

The Sirens Call



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*A Dark Fiction
& Horror eZine*

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

*Image Inspired Poetry
by T.S. Woolard*

*Photography by
Claire Loader*

*Featured Author
T.S. Wollard,
along with an excerpt
from his novella
Heaven's Healer
from Hell*

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THE CREATURE

WHAT'S THAT BEYOND THE TREES,
CRAWLING ALONG THE GROUND UPON ITS KNEES,
JOLTING, JUMPING, JOSTLING AS IT FLEES?
OH! HERE IT COMES, TRAVELLING OUTSIDE THE PATH,
DESCENDING ON ME, BRINGING ITS WRATH,
LICKING THE TERROR, LONGING A BLOOD BATH.
I SHRIVEL IN FEAR, COWER IN MY SKIN,
TRYING TO HIDE, FIND SOLACE WITHIN.
I'M STUCK, A STATUE, WAITING FOR IT TO BEGIN.
IT CLAMORS TOWARDS ME, DEATH IN ITS EYES,
HIDING A GIFT FROM ME, A TINY SURPRISE.
WHAT'S CONCEALED IS MY DEMISE.
I MEET IT, OR, RATHER, IT MEETS ME.
SCREAMS FILL THE WOODS BENEATH A THICK CANOPY.
THE CREATURE CLAIMS ANOTHER AMONG THE TREES.



The Wind at the Crossroads | Patrick Winters

Silvia—Freddy’s dingbat great aunt—used to have a lot of weird advice to share, before she passed on twenty-three years ago . . . and long before he’d ever met Cathy. While a great deal of it had long since turned to so much dust in the halls of Freddy’s memories, one particular tidbit came back to him as he sat in Donnie’s, hunched over the bar.

“When Halloween night comes around, find a crossroads, stand at its center, and listen to the wind. It will tell of all that will happen to you until your next Halloween.”

That odd nugget floated back into Freddy’s mind as his third Budweiser went down to his gut—and right as a Count Dracula bumped an elbow into his back, the burly vampire too focused on his Sexy Nurse girlfriend to spare an apology as they headed out of the bar. Freddy just shrugged it off and took another heady sip.

He’d come to Donnie’s hoping some rounds might make him feel a little better—maybe even feel something that resembled ‘happy’, in that buzzed-out-of-your-brains sort of sense—but he hadn’t so much as felt his spirits twitch since hauling himself up to his stool. At least, not until his great aunt’s old bit of superstition came back to him; because when it did, he actually managed a chuckle. Quick, and a little shaky, but a chuckle. And considering how he’d been feeling lately, he’d take that.

It was a pretty random recollection, but random recollections had become an irritating par for his lonesome course these days. Like how a flower vendor peddling azaleas on last night’s rerun of *Blue Bloods* had reminded him of that gorgeous floral dress that Cathy had worn the time they drove up to Chicago. Or how the deep, plush scarlet of a bedspread he’d seen in Sears last week brought back how luscious Cathy’s lips had looked on that first night when he got to kiss them. All sorts of little things were bringing back big heart-wrenchers like that. And it was getting damn irksome.

But his aunt Silvia’s bit of advice? That was different. For one thing, it didn’t hurt to think about, and for another, it had nothing to do with Cathy—not a single, solitary thing—so he latched onto it and ran it through his mind, over and over again. He even got a little giggly, recalling how serious his aunt had seemed back when she said it, uttering it with all the hokey severity of the gypsy that’d told Lon Chaney Jr. he was cursed with the mark of the werewolf.

When Halloween night comes around, find a crossroads, stand at its center, and listen to the wind. It will tell of all that will happen to you until your next Halloween.

What a load of bull.

But as he kept thinking about it, sucking on his teeth and rotating the sweaty bottle in his hands, the stink of manure seemed to waft away from the idea, and instead it became . . . sort of enticing.

It was Halloween night, after all. That was surely what brought the memory crawling back from under his subconscious—that, and all the alcohol, which his mother had often said aunt Silvia had been partial to. Trying to explain away her ‘eccentricities’, as his mother called them.

