to cry out for help.

His body was turned over by a single gloved hand. He found himself looking up into the shadows of the coat that had hung on the banister just before the attack. The trousers gaped beneath the coat around the thing’s unseen torso, each leg ending with one of those wet black boots. And above the collar of the coat, those two wicked, sad blue eyes.

“I’m sorry,” whispered the invisible man, as he reached down with one gloved hand and cupped the boy’s chin. Snowflakes rained down, defining a head of feathery hair, the nape of the man’s neck. The blue eyes streamed water that froze on transparent cheeks. The invisible man wiped the frozen tears from his face as the warble of sirens blew in on the cold Lake Michigan wind.

“Guh,” moaned Andy.

“Kid, if the world was gonna do you how it did me, then this is for the best.” And then the phantom wrenched the boy’s head to the right in one brutal motion. There was a wet snap as Andy Franco’s short life came to an end.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Roy Bishop’s fiction has appeared in collections by EMP Press and Lycan Valley, as well as the Caravel Literary Journal. He resides in Fort Collins, Colorado with his dog, Laserbomb.

Amazon Author Page: [Roy Bishop](#)



Nora’s Wish
John Mc Caffrey

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

The Calling



BRENT ABELL

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

The Snot Crow

Before Peter went to sleep he always searched his nose for slimy bogeys. When he found one he always looked at it with great admiration before he threw it away under his bed. But one night Peter awoke by a strange noise.

“Who is it?” Peter asked frightened.

“It’s me the snot crow,” and from under his bed a big green lob crept up.

“I am so lonely I want to crawl back into your warm nose again.” said the blob and did so.

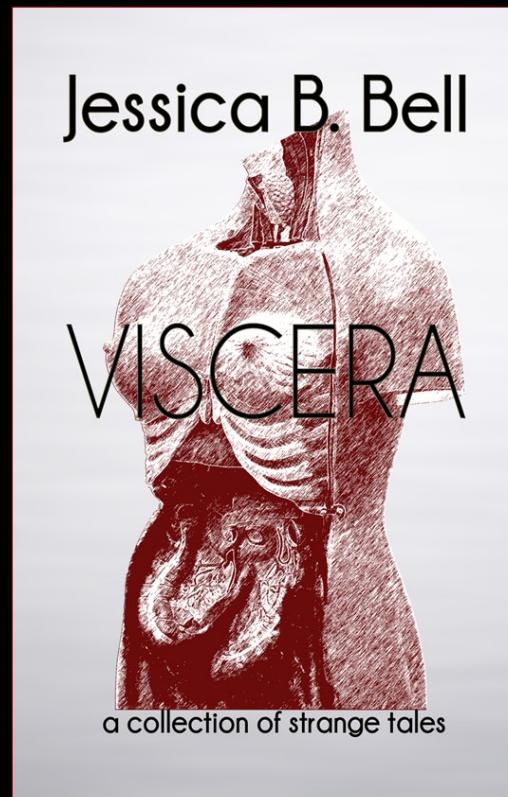
When Peter’s mom found him dead in his bed, his face was covered with green snot.

The Monster in the Lake

He had heard the legend of the big trout in the distant woodland lake. After a day hiking he found the black deep lake surrounded by thick forest. The dusk was calm and silent. He threw out the bait and started to reel in the line when he felt the bite on the rod. When the catch came closer to the beach he disappointedly could see it was just a pile of seaweed. He stretched down his hand to release the lure when something grabbed his arm. A wet hand of seaweed pulled him down into the cold dark depth.

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

Facebook: [Mathias Jansson](#)



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

The Vampire | *Ramona Thompson*

From graveyard dirt
I rise
Myth?
Legend?
No, only a man
Made long ago a monster
By love denied
My soul sold
To lay claim to her
The one I believed
To be my eternal bliss
The one I believed
Never would betray me

Now all these eons later
Under a blood red moon I walk
On a quest for vengeance
On a quest to quench
This most unholy need
Gripped in a rage
I have lived and died
A thousand times
Trying to understand

A babe led me
To my undead grave
Never will I see the sun again
The agony almost too much to bear
This knowledge of who I was
What I have become
What I can never be again
It is the living stake
Driven straight through my darkest heart of
hearts

Soon I shall find her
And when I do
It is Hell in full she will pay
For the Hell she made of me
A mad man
Driven by one powerful, unstoppable lust
Killing
Feeding
If only to gain
For a short time
Some peace of mind
Dear God
If perchance we ever meet
I pray you have mercy
On a blood sucking bastard's sorry soul

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Ramona Thompson has been writing over 20 years. Her credits include work with Grotesque Magazine, Calvary Cross, Infernal Ink, Blood Moon Rising and many more. Readers/fans may stalk her through Facebook page.

Facebook: [Ramona Thompson](#)

The New Reality

Her back pressed against the tree
the bark digs into her flesh, scrapes
so she can feel the pain outside
as deeply as it can be felt within

The blood moon was full last night
drenching the woods in vivid color,
tingeing the leaves of the trees
the rocks, grounds and each other

Come walk with me, he said
within the mystical starry night,
she took his hand with trusting eyes
unafraid of the handsome stranger

Along the twisted, winding path,
when into a cemetery it ended,
deep within the silent woods where
the moon hid its face behind a cloud

Among the restless dead, whispered
warnings
that it all was not as it seemed,
the tombstones wept mossy tears
as the wolfsbane withered and died

He smiled a wolfish grin, eyes glowed
hairy fingers extended, he pulled her close
as he softly spoke into her ear
“This, my sweet, is your new reality”

Swamp Mist

Spanish moss festooned through trees
hanging low, fingerless touch brushes
against my feverish face, as sweat drips
leaving tracks through the greasy grime

The path disappears in the swamp mist
twists, turns and doubles upon itself
narrowly avoiding the bubbling brew
of slime covered bottomless sinkholes

I stumble along, skeletal branches poke
my sides as vines entangle my feet,
drawing me along unwilling, unwittingly
further into the dank murky darkness

Ahead I see a warm golden glow
which reflects in the leech infested water,
a safe haven from this nightmarish hellhole
which there is a point of no return

As I approach, low singing is heard
almost a chanting, rough and uneven
from the surrounding trees, hang fetishes
skulls, feathers, beads and bits of glass

A fire burns low; kettle hangs and sways
while rancid contents roil in a continuous
circle,
unidentifiable pieces make their way to the
top
chunks glisten, then slowly submerge again,

From within the deepest shadows
an unnoticed shape moves, shifts position
lightly
as a deep voice says in a crooning tone.
“Ah, I’ve been waiting for you.”

Predator

The vampire, a whisper in the fog,
as he stalks his victim, anticipation rises
as she turns, he strikes like a snake
quick, deadly as the blood flows.

Gently laps the crimson river
drinks from his great feast,
he takes her last sigh
as his sweet, sweet dessert.

Carelessly, he tosses her aside
stretches, reaches upward, now sated
he turns, as his red eyes glow
reflects with a hellish heat.

As he blends back into the fog,
a predator, always patiently waits
until the next hapless victim
crosses his unholy path.

Blood Offerings

Behind the house, at the edge of the woods
the ancient gnarled tree is bare right now,
stark twisted branches grasp at the sky
in an unrelenting futile grasp.
I should just cut it down for kindling.

I went and stared at the old tree today
the others have leaves full and green,
but the old tree still stands, limbs sway
whispering in its half-alive decayed state,
dead grass makes a ring around the base.

The Magic Within

The candlelight flickers in the dimness of
the room
a golden glow which reaches out, touches
the ancient pages of the fragile book
written in a language, long ago forgotten

As the hand turns the parchment pages
life within the book begins to flicker
the question that puzzles is this,
is the magic in the book or in the hand?

Bright sparkling fragments burst forth,
circle around the room three times
then settle softly between the pages
as if to say, "See here, this is it!"

The necromancer nods his head in thought,
traces the spell with a long nailed finger
mutters the incantation within the circle of
light,
as it flares up in beat with the words

The words are cast, not to be taken back
as the foolhardy client looks aghast,
at the beast that was within him
now is shown for all the world to see

I checked on It this morning,
the brown circle is much larger now
as if reaching for the house eagerly;
I found a dead snake, half-skeletonized
lying just beyond the brown grass.

I stood by It this afternoon,
I measured the circumference of the spot,
eight feet wide with tendrils stretching outward
as if trying to break through the woods for freedom,
also, a skeleton of a rabbit was at the base of the tree.

I swear that the tree has moved!
It seems closer to the house, but it could be me,
a deer lies within the circle, looking untouched;
blood seeps into the ground, dyes it a dark red,
the ground laps at it hungrily as if famished.

That night I am restless in my bed
strange shadows are cast upon my wall
like fingers reaching for me move stealthily,
the breeze blows through the open window
brings with it a scent of rot and putrefaction.

The night peepers stop singing their chorus
and the moonless night becomes still;
a scrape, a thud, a scrape, a thud...silence, then
slight whispery sounds scuttle up the side of the house;
I feel a pull on my ankle as the branches entwine.

Now I realize in horror the secret of
as I am the final blood offering!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Linda Lee Ruzicka has poetry published in Twilight Times, Dark Krypt, Fables, Descending Darkness, Writing Village, Spine and Page, Muses Gallery, Bloodbond, Lycan Valley Press Publishers, Alban Lake, Highland Park Poetry and the June Cotner anthology, “House Blessings” and “Garden Blessings She has short stories published in The Grit, and Reminisce, Haunted Encounters: Friends and Family. Plus, a personal essay at Mamalode and Haunted Encounters: Friends and Family.

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Facebook: [Linda Lee Ruzicka](#)



judsonmichaelagla 2017

In Wormwood Days of Wither

Trailing cyclones,
it rises,
on limbs of rotted black.
From a mouth thorned
wide with laughter,
the red wound of morning
calls its name.

Painted with the yellow blood
of hornets,
at dance with a dead rainbow
of leaves
and the shed husks
of cicadas,
it sings a dirge of smoky fogs
and strange howlings.

Beyond the walls of summer,
scraping at the gates
of winter,
it caresses in whispers
of cold rain.
What will it savage?
What will it save?
What havoc will it dream?
October!

A Hiss of Angels

Like a haunt from sweated sheets, I drift.
And through the walls I hear...
from out of the dripping night,
a hiss of angels.

The black pipes of heaven
ring like ice and ashes.
I would sing with them
but my voice has not the glory.

Mother Cold-Eyes

Whiskey darling.
Parasitic queen.
Make a pathological prototype
for your quick-time fetus.

You are the architect of chafe,
scrawling in metronomic efficiency
your runes in the ruins
of the white-hearted.

Your leper nodes abrade,
distill a cryptic ergot
that trips the brain
into frenzied delusion.

Let us curl in your mandala,
lie in your transmogrifying coffin.
We plead to worship
as you sanctify your rages.

Forever we will reprise...
you.

Why in darkness do the angels
come to me now?
Through years I prayed them down,
and in their iron towers
they but laughed and scorned.

At times I would hear
a baying of human hounds,
or the clash of horse's hooves
striking fire from an obsidian moon.
At times I felt the brush
of strange pinions in the
breeze that tangled my hair.

But sing to me, the angels would not.
Speak to me, they did not.

Tonight they do.
Tonight they will.

I will walk in the woods
where night's unholy beasts crawl.
And the pipes that wail
like wolves
will bloody my ears.

In the sky the words
of God will be written
in shades of war.
I will greet the winged
as lost brothers and sisters.

Together we will rise.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Charles Gramlich writes science fiction, fantasy, and horror from southern Louisiana. His poetry has appeared in Star*Line, The Horror Zine, Beat to a Pulp, Dreams and Nightmares, and Pedestal Magazine. His books are available through Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Wildside Press. His chapbook of vampire haiku, Wanting the Mouth of a Lover, is out of print but available if you contact the author.

Blog: <http://charlesgramlich.blogspot.com/>

Facebook: [Charles Gramlich](#)

Darkness, Darkness | Rory J. Roche

Waking with a burning thirst,
The Moon above, my guiding light.
Was this a gift, or a damning curse?
How will I fare in eternal night?

The air is cold, the night is still.
Awakened now, there's something more.
Thrumming heartbeat, stronger will.
A screaming urge within my core.

A candle performs a flickering dance,
Your sleeping form and steady breath,
Lust for blood becomes a trance,
Curse you, too—or grant you death?

Razor fangs penetrate smooth skin,
Sanguine viscosity warrants greed;
Hellish existence tainted with sin.
From mortal bindings, I was freed.

Salty sweet crimson delight,
So tantalizing; should I feel remorse?
I know it's wrong, but it feels so right.
Desire, no; *need* for your life force...

Your heart goes silent, your cries subside.
Can I live with myself for this heinous crime?
Must I chastise myself? Can I still walk with pride?
With this rebirth, perhaps I'm sublime.

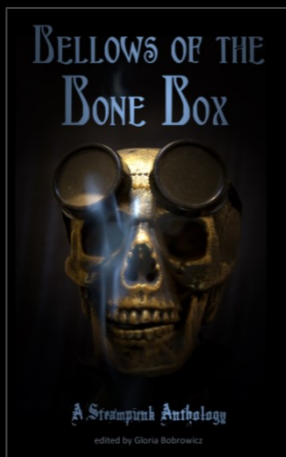
Stronger, faster—immortal; a god?
Fatal, luxurious—a charmer; a king?
So the price of survival is the life of a sod.
Child of Night? I'm an ethereal being.

No Earthly limitations, dilemmas,
restrictions.
Proud and undaunting; free to roam.
No need to worry of illness or afflictions.
Darkness, darkness, *welcome me home*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Rory is an artist, photographer, 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 runs an LGBT+ eZine. He wrote a short play performed by HVSF actors in 2017, and is making it full-length. He is currently studying German, French, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, and Russian

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Bellows of the Bone Box

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Mental Ward

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iTunes

A Promise Unfulfilled | *Dusty Davis*

I creep into her room where dark shadows conceal me from sight.
As I gaze lovingly at her creamy skin, bathed in moonlight.
With my heightened senses, I stare upon her delicate form.
Lusting for more than just her flesh, my desire builds like the coming of a storm.
In her dreams, she is able to escape her Hell.
But there is no escape for me. The daylight has become my prison cell.
Within a single night, my fate was sealed.
Together forever, a promise unfulfilled.
I watch as her brow creases as time slips away.
In the darkness I remain frozen, in fear of the coming day.
My life I would give to the rising sun, just to hear the words I love you spoken.
But here in the shadows I wait, my loneliness remains unbroken.
The sun will soon rise, erasing all the night's sin.
For her time will pass, but for me it will remain frozen.
Under me the floorboards creak, as I creep closer to my fate.
The pulsing in her neck makes it so hard to wait.
With a growing need my lips brush against her soft skin.
Like a once upon a time that has been forgotten.
Her eyes open in fright as I clutch her in my embrace.
I feel ashamed for her seeing me as God's disgrace.
My teeth clamp down on her neck until her heartbeat is stilled.
Together forever, a promise unfulfilled.

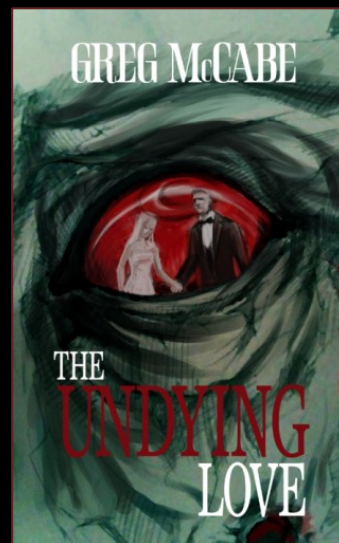
ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Dusty Davis is an author of short stories, poetry, and novels. He lives in the small town of East Liverpool, Ohio. When he is not frightening readers with his stories, Dusty can be found at home scaring his wife and two children.

Amazon Author Page: www.amazon.com/author/dustydavis

Facebook: www.facebook.com/dustydavis21

The Undying Love *Greg McCabe*

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



The Scarecrow | *Lana Lea*

The moon hung low and still
Over the misty hill
Scarecrow stood alone
In the evening chill
His shadow stretched forlorn
Over the rustling corn
Scarecrow stood alone
A purpose to fulfil

The wind was an eerie moan
Over the fence of stone
Scarecrow, he moved not
Though the field was all his own
His rags were stuffed with straw
Which filled his heartless core
Scarecrow, he moved not
Like one of flesh and bone

The footprints, they looked new
In the sparkling dew
Scarecrow could not see
The darkened trail they drew
His eyes were empty holes
That burned like blackened coals
Scarecrow could not see
The footprints left no clues

In the village near
Little children dear
Scarecrow on the hill
Filled them all with fear
They knew that on the morn
Another would be gone
Scarecrow on the hill
In the rustling corn

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Lana started writing at age 7, and now writes poetry, songs, radio skits, plays, short stories and novels. Her genres are horror, mystery, supernatural, crime, fantasy, zombie apocalypse and steampunk. Lana has taken part in National Novel Writing month since 2008, hosts creative writing and poetry workshops, and runs a writing group, Generation XYZ. She is currently writing several trilogies and stand-alone novels.

Facebook: [Lana Lea](#)

Ghost Train | C4NDICE

Midnight. Moon riding high. A cloud glides by.
“Owwhoooooh” A wolf. He howls in the distance.
The Full Moon is rising in his eyes.
“I’m going to eat you for dinner”

Lanterns lit by an ember,
Burning bright, it’s a hell-fire light.
Don’t forget to remember
the Ghost Train
Riding ghost rails
Through wind and rain
It’s love and pain
That drives the Ghost Train.

Set a place.
Set a place at the table in the buffet car,
For those dearly deceased.
They’re going to join you for a feast.

Aboard the Ghost Train
Riding ghost rails, through wind and rain
It’s love and pain
That drives the ghost train.

Vampires are out to play
They slept like the dead today
Bats carve their way between the trees
Where the spiders weave

Ghost Train
Riding ghost rails, through wind and rain
It’s love and Pain
That drives the ghost train.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — C4NDICE is a singer/song-writer from London, who has fronted the bands Kitten Cake and Candice& the Crows. She sees herself as an alchemist, transmuting suffering into clarity and pain into peace, through her song-writing. Performing her original jazz-tinged folk-pop material live at Art and Foodie events, as well as at Hallowe’en happenings, C4NDICE plays in the “miracle” or “love” frequency of 528 Hz. She has begun her journey into poetry and fiction writing and hopes to draw deep from her pagan heart to share her light. She is most grateful to Sirens Call Publications for this platform.

Website: <https://www.musicglue.com/c4ndice/about>

Website: <https://www.reverbNation.com/c4ndicejoyce>

An Interview with Artist Judson Michael Agla

The artwork featured throughout this issue of *The Sirens Call* is from the mind and finger of Judson Michael Agla. We sat down with him to ask a few questions about his art and this is what transpired.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Judson! Why don't you take a few moments to introduce yourself?



Judson Michael Agla: Hey there Sirens Call Publications! My name is Judson and art started for me ever since I can remember. I grew up in Scarborough on the outskirts of Toronto, Ontario where I enrolled in Wexford C.I.—a specialized high school for the arts. This eventually led me away from the juvenile delinquency usually associated with the suburbs. I went through the Ontario College of Art's foundation year after spending a year at the George Brown Culinary School which has helped this starving artist not be so hungry over the years. I spent a few years out west where

I studied Classical Animation at Capilano College in Vancouver, but it never took. My lowest grade was in animation and though I had the highest grade in the class in life drawing, after trying to make Porky Pig climb a rope, I knew my aspirations lay elsewhere. I did finish the programme but it felt like penance.

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

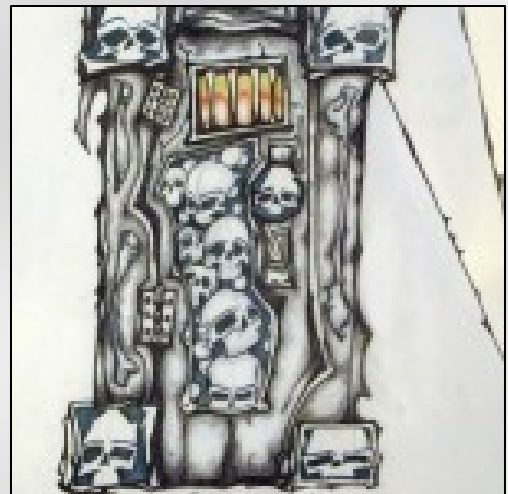
JMA: I've worked with just about anything I could get my hands on: oil on canvas, pencil, pencil crayon and pen and ink on paper. I've had my hands in clay, plaster, polyurethane foam, papier mache, carved soap stone and wood.