And maybe the Budweisers were starting to get to him in much the same way, but by God, the idea sounded more and more like an interesting experiment. This was a little hick town, after all, smack dab in the middle of Illinois’ cornfield country. There were plenty of crossroads to be found on the old country lanes spider-webbing their way around the outside of town. And hell, it wasn’t like he had much else to do, other than nurse a few more bottles, go home, and toss and turn, missing the feel of Cathy.

Listen to the wind. It will tell of all that will happen to you until your next Halloween.

Sure, maybe it was crazy, or even just plain stupid—but it was also a little bit tempting. And what if it proved true . . . ?

A parched traveler in the desert didn’t know if the shimmering oasis was real or illusion—until they knelt at the waters. And maybe he wouldn’t know if his aunt Silvia had been on to something or was just completely fruity until he found himself a crossroads . . .

By the time he'd reached the bottom of his fourth beer, the notion was looking like a curious possibility; once he'd hit the middle mark of the fifth, he was out the front door of Donnie's and heading for his truck.

He headed out through the eastern half of town, trying his best not to sideswipe the gaggles of ghosts, ghouls, and Pickle Ricks roaming the streets. There was still another good hour of trick 'r treating left in the night, before the costumed wanderers would head home and porch lights would flick off for good. The shadowy crowds grew thinner and thinner as Freddy neared the outskirts of town, and by the time he'd hit the households nestled amongst the first cornfields, he had the road and the starry night to himself.

As he pushed the needle up to 65 mph, he started to wonder what he might hear on the wind—what he'd *want* to hear—assuming his aunt turned out to be right.

A hearty slap on the back and his boss' voice booming out congratulations on a promotion. The rumbling engine of a new truck whose suspension didn't constantly squeak like the piece of shit it was. His brother calling him a lucky bastard for winning the state lottery . . .

Cathy, calling him and saying that she forgave him.

Cathy, saying she would always love him, no matter what he'd done.

The two of them laughing together, just like they used to . . .

He kept heading further into the miles of corn that were waiting patiently for harvest, seeking out just the right crossroads: a quiet, secluded spot where he could go out into the road without fear of encountering a passerby. You never knew who might be out on a night like this, going on a joyride, driving drunk and doing something of a questionable nature—not unlike himself. He took nameless lanes and short stretches of gravel as they came, winding this way and that for several more minutes . . . until he found just the place he was looking for.

Up ahead, the corn gave way to a crossroads that sat nestled in the darkness of the evening, finding a home in the anonymity of the sprawling countryside. Wild, waist-high weeds grew up in tufts on each of its four corners, swaying along with a meandering breeze; some old, monolithic post rose up from the far-right corner across the way, leaning at an angle, its wood rotting and its former purpose quite unknown. Freddy pulled over to a patch of grass on the side of the road, where the asphalt was starting to crack and crumble at its limits, the steady touches of both time and nature working their magic on the man-made paths. He killed the engine and sat there a moment—in the dark, his window rolled down, listening.

The breeze that stirred the weeds rose with the slipping of seconds, setting the strands to dancing as the wind blew freely through this lonesome place.

Freddy got out of the car, his door slamming shut like a squeaking gunshot in all this elsewhere. He trudged out into the center of the road, half-stepping along and dragging the soles of his boots against the asphalt, his head spinning a tad as it fought back against that last bit of Budweiser. When he reached the middle of the crossroads, he stopped, straightening up and rubbing his sleeve along his face to help clear his head. He silenced that last bit of ego that was still saying how stupid this all was, shut his eyes to focus—and then he listened to the wind.

It rose; it fell.

It rose again, sweeping over him with a stronger swell. And then it fell again, back into a whisper.

It rose; it fell. It rose; it fell.

As the night breathed on and on around him, revealing nothing but silent minutes, Freddy felt a swell of self-pity that steadily brewed up from his gut and rose into his heart. He even felt a tear welling beneath his eye.

How pathetic. For a moment there, he'd *actually* hoped . . .

The wind rose up once more, beating against him, and then it gradually fell—and it kept falling, the breeze winding down until it had died entirely. All was silent—not a single rush of wind or the chirp of a

cricket. Just that quiet, droning ring in his ears. And when the wind kicked up again, blowing over him harder than it had yet to blow, that silent drone just continued on.

He opened his eyes, staring wide-eyed at the crossroads. The weeds around him whipped to and fro, as if trying to wave him down, urging his attention—but he couldn't hear them thrashing about, nor the wind that thrashed them. He'd seemingly gone deaf to the whole world, and in the span of a passing moment.

Freddy swallowed his confusion. His throat had gone dry and scratchy. He rocked about on his heels, feeling his heart *thump-thumping* in his chest.

What had happened? Where was the sound of the wind? Where were the sounds of his future, being whispered to him, revealing what was to come?

Listen to the wind. It will tell of all that will happen to you until your next Halloween.

But there weren't any whispers, damn it. There was just . . .

Nothing.

Just the stillness of time no more and the endless yawn of emptiness, stretching on through a great void.

Freddy stumbled backwards, feeling a bit of nausea rising in time with his pulse. Panic quickly set in, making his hands tremble and his knees quake. He swatted at his ears and snapped his fingers beside them, trying to hear once more. He spoke to himself, saying "Hey!" repeatedly and louder each time, but even his own voice was lost to him.

He was so enwrapped in his dread that he didn't notice the glow of headlights swelling up from behind him, casting his shadow out and onto the road ahead; and he didn't hear a bit of the last-minute draw from the speeding Crosstrek's horn.

Freddy turned about, his mind going blank the instant he saw the car's nose zooming towards his gut. His arms rose up of their own accord as the vehicle careened into his lower half—and then his whole body rose up, flying into the air as he rolled up and over the Crosstrek's roof. Everything around him went whirling as pain shot through him; then he was lying on the ground. The scarlet glow of taillights shimmered in the corner of his glazed eyes.

He looked up into the starry sky, the millions of pinpoints barely registering as that impossible silence drew on, the wind still blowing around his broken body. He lay there, feeling the stillness of time no more setting in, falling into that yawn of emptiness, dipping down into that great void that awaited him.

Because for Freddy, there wouldn't be another Halloween.

About the Author:

Patrick Winters is a graduate of Illinois College in Jacksonville, IL, where he earned a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing. He has been published in the likes of *Sanitarium Magazine*, *Deadman's Tome*, *Trysts of Fate*, and other such titles. His first collection of stories, *WEERD*, is now available in print through Barnes & Noble.

Publication List: [Patrick Winters](#)

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I Never Knew Your Name | Sonora Taylor

Cities are filled with familiar strangers. That is how I knew you. I saw you every day, but I never knew your name.

There are enough people in the city to sift through them anonymously, but also enough doing the same thing as you, going the same way you're going, that you get to know them in everything but name.

I saw you each day on my way to work, as I see many. We surely all recognize each other, but only you made eye contact with me. Only you smiled and said, "Good morning, ma'am."

And though I normally prefer familiar strangers to keep their distance, I too smiled at you. I too waved at you. I too said, "Good morning."

That was the start, and end, of our friendship. We'd pass each other each day, smile, wave, and say "Good morning." No more, no less.

I wondered, as the days and our greetings grew in number, what connected us apart from all the others. I'd never seen you anywhere but that sidewalk. No one else spoke to you, and you spoke to no one else.

Perhaps you didn't want them to see you. Perhaps I saw you by accident. I saw you in the morning on my way to work, then promptly forgot you.

I only thought of my morning paper, with its distraught headlines: war, famine, a local child missing. There were wars every day, hungry people everywhere, many children who had disappeared. I turned the page and read the comics.

I continued to see you. We would say good morning. You'd walk by others in silence. I would read my paper.

Continued war, continued famine, two more local children gone missing. I read the comics, but thought of the three local children who were gone. Children didn't disappear from my neighborhood every day. Where did they go?

As we passed each other, I'd wonder things about you. Where were you from? Why were you walking opposite the workflow? Did you work at night? I began to think of you even when we didn't share a sidewalk. I'd seen you so often, you were almost my friend. One whose name I didn't know.