SCP: What are some of your main influences?

JMA: I've always loved with Rodin's work and Leonard Cohen's writings, however as I got older I found I needed something to stir the pot. I became interested in Jackson Pollock and Andrew Wyeth, which is quite a dichotomy of learning. Influence comes from a lot of different places. I met a man (now close friend) who collected old rotary phones and he gave me permission to sit and draw them for a few days. I ended up working and abstracting the images which manifested into a pretty nice body of work.

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

JMA: If he were alive I'd love to take a few lessons from Jackson Pollock. Considering the size and scope of his work, I can see how we might share an interactive experience without bugging the crap out of each other.



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

JMA: I always let the piece do what it wants, sometimes it helps direct me to where I'm going and sometimes you have to yield to what's happening and take off the pressure. It's helpful to have a few pieces on the go to keep your mind and intentions fresh.

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

JMA: There have been many days spent staring at a blank canvas where I felt like I've lost my abilities, my vision—and all in all, it's a horrible situation to be in. Usually I have to gas up on some other past time, rip myself away, and move to another medium, reading works occasionally. However, these spells of non-function can last for months or even years. As of yet I haven't found the true escape route. It's different for everyone and it changes every time.

SCP: Where do you find your inspiration?

JMA: "Only do it if you feel as though you're going to die if you don't". I look into myself and see the disorder that exists. I make things to attempt to unscramble my thoughts and to slow them down. I have Bi-Polar Disorder and OCD, among other mental issues. The work is the only way to escape from the darkness, the Abyss. I don't have a choice, its grounding; it's been my teacher and saviour through a lot of sickness, panic, and ruin. In a lot of ways, you could say that the work is only the means to reach open doorways. When I look at the canvas it feels as though I'm looking at myself transcended, like I'm seeing a description of myself in a foreign language that I don't understand fully. However, the works all manifest into a story, a communication, and sometimes an exorcism. However, like any story, comedy has to be there to balance things out. I can't feed on the demons too much or it moves into self-indulgence and spoils the broth.

SCP: What influences your composition?

JMA: When I speak about composition, I speak of the placement of objects or areas around the canvas. Generally I use math to plot it out, (the rule of thirds) or (3.14). This is what gives me the ability to start building whatever I want. I guess you can say that it doesn't matter what I put in my composition, but it does matter where I put it. The basic foundations work just like putting up a skyscraper, you have to begin with a solid beginning.

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

JMA: "Multiplicity" is a 54" x 36" oil painting on canvas that has repetitious ochre skulls against a blue back ground. The inspiration behind the piece is "Steppenwolf" by Hermann Hesse—in my interpretation the protagonist discovers life is not about duality but multiplicity that he is made of many selves and not just wolf and man.

SCP: Have you ever completed a piece for a client and thought it wasn't good even though it was exactly what they asked for? What did you do?

JMA: Whenever I work with a client I ask for references and their ideas. I go back and forth with the client until we come up with a similar vision. Basically I finish the piece before I even start it. Obviously there are always a few bumps in the road, but I've always come through in delivering what they want. There was one piece I had in a show that sold three times,

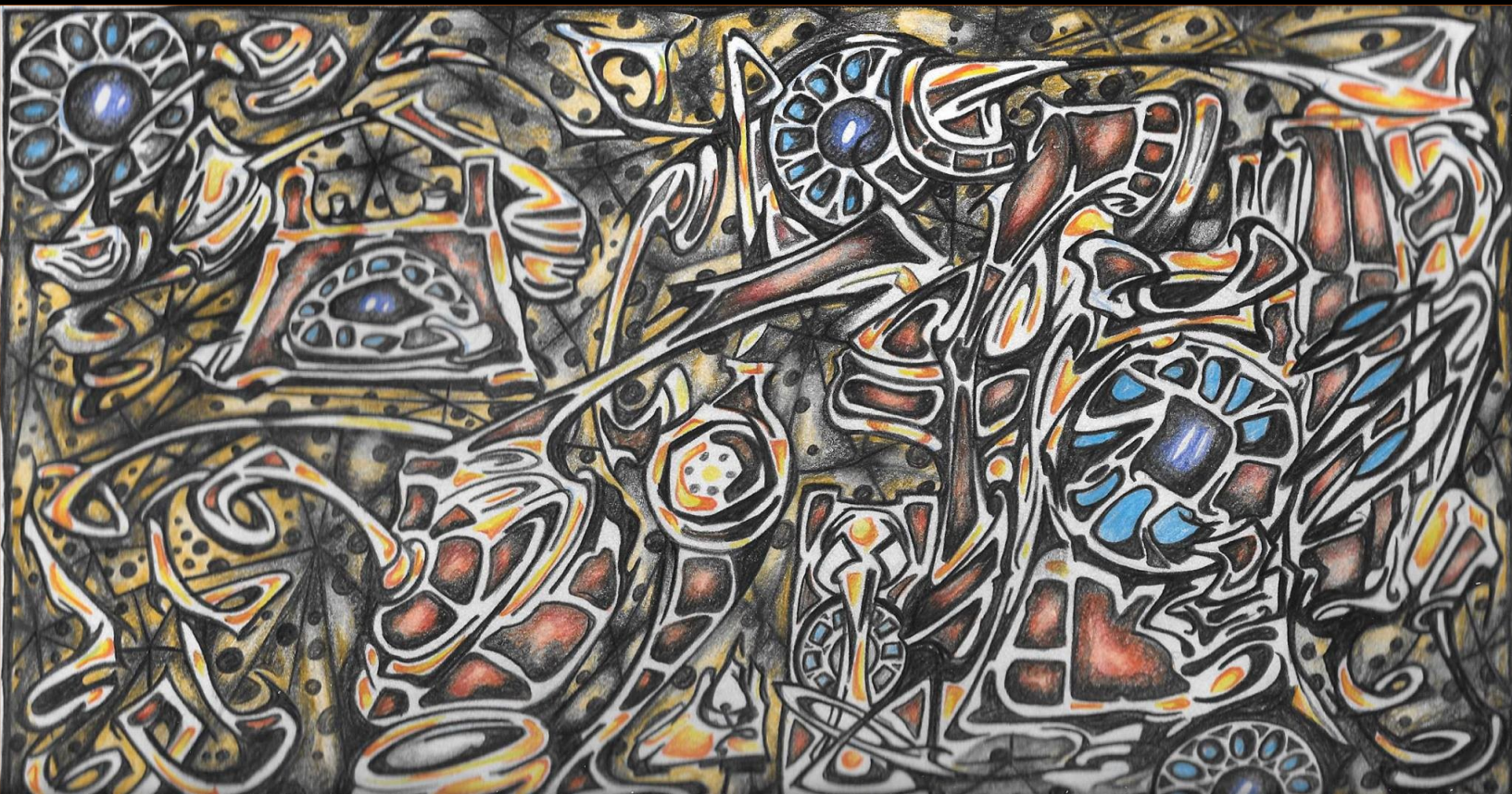
accidentally. So, I went back and drew two more, and as a matter of fact I sold around nine re-drawing every one.

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

JMA: I would have to say “The Gates of Hell” by Rodin.

Thank you Judson for taking the time to answer our questions and for sharing your art with us. To find out more about Judson and his art, please visit:

<http://judsonmichaelagla.com/>



Bright Lights, Witch City | *Stephanie Calderon*

She ran five miles every evening at her favorite park and found herself working out more than her body; her mind solved many of the day's problems brought to her either from work or home. She found it to be much cheaper and less of a time sink than visiting a therapist.

The mid-October sun set earlier every day and she would soon need to stick to the section of the park with a fully lit track for safety's sake, which was so completely, mind numbingly boring. She loved the scenery of this park, especially the large expanse of wooded areas where she imagined all sorts of scenarios that took place within.

The woods always called to her, even as a child growing up in one of the largest cities on the planet, and she never quite understood why. Her parents and their parents before, all had little if any desire to discover nature in any way, other than the farmer's market on Sunday mornings to buy fresh produce for the week. There was something simultaneously sinister and playful that she couldn't exactly put her finger on, a pulse she didn't quite know how to read.

She decided to tempt fate and run for as long as possible on the walking paths. When instinct told her to get herself onto the track and within the safety of a constantly lit area, she would do so. While the park was a beautiful and peaceful respite from the daily drudgery of city life and landscape, this was still part of the city after all, and cities are dangerous places after dark.

Operated by timers, the path lights typically came on at seven, but she noticed lately the lights would turn on later and later, if at all.

As she ran past the first of six light posts, she noticed within a few steps of approaching, it turned on. Coming closer to the next post, that too turned on, and again with the third, all the way to the sixth post. Giggling at her luck, she looked behind her to glance at the row of lights and noticed they'd all turned off again as she passed them completely. Surprised by the curious phenomena, she thought nothing of it and completed her run.

Once at home, she made a hungry dash for the fridge, digging her toes into the backs of her shoes and kicking them off one at a time as she crossed the floor. She'd been daydreaming about the leftovers from her favorite dish. Her visiting Grandmother, who had long ago retired to the island of Puerto Rico, taught her the recipe and together they organized the ingredients while she watched carefully and took copious notes on the correct method to cook it.

Her Grandmother was back on the island three days already, but she made sure to savor every bit of food prepared and resolved to make sure it lasted a whole week. With every bite, she thought of how much she loved her grandmother and how much she learned at her grandmother's knee.

Her fondest memories were of learning the odd songs her Grandmother taught her. They didn't quite rhyme and sounded peculiar to her. Now older, she would consider the songs more along the lines of a chant.

Looking through the shelves of the fridge, she couldn't find her glass container. She asked her mother if she'd seen it, to which her mother only raised an eyebrow and said, "Ask your brother."

She stormed into her brother's room and asked if he'd seen the glass container with the food that Abuela had made just for her. His face reddened and he raised his hands in defense. "I can explain," he said. She'd heard enough and exploded, "I DON'T WANT TO HEAR IT!"

At that, the television screen in her brother's room cracked and shattered and the entire house went dark. She heard her parents running toward the room to make sure everyone was fine, though she didn't understand what the big deal was. After all it was only a blackout.

Then she looked out of the window and realized the blackout consisted of just one house.

That fateful evening she learned from her parents why they were so worried. She was a witch.

According to her parents every female in the family line going back to the days of indigenous Taino population on the island of Puerto Rico are what would now be called witches or brujas. Every few generations, a witch of great power was born, able to call the elements into action like few others.

She was never told of her abilities because her mother rejected the practice of witchcraft, to her grandmother's chagrin. Her mother wanted to be free of the responsibility and wanted the same for her daughter.

Suddenly small moments in her life were adding up. The game she would play where she guessed who was calling the house before anyone picked up, the mysterious pull she always felt to the woods, those peculiar songs she learned at her grandmother's knee. They sounded like chants because they *were* chants. More than that, they must have been spells, a way for her grandmother to keep the practice and tradition alive without alerting her parents.

Aware of her new reality, it was all she could do not to set the house on fire. She was furious at her family for keeping this lifelong secret and felt her trust and innocence within her heart die.

Somewhere else, however, something new began to grow, deep down inside, and this something was very dark, and surprisingly alluring.

She left the house to try to clear her mind with a long run. It was quite late at night and anyone left in the park was by every account looking for trouble. She was no exception.

Three thugs came at her wielding knives and a baseball bat demanding her money and maybe more if she didn't do it quickly. This outrage was just the spark she needed to tap into her power.

A burst of euphoria came over her and out of the night sky a huge lightning bolt struck one of the nearby trees which immediately fell onto the thugs. None survived. She was shocked by how quickly everything happened and surprised at how pleased she was with her aim. She craved more.

Days passed while she came to terms with her new identity and what occurred in the park that night. She was raised to be a kind person, a good person, certainly not a murderer. Yet that's what she'd become. Or was it?

Harkening back to a college ethics class thought experiment, and desperate to justify her desire for the feeling of euphoria when she killed, she recalled the trolley dilemma. Could she kill one more person to save five? She knew she could, with no problem. They were the bad guys. She wasn't a killer, she was a savior. Right?

She came to a deadly conclusion: to potentially save hundreds, she would kill many.

She made sure to find herself in the most dangerous parts of town and in the worst kinds of situations. She killed twenty people that first week. Both men and women, rapists, pedophiles, drug dealers and the like. Every kill came with an addictive, orgasmic blast of magical energy that surged throughout her entire body.

Boredom set in after the next dozen or so kills. There was no real challenge for her, killing degenerates had become too easy. The thrill waned, but the urge to kill did not, and the darkness inside grew larger. Ethics no longer came to mind. Her sole objective was the magical rush of killing.

She now preferred to know her prey more intimately before she pursued the kill. With olive complexion, voluptuous figure, large green eyes and long black hair, people were enchanted by her beauty, even before she found her gifts. This made eliciting trust from unsuspecting strangers much easier and she intended to use it to her full advantage.

It became something of a game. How quickly could she gain someone's trust to let her close enough to kill?

She killed her least favorite waitress from her favorite restaurant by convincing the waitress to accompany her to the movies. Both women used the ladies room at the same time, but only she emerged alive. An older curmudgeonly gentleman she met at the grocery store proved more challenging than she expected. Her attempt to seduce him was not successful. He was not very impressed with her beauty and was not looking for a new friend. She offered to help load his groceries and he finally relented. She killed him quickly before he could start his car by sending a jolt of electricity through his body causing a heart attack.

Soon killing consumed her every thought, and it adversely affected her work. She was often fatigued, having stayed out late the night before killing for pleasure. She missed critical deadlines, was late to meetings and could no longer keep up with her workload. She decided to place her evening endeavors on hold to connect with some friends for a much needed break.

At a bar during happy hour with some girlfriends, she bumped into an ex-boyfriend. They chatted for a bit and exchanged pleasantries. He couldn't stop staring at her and smiling and asked if she wouldn't mind going to dinner with him. She expressed regrets to her friends, explaining she really wanted to re-connect with them, then with a nod of her head, pointed out a handsome muscular blonde man. Her friends saw him, let her go with their blessings and she bade them goodnight.

Dinner with him was fun and easy. She was still comfortable with him, and they reminisced and laughed while they continued to drink and talk through closing.

She even teased him about the necklace he wore with a garish gemstone pendant that reminded her of something out of a tacky 1970s movie, which she found ridiculous. He seemed to be offended at first, but laughed it off and explained it was a cherished family heirloom he inherited a few weeks ago, so didn't mind the silly look of it.

They even talked about why it was they broke up. They were actually pretty good together for the most part, but he reminded her he had familial obligations that left little to no time for a love life and thought it best not to lead her on. Given her recent circumstance, she fully understood.

After hours of engaging conversation—and aggressive flirtation—she thoroughly enjoyed herself that evening, but found it impossible to ignore her desire to kill again. The thought of the rush, the euphoria, and the climax that came with every slaughter tickled her down below. A sensation of tingles started to rise within, and she needed something to satisfy her, but sex would not be enough. He invited her to spend the night at his house and she quickly accepted. It would be the perfect release, in more ways than one. She would ensure her sexual needs were met. Then she would kill him.

She dozed off after they made love several times, but woke to a start when she felt hands closing around her throat.

Scared and confused, she tried to defend herself with her magic, but it was useless. She couldn't understand why she was unable to get him off her. He must have read her expression because he started to laugh wryly. He turned her over onto her stomach, zip tied her hands together and sat her in a chair. Her rage grew by the second and the house reacted to her magic—electronics beeped, buzzed and hummed in all rooms and corners of the home—but he did not.

In a cold tone of voice he instructed her to settle herself because she wasn't going anywhere, not just yet. It was hard to hear him with the stereo and television simultaneously blaring on and off, and she couldn't really get her bearings with the lights flickering. She realized it was in her best interest to calm down and contain her anger. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, then demanded an explanation.

He explained they did not meet by chance that evening because he'd been following her for some time; he witnessed her first kills in the park that night and every one since. She could not comprehend why he would be following her or why he wouldn't have reported her to the authorities.

Sensing her complete confusion, again, he touched his ugly necklace. He told her it belonged to his father and had been in the family for several generations. Sworn to protect mankind, he came from a family of hunters who tracked and killed a specific prey. Hearing that and looking at his necklace, she immediately understood why he was not affected by her magic and that it was not likely she would live to see morning. She continued to listen to what he had to say.

He revealed that they only dated those years ago so his family could determine if she was to be eliminated, but it was clear she had no idea who she was or of what she was capable. He also shared with her that he was glad because he found he had feelings for her and did not want to kill her if not critical.

It was his family's obligation to obliterate all witches, especially those with special abilities like hers. The desire and gratification of killing was not specific to her; for witches like her, the addiction was *too* strong to deny and they became a greater threat to his kind. He was impressed that she was the only witch who ever targeted evil people, but as soon as he saw she was killing innocents, he knew she'd become addicted to the rush of murder and could no longer ignore his duty.

Through sobs of fear, regret and anger she pleaded, "Please! Let me go! Let me go, you monster! Please!"

He looked at her incredulously. "Did you just call *me* a monster," he demanded. "Do you really think I didn't know you planned to kill me tonight?"

She had no response to this, the realization that he was aware of her motive all night having caught her completely off guard. It was as if he splashed cold water in her face. She had been a smug fool guided only by her dark desire.

He positioned himself behind the chair on which she sat, exposing a mirror in front of her. She saw in the reflection he held a large and ornate blade in his hand. He stared at her coolly in the mirror and moments before he slit her throat he said, "Look in the mirror love, there's your monster."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Stephanie lives in New York City. Enamored of world cultures, she has lived and traveled all over the globe. When not chained to her office chair, she's either in the gym, crocheting, reading, or working on her blog. She is proud to say *Bright Lights, Witch City* is her first published story and is influenced by authors such as Daniel Loubier and Scott Snyder.

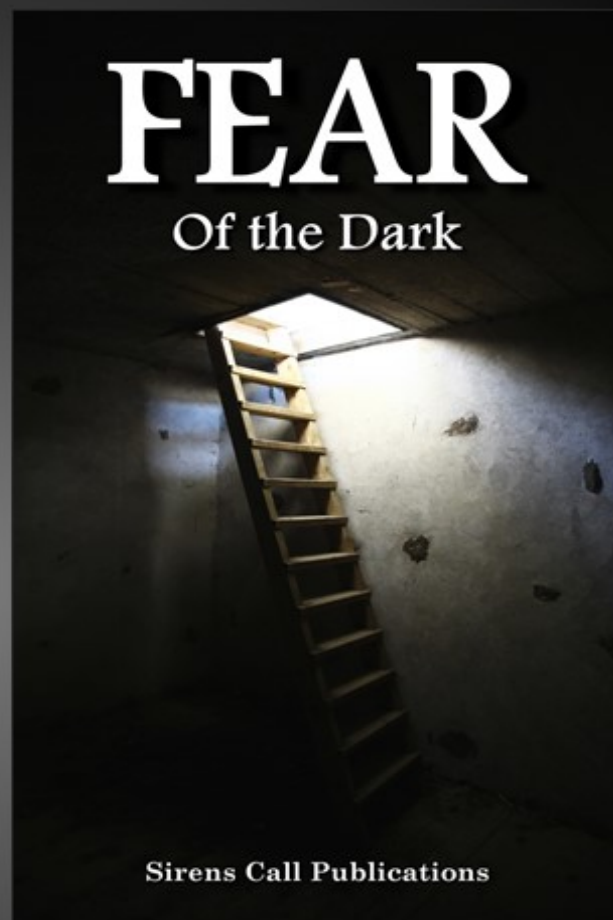
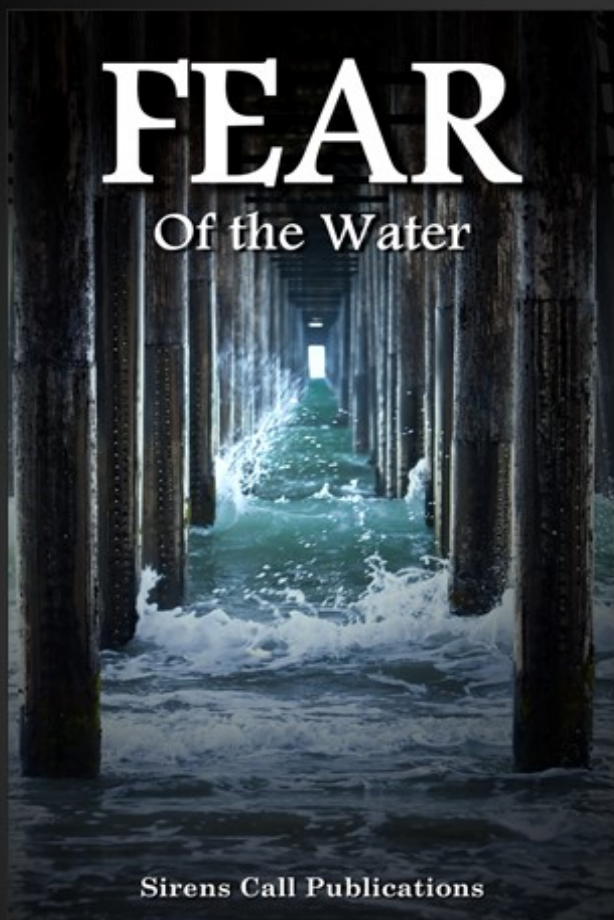
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The Thing in the Cellar | Robb T. White

“What the blue hell’s that down there?”

“Found it in the woods couple days ago,” Rafe said.

He never took his eyes off the TV. The Vols were playing.

“What *is* that thing?”

“Already done tole you, dummy. Found it in the woods when I was looking for mushrooms.”

“You mean, when you was out poachin’ deer,” his cousin Ron replied.

Rafe Carver paid more poaching fines than anybody else in Hickman County.

“That’s a human bein’ you got chained up down there.”

A loud whoop, spluttered, joyful curses. The Vols scored. Ole Miss was two TDs behind.

“Listen to me!”

“Ron, what the hey, the game’s on!”

“I can’t believe you watchin’ that game while you got a—a person down there chained to a support pole.”

“It ain’t no human. Just because you seen arms and legs on it. That’s some new creature they ain’t got round to identifying yet.”

Ron Carver couldn’t believe his ears, although his cousin had said plenty of stupid things in his life. The family story Ron’s momma Eileen told was Rafe had got a staph infection that swole up his head to the size of a beach ball. Fried his brain too, but it was more likely the white lightning his uncle brewed and Rafe’s momma drank while she was pregnant.

But what was it exactly? Ron had glimpsed a hairless thing, taller than a man, crouched in the corner of his cousin’s dank basement, breathing in guttural rasps; it looked as if it had folded itself up into a pale ball, like a praying mantis, with no discernible features except appendages where feet and hands with claw-like nails protruded. He approached it slowly to get a better look, but the sudden swivel of its head in his direction made him gasp for breath. A shaft of light from a window used for a coal cellar chute revealed a pair of piercing blue eyes. *Oh my God, what is that thing!*

Fear made Ron stutter-step backwards tripping over cardboard boxes. Stories and rumors of a sasquatch-like animal flooded back to his memory. He and Rafe had once glimpsed something in the woods as boys when they were camping out by Neilson’s Creek. A big thing, eight-feet tall by a tree limb, they reckoned, albino-skinned and fast as water moccasin whipping through the grass. But everyone told stories like that back then.

He hurried back up the stairs and hollered at his cousin; a sudden, disgusting idea came to him, seeing the big-bellied slob sitting there in his chair acting like he’s King Farook on his throne.

“You think it’s a woman down there, don’t you?”

Rafe never turned around. He slugged down the rest of his beer, crumpled the can, and flipped it backwards at Ron.

“Go screw yourself, Ronnie, because I ain’t giving two shits what you believe or don’t believe.”

“You can’t keep it, him, her, whatever,” Ronnie said.

“Can too.”

The words caused a red mist to cloud over Ron’s vision. *You bullheaded dimwit, Rafe Carver,,,*

“Where’d you shoot it at?”

“Done tole you, idiot,” Rafe replied. “Out to Neilson’s Creek yonder—”

“No, moron. I meant where in the body did you hit it? I seen a pool of blood down there by her, its—the feet.”

“Got it in the hamstring,” Rafe replied. “Drug it here by a rope attached to my four-wheeler. Used a twenty-inch Headhunter.”

Like it mattered what arrow he shot it with, Ron thought.

“Animals has stronger immune systems than people,” Rafe said. “You was a real hunter, you’d know that.”

Ron had half a mind to let his cousin wind up in Brushy Mountain penitentiary like their second cousin Mort Jones, who’d killed his wife Virginia four years ago with her own iron skillet.

On the TV, a Mississippi cornerback snagged a pass intended for a Tennessee wide receiver and scored an easy, seventy-two-yard pick six.

“Threw it like a got-danged wounded duck,” Rafe moaned.

“Listen to me, Rafe, we got to take that person—that creature thing—back to the woods and let it go. Or else you headin’ for a world of trouble, man, old Sheriff Bob Bailey finds out what you done now.”

“He can kiss my ass in the crack—and you, too, Ronald James Carver,” Rafe said. “I’m gonna be puttin’ it on eBay, make some real cash outten it.”

“You are one dumb s.o.b.,” Ron blurted, “you ain’t even got a computer.”

“I’ll use the one at the public library.”

“I’m gonna cut it loose right now.”

“Like hell you are...”

A moment later, the two cousins were rolling on the floor, overturning furniture and breaking glass in the tussle.

Ron was surprised at the strength of his flabby cousin. He’d knocked him around plenty when they were kids out fishing and hunting or playing Civil War soldiers in the woods where Rafe poached deer and shot squirrel. Now, however, he had all he could handle with the fat slob pinning him to the floor, grunting like a boar, and blowing his beer breath in Ron’s face. Rafe put an arm bar across Ronnie’s neck and pressed his full body weight into it, choking him out. Ron spluttered, gathered his strength, and twisted under his cousin; he snapped a leg up and sent a hard knee to Rafe’s groin.

Rafe bellowed, spit flying from his mouth all over Ronnie’s face.

Oh just great, Ron thought, gasping for air, now I got his friggin' cooties on me.

Neither man heard the groan of basement steps stressed by a heavy weight climbing up from the dark below. Neither one saw the thing in the basement appear in the cellar doorway to behold the two men struggling on the floor. Neither heard the raspy breath drawn in pain from the savage wound where Rafe's arrow had chewed through the thigh meat and come out the front; it looked raw and had to be painful. While it sat below in the dark for two days, cadaver flies had lain eggs and the maggots had devoured some of the dead tissue enabling healing.

Rafe, however, was right about one thing: this creature of the Smoky Mountains possessed healing properties gathered from the bowels of the Earth over centuries that no human being could duplicate. Immensely strong with a digestive system like a hyena's, it could scavenge off carcasses and devour rotted meat rank with botulism; its jaws were elongated and filled with retractable canines. The quadriceps muscle the arrow had pierced would have crippled any Volunteers running back for months, but this creature had a double set of muscles for hip and knee flexion.

Ron woke in the ICU two weeks later. He felt like someone who had been swimming too long under water and his lungs were about to burst. One week spent in an induced coma. The second week was all operations to repair damage and do skin grafts. The operation to reattach the arm had failed despite two teams of surgeons from Nashville working non-stop—too much ligature damage; his right eye was missing, and the cheeks had been scraped clear to the bone as if some madman with a dull cleaver had gone to work on him. Ron's torso and back were crisscrossed with sutures. He resembled a child's crude drawings of spider webs in black crayon. He itched badly despite the goo they slathered all over his cuts; his skin burned from all the stitching and the clips used to hold it together. They'd used superglue to close some of the gashes where the veins were exposed.

He told the sheriff what little he remembered but he couldn't get past wrestling with Rafe on the floor. It all went black like a curtain come down over his eyes.

"It was like he just suddenly... lifted himself... off me," Ron repeated. "Floated up, like. I remember seein' the look on Rafe's face—but then it all goes blank."

"Now how could a two-hundred-sixty-pound man just float off you? You tell me that," Sheriff Bailey asked him.

The sheriff tried not to sound unduly harsh. Carver looked like something dropped into a wood chipper with rusty blades.

"Sheriff, I don't know what happened..."

The med-surg nurse interrupted the sheriff's grilling for her patient's sake. Any movement could open wounds, expose him to nosocomial infection. Ron Carver'd lost a third of his body's blood; the sheriff told him in the hospital that the inside of Rafe's house looked as it had been sprayed with blood from a high-pressure hose. Rafe's body was never found.

"He must have stumbled out, fallen into a gorge. We'll find him, though," Sheriff Bailey said. His look said: *When we do, that'll be the day I put the cuffs on you.*

Out in the hallway, Sheriff Bailey told his deputy he'd seen marks like that before when a Cooper's Hawk swooped down on pigeon, raking its talons over the bird after striking it senseless.

On Halloween, the day Lynette met him in the lobby to take him home from the hospital, she was wearing fake vampire teeth to cheer him up.

Ron quit his job at the power plant, rarely left the house. When Lynette finally grew bored with staying home with him watching TV, she dumped him for Jimmy Lee Slater from Grinder's Switch, who claimed to be a cousin of Beth Slater Whitson—Minnie Pearl of the Grand Ole Opry. Ron said he had no hard feelings and wished her 'good luck'. He finally stopped talking to people, and he never once mentioned the thing in his cousin's basement.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Robb T. White lives in Northeastern Ohio. He has written three hardboiled private-eye novels featuring his series character Tom Haftmann. He has a pair of crime novels: *When You Run with Wolves* and *Waiting on a Bridge of Maggots*. His digital novel *Special Collections* won the New Rivers Press ebook competition in 2014. *Dangerous Women: Stories of Crime, Mystery, and Mayhem* is forthcoming from Class Act Books.

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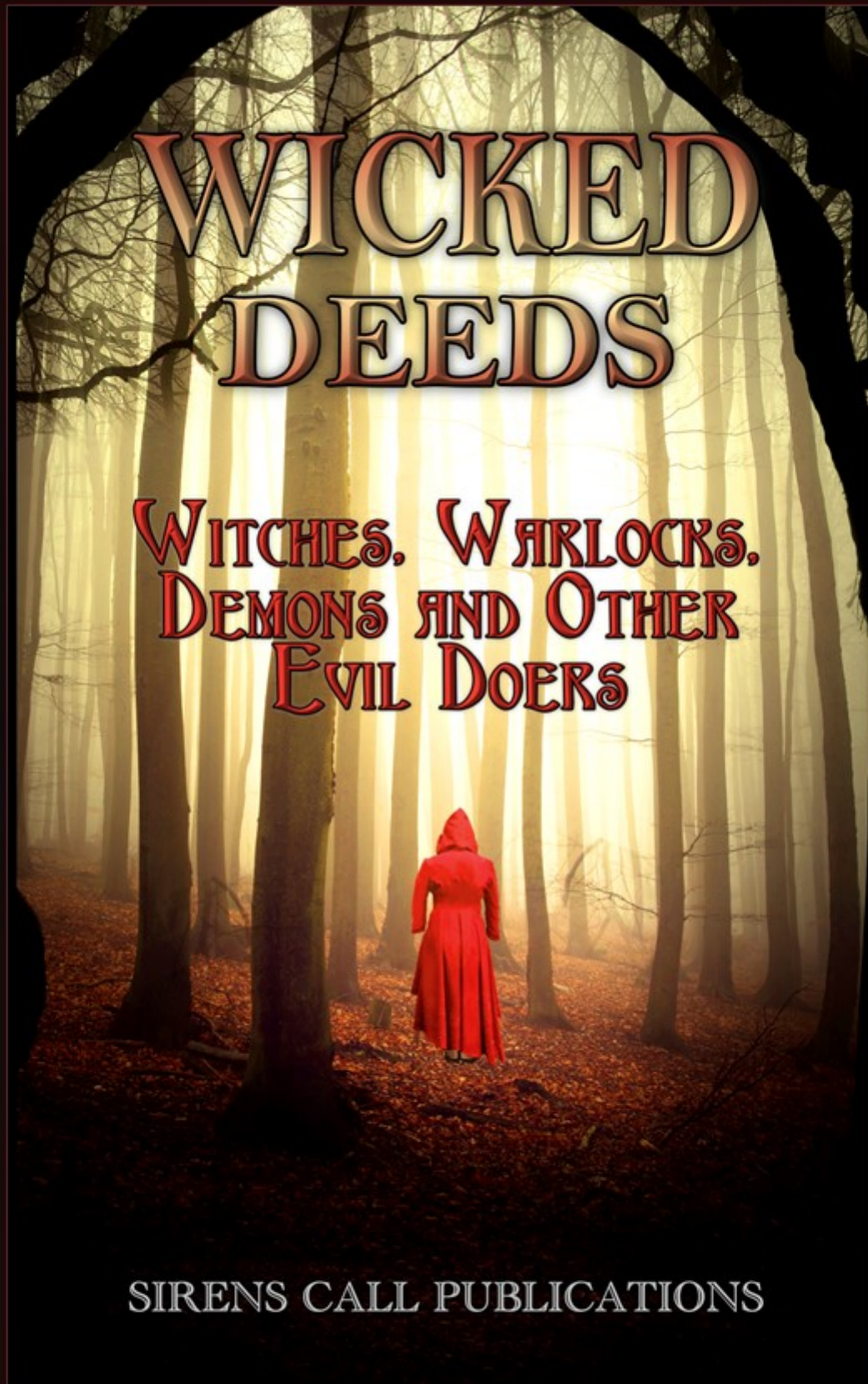
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The Friend | *H. Steinwachs*

He stood staring ahead. Eyes cold and dark, and expression seemingly blank.

“Soon,” he said aloud to no one, save the body on the slab in front of him. He smoothed the wrinkles from his brown leather apron.

“Ok.”

He looked down at his arm and saw the hairs begin to raise. Lightning struck. Close. He felt the house shake slightly. Thunder clapped overhead. He looked down at his masterpiece. All worth it. All the sacrifice. The pretending. The...smiling. It made him gag.

“Ugh.”

One by one he had befriended those losers. The supposed cream of the crop of Benfield High. Ridiculous. All of them were such ignorant peons. It was all for this. This creation. A friend who would be worthy of his genius.

He had almost felt bad for the last one. Luke. The look of surprise on his face before the axe had struck him in the chest was pathetic. He had been careful not to hit his head. His brain was the best he had been able to find. He had gone through the locked file cabinets to find the IQ scores. His was the top score, of course. Luke was second, far below his; but second nonetheless.

He felt the electricity build in the room. He walked over the big button he had put on the wall. A monster spider of wires came out of all directions, connecting it to the equipment in the room and from the equipment to the slab before him. When he felt the pressure reach its peak he slammed the button down and the lightning rod he had created rose above the house just in time to catch the strike.

An explosion of light lit every room in the house. Every bulb exploded simultaneously and every appliance started smoking. Pitch black.

“One-one-thousand”

“Two-one-thousand”

“Three-one-thousand”

He turned on the flashlight that was sitting next to him on the desk and focused the beam on the body. The pointer finger on the right hand twitched and suddenly the eyes opened.

“Hello friend.” His laughter rose into the night.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — When she’s not running around caring for her two amazing children, H. Steinwachs lives the real life horror show of a GI surgical nurse. From exploding ostomies to unstoppable rectal bleeds, it takes a lot to freak this lady out. This is her first shot at flash fiction and she’s sure it won’t be her last.

Weighing Feathers | *Kevin Holton*

We surrounded Jacklyn in her own living room, some holding flasks of holy water, some with aerosol cans, ready to make flame jets if the situation got desperate. As the group leader, I held the stake, but we all had one, ready in case she got to me. She could overpower one of us, but would never move so quickly that we'd all be killed. Our assault team counted seven people, with another four waiting nearby, hiding, wielding guns armed with wooden bullets.

"Three weeks ago, Jedidiah woke up pale, weak, with two holes in his neck," I said, announcing her crimes like Miranda Rights. "Last week, I saw you drinking blood from my sister, your fangs buried in her neck. Explain if you want. This only ends one way for you."

Jacklyn had always been the subject of some stares around our parts, the target of jeers and derision. Hamsfield didn't count as a village or small town by any means—if you wanted to quietly make a living and keep out of sight, no one would notice you—but scarring all along her face and arms made it hard to look away. Otherwise, she seemed okay, at a glance. Modern clothes, hot in a modest way, mysterious eyes somehow deeper than they should've been, reeling you in when she talked so you couldn't look away.

"Figures, right?" Mark spoke up from behind her. "Should've known. Is that how you got so messed up? Holy water burn that pretty little skin right off?"

She scowled, not bothering to look back at him. "I got caught in a house fire. Medically speaking, I died. Took a miracle to bring me back, and I still woke up wrapped head to toe in bandages. Is that why you want to kill me? I'm ugly?"

"Don't get coy and act like this isn't about you drinking blood." I spoke loud, to shut Mark down. It might very well have been about looks for him, and we didn't need to get off topic. "You're a vampire. I... I didn't think things like you were real, but apparently, you are. Just not for long. I won't have you running around feasting on unsuspecting people."

A curious look passed over her face. Letting out a heavy sigh, she raised her arms, supplicating, a sinner before a vengeful god. "There's no way I can talk you out of this?"

I shook my head, hand trembling. We hadn't broken into her home to offer her mercy. Our city's best sharpshooters didn't have the building surrounded for shits and giggles.

She dropped to her knees, arms spread wide. "Fine. Stake my heart if you can. I lost it long ago." Her collar sat snug around her neck, but the shirt's thin fabric wouldn't pose a problem.

Lunging forward, I drove the stake deep into her chest, not noticing any resistance from her sternum. No bone held me back, no dramatic spurt of blood from the wound announced her death. She didn't gurgle, grunt, or cry out. Jacklyn fell backward, hitting the floor with a soft *thwump*. Placid and peaceful, her face offered no sign of final throes.

A small pendant fell from inside her shirt, clattering to the floor by her neck. In a spur-of-the-moment decision, I snatched it, yanking it from the thin chain. A tacky little dollar-store knickknack, some kind of bug made from slate or cement. This would be my trophy, as so many hunters had taken ivory of antlers or skulls. Lucas Myers, vampire slayer.

“Okay.” I addressed my team, steely, resolved. Some stared with wide eyes, but we all knew I wasn’t a murderer. I’d killed a supernatural creature, an act as morally null as killing a bear that’s trying to break into someone’s home. “We need to break this down and know what we’re dealing with, in case it happens again. Steve, Maria,” I turned to the two at my left, “take her back to the morgue and perform an autopsy. We need to know what’s going on inside this thing, what its organs do, what its heart looks like, all that. Got it?”

They nodded, gingerly walking over. Steve kicked the body’s side to make sure it really died, then helped carry it to Maria’s van.

“Mark, Lisa, Pheobe, clean the house. Make sure there are no traces of us here. Wipe the knobs, vacuum if you have to, I don’t care, just erase all evidence. We might know what she was, but I somehow doubt the sheriff would be on board with what happened tonight.”

After divvying up the duties, each set off to do as I’d asked.

“And Miguel?” I turned to the last remaining member of my team. “Tell the shooters to stand down and go home. They probably saw the two carrying her body out, but we want to make sure they’re aware so nothing shitty happens.”

“Sure.” He pulled out his cell phone to notify the others.

“I’ve got a few other things to follow up on. We’ll meet back up soon to talk more about this. Once you’re done, text me so I know you’re home safe.”

With that, I left. Truth be told, I had no other business. Her house became a cemetery thanks to me. Well, a crime scene, at least. They didn’t need to see how badly my hands shook, or how I kept muttering, “Not a human being, not a human being,” desperately trying to convince myself of what I thought I’d already known.

One short car ride and three whiskeys later, I sat in an arm chair in my living room, watching the local late-night news. Despite this broadcast basically being a rehash of the 5 o’clock show, I couldn’t help feel they’d announce a gruesome murder conspiracy, then look dead into my soul and say, “Lucas Myers, don’t bother running.”

That never happened. Nothing eventful happened at all. I waited, watching the same footage of car chases and little league games until my phone rang. Maria, calling with news about the autopsy, no doubt.

“We might have a problem.” No hi, no hello, straight to the adrenaline surge.

“What? Why? Was she... wasn’t she a vampire?” My hands barely held the phone.