Another child missing – and the other three had yet to be found. I couldn't read the comics.

No one else even waved to you, much less spoke to you. Could they see you? Were you a ghost? A spirit? A floating friend to greet me hello each morning?

Three more children missing. One of the first to go missing had been found by a riverbank. There were pictures in the paper. She looked ... empty, like the life had been vacuumed from her, like her soul had been drained. People wondered what mysterious stranger would take them away.

Like many familiar strangers, you began to flicker out of my routine. Days would go by where I wouldn't see you, and I thought you'd found a new job, or moved away. But then you'd reappear. We'd smile, and wave, and say, "Good morning." You never said anything more. Maybe you didn't want to tell me more.

More children were found. They all looked like the drained girl. A few more disappeared, but now the papers said they found a pattern, a path to lead them to the attacker. Fewer children went missing. I saw you less and less.

Soon no children went missing. The news moved on to celebrities and politicians.

Soon you were gone forever. And I never knew your name.

The Note on the Door | Sonora Taylor

Rory walked by the same door every day on her way to work. She walked by many doors, but on Monday morning, only one caught her eye – one with a note taped to the glass.

Rory kept walking. She knew the note wasn't for her, and she didn't want to walk up a stranger's porch and look like a creep in front of her fellow commuters.

Tuesday and Wednesday went by in time with her steps. The note remained on the door.

On Thursday, she stopped and tried to read it from the sidewalk. She could see handwritten scrawl, but not what it said. She turned and walked away. The note wasn't written for her.

On Friday, she could no longer bear it. She glanced from side to side to make sure no one would see her trespass. She walked up the porch and to the door. She read the note:

If you're reading this, please help me! The key is under the vase.

Rory shivered as she looked for the key. If only she'd read the note sooner. She found it and almost dropped it twice as she unlocked the door. She stepped inside and saw five red lines on the wall. They ended abruptly with a smeared bloody palm print.

Rory dropped the key and sighed. She was too late.

A hand clasped her throat. Rory's heart raced as she felt warm breath on her ear and a body press against her. "Thanks for reading my note," a man's voice whispered.

Rory's excitement grew as she reached in her tote bag. In one swift motion, she pulled out her knife and plunged it into the leg of the man behind her. He dropped to the floor and cried out in pain. She stared a moment longer at the handprint of the one she hadn't gotten to first.

"No," she said with a smile as she turned to face the man. "Thank you for writing it."

About the Author:

Sonora Taylor is the author of *The Crow's Gift and Other Tales*, a collection of short stories; and *Please Give*, a novel. Her work will appear in Camden Park Press's *Quoth the Raven*, out October 2018. Her next short story collection, *Wither and Other Stories*, will be released October 9, 2018. She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband.

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It's time to let the monsters loose...



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

Summer's Labor | DJ Tyrer

He labored at it
Beneath the heat of the summer sun
Weeks of work to build it
Finally completing it
As the first autumn mists rolled in
An enormous man
Made of wicker and wood
Ready to burn
A blazing sacrifice
Intended to transfer his neighbors
To a new and ethereal life
And, make his lands fertile again.
But, they turned the tables
Thrust him inside
The cage of wooden ribs
Set it ablaze
Dancing about it
Laughing in time to his screams
Welcoming the fall of leaves
And, the hope of new life
To come.

About the Author:

DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing* and has been widely published in anthologies and magazines around the world, such as *Chilling Horror Short Stories* (Flame Tree), *All The Petty Myths* (18th Wall), *Steampunk Cthulhu* (Chaosium), *What Dwells Below* (Sirens Call), *The Mad Visions of al-Hazred* (Alban Lake), and *EOM: Equal Opportunity Madness* (Otter Libris), and issues of *Sirens Call*, *Hinnom Magazine*, *Ravenwood Quarterly*, and *Weirdbook*, and in addition, has a novella available in paperback and on the Kindle, *The Yellow House* (Dunhams Manor).

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

Amazon Author Page: [DJ Tyrer](#)

Milking the Dead | Maynard Blackoak

With lines of fatigue written on his face, Landon stared at the rows of gurneys crowding