“No. I mean, maybe, but... you didn’t stake her heart. Remember when she said she lost hers? I think she meant it literally. There’s no heart in her chest, no sternum to protect it. They’ve been removed. Surgically.”

“Surgically? Maria, what the hell are you saying?”

“I’m saying, someone did a real fine hack job on Jacklyn, because these are all clean cuts, with just a little bit of scarring from the incision. Her burns kind of hide the lines, but she’s been through an autopsy, and I don’t think she’d be considered undead. Just dead.”

“Like a zombie?”

“No, not like a... like... like I don’t know, okay? Mythology and religion and werewolf swamp babies were supposed to be your department!” She snarled into the receiver, making me jump away, as if she’d bite me through sound. “Here’s all I know: she doesn’t have a heart, there’s no reason she should’ve been alive, and the stake was just there, sitting in a bind of muscle, but poking into empty space.”

Footsteps echoed in the background, behind her words.

“Lucas, we really need to take a step back and see what else could’ve... Steve?” Her words trailed off as she addressed her assistant. “Steve what are you—Steve, no!” A shout came through along with a grizzled, manic laughter. The clattering of her phone hitting the ground made me grit my teeth against the sharp volume spike, but it didn’t mask the sudden *splish* of someone stabbing into someone else. I shouted for anybody to answer, but the only reply came as a wet spurting and a crazed giggling.

Then I got a video message from Steve.

Barely looking at the camera, his mouth hung open, eyes rolling like loose marbles, entirely bloodshot. Panning to show Maria’s body riddled with stab wounds, each bleeding profusely, the mortician already unmoving, he turned back, still laughing. Without a word, he raised a scalpel and drove it into his neck, slicing so deep I could swear his head would roll off his shoulders. I couldn’t look away. My team. My friends. A murder-suicide, because of what? What had he seen?

I didn’t have to wonder long. Videos poured in before I could consider calling them, or rushing to someone’s aid. Mark set himself on fire with a makeshift blowtorch. Phoebe sent a video of Lisa smashing her head against the ground until her skull split, then grinned at the camera before chewing through her own wrists. Miguel threw himself into the quarry, swan-diving, thankfully hitting send before he hit the ground, but still sending a good few seconds of falling and scream-laughing. All four of our sharpshooters sent pictures with the barrels in their own mouths, captioning the same single word: Bye.

None of my reading prepared me for this. Nothing tipped me off to whatever she was, or might’ve been, but I had to warn somebody. I called 9-1-1 to report a lot of deaths, racing for the door, then stopping dead.

Jacklyn plucked the phone from my hand as the operator answered. “Sorry!” she said cheerily. “My kid got away from me. He just started kindergarten, and they learned how to call 9-1-1 today. I’ll make sure this doesn’t happen again.” The dead woman hung up.

She glared at me, more disappointed than angry. “So smart, yet so unbelievably dumb.”

“What are you?” Her eyes glowed in the dark of my living room.

Placing a cold finger to my lips, she reached into the left pocket of my jacket, pulling out the pendant I’d torn from her earlier. It gleamed a sickly golden-black, held gently in her pale palm.

“I already told you. I died, once, and woke bound in bandages. But, your western mind could only comprehend your western myths. Vampires aren’t the *only* creatures who, at times, feed on human blood.”

“You’re a... a mummy?” I knew of them, of course, but never heard of one acting like this—feeding on other people for sustenance.

She nodded. “The heart is our connection to the afterlife, according to Egyptians, at least. I’d been dead long enough for Anubis to take mine and weigh it before my lover brought me back. In exchange, the god of death gave me this scarab, as he couldn’t return what he’d taken, but couldn’t deny my return. I drink blood because, as I mentioned, I lost my heart long ago. This little amulet will serve as my second heart, ready for the scales, should I ever make the mistake of dying again.”

I shook my head. A mummy, drinking blood, having no heart? I didn’t know enough of Egyptian lore to say if she told the truth, but still, this defied all logic. At least vampires, zombies, even werewolves followed some basic rules of anatomy. Her gaze didn’t leave the scarab.

“Funny thing, death. When you die—when some die—they meet Anubis, and if the weight of your guilt is heavier than Ma’at, or truth, he eats your soul. Tricky to pass that test, considering truth is just a feather. I think I’ll fare just fine the second time around. You tried to kill me, after all. I’ve never harmed anyone, just borrowed some blood. Enough for myself and my food to survive. You? Cold. Blooded. Murderer.”

She locked eyes with me, and the way my heart stopped, I almost knew how she felt, walking around without one. “Those are the facts, aren’t they? Everyone has different truths. Different interpretations of what they think is real. You thought I deserved to die, but really, you dragged a bunch of people into a witch hunt. Now, you’ll face penance for all their spilled blood.”

Jacklyn turned to go, but looked back, her hand resting on the front doorknob. “That’s why I’m leaving you alive, you know. I can drive anyone mad with my will alone, but you’ll have the rest of your life to atone. Everyone else died insane, but innocent. You?” She shrugged. “Maybe this is mercy, giving you a chance at heaven. Let’s see if you deserve it.”

With that, she stepped outside, pulling the door shut behind her. The lock clicked into place, and I stood alone in the darkness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Kevin Holton is the writer behind many short stories, and the forthcoming novels *The Nightmare King* (Siren’s Call Publications) and *At the Hands of Madness* (Severed Press). His work has appeared with James Ward Kirk Fiction, Radiant Crown Publishing, Mighty Quill Books, Transmudane Press, and many others. When not writing, he can be found teaching, working out, or talking about Batman.

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Like A Puppet | Jon Olson

Earl was two hours into his shift and already pissed off.

It was bad enough that management stuck him out at the East Gate Security Checkpoint but they also put him with the new guy, Geoff. Not only that but his guts rumbled too, threatening to spill out his hind quarters at any moment.

No one really used the East Gate anymore as it had been turned into an exit-only checkpoint. The road was poorly maintained with crumbling asphalt and the gate itself was rusted chain link. Their guard shack was roughly the size of a large recreational vehicle and sat just off the road surrounded by weeds.

Inside was a large desk with two computer monitors, each of them linked to a CCTV camera. Fluorescent lights hummed above, giving the trailer a slight hint of green, making Earl think of a hospital. There was a single phone hooked to the wall and even it had seen better days. In Earl's view, the only good thing about the shack was the air conditioning.

"I'm going to have a smoke," Earl grunted.

He stepped outside and lit a cigarette.

It was a humid evening, evident from the sweat already running down his back. The sky was streaked with crimson as the sun slowly dropped toward the horizon. He glanced up at the lone street light standing next to the shack and watched as the moths were drawn to its glow.

A mosquito buzzed by Earl's ear and he swatted aimlessly at it. Nearing fifty with a gut starting to hang over his belt, Earl had been with Dragon Security for almost fifteen of those years.

Despite that experience, they decided to screw him and stuck him the East Gate.

"No," Earl said, sighing heavily. "You got yourself stuck here."

The door opened behind him.

"Did you say something, Earl?" Geoff asked.

Earl shook his head and waved the new guy away.

He didn't dislike Geoff as a person, but rather disliked him for reminding Earl of what he once was: young, in shape and working the job solely to pay his way through school.

Not earning a living off a security guard's shitty wages, he thought.

The air conditioning felt great, although it also gave him the chills thanks to his sweat. He sat down on one of the hard plastic chairs and looked at the grainy black and white images on the monitors.

"What do you think they do up there?" Geoff asked, sitting down next to him.

"Up where?" Earl asked.

"At the Institute."

Earl glared at him and said, "It doesn't fucking matter what they do up there. The less you ask, the better."

Geoff blinked, not expecting Earl to snap.

Earl sighed. "Look, I'm not trying to be a dick. I made the mistake of asking a similar question and now I'm getting punished."

Geoff opened his mouth to speak but thought better of it and turned back to the monitors.

About a week ago when Earl was still in Dragon Security's good graces, he was working at the Main Entrance. He had gotten to know some of the people who actually worked inside the McFarlane Institute, one of whom was Dr. Richards. They shot the shit daily until Earl made the mistake of asking what they were doing up there.

A harmless question.

Dr. Richards didn't speak to him after that and shortly thereafter he got assigned to the East Gate. It still pissed him off thinking back to it.

The ground shuddered, followed immediately by a deep, heart pounding thud.

The lights flickered twice before going out, along with the monitors and air conditioner.

They lost power.

"What the hell was that?" Geoff asked as he jumped to his feet, knocking the chair over in the process.

"Relax," Earl replied. "Just give it a sec. Sometimes there are power bumps."

While it was true, Earl had never experienced a power bump like that before. He looked out the window toward the institute and saw that the lights were still on.

Why hadn't they gone out?

The power returned and everything went back to normal.

"You see," Earl said, rubbing at his stomach. "There's nothing to it. If you're here long enough you'll get used to them."

"I won't lie," Geoff said picking his chair off the floor. "It gave me a start."

Earl's guts rumbled again and he knew better than to tempt fate.

"I'm going to take a shit," Earl said making his way toward the bathroom. "Are you okay out here?"

"I should be," Geoff nodded.

"You remember what to do if a car comes?"

"Check their documents of entitlement and identification. If everything looks good let them out."

As he reached the bathroom, Earl turned around and said, "If you have any issues let me know."

He shut the door, dropped his pants and closed his eyes as he sat down on the toilet, enjoying the relief it brought. For some reason, the trailer's designer felt it necessary to put in a small window in the bathroom. It was the size of the Kleenex box and up high so they left it alone, usually leaving it open to air out the shitter.

As much as he wanted to believe that it had just been a power bump, Earl couldn't shake the feeling that it was something else. Every other power bump had knocked out the exterior lights to the McFarlane Institute.

This time it hadn't.

“Hey Earl,” Geoff called through the door. “There’s a car coming.”

“So handle it!” Earl yelled back.

He heard Geoff open the shack door and step outside. As Earl went ahead with his business, he listened as Geoff’s voice carried in through the open window.

“Good evening,” Geoff said.

There was a pause and then a voice said, “Good... evening... it... is...” Earl recognized the voice as Dr. Richards’. Why did he sound weird?

“I need to see your ID and document of entitlement.” There was the sound of movement, then shuffling of paper. “It’ll just be a quick second while I validate these.”

“Going... home... for... night...”

“What was that?” Geoff asked.

“Going... home... for... night...”

“Quitting time is always a good feeling.”

The phone began ringing out by the desk.

“Fuck sakes,” Earl muttered.

After a quick wipe he walked toward the desk, stealing a glance outside at Dr. Richards’ car. Geoff was handing his paperwork back through the passenger side window. Earl saw the good doctor and stopped, as there was something off about him.

His motions were jerky and delayed as if he were reacting. It reminded Earl of the old ventriloquist puppets when their heads would turn followed by their eyes. That combined with his bizarre speech pattern rubbed Earl the wrong way but he couldn’t figure out why.

The phone continued to ring.

Earl heard the familiar buzzing indicating that the gate was opening and saw Geoff with his hand on the control switch. The gate was almost completely open when Earl picked up the receiver.

“East Gate, Earl speaking.”

The gate creaked to a stop.

“*This is McNeil!*”

Geoff waved Dr. Richards’s car through.

“How’s it—?”

“*Don’t let anyone through the gate! We’ve had a breach! I repeat, we’ve had a breach!*”

Earl dropped the receiver and bolted outside just as Geoff hit the switch to close the gate. Dr. Richards’ car was already outside a few meters beyond the fence where it had stopped.

“That guy sure seemed fucked up,” Geoff said, then looked at Earl. “Hey, who was that on the phone?”

Dr. Richards began convulsing uncontrollably.

“It was McNeil from the institute,” Earl began. “He said there’d been a breach.” His voice trailed off.

Dr. Richards rose from his seat and hung out the passenger side window by what looked like a cross between a snake and tentacle.

“Uh... Earl,” Geoff whispered. “What the hell is that?”

Earl said nothing as a larger shape materialized from the backseat and slithered through the window.

The creature had what looked like five appendages, including the one holding the good doctor. Its moist body glistened in the light of the street lamp. It emitted a sound similar to that of someone smacking their tongue against their lips.

Dropping Dr. Richards’ body onto the ground, it disappeared into the darkness.

“My God...” Geoff muttered. “Earl... did it... did it use his body like... like...”

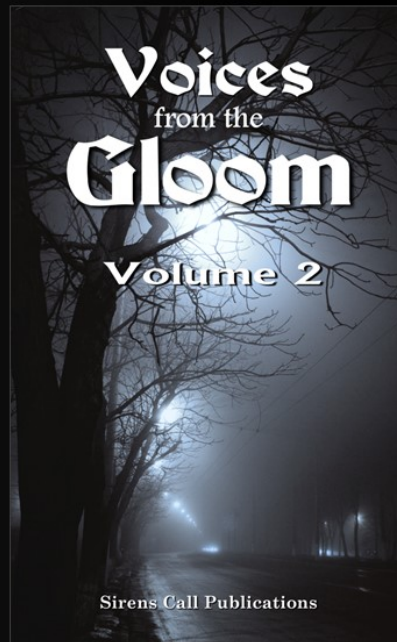
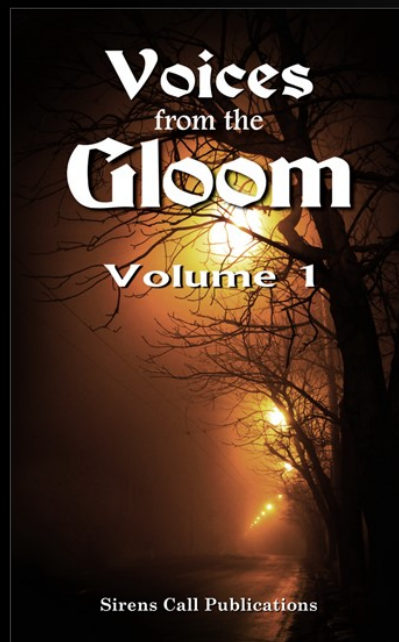
“Like a puppet,” Earl managed to say.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — As an author of horror and dark fiction, Jon also has a passion for science fiction and comic books. He’s a proud member of Pen of the Damned and the Horror Writer’s Association and resides in Eastern Passage, Nova Scotia with his family.

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Class Reunion | *Robert C. Eccles*

As captain of the football team and pretty much the most popular guy on campus, high school reunions had never appealed much to Jim Bader. That was before he became a vampire. Now he actually looked forward to seeing some of his classmates again, especially the ones who had been a pain in his ass.

Jim pinned his name tag on as he walked into the banquet hall. The tag included his high school yearbook picture, his name and his occupation, which he had boldly given as ‘vampire’, figuring everyone would get a big laugh out of it.

As Jim wandered through the crowd he saw that most of the girls he had found attractive in high school held little interest for him now. The exception stood at the bar; a tall, leggy creature with long, chestnut hair. She wore a skin-tight sequined red dress, stockings (the ones with the line up the back) and red stiletto heels. She looked familiar, but Jim couldn’t see her name tag. He ogled her as she walked from the bar back to her table.

As she reached the table a scrawny man sporting bent wire-frame glasses and a comb-over held her chair out for her. She kissed him on the cheek and sat down. Jim didn’t have to look at the guy’s name tag to figure out that this gorgeous woman had come to the reunion with none other than the class dweeb, Chester Nelson.

Jim had kicked Chester’s ass more than once back in school. Chester (who Jim had dubbed ‘Chester the Molester’ for no good reason) had been the source of much aggravation for Jim. Jim’s beef with the dork had centered on Chester’s girlfriend, Denise Wixom. Denise was a looker in high school, and Jim could never understand what she saw in the kid with the pocket protector and the glasses held together with duct tape and paper clips. Jim had tried to lure her away. She refused his advances, which pissed Jim off to no end. So Jim started spreading rumors about Denise. He told people she was a slut, and the rumors stuck. Denise accused Jim of ruining her reputation, and Jim didn’t deny it. Truth was, he didn’t give a crap.

As Jim approached their table, he glanced at the woman’s name tag. Could this possibly be Denise Wixom? The picture on the tag was definitely Denise’s high school mug shot. The name below it was Denise Nelson. Jim’s mouth dropped open. Chester ‘The Molester’ Nelson had married this hottie?

“Jim! Great to see you!”

Chester stood up, extending his hand. Jim closed his mouth with an audible snap, took Chester’s hand and shook it, deliberately squeezing too hard. Chester winced.

“Jim, I’d like you to meet my wife, Denise. You remember her from school?”

Denise stood up and leaned forward, holding out her hand. Jim took her hand and gave it a cursory shake, but it was her cleavage he was staring at.

“Nice to see you again,” Jim said, finally shifting his eyes to Denise’s face. “And of course I remember you. How could I forget?”

“Nice to see you, too,” Denise said, smiling. She didn’t seem to be harboring any ill feelings toward Jim, and neither did Chester. Denise sat down and Jim followed suit, glad to be able to hide his growing erection.

“Hey, Jim,” Chester said, “I’m gonna grab something to drink. Can I get you something?”

“No, thanks,” Jim said. If he was going to drink anything tonight it wouldn’t come from behind the bar.

“OK. I might as well mingle a bit while I’m up.” Chester kissed Denise, this time on the mouth. Jim thought he saw their tongues flitting briefly as their lips parted. Chester straightened up and smiled. “I can trust you with Jim, can’t I?”

“Of course, silly!” Denise said, smiling back.

Chester chuckled and walked off toward the bar. Denise moved to the chair next to Jim. He opened his mouth to say something and then felt a hand high up on his thigh. Jim’s mouth snapped audibly shut for the second time in sixty seconds. He looked down at Denise’s hand, then up at her face. She was grinning.

“You wanna go outside for a while?” she asked.

“Sure,” Jim answered, “but you’re gonna have to walk in front of me.” Denise glanced down at the tented front of Jim’s pants.

“I see. Well, just follow me.”

They stood, and Denise led Jim by the hand toward the exit. A smile spread across Jim’s face as he realized he was finally going to have the one girl who had shunned him in high school. And by have her, he meant kill her. And then he’d drink her blood.

Denise led Jim around the back of the banquet hall, behind a Dumpster. She leaned against the wall and pulled him to her. Jim’s hands grasped Denise’s buttocks, and as he mashed his mouth against hers he could feel his canine teeth lengthening into fangs. Denise pushed him away, gasping for air.

“We’ve been waiting for you to come to one of these reunions,” she breathed.

Jim was puzzled. “You mean ‘I’ve been waiting’.”

Jim was startled by the throaty growl from behind him.

“No, she means ‘we’ve been waiting’.”

Jim spun around to see an enormous wolf standing on its hind legs. A pair of bent wire-frame glasses sat askew on its muzzle. In the instant before Jim’s head was ripped from his shoulders, the name tag hanging from the creature’s tattered dress shirt caught Jim’s eye. He had enough time to wish he’d paid more attention to it earlier. The name on the tag was Chester Nelson. Chester had listed his occupation as ‘werewolf’.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Robert C. Eccles is a former radio news guy who enjoys writing short stories, mainly horror and sci-fi. His stories have appeared online and in print anthologies. *Necrotic Tissue Magazine* published six of his 100-word stories, and included one of them in their "Best Of" edition. He’s a member of the Horror Writers Association, the Great Lakes Association of Horror Writers, and The Fictioneers.

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The Stray | *Wile E. Young*

The autumn night air was cool... the way it should be in October. The long summer was over and the day was winding down as Spencer breathed in the East Texas air, letting himself feel the subtle chill of winter.

Candles burned in dark windows and the occasional jack-o'-lantern flickered merrily as his footfalls echoed through the subdivision's street. He was the only one out walking tonight—a fact that did not bother him. Spencer preferred the solitude to small talk, which held no interest for him. Every hundred yards or so, a streetlight lit the walkway—the fluorescent orange glow reflected off the black pavement making temporary islands of light against the night.

He was almost ready to turn for home when he saw it. Standing under the streetlight closest to him was a large dog, panting—its humid breath spraying puffs of gray mist into the evening chill. He was a big fella, probably a mutt, brown (almost red) fur, big soulful orange eyes, and perky ears that twitched as Spencer stopped in his tracks. They stared each other down. Spencer was apprehensive, but excited. He loved dogs but was overly cautious of strays.

He crouched, trying to appear non-threatening as he held his hand out; the dog took a cautious step forward.

“Come here boy!”

Spencer spoke calmly, trying not to scare him off. He wasn't sure if the dog was a boy or not, falling back on his previous experience in getting dogs to like him.

The dog wagged its tail and took another cautious step forward, and then another, until Spencer could have reached out and pet him. He could see that it was a boy and its gigantic nose took in Spencer's scent before licking his hand.

Spencer smiled as the huge mutt rubbed up against him nearly knocking him over from his weight, “Yeah boy, hey yeah, you're a good boy.”

The dog huffed in excitement as he put his paw on Spencer's shoulder. He laughed as he scratched the dog behind the ears.

“Where's your people bud—huh? You don't look like you're starving.”

The dog's soulful eyes provided no answers and Spencer sighed, “Well, can't exactly leave a boy like you out here can we?”

The dog made a chuffing noise that Spencer affectionately referred to as ‘boofing.’ Spencer stood and motioned with his shoulder. “Well come on!”

They both walked home.

Spencer had decided to call the dog ‘Tanker’ because of his size. He had searched the forest of fur but hadn't found a collar.

The veterinarian clinic wouldn't be open until the next morning. Spencer laid out a bedding of pillows on the living room floor for the dog to sleep on during the night. He filled up a Tupperware bowl with water along with a spare plate of sweet and sour chicken leftovers for the dog to eat during the night, if he got hungry.

The food was left untouched and the dog stared mournfully at Spencer as he scratched him behind the ears, “Well buddy, I'm going to bed. I'll see you in the morning.”

Tanker stared back at him and boofed lightly as Spencer smiled and headed back to his bedroom.

He already knew that he was going to keep the dog. He had a big enough house, and his job working timber out in the Ozones beyond the city limits paid enough for him to support an

animal. It was a happy thought. He might even get a girlfriend out of it too. He had been told that the waitress down at the *Rabbit Patch Diner* liked dogs.

He drifted off with happy thoughts.

Spencer's cheek felt wet. He blearily opened his eyes and pushed a halfhearted hand against his face. He felt his stomach recoil when thick globs of saliva came away in his hand. Tanker sat on the floor staring at him with his knowing orange eyes, mouth agape in a doggy grin. Spencer's annoyance vanished as he looked at the dog.

"We're going to have to work on your licking problem."

The dog's grin disappeared and he just sat in the half-light of the bedroom. His knowing eyes made Spencer almost think that the dog was glaring at him. He ignored that feeling in the back of his neck that something was amiss, hoisting himself up to a sitting position.

Tanker's lips peeled back, his teeth bared and a low rumbling growl of warning unleashed. Spencer's blood stopped. He felt the roof of his mouth go dry as he reached out his hand (that wasn't quite as steady as earlier when he had met the dog).

"N-now buddy come on, I'm just trying—"

Tanker barked—a throaty roar that echoed through the room and made Spencer jump in his bed. The dog crouched its front paws and dug into the carpet with a rough dragging noise, ears at attention.

Spencer scooted away. This only seemed to anger the animal and the barking began again. The dog jumped up on its hind legs, long drops of saliva splattering against Spencer's bedsheets. He scrambled away to the other side of the bed hearing the massive dog struggle to get down and run around the frame to resume his attack.

Spencer always left a small pistol on his nightstand with a clip nearby—just in case a burglar might decide his house was a juicy target. He clicked the hammer back making sure the bullet entered the chamber. Tanker leapt onto the bed snarling, teeth clacking as he raced up the covers towards Spencer's face.

Spencer screamed and pulled the trigger.

He couldn't see where he hit, but the dog yelped. Spencer could hear the sound of paws scrambling on the floor, disappearing down the hall into his kitchen, and then silence.

He breathed deep, his heart pounding as he held the weapon in his hand, the smell of fresh gunpowder burning his nostrils. He waited, a minute or two, and wondered if the dog would come back and try to resume its attack. Nothing moved in the darkness. There was no noise, no panting, just an eerie pervading quiet.

Spencer got out of bed, taking a deep breath before placing his feet on the floor. The carpet muffled his footsteps as he slowly made his way across the room and peeked around the corner. A small lamp lit the hallway to the kitchen but nothing moved or dwelled there. The dog was nowhere to be found.

Spencer moved forward carefully examining every nook and cranny in case the animal had decided to lay in wait. He was aware of his breathing and the beating of his heart. Both were hard to control and almost deafening in his ears—like claps of thunder.

He entered the kitchen just in time for the light to click off.

Spencer gasped and fumbled around—pistol waving in the darkness as he tried to adjust his eyes. He could see the faint reflection of his car in the drive outside. The shadowy silhouettes of trees and the full moon's gleam off the dining room chairs washed the house in an eerie white light.

A dark silhouette scurried across the floor close to the front door next to windows. The movement was completely silent and caused Spencer to jump and let loose a small shout that he tried to stifle. He held the gun in front of him while expecting fangs and a lunge at his throat as he passed the parlor. He was prepared to fight off the animal.

Nothing came for him.

He walked forward and his bare feet suddenly felt warm.

It was sticky, wet, and warm.

He glanced at his feet and found himself looking at a vaguely sprawled silhouette of the dog.

Spencer reached over, fumbling for the light switch, the skylight above him blaring to light as the switch clicked.

It was Tanker's skin. The gigantic mutt's fur and flesh was splayed out resembling an expensive animal rug in some rich person's house. The animal's purple tongue lay on the floor and Spencer was stepping on it.

He jumped off in revulsion and stared into the skin's empty eye sockets—the knowing eyes were gone, replaced by darkness and wet fetid innards. Spencer eased his foot under the skin and bit his tongue to keep from vomiting, pulling upwards. The red guts hung in strands, but the entire belly of the skin was gone. A jagged, maroon hole was all that remained.

There was a noise deeper in the house, like someone had bumped a table trying to hide. Spencer was alert again. His pistol was raised as he stepped over the dog skin walking around the corner past the stairs into the secondary living room. There weren't any lamps or lights—it had been a sunroom that he had converted into a game room when he moved in. The TV stand was a dark obelisk against the wall. There were a few couches for casual seating, along with a side table. Next to the table was a large window that filtered in the white moonlight from between the twisted and gnarled trees.

Spencer scanned while looking for anything out of place.

The stairs creaked behind him.

He whirled around and screamed as a man lunged off the bottom step.

Spencer pulled the trigger. The muzzle flash lit up the room while showing the man's face.

Grinning, sparse black hair, wrinkles...

Knowing eyes.

Spencer tried to angle the gun to get another shot but a swift blow to the head sent him to his knees and another one sent him into darkness.

It was the taste that woke him up.

It was a wet putrid heavy taste along with the copper smell of blood. There was barely any light and everything around him felt damp.

Spencer was inside something, maybe a burlap sack, (at least that was what it felt like). There were two holes above him, just barely big enough for his eyes to see through.

He was in a shed of some sort. All kinds of knick-knacks, tools, buckets and assorted 'shed paraphernalia' hung from the wall.

Spencer rotated inside the sack and saw he was on a table. The burlap sack was covered weird and looked like it was made out of some kind of skin, possibly a deer or cow. Spencer couldn't really tell.

The man was sewing him in. He was naked. His mouth hung open and his breathing was hard.

Spencer screamed—a muffled sound that the man didn't seem to pay attention to.

He noticed that the man was sewing up the last little bit of the sack that was still open. His chest was clenched and he thrust his hand through the opening, scrambling for any kind of purchase or skin to fight back. The man grunted and walked away. Spencer wasn't relieved and started trying to undue the stitches on the sack.

He shouted for help.

Spencer heard the footsteps and then the hammer smashed his hand. He screamed in pain, his hand desperately twitching against the stitches despite the agony.

The hammer smashed his hand again...and again...

It continued to smash his hand until he retracted it, cradling it against himself and sobbing in agony.

The man began to sew again and Spencer watched with despair as the light below him disappeared. He peered out of the two small holes and saw the man pick up the hammer again. Before it came down on his head, Spencer realized that he wasn't inside a sack.

Whatever he *was* in had legs that ended in tiny black hooves.

The hammer came down and the blackness returned.

Spencer saw the trees first. He blinked his eyes and felt strangely comfortable for some reason. The morning light was shining through the woods, the eerie purple and orange bathed the forest floor in myriad hues as the early morning mist struggled to hold sway in the darkness. The moon was still visible in the sky. Spencer tried to stand up pushing his hands downward.

He fell back on his face.

Spencer's eyes widened as he saw that he didn't have hands, or elbows, or fingers.

His long slender legs ended in black hooves with brown fur and his head was long, angular and heavy—antlers growing out of it.

He screamed but only a long warbling cry came out of his mouth.

Spencer tried to form words but it was only grunts and croaks.

The early morning sunlight pulled the mist away from the ground and he realized he was surrounded by a vast pack of dogs.

All were mutts with brown and black fur, snarling white fangs, and wicked knowing eyes. Tanker was at the forefront. The massive animal was barking and when Spencer didn't move, he lunged forward with a snarl.

Spencer jumped and found himself standing on four shaky legs.

The dog stepped back—evidently pleased.

The dogs began barking and snarling in unison.

Tanker stepped aside and from out of the darkening woods, Spencer stared in panic as a wolf unseen in East Texas for many years stepped from the darkness. Bigger than the rest of its kin, it stared at Spencer, who quivered trying to speak...to beg.

Only a panicked bleating came out of his mouth.

The wolf too had the same knowing eyes and it gazed at the rest of the dogs before giving a slow bow of its head. On cue, the dogs began barking in unison—great wads of saliva flying as they dashed forward causing Spencer to scramble backwards not used to his new limbs.

The message was clear.

Spencer ran.

The dogs gave chase.

He bound through glen and glade, jumping over logs and dodging tree limbs. Behind, he heard the long low howl of the wolf and the snarling of the dogs getting closer.

The moon still shone in the brightening sky.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Wile E. Young is an author who specializes in southern themed horror stories, both terrifying and bizarre. He has many short stories under his belt with many more to come.



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Wraith-like, Elias crept through the shadows, sinister glee dancing in his eyes. The night was cool, pleasantly so, the stars overhead shimmered, and he wasn't the only one on the prowl. A few yards away under the safe glow of a streetlight was a man speaking amicably with three other adults. They had all attended the same school event, but Elias knew something the parents didn't; this guy wasn't one of them. He only ever had children temporarily and they were never the same when he finished playing with them.

And though Elias enjoyed his own manner of play, he didn't care for this man's choice of victims.

Kids were off limits.

So he waited, remaining concealed in the pools of darkness, making no sound. Elias' fingers curled around the sharp medical instrument in his hand, the blade nipping at his skin. A tiny cut leaked a droplet of blood and the scent of it made him hungry. For a breath, which he had long since stopped taking, Elias closed his eyes and imagined how the rest of his evening would go. A tingle of pleasure passed through him.

He could barely contain himself.

But patience was important and worth it in the long run.

So he waited, grimacing at the laughter from the group, wondering if the nasty thoughts running through his mind mirrored those of his victim. Did it matter? Before the night was through that man would be as dead as Elias should have been. Cold, an empty husk, discarded somewhere trashy because he certainly didn't deserve a proper burial.

"Finally," whispered Elias as he witnessed the group breaking up. He watched the innocent move away, slipping into their respective cars. It was hard to tell what his prey intended to do, but in the end it didn't matter.

Elias made his move.

A heartbeat or two later, and what a lovely sound that was, the steady thump-thump in the man's chest, Elias was upon him. Effortlessly, like a giant four-legged spider, his fangs just as deadly, Elias slipped an arm around to muffle any screams. His other hand, the one holding the scalpel, went to the neck.

"Now, now," Elias soothed, biting back the desire to laugh. "I wouldn't do that if I were you. Fighting only makes it more fun. Surely you already know that."

The man grunted, muscles tensing as if he planned to break free. Elias grinned, tightening his hold and earning a whimper in response. The scalpel had kissed the neck too passionately and earned a thin red line in return. Elias was wicked quick, his tongue flicking out to taste the offered treat. It danced deliciously on his taste buds. Eyes closed, Elias savored the flavor as he swayed back and forth, the coppery blood spiced with a dash of fear. His favorite.

"I have a hairy little friend who doesn't much like it when I kill," Elias spoke, carting the man off, his hold unbreakable. "But something tells me he'll make an exception for you."

Elias led the man into the tree line, directing him with a hand clasping the back of his neck. His thumb played over the pulse of the jugular, excited by the rush of blood passing just below the surface. Once out of sight he finally let loose, turning to stand in front of his intended meal. He smiled, having positioned himself just so, faint light flinging off his fangs. The man's eyes grew wide and he stumbled back a step.

Elias laughed, the broken pieces in his skull rattling around, his sanity clouded. "Go ahead, make a run for it. We both know it only makes this whole dance more enjoyable." Elias actually shooed the man with his hand. "Go on. Go ahead, try. This is the one chance I'm going to give you to save your hide before I pretty it all up," he finished, gently slashing at the air with his scalpel.

The man didn't need much encouragement, shooting off in the direction of the lot. Elias laughed again, the night ringing with the sound of his insane glee.

"Run, my little gingerbread man, it'll make you taste splendidly."

A cool breeze sent the autumn leaves scurrying, the decaying scent tainting the air. The perfume of blood mingled with them and Elias sighed. It truly was a wonderful October night, still days away from Halloween, but he already had his sweet treat, and had played a number of decidedly nasty tricks. He poked the man in the chest, amused at watching him swing back and forth, chains rattling. The man groaned.

"How much longer do you intend to play with your food?" inquired a rich baritone.

Elias didn't turn around. Grae Ashlynn had been his friend far longer than anyone cared to admit, especially since the vampire community would have preferred Elias to no longer exist. None of them, however, had the nerve to stand up to Grae, a man with golden eyes and impeccable style, as well as heaps of respect. He was certainly more reserved than Elias, but allowed for Elias's indulgences.

Sometimes.

"He likes kids."

Grae stepped up beside him. "How... inappropriate." Grae looked up, letting his gaze take in the nicks and cuts Elias artfully administered to the naked man, who at this point was dangling from a sturdy tree branch, strung up by his ankles. "Still, you know who will be home soon and he won't be happy about this."

Elias shrugged.

"Perhaps finish up? I'm not in the mood to deal with him tonight. The full moon is coming and he's been testy."

"All the more reason to screw with him."

Grae sighed. "Not tonight, Elias. Just finish with this abomination and be done with it. I think he's learned his lesson."

The bloodied scalpel danced through the air. "I think he'd learn it better if I chopped it off." His words earned him a wide-eyed stare.

"Perhaps," Grae considered the man's anatomy. "But what would you do with it?"

Elias shrugged. “Leave it on my favorite puppy’s bed as a surprise?”

“Elias...”

He sighed, frowning. “Party pooper.”

“You’ll survive. Besides, the night is almost over.”

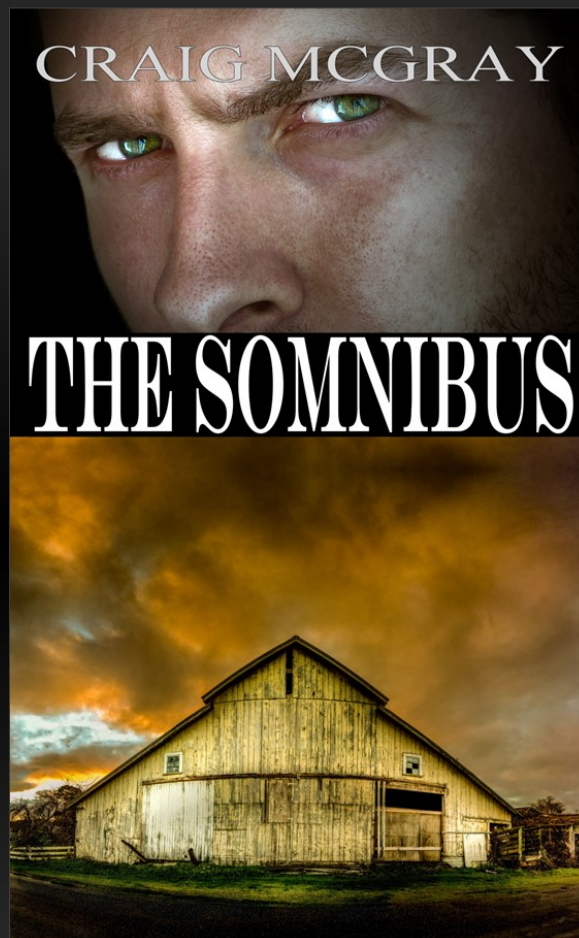
“Okay, okay.”

Elias licked the scalpel like it was an ice cream cone, making sure to get every last drop. Then he secreted it away on his person, keeping it close for those times when the artist he used to be came creeping back to the surface. Of course, with his mind fractured and touched by darkness it was all too easy to see why his works were no longer in demand. Still, he didn’t mind slipping back into his old self every now and then.

“It’s been fun,” he said, patting the upside down man on the chest. Then he roughly turned the man’s head to the side and relished the sensation of his fangs sinking into flesh. A muffled screamed buffered his ear and the man attempted to struggle. But Elias didn’t care in the least as sweet blood rushed into his mouth.

He drank deeply, making sure to get every last drop.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — KL Dantes realized she couldn’t be Batman so she started writing. She has now published over 30 short stories in various genres. She lives in southern Wisconsin.



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A Stranger Follows | *Anthony Avina*

The howl of a lone wolf pulled Natalia's attention away from her phone. It was nearly midnight, and the empty streets of the California desert town of Bushmere made her feel isolated. A cold wind sent a chill down her spine, and as she looked around she saw no signs of life anywhere. It was Halloween, and the 20 year old college student had angrily left the party, her best friend Alicia having abandoned her for some drunken alone time with her football player boyfriend Brett. With no car and only ten dollars to her name, Natalia had stubbornly decided to walk the four blocks to her apartment.

Checking her phone, she thought about the awful night she had. She had resolved to stay inside her apartment this Halloween, watching dumb horror movies and eating junk food without a care in the world. The beginning of the school year had already been stressful. Her boyfriend Seth had broken up with her once school started up again. The heartbreak had begun to affect her studies, her history teacher Mr. Keith having pulled her aside and telling her that if she didn't start pulling her grades up he'd have no choice but to fail her.

Her attempt to return to a life of normalcy and relaxation had been disrupted once Alicia arrived. Her bubbly friend had stood in the door, wearing a cheerleader uniform with splattered fake blood and rips in the costume.

"Who the hell are you supposed to be?" Natalia had asked, brushing her glossy black hair from her face as she stared at her friend.

"A horror movie victim, duh!" Alicia spouted, sticking her tongue out before shoving her way inside.

"Come right in I guess," Natalia replied.

"Where's your costume?" Alicia asked, glossing over Natalia's annoyed tone.

"What costume? I told you I was staying home tonight. Remember, I gave you the whole speech about needing to recharge my batteries?"

"Ugh, you were serious. No, that's not happening. You need to get out and meet a hottie."

"I'm not ready to meet anyone yet, Alicia."

"Natalia, you have to get over Seth. It's been two months now. Look, Brett is going out with a bunch of his friends to drink somewhere out of town, and I need a friend to hang out with. There's a party downtown that sounds killer, and I want you to come hang with me. I may even help you get laid."

"I told you, I'm not interested in getting laid..."

"Whatever you say, Natalia. Just come out with me and have some fun. You can stay home and watch horror movies anytime. Tonight, let's pretend to be someone we're not and have a wild time."

Natalia had been unable to argue with her friend, and eventually caved as she always did. She grabbed last year's vampire costume and headed to the party.

The night started off fine. They grabbed a couple of drinks and danced to some upbeat electronic music. Natalia began to feel the weight of the world lifting from her shoulders,

dancing back to back with Alicia and laughing as they nearly fell to the ground. She had even flirted with a gorgeous Adonis of a man. He hadn't spoken a word, but they'd locked eyes from across the room and she felt her heart putting a million miles an hour.

He had been absolutely beautiful, with flowing black hair that shined in the glow of the party's disco ball. His eyes were a piercing shade of green, as if emeralds had exploded inside them. His body was that of a god, his open collared shirt showing the glistening skin of a model. He flashed her a toothy grin before disappearing into the crowd, and although she'd never been able to find him, the brief moment of flirtation had been enough to give her the confidence she needed.

Then she'd found Alicia, caught in an intimate embrace with Brett. Having decided to blow off their friends, the couple left Natalia behind and made their way into an empty bedroom. After an hour of waiting for Alicia to return she had given up, then strode down the deserted streets of the town, feeling ridiculous in her much too revealing outfit and the painful heels she'd been talked into wearing.

After about ten minutes of walking, Natalia began wrestling with the idea of calling Seth. She'd flirted with the notion for weeks, missing the sound of his voice. She secretly hoped that talking with him would lead to the reunion she so desperately desired.

As her finger hovered over Seth's contact info on her phone, she suddenly heard loud thumping behind her. She stopped walking and slowly turned to look. She saw the most horrifying sight she'd ever seen. A large man with mottled green skin, bulging muscles and large stitches across his neck and arms. Stepping out of some black-and-white horror movie, the man limped towards her, his eyes as black as coals and his hand covered in blood.

"Waaaaaiittt...." the man called out, foam spitting from his mouth and blood oozing out of an open wound in his chest. He wore a torn apart suit and large hiking boots, and Natalia watched as he limped closer and closer towards her.

"What the hell..." she said to herself, unable to comprehend what she saw. The man stepped closer, and a nearby street light revealed that the man's head was twisted, as if it had been severed and reattached backwards. She was looking at a dead man. He wasn't quite a zombie, as he spoke to her and didn't utter any animalistic noises. Yet somehow she was watching a dead man brought back to life, and the sight of the monster nearly made her heart drop into the pit of her stomach.

Without a second thought, Natalia took off and ran home, determined not to become this monster's next victim.

"Sttttoopp PPP...." the creature called out, rushing towards her. Her apartment was only a few minutes away, but the run seemed to drag on for hours. She screamed for help, but not a single soul remained on the streets of the desert town. Each painful step she took was a reminder of what a mistake this night had been, and she promised herself that if she was killed she would totally haunt Alicia forever.

The run for her life ended when she reached the steps of her apartment. Fumbling in her purse, she grabbed her keys just as the monster neared her building. Screaming, she turned and shoved the keys into the lock, ran inside and slammed the door shut on the ascending beast. She listened as the creature pounded on the door, the walls shuddering under his brute strength.

"Don't... don't go..." the creature called, but she ignored its cries and ran down the hall and towards her apartment. Opening the door and slamming it shut, she locked the door and then slid down to the floor, taking deep gasping breaths as she relived the last ten minutes of terror.

"It... it's not real. I'm... I'm just drunk, that's all. I'm going to sleep, and when I wake up this will all have been one terrible nightmare."

Natalia nodded and stood up, determined to ignore what just happened. Sure that the danger had passed and a good night's sleep would make the deadly chase fade from memory, she walked down the hall toward her bedroom. As she flipped the light on, she noticed the open window, the wind blowing her curtains delicately. Her heart stopped, knowing she hadn't left the window open, and that's when she noticed the smell.

Is that... is that iron, or blood? she asked herself. Turning around, she stifled a scream as she came face to face with the beautiful man she'd been flirting with at the party.

"Hello, my dear. You smell... delightful," the man purred.

"What... what are you doing here?" Natalia cried, backing away from him in horror.

"Why, having dinner of course," he replied simply. Then his face transformed, two large fangs protruded from his mouth and his fingernails extended into claws. She turned to run, but before she could the man turned vampire grabbed her, pulling her towards him and holding her head up to expose her neck.

"Horatio... don't... don't..." a voice called, and she saw from the corner of her eye the dead man leaning in the open window, holding out a hand in protest.

"Your creator had more vision than you monster. You are an abnormality, and your mission to stop me is folly. I win again, monster, and now she is mine."

Before the monster could reply, Natalia felt a sharp pain in her neck. She gasped in pain, but then it subsided and warm pleasure filled her body. Before she knew it, she smiled as she was carried down into a blissful abyss.

Alicia walked down the streets of the town a week later, laughing as she talked on the phone with Brett.

"She still isn't talking to you?" Brett asked.

"Nah, she's pissed that I bailed on her. She'll come around though. Want to meet up later?"

"Yeah baby, you know it. I'll be at your place around 10."

"Sounds good. Love you!"

"Yeah, love..." he began to reply, before the call cut off. Shaking her head, she put her phone away as she approached her building. The sun had set and night had taken over, covering the alley near her building in perfect darkness.

As Alicia walked up the steps of her apartment, she heard soft laughter coming from the alley. She turned slowly to look in that direction, and saw two piercing yellow eyes glowing in the darkness.

“Alicia...” a voice called, and she recognized it immediately.

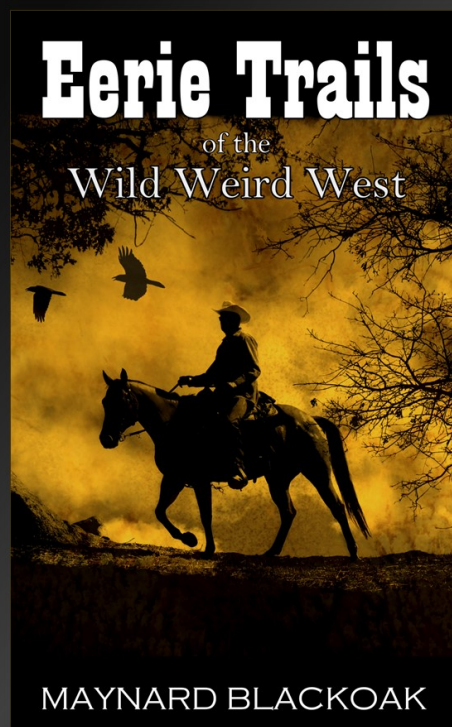
“Natalia? Where have you been? You know Mr. Keith is talking about kicking you out of his class...” she began to say, walking into the alley. As she approached her friend, she stopped cold as Natalia stepped into the moonlight. Alicia stared in horror as she saw her friend emerge, her skin a marble white porcelain color that made her look dead. Her eyes continued to glow, and as she brushed the hair away from her face, Alicia saw that two blood-stained fangs protruded from her mouth.

“You made me into this, Alicia. Now it’s your turn to join us...” Natalia cooed. Alicia screamed, and ran towards the mouth of the alley. She made it onto the street before Natalia caught her with one powerful claw. Alicia continued to scream as Natalia dragged her quickly into the alley. Soon her screams turned silent. The town became quiet once more, and the people became oblivious to the monstrous threat that was quickly infecting the city. A deadly and shadowy war claimed yet another victim, and soon not a soul would be left in all of Bushmere.

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

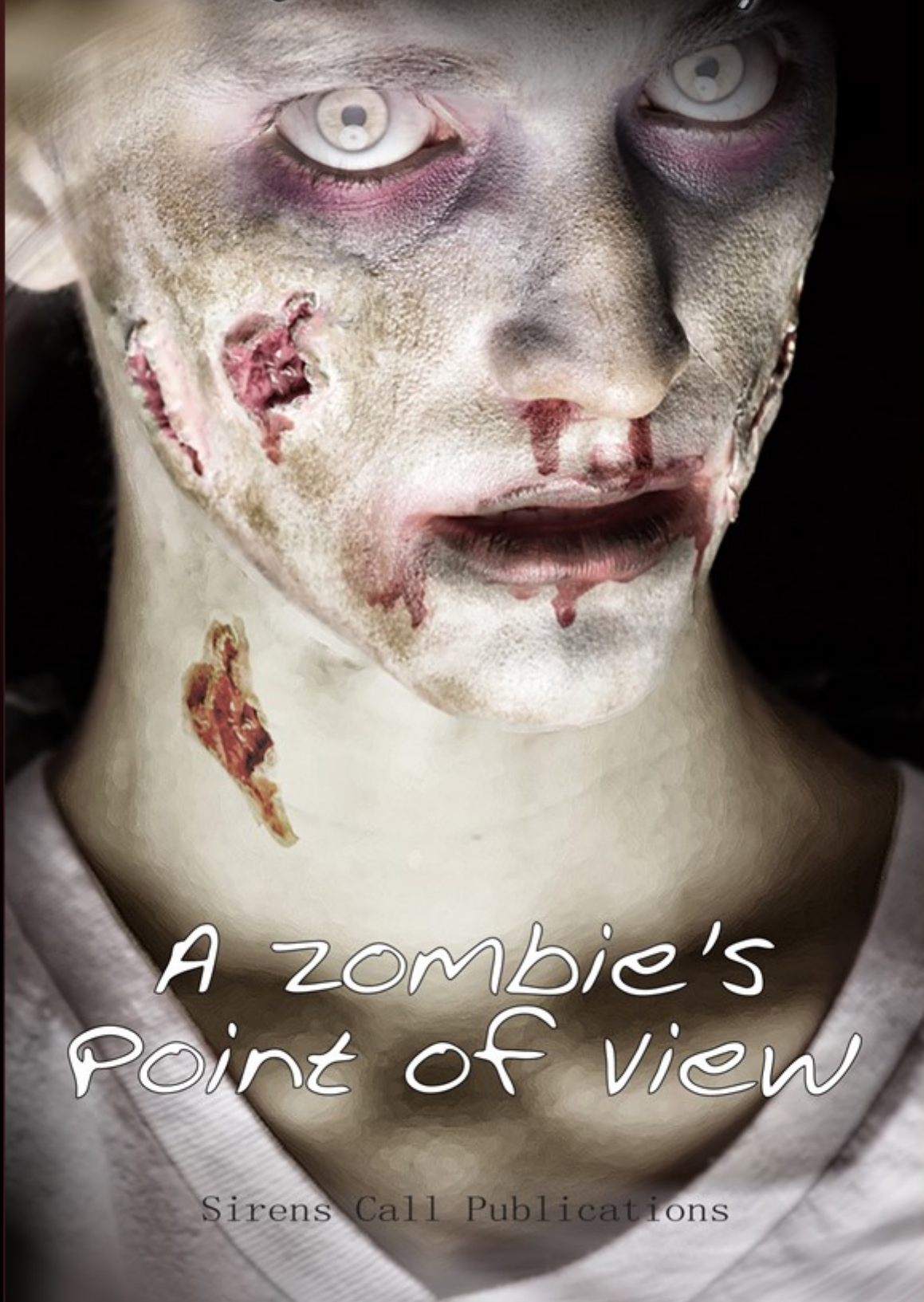
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Through Clouded Eyes



A zombie's
Point of view

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“And you’re sure there are Silver Ridgebacks in the glade?” asks Tristan while following the light from his headlamp trained on the forest floor.

Brodie studied this terrain for the last few weeks and knows he’s close to where he videoed the Ridgebacks remotely the previous three months. He never got a clear enough picture to confirm they were indeed Silver Ridgebacks and not their cousin, the far more common Gray.

He stops, keeping his own light pointed low while still looking at his partner. The young man is half Brodie’s age, eager to learn, and has been a pleasure to work alongside. After only three hunts he already proved himself valuable at Brodie’s side, taking up the physical load where Brodie no longer could. “You ever been this far out with anyone you worked with, T? Silvers are the most feral of all the wolves and steer clear of human contact. There’s no way it’s anything other than ‘em.”

“How much do you think we’ll get for them? I’ve never even seen Silver fur in real life.”

“We’ll both be set for quite some time, that’s for sure,” Brodie glances at his watch, 11:15 p.m. “We need to get moving. I wanna be there in fifteen minutes to make sure we’re good to go.”

Brodie steps off and hears the soft sound of Tristan behind him. Both men are skilled hunters, making it second nature to move quick and silent. Brodie continues to lead the way after the arduous three-day hike through the Elkhorn Mountains. They left most of their gear at the campsite a few miles back, making the final trek with their weapons, ammo, and empty backpacks. Brodie’s custom-designed pack is a hit with hunters across the world. Two of these packs combined can be turned into a rolling stretcher to remove anyone that may be injured, or transport the fur lying flat which keeps it smooth and the resale value higher.

Brodie weaves amongst the trees and they start to thin out. The elder hunter snaps his light from white to red and stops between two trees that make a V coming up from the ground. He checks the time, 11:30, just as he planned, and before he can signal Tristan forward, the young man is at his side. The few clouds that have crossed in front of the moon are gone and it is full and bright in the blackened sky.

Tristan slips off his pack, setting it on the ground. “We couldn’t ask for a better moon,” he says in a hushed voice. “Their coats are going to be extra thick, that’s for sure. The videos of people wearing the fur, the way the light bounces off it ... I can’t wait to see it in person.”

Brodie winces as he takes his own pack off. “I’m sure it looks pretty. Too bad all that pretty means they’re even stronger. Stay focused, T. After my first shot, fire away. We’ve got another fifteen minutes to be in position. Let’s not take that long, I don’t want to push our luck.”

The two men swap over their regular ammo to the silver ammo needed for the hunt. Each have twenty-five rounds between their rifles and pistols. With six Ridgebacks on surveillance feeds, Brodie figures that should be enough for them with plenty to spare. “Don’t waste ammo, T. Them rounds ain’t cheap, ya know.” Brodie looks at his watch again, “You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

The two men snap off their headlamps and, with only the moon to guide them, spread out twenty feet apart. Brodie lays himself on the ground, placing his pistol at the ready next to him. He gets the rifle nestled against him with his finger on the trigger. Timing is everything with wolves: too early and they won't be fully formed, too late and they'll be at peak strength, which means more bullets to take one down.

There's no reason to look at his watch, it's a waiting game now. Months of preparation have come down to these moments. Brodie takes slow, even breaths, keeping himself calm while watching and listening to the world around him. What most people would call silence, to him is a cacophony of noise. Insects of all kinds go about their business, wind ruffles the leaves in the trees, and from off to his left is the low rumbling growl of a wolf. That is met by another and another. Brodie lets out a long breath as three wolves enter the glade, immediately followed by a fourth.

There's no doubt, they are Silver Ridgebacks. Their fur is iridescent in the moonlight, hues of bright silver shifting as the wolves pad across the opening of the forest. They're all monstrous creatures, four feet of sinewy animal muscle. The largest of them snarls, showing its teeth to the others, and begins to pace circles around their territory. The snarl turns into a guttural howl that echoes across the forest, being met by howls from the other three.

The smallest of the group arches its back, then snaps its head up. His voice becomes the loudest of the pack as his body morphs inside and out, making itself ready to walk on two legs instead of four. The muscles ripple against the fur and little slivers of light bounce from it.

The other two arch their backs, their bodies trembling as they stay on all fours. The first one is fully transformed now, sniffing at the air. The largest circles the group faster, howling continuously.

Brodie watches the scene in front of him. Why are the other two not changing? Noise from the largest one pings all round him and he can't get a fix on anything else other than what he can see.

The largest one stamps its paws as it runs, then jumps a few times while its body contorts in mid-air. One of the pair lets out a cry and starts to rise up on its hind legs. Howls turn to barking amongst the four.

Brodie takes aim on the one fully transformed. It's going to take at least two shots to bring him down now. If he waits much longer it will be three. Why aren't the other two changing? Why are they fighting it?

Why are there only four?

"Oh, fuck," Brodie mutters still staring down his scope.

Off to his right a shot erupts in the night, followed by a pained animalistic wail. None of the wolves in the clearing drop. It registers to Brodie that the shot was from a pistol. There is another cry, this time a human one, and for a moment the wolves stop their howling and barking.

Brodie pulls the trigger, resets, then pulls the trigger again. His two shots slam into the werewolf in the glade. The creature staggers and falls to the ground. The others stop fighting it and begin to finish their transformations.

Brodie shifts aim, no longer caring who he hits, and fires off one more round. He pushes himself up and darts away from where Tristan is. His only hope is to get himself to a better defended position and try and hold out.

Within a few steps into the forest, darkness deepens as the moonlight is blocked by the trees. Brodie fumbles for his headlamp as he is running and then the air explodes from his lungs as he topples to the ground. He spins and comes to a body-wrenching halt against a tree. Brodie struggles to breathe and stay conscious at the same time. A dark shape looms over him.

Another one runs up alongside the first. "I've never a seen human before," it growls. "We'll be set for quite some time, that's for sure."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Mark Steinwachs is a former roadie that has retired to shop life as General Manager of BanditLites in Nashville, TN. Years of traveling the road on tour buses, plus time in the United States Marine Corps, and as rave DJ/promoter has given him a unique set of experiences to draw on for his stories.

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DRAGON BORN



Ela Lourenco

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Time | *Jennifer Mccullah*

The day was cloudy and rainy. Gerald sat on a park bench and watched a little boy play in the sand box. The boy made roads for his cars, built a sand castle and then tore it down, only to build a bigger one. This child seemed so happy and carefree. As the child played in the sand, Gerald was reminded on his own youth. It was a time that he barely recalled.

Gerald longed for some moment when the world was still full of wonder and excitement, when life was shiny and new. Unfortunately things didn't work that way; time dulls the joy of life. Gerald could not even imagine the innocence with which this boy saw the world. With a little sadness, he stood up and stretched. Then he grabbed the child.

The boy struggled, he squirmed and tried to get away. Tiny fists pounded against Gerald's arms. The smell of the boy's fear just didn't have the same appeal it once had. This used to be his favorite part.

Gerald rushed into his RV with the boy. Once they were inside, he extended his fangs and bit into the fragile neck. The warm, metallic taste filled his mouth. Gerald fed and then tossed the lifeless body on the floor. It did not satisfy him the way it had seventy years ago. Maybe he'd hunted too many children. There was no joy left in their terror.

The child gasped for air. Gerald was so preoccupied with his own thoughts that he hadn't finished his meal. Perhaps it was time to try something new. He grabbed a knife and cut his own hand. Gerald knelt down and let his blood drip into the boy's mouth.

"Drink this or you'll die."

The boy obeyed.

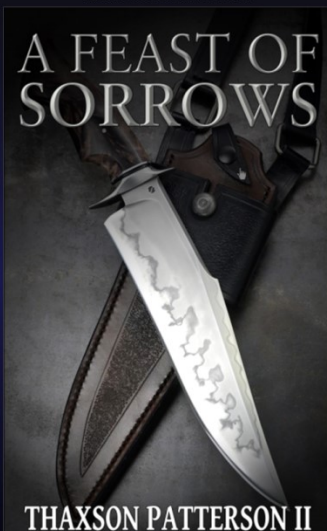
For the first time in decades, Gerald had something to be excited about... fatherhood.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Jennifer Mccullah is a writer from Kentucky. She lives with her girlfriend and the two coolest Chihuahuas on the planet.

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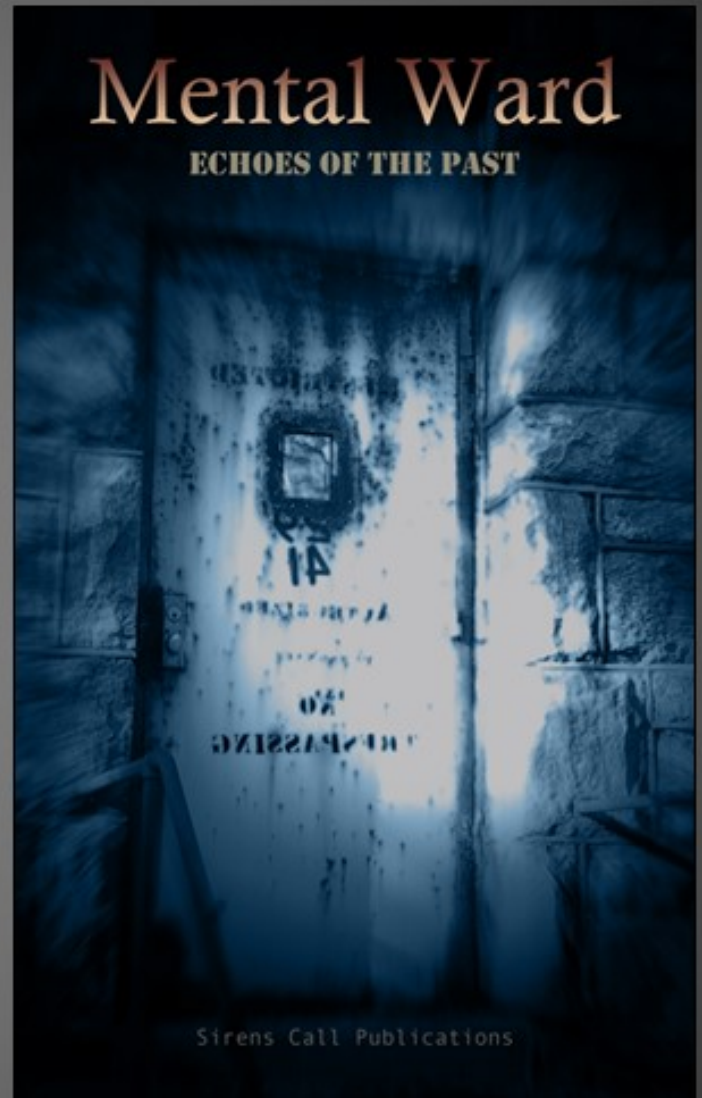
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The Creaky Door | Evan Baughman

Dave closes his laptop, snuffing out the blank white document glaring from its screen. He places the computer onto the wooden floor beside him. The huge house is soundless, undisturbed, alone beside a dusty road. It provides the perfect reading environment.

Dave trades the laptop for an anthology of spooky stories he purchased at a yard sale long ago. Perhaps inspiration lurks somewhere within the book's yellowed pages.

Under lamplight, he examines the table of contents. His imagination takes hold and starts to shake him free of rust.

Is *A Maid and Her Madness* the tale of a beleaguered hotel employee driven to murder? Is *The Roar from the Trees* about a Sasquatch infuriated by deforestation? Well, *Rain of Terror* surely describes a sudden downpour of flesh-eating acid marring some poor family's afternoon picnic.

No longer rigid in his moth-eaten recliner, Dave drapes his legs over an arm of the chair. He smiles and turns to page 66, to see if the titular *Smile in the Dark* belongs to a hungry, saber-toothed Cheshire tiger.

Behind him, the basement door slowly creaks open.

Dave peers over the top of his seat. Shadows seem to creep up the basement steps and inch their way across the living room.

Dave walks to the door, grabs its knob. He peers into the basement's black maw.

When he moved into the old place two weeks ago, he'd gone into the basement and seen it was empty. No boxes. No shelves. Yes, his flashlight had revealed some cobwebs, but there weren't any other signs of life. No tiny pawprints or droppings on the hard-packed earth floor. Not even a small window to the outside. Below the house, the air had been stale and hot, trapped inside a prison of cinderblock walls.

Now, holding the knob, Dave moves the door slightly. It creaks on corroded hinges. He'll have to find a hardware store this weekend. Does the little town off the highway even have one?

And how could the door have opened? No window in the basement means no draft to push upstairs. Besides, the night is calm. Wind's not whistling around the house. Storm shutters sit still.

Dave shrugs. He's no expert on the behavior of old houses.

As he shuts the basement door, its hinges squeal, whining in protest.

He returns to the recliner, re-opens the book, and gets comfortable once more. Within moments, he's lost in a fictional world from which he seeks no escape.

It's been three months since the divorce, and Dave welcomes a bit of fantasy.

Moving into a paint-chipped house that no one wanted, far from others' happiness and laughter, had been a fine idea at first. He thought the change in location would jumpstart a bit of creativity in his brain. Force him to finally get to work on another novel. Something eerie and profound. But all he's been able to create thus far is a collection of embarrassing high school poetry about heartbreak, infidelity, and how much he hates, loves, and loves to hate his ex-wife.

Plus, he's gone eight days without conversing with anyone but himself. Sometimes, he doesn't bother to move his tongue at all.

The cardboard box marked 'Books' is the only one he's felt compelled to open. Others are precariously stacked around the living room, monuments to his slug-like state. The house's second story is virtually empty, save for toiletries forgotten by a stained bathroom sink and a lumpy mattress lying on a dusty bedroom floor.

As Dave reads and matches the sinister *Smile in the Dark* with his own grin, the basement door creaks open behind him again.

This time, the hinges shriek louder, more shrill. Dave cups his hands over his ears, trying to dull the noise. The sound is painful and pierces like a wasp's sting.

He races to the door and attempts to shut it tight.

However, it resists.

Instead of closing, the door pushes against Dave's weight and opens further, creaking. Squealing. Screaming.

Dave grunts, strains as he is driven backward. He slides along on sweaty socks.

The door won't budge, but it does a great job of budging Dave. He struggles to stand tall.

Eventually, he sees it. A thick, black tendril wrapped around the edge of the door.

A tentacle made of shadow.

The darkness in the basement wants out.

Dave runs over to the lamp beside the recliner. He removes the lampshade and angles the bulb so it burns bright in the direction of the basement door.

Darkness retreats down the steps. Good thing, too, because its tentacles have tripled.

Dave springs into action and slams the door shut. He turns the lock and prays that it actually works.

The house is silent.

For a moment, Dave thinks he's okay.

But then the lamp flickers and dies.

The lock on the basement door rotates to the left.

And the door creaks ajar even louder than before.

Dave moves for his laptop. He flips it open, holding it out in front of him like it's a cross with the power to deflect demons. Its weak glow slows his heart rate a beat or two.

He backs up to the window, parts wilted floral curtains, and welcomes in some of the full moon's light.

Dave warns the darkness to stay away, though he has difficulty seeing what it's doing at the top of the stairs.

He, however, has no trouble hearing it slowly open and close the basement door over and over and over again.

Creeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeak, the door moans. *Creeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeak*.

CREEEAK.

Why?

Why hasn't the mass of shadows come for him?
Why is it playing such grating night music?
Why is the sentient gloom messing with the door?
In the distance: a howl.
Dave looks out the window. Crouched on the dirt road in front of the house is a gigantic dog.
Scratch that. A wolf.
A monster the size of a refrigerator. It raises its snout to the sky and howls again.
Behind Dave, the basement door creeeeeeeeeeeeeeeaks.
The wolf's ears perk up like dual antennae. It steps onto his property, easing over a fallen fence, stepping through overgrown weeds on the neglected lawn.
Dave looks at the unopened boxes to his right. Which one contains the block of butcher's knives? Probably the one marked 'Kitchen'.
He tears open the box, but there are no kitchen utensils inside. Instead, there's his framed college diploma, a bobblehead of Edgar Allan Poe, and other knick-knacks from his study back home.
No, no. This is home now. This horrible place with the living darkness and the werewolf approaching the front door.
Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God.
How could he have mislabeled the boxes?
How? How? How?
Wait. His coin collection's in this box, too. And some of the coins are silver. Horror films suggest weaponizing the precious metal against various creatures of the night.
He shakes his head. What's he going to do? Throw an American Silver Eagle at the beast like a miniature discus?
The basement door creaks louder, LOUDER. Dave whispers harshly at the darkness to stop, PLEASE, STOP, because the sound is drawing the impossible animal closer, CLOSER.
But that seems to be what the darkness wants. To lure in the horrible beast.
To bring it inside the house.
A huge, black arm snakes out of the basement. Dave shrieks, falls away from the box, certain that the darkness is coming for him. He backs up to the window once again. The room seems to fill with even more shadow, ready to strangle him free of breath.
But the darkness moves past him, toward the front door.
The wolf is on the porch, growling.
Dave is frozen. He knows he should flee, hide.
But where is there to go?
He can't remember where he left his car keys. His nearest neighbor is half a mile away. If he makes a break for it, he doubts he can outrun a giant wolf in the expanse of open fields outside the house.
The dark arm turns the front doorknob. The wolf pushes against the door.

The monster enters.
The darkness gestures for the wolf to follow, and so the creature does.
The wolf lopez into the basement and disappears from view, but not before nodding at Dave, as if to say, *Thank you, sorry for the intrusion*.
The basement door continues to creak back and forth, back and forth.
In the distance: a chainsaw whirs to life.
The creaky door guides into the house a masked psychopath wearing bloodstained overalls. The humongous man kills the motor on his weapon and tells Dave, "Too scary out there. Need a place to stay."
He, too, ventures into the basement.
Dave listens for a struggle between psycho killer and werewolf, but there isn't one.
He only hears the irritating hinges of the creaky door.
Next, the noise brings in a vampire seeking shelter. He explains that, recently in his neighborhood, an arsonist has sent a pair of children to the burn ward. Another drive-by has claimed the life of a mother of five.
"Don't want to be around that anymore," the creature explains, then flips his cape and floats down into darkness.
After that, a scaly fiend displaced by the latest hurricane steps into Dave's home on razor-tipped flippers the size of rake heads.
A scarecrow defeated by drought puts down its scythe for a moment in order to shake Dave's trembling hand.
A mummy tagged with Islamophobic epithets expresses its gratitude with unintelligible sobs. It cries so hard that its jaw snaps off and falls to the floor.
All manner of monster is brought to the basement by the creaky siren's call.
A ghost, a ghoul, a goblin.
A chupacabra afraid to be sent back to its world of origin.
A cyclops, a clown, a chimera.
Dozens of creepy, crawly, growly things, all in the basement. One by one by one.
How can they possibly fit inside such a cramped space?
There must be other gateways down there, invisible to the human eye. The walls are strictly optional.
The house's last guest is a possessed ventriloquist's dummy who tips his little hat to Dave and then descends the basement steps with a toddler's grace.
The darkness finally closes the creaky door for good.
The lamp turns on, and, aside from an open front door, it's like nothing has happened at all.
Dave goes to the recliner and turns it around so it now faces the basement. Before closing the front door, he checks for any straggling lost souls, but there's no movement on the quiet road.
Dave returns to his chair, sits. He bookmarks his spot in the short story anthology and then puts it aside. There'll be time for reading later.

A blank white document beckons from the laptop in his hands. Dave extinguishes the lamplight.

He glances at the basement door. He smiles in the dark.

It's time to write.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Evan Baughfman is from Southern California. His newest play, *A Taste of Amontillado* (an adaptation of *The Cask of Amontillado*), is available through Heuer Publishing. Additionally, Evan's authored the collection, *Twisted Tales from Edgar Allan Poe Middle School*. Many of those tales have also been adapted into short screenplays. "The Emaciated Man" won Best Overall Short Script at the 2017 International Horror Hotel Film Festival.

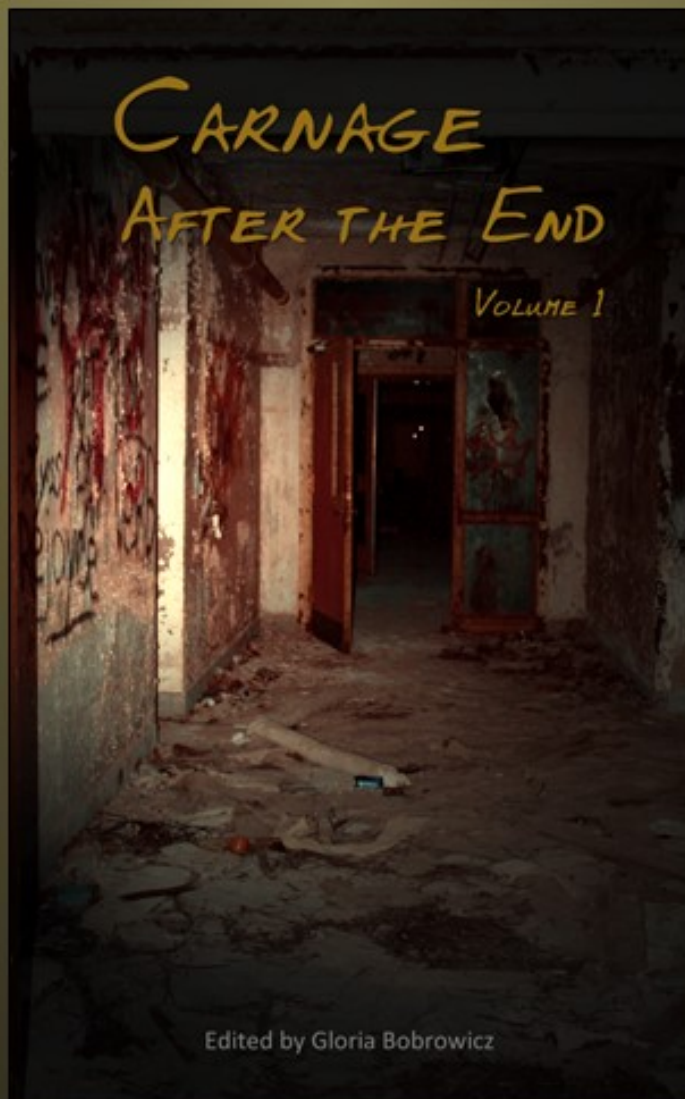
Website: www.evanbaughfman.com

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



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

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...



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

Cliff Harris, free and thirty-five, promised his eight year old daughter Sara a new dog. Not a new Mom. He vowed never to marry again. After a lengthy custody battle, Cliff won. He had Sara to himself. They would share the two-bedroom house in that quiet suburb close to school. Linda, his ex-wife, was free to hang with whatever bum could satiate her lust for drugs and booze. As District Attorney for the small Midwestern town, Cliff had sent Linda’s lover Moe Thorpe to jail for selling pot in the park. Linda called it cruel and extraneous. Cliff called it comeuppance.

Moe could thrive on his good looks. Cliff’s frame toted an appendage of fat that quivered with each step, a headfull of graying follicles, a double-chin that showcased a second smile. Moe, with his dark, lean, swaggering visage, would merit unwanted attention behind bars.

Say goodbye to my wife, Moe.

The irony of having to visit Moe’s older brother Victor bothered Cliff. Victor Thorpe was one of the town’s two veterinarians. He specialized in ailing canines and the waiting time was shorter. ‘Sirius Matters,’ the font on his store read, as in ‘Sirius, the God Dog Star’. Yes, Dogs only. Cliff had decided that Sara’s aging pit bull Teddy was gravely ill, despite Sara’s protest, and needed to be euthanized. He despised the yappy little bastard. Victor recognized Cliff from the local TV news broadcast of his kid brother’s arrest a week earlier. His glare was unforgiving as Cliff plopped the pet carrier on his desk. Teddy’s whimpering filled the room.

“Put him out of his misery.” Cliff told him, oblivious to Vic’s vibes. If Vic’s eyes were laser beams, Cliff would have been in pieces. He studied the dog, then sneered.

“You must be real proud of yourself,” he said.

“I’m sorry it had to be your kid brother, Vic. But selling drugs to teens? Come on.”

Vic peered into the carrier where Teddy lay. “This dog looks okay to me.”

“He’s *old*, Vic. He vomits on the rug, won’t eat. He’s like a garden slug.”

“He don’t look old,” Vic countered, adjusting his black wig. His craggy scowl seemed painted on. “But, hey, it’s your money.” He gently placed the carrier next to his feet behind the counter and wrote up the form.

Cliff had heard stories about Vic the Vet.

The ‘Mad Scientist’ they called him. The fifty-something lab tech who lived alone and liked to experiment on animals, like the Nazis had done on humans. The story originated from a plumber who had visited Vic’s ancient one-story house that faced a wooded area, an area jammed with dug-up and refilled holes. The story soon spread but no one dared test its scuttlebutt. Vic was a creepy guy but an expert handler of afflicted dogs. Cliff wondered what category of utensils ringed Vic’s basement in that old house.

“Dad, I still miss Teddy,” Sara said. “I think about him every night. Even in class. Why’d you have to put him to sleep? Did he break a law? All he had was a fever.”

Cliff looked up from his modest living room desk. How to mollify your only child. He tried this: “Sweetie, Teddy was dying. And pit bulls make me nervous, anyway. No kid should own a pit bull. They’re unpredictable. I’ll get you a chow.”

It was Linda who had chosen Teddy for her daughter before the messy divorce. Once Sara segued to stilled withdrawal, Cliff envisioned a peaceful co-existence with his crestfallen daughter: find a babysitter, mingle with his admirers and staff at the finest restaurants, bask in his courtroom sweeps, and educate Sara on the principles of right and wrong.

Then came the bizarre news.

The blond square-jawed TV anchor had to keep a straight face. “It’s been reported that a dog with a ‘man’s face’ had been spotted by a night guard standing outside an apartment complex. According to a witness, the guard screamed and scrambled back into his lobby when the pit bull advanced towards him.” The anchor shook his head, his lips curled. Chuckles could be heard off-screen in the studio.

Cliff, not amused, jacked up the volume just as Sara padded in from her bedroom.

The broadcast switched to an interview with the guard, who looked shaken. “This weren’t no figment of my imagination,” he said. “I saw it. A man’s face! On a pit bull body! Blue eyes starin’ up at me! And a head full a’ curly hair!”

Back to TV Anchor, fighting down a smirk.

“Slow news night, folks. What can I tell you?”

Sara gravitated towards the HD screen, her eyes wide. “Daddy? Did I hear him say pit bull?”

“Sweetie, go back to bed. School tomorrow.”

“Did they show the dog?”

“No, it was someone’s idea of a joke, baby. Go to bed.”

Cliff had to steer Sara back to her room. He could feel her shoulders trembling. It was past two a.m. He went to bed and gazed at the ceiling.

Nonsense.

That guard was on K2 or something, or drunk, or feared dogs of that species, or—trick of light. Yes! He concentrated on Linda. Her visiting rights would kick off this weekend. He would never forgive her.

Have Sara back by six, Linda.

He heard a dog bark from outside the window that faced his cluttered back yard. Another bark. Louder. Cliff shot up like a coiled spring and listened, frowning. *A stray mutt.* Lost in the wasteland of strewn garbage and parched foliage. Another yelp. More muscular. Cliff shook off the din and chuckled.

You dope. The guy’s a vet, not a grave-robber, not Friggin’ mad scientist.

The barking grew louder. Cliff could hear Sara’s response from behind the door. Her thumps nearly drowned out the howling that began outside. “Daddy, he called my name!”

Cliff swung out of bed and pulled open the door. Sara was shaking. He bent down. “What’re you talking about, Sara? It’s just a dog.”

She screamed and pointed to the window. He looked over his shoulder. Only the horizon of distant naked trees met his gaze. "I saw him," she said. "He looked right at me."

"Who saw you?"

"Teddy! He smiled at me!"

Cliff shook her and she began crying. "Stop this, Sara! I mean it! Teddy's gone! Go back to your room." She jumped to his bed instead and cowered under the blanket.

"Stay with me?" she mumbled. Cliff stared at her, then at the vista beyond the window.

"I'll go see for myself. Stay put."

He skipped to the kitchen, pulled out the largest knife, and crept to the screen door. His heart thumped like a disco bass as he throttled the knob. He eased open the door. The dog's labored huffs tinged the shadows. Cliff gripped the knife and took a step, his black pajamas soaked in sweat. He froze.

There it was.

The dog's smallish tongue lapped in and out from its thin, sensuous mouth, then dangled over a perfectly-formed row of teeth. Its human-like ears pricked back upon hearing Cliff's footfalls. Its eyes were vast and fixed. Cliff could decipher the stitches on its neck before the half-animal lunged at him.

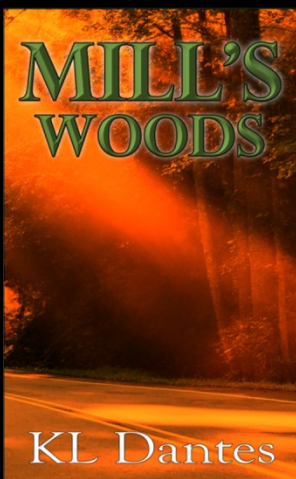
By Sunday, Linda Harris held full custody of Sara. The police report was fuzzy. Her ex-husband's throat had been torn open. Loss of blood ended his life. A renegade dog, she'd told them, modifying Sara's account. What a smart little girl, they said, dialing 911 soon after watching her father writhe in a pool of his own blood. Her new pet, however, could never replace Teddy. The dog was never found, but Sara peered out the window every night, hoping Teddy would return and smile at her again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Rob's two feature films have screened at various festivals and his work has been published by Centum Press, HP Lovecraft Lunatic Asylum, Bon Appetit, Story Shack, Sirens Call Publications, among others.

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

Facebook: [Rob Santana](https://www.facebook.com/RobSantana)

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



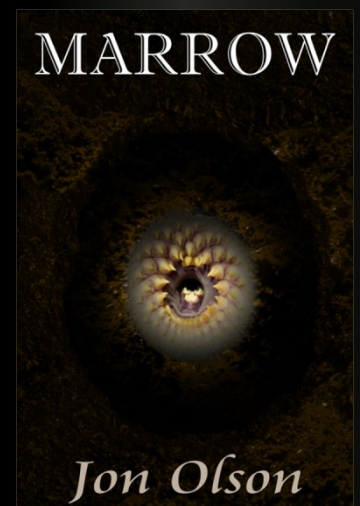
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The Wandering Nun | Edward Palumbo

"I'm tired of trying to see the good in people."

"You worry too much," Sonya replied. "Anyway, we need the evil among us, if only to balance out the prudes."

"Right, nobody wants unbalanced prudes."

"I have to get rid of this habit," Sonya complained.

"Try that nicotine gum," I suggested.

"Not that habit, the one I am wearing. Where can I change?"

We stopped by my apartment and I found the note.

Sonya came out of my bedroom carrying the habit over her arm, a cigarette in her lips. Her slender frame belied her forty-four years. "Did I make a convincing nun?" she asked.

"The best," I answered, without looking up from the note.

"What do I get for being an extra in the commercial?"

"You get four hundred for the job," I promised, "less my commission."

"That's not bad, for three hour's work. What are you reading?" she asked.

"A note that was taped to my patio door."

"From who?"

"Somebody called *The Unicorn*," I replied.

"Unicorns are imaginary," said Sonya.

"So is Santa Claus, but you got a Christmas present last year, didn't you?"

"What does that mean?" She asked

"Nothing."

"So what's the note about?"

"The handwriting is horrible, but based on the words I can read, I'd say my brother is in trouble, big trouble."

I handed Sonya the note.

Casey—thirty, goth, genderless, (she cared for neither sex), and very slim—once told me that she was so adept at removing blood from a person that she would have made a fine phlebotomist, except, inasmuch as she used her fangs to do the removing.

"You are not a vampire," I told her from behind my desk, one fall day.

"Bring your neck over here and you'll see who's a vampire. And, after it's over, you'll be undead like me."

"Will I have to dress in purple and black?" I inquired.

"Black has never been out of style and purple is the new white."

"No, purple is the old purple and it goes with nothing, not even more purple."

"What do you have for me?" Casey asked.

"Halloween party."

"When?" she asked.

“Arbor Day, when do you think?”
“What do I do?” she inquired as she leaned forward.
“You show up at midnight and scare people,” I told her.
“Makeup?” she asked.
“Yes, but it’ll be even more scary if *you* go without any makeup.”
“You are very witty,” said Casey, “draining your body of its essence will give me great joy.”
“You and my ex-wife.”

My name is Roger Goodman. My office is in Serenity, Massachusetts, a short drive or a very long walk from Boston. I am 50 years old and I have been since my last birthday. I am a talent agent, in the purest sense, but the talent can be most anything and it does not have to involve entertainment. That being said, if you need an extra for your public service commercial, I can oblige, but I can also assist if you need someone to pose as your wife or husband or karate instructor or dog. Whatever your need, I have you covered. For the right price, my clients will come to your standup comedy debut and scream with laughter. They will come to your kid’s baseball game and cheer for him/her and they might even beat up the opposing team’s coach, given the need. Customer service is what I am all about, my clients range in age from 9 to 90 and my fees are the best in the Boston metro area. I love a challenge and rarely fail to meet or exceed a customer’s expectations. Everybody wins, the customer gets what he or she needs, my clients get paid and I get my commission. And, it is very rare that anything ever goes wrong, very rare, but it happens.

It was Thursday afternoon and clear, but downright frigid. Casey came in wearing black jeans and a ridiculously long overcoat, also black.
“You ever read emails?” Casey asked as she took a seat at my desk.
“I like my clients to come to my office,” I responded, “I prefer looking into their eyes.”
“Fine.” She looked into my eyes. “You got anything?”
“It’s Christmas in fifteen days, where am I going to book a make-believe vampire?”
“I am not make-believe, but I will take anything.”
“Anything?” I pressed her.
“Yes, Roger, but I do not like that look on your face.”
“I have to put together the pieces of a living nativity scene for a very rich customer.”
“You are kidding me.”
“No,” I promised.
“Not—”
“Who else? The rest are all men and animals.”
“Did you offer it to Sonya?” Casey asked as she folded her arms.
“I need someone a little more youthful.” I replied
“I don’t know about this, I could be one of the angels, instead.”

“Bit part,” said I, “if I book you, it’s for a prominent role. You’ll start on the 17th and work right through Christmas Eve, three hundred fifty a night and they might even feed you, although you don’t look like you’ve ever eaten anything.”

“I ate the intestines of one of my old boyfriends, once, after I cut his throat.”

“Yum. Anyway, you’ll start on the 17th.”

“Me, as the Virgin Mary.” Casey half-whispered, as she shifted in her seat.

“That’s why they call it *acting*,” I replied.

“I will sing a show tune on the morning I exterminate you.”

“You and my ex-wife.”

Graham Blake had a lot of money and he spent it. It was he who ordered the living nativity scene and Mr. Blake was used to getting exactly what he wanted.

“It’ll be my Christmas gift to the town,” the seventy-year-old entrepreneur told me over the phone, “a work of charity, if you will.”

“Where will we be setting up?” I inquired.

“Durfee Park, near the ballfields.”

“That’s public property,” I replied, “we’ll never be able to set up a religious display on that site.”

“It’s not religious, Roger” Blake insisted, “it’s performance art.”

“Do you think you’ll get a permit?” I asked.

“I already have it, I have a lot of friends in this town, my friend. Why, I’m even going to invite the mayor for our opening night—we’ll patch things up, he and I, I want him to know there’s no hard feelings from our past tangles.”

“He’ll be delighted to come, if I know the man.”

“Few know the mayor better than you,” said Graham Blake.

“Yes. I’ll start pulling the parts together right away, but I’ll need no less than half the money soon, so I can make arrangements with my costume-people and the set builder.”

“Come by and see Grace,” he instructed, “she’ll give you a check. Remember, the first performance is December 17th, at dusk, rain or shine. And make sure the three wise men are of varying race, we want to appeal to everyone.”

“You know, the Bible never refers to the *number* of wise men, for all we know there were two or four or twenty-four.”

“*You* can send as many wise men as *you* like,” said Graham Blake, “but I’m paying for three.”

Grace gave me the check, and that evening, herself. She was old and cold and painfully white. Grace groaned rather than moaned. I made a final thrust, having lost interest, in her depths, anyway. I pulled myself from her and I was covered in blood from my shoulders to my knees.

“Red tide,” Grace said, “you should see yourself in the mirror.” She rolled onto her stomach.

“The mirror is not an issue,” I promised.

“I’d like to introduce you to Abraham V.,” she warned. She rasped out a laugh.

I cleaned up, a bit, and said my good nights. Grace went limp in my arms. The well was dry. I kept her panties as a memento. They were as red as the night.

December 17th came and it was a cool, misty day, but very passable for the time of year. Sonya rushed into my office, just as I began my midday Scotch.

Sonya huffed and puffed and then she cried out something amazing, “There is a bomb, a bomb inside the baby Jesus!”

“What are you saying?” I asked.

“How could I have been clearer?”

“How did you find out?” I asked.

“Mr. Blake told me,” she replied as she dropped onto my couch.

“He told *you*, he doesn’t even know you.”

“He knows me a lot better than you think.”

“Why would Graham Blake do this?” I asked, still not convinced.

“Because he is crazy and because he hates the mayor for squashing his waterfront land deal on the Mystic River, it cost Blake millions.” She rubbed her forehead. “When the mayor visits the nativity scene, Jesus explodes and kills him and who knows how many others.”

“The mayor,” I uttered lowly, “my brother, the mayor.”

“That’s right, Roger.” She rose to her feet and moved to look out the window.

“Who do I call first,” I asked as I picked up the desk phone.

“No one,” said Sonya, as she turned to face me.

“I call no one?”

“Right,” she answered, as she pulled a pistol from her purse and aimed it between my eyes, “put the phone down and relax yourself, it’ll all be over before you know it.”

Sonya lay dead on my office floor, the blood drained from her body. Casey sat on my desk, sipping a diet cola, loudly.

“Thanks for saving my brother and everyone else,” I said, as I wiped the blood from my chin.

“No problem,” Casey replied, “but I thought you didn’t like your brother.”

“I don’t like him, but I did not want him to die from an exploding baby Jesus. How did you know there was a bomb?”

“The baby had a clock in his belly.”

“But he was covered in swaddling clothes, or at least I assume so.”

“Swaddling clothes don’t cover as much as you might think.”

“I see,” I replied, “so you spotted the bomb, then what?”

"I noticed that the bomb was set to go off in 90 seconds, so I grabbed it and ran to a dumpster and threw it in and ducked for cover."

"Anybody injured?"

"Nope," she said after finishing her drink, "no people, one squirrel received minor injuries, but he's going to be fine. The dumpster, however, was totaled, as you can imagine."

"I can imagine. I figure Blake must have made a run for it."

"He did not get far," she said, "I found him and I cut his fingers off, and slowly. He bled to death. I hoped he learned something."

"Yes. Imagine, Graham Blake, with all his money, turning to terrorism, with an exploding Jesus."

"It happens every twenty minutes in some countries." She pointed to Sonya's lifeless body. "Now tell me, what the hell happened to my dear friend Sonya? Did you eat her?"

"If only," I replied.

"I'll ask it again, did you eat her?"

"She was working for Blake," I explained. "She pulled a gun on me. When I tried to overpower her, she shot me, but the bullet missed my heart and so I tackled her and sucked all her blood out."

"That's almost like something a vampire might do."

"Wonders never cease."

"I can't believe *you* are a vampire. You don't look the type, no widow's peak, not much hair, at all, really."

"Thanks for noticing."

"And the way you dress, L.L. Beane, himself, looked less L.L. Beane."

"My cape's at the cleaners." I promised.

"Oh. Anyway, I have to go, I have a date tonight."

"You, a date? You don't look the type."

"One day, I will smile broadly as I drive a stake through your black heart."

"You and my ex-wife."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Edward Palumbo is a graduate of the University of Rhode Island (1982). His fiction, poems, shorts, and journalism have appeared in numerous periodicals, journals, e-journals and anthologies including Rough Places Plain, Flush Fiction, Tertulia Magazine, Epiphany, The Poet's Page, Reader's Digest, Baseball Bard and Dark Matter. Ed is a prize-winning poet and playwright. Ed's literary credo is: if you fall off the horse, get right back on the bicycle.

Website: bronzedagain.blogspot.com

An Interview with D.W. Gillespie, Author of *Still Dark*

Sirens Call Publications recently released D.W. Gillespie's debut supernatural horror novel titled *Still Dark* and we wanted to take a moment to sit down with him and ask him a few questions.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome D.W.; why don't you take a moment to introduce yourself?

D.W. Gillespie: Everyone thinks that us horror writers must be closeted serial killers, but nothing could be further from the truth. I'm very open about being a serial killer.

Seriously, I'm a pretty normal guy. I have an awesome wife, two smart, funny kids, and I just love writing. My long-term goal is to be able to do it full time.



SCP: What made you decide to become a writer?

D.W.: The simplest way to say it, it's just who I am. In my genes so to speak. My days and nights are just filled with constant, random, occasionally non-sensical dreaming. That's my language, and once I realized that it was at least somewhat unique in the world, I knew that I wanted to use it.

It's the only work I've ever done that doesn't quite seem like work. It's effort, sure. It's a time drain, and sometimes I'm too tired to bother. But it's also fun as hell.

SCP: What is *Still Dark* about?

D.W.: It's a bit of a mashup. It's a cabin-in-the-woods story, but not quite the way you might think it is. It's got some sci-fi, some nature horror, and some serious gore.

The setup starts simply enough. A family is vacationing in the mountains when a strange explosion takes out all the power in the area. Pretty soon, all hell breaks loose with impossible animal attacks, voices from the woods, and a strange being named Apex that might just be behind it all.

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

D.W.: *Still Dark* represents years of quiet work towards becoming a better author, one that might actually be worth reading. While this is my debut novel on the market, it's actually my 5th book. The first four have been quietly tucked away, never to be seen because of one simple fact. They weren't good enough.

But ultimately, I'm just very excited for people to finally read it. It's been a long road here, and I can't wait to see what people think.

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

D.W.: For years, I considered myself more of a planner. I think some stories really do lend themselves to a solid, well considered outline, but nothing is ever set in stone. On my last few novels, I've gotten a lot more experimental with my process. My favorite book that I've written was almost completely by the seat of my pants, and it's no coincidence that that particular novel is very character driven.

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

D.W.: That's a tough one... maybe Chris Pratt as Jim, but the chubby, non-buff Pratt. That's how I picture Jim. Just barely capable, but brave when he needs to be. He gets the job done, but with very little panache.

For Laura, I'll go with Emily Blunt. After seeing *Edge of Tomorrow*, I think she would kill it as the tough mom.

And finally, for Walt, my favorite character in the book. There's only one answer for that one... Sam Elliot!

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

D.W.: For me, the hardest part of being a writer has been learning to deal with rejection. I'm a mostly quiet, admittedly sensitive kind of guy, which are traits that make for a good writer. But the one trait I was missing naturally was resilience. Tenacity. The ability to get knocked down and get back up.

I never played sports much, but I've grown to appreciate the lessons they teach kids, namely grit. I had to learn every bit of that through my writing. So, here's what it would look like in my 20s...

Write a story. Slightly edit it. Lean back in my chair, marveling at my own brilliance, and send it out to a small market. Skip forward a month or two. Read rejection email. Read it again. Tell myself that the editor obviously doesn't know true talent. Get mad and not write for a month or two.

I see now, 15 years after writing my first short story, how easy it is for people to get angry and bitter. But I just finally reached a point where I realized I wasn't being honest about my work. I wasn't putting in the time with edits that I needed to. The story really wasn't good enough. And once I realized that, everything changed.

I worked harder. I took criticism under consideration. And most importantly, I began to eat rejections for breakfast. Once my skin toughened up a bit, well, it's gone much smoother.

SCP: In your opinion, what sets *Still Dark* apart from other books of the same genre?

D.W.: That's a tough one, and ultimately, it's up to the reader to decide. I will say this... one of my biggest goals is to try my best to give people something they haven't seen. We all know that, by now, it's all been done, but I really work hard to give people something different. Whether or not I'm successful, well, that's up to them to decide.

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

D.W.: Paul Trembley's *A Head Full of Ghosts* is a hell of a book I just finished. I also recently finished Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* Trilogy, which is just remarkable. I'm not quite sure how I feel about the series overall, but I'm still thinking about it long after reading it. I consider that the mark of something special.

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

D.W.: Richard Matheson. John Steinbeck. King. Lovecraft. Tolkien. Honestly, too many to list. When it comes to specific books, I'd say *The Hobbit* is up there. It's one of the few books I've read more than twice.

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

D.W.: I've learned over the years, that success is a moving target. 7 or so years ago, I hadn't published a single short story. This is after years of writing on and off. That first acceptance felt like winning the lottery. Getting a novel accepted was the next big milestone. Then, getting an agent. Each one of these steps have been huge morale boosts, and I would never downplay any of them.

Success is in the eye of the beholder. Some people might be satisfied just to write one book and self-publish it, or just to print copies for their families. I would never downplay that either.

For me, I'm very excited and proud about the progress I've made, but I'm nowhere near satisfied. If I had to choose, here's my personal measuring stick of success... if I ever make enough money writing that I can quit my day job, you can be damn sure I'll consider myself successful.

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?

D.W.: At this point in my career, I'm still a tiny fish in the ocean, and I hate it when tiny fish try to act like gurus. Just keep working hard and be honest in your writing. That's about all I can say.

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

D.W.: Ultimately, I just hope they enjoy it. To me, it's just a fun slice of genre that hopefully leaves them satisfied with the ride. Beyond that, well, I'm just getting started as a writer. If *Still Dark* plants a little seed in their minds to check me out in the future, that would be just dandy to me.

Thank you D.W. for taking the time to answer our questions. Here's some additional information about Still Dark:

When a thunderous explosion rocks an idyllic cabin resort in the Great Smoky Mountains, animals and humans alike begin to act strange. Jim, along with his wife Laura and son, Sam, are cut off from the outside world, but they soon realize the true nightmare is just beginning...

Deep in the snow-covered woods, something is waiting. The creature calls itself Apex, and it's a traveler. Reading the minds of those around it, Apex brings the terrifying fears hidden in the human psyche to life with a singular purpose: to kill any that stand in its way.

Locked in a fight for their lives, Jim and his family must uncover the truth behind Apex, and stop the creature from wreaking a horrifying fate upon the rest of the world!

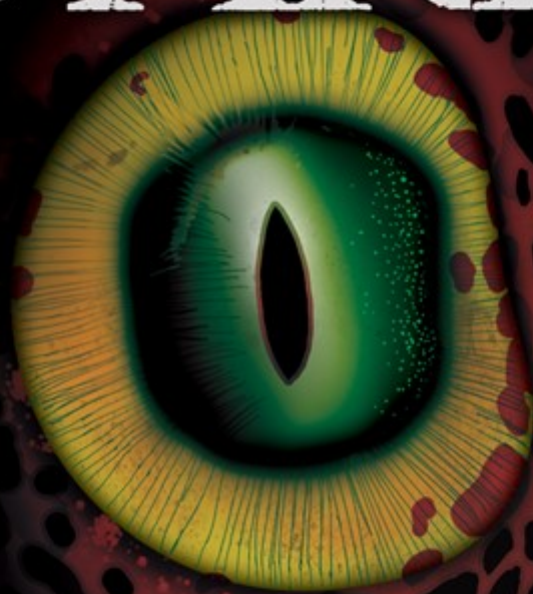
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Deep in the snow-covered woods, something is waiting...

STILL DARK



D.W. GILLESPIE

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An Excerpt from *Still Dark*

52 Hours Post-Incident

“Please... folks, please... I know you have a lot of questions, but you’ll have to calm down...”

“If everyone will please try to quiet down a bit, I’ll get us started.

“I’d first like to set expectations here. This will be very brief and will focus on the facts only. There has been a lot of speculation, and uhh... misinformation going around, and we hope to be able to give some clarity to the facts as we currently know them.

“It’s also worth stating that this press conference will *not* be able to give answers for everything that has happened. The investigation is ongoing and it may take weeks or even months to completely understand what has occurred here. The public needs to understand that local, state, and federal law enforcement and emergency services are combining their efforts to resolve this matter and to ensure public safety moving forward.

“Here’s what we know for certain. At approximately 10:15 a.m. January the 3rd, an incident occurred in the Smoky Mountains National Park, just outside of Gatlinburg. The closest we can tell, based on satellite data, is the epicenter of this incident is near a small cabin rental property called Black Hollow.

“Whether this incident was man-made, meteorological, or perhaps something else entirely, we don’t yet know for certain. What we do know is that widespread electrical issues followed, including power outages and disruption of various electronics such as computers, cell phones, and some cars with computer components. We also know that following this disruption, further, undetermined factors led to many injuries in the greater Gatlinburg area, including an unknown number of potential fatalities. We refuse to speculate as to the cause until we know more, but emergency personnel are now on the scene helping in every way possible.

“Now... I will open up the discussion for a few questions, but please keep in mind there is a lot we still don’t know.

“Yes, you...”

“Can you say anything about the widespread reports of animals attacking people in the area and...?”

“No, and I’m sorry to cut you off, but we won’t comment on those reports at this time. There is just too much uhh, too much we don’t know to comment at this point, and it would be um, wrong to speculate until we have more answers. You...”

“It’s safe to say we’ve never seen a power outage this wide reaching. Is there any thought this might be terrorist related?”

“Everything is on the table. I won’t pretend like bad things didn’t happen here... so, everything is definitely under consideration. You there...”

“I have personally seen some of the victims that have been moved to nearby hospitals, and I’ve seen some of the injuries. Bite marks, claw marks, maulings and more... are you telling us you can’t give us any indication as to...?”

“No. I can’t. Not until we know more. Next question.”

“Can you comment on the complete evacuation of the city?”

“Not specifically, no. We’ve taken steps to ensure that residents are safe, and we’re working hard to...”

“But there is a military line, almost like a quarantine...”

“...that’s not something we...”

“...it looks more like a war zone.”

“Again, we can’t comment on specifics...”

“Well allow me to. I’ve seen aerial footage of streets literally running red with blood. Are we supposed to believe this isn’t something...?”

“...that’s enough. Please, we can’t keep focusing on things we can’t discuss at this point. I’ll take one more...”

“Is it not true that the technology needed to disrupt electrical equipment over such a range would be impossible to duplicate by terrorists?”

“I don’t see what you’re...”

“I’ll spell it out for you then. Has the government considered that this might be the work of extraterrestrials?”

“I won’t answer that... and it’s clear that we’re not going to be able to give any information which would be useful at this time. No further questions.”



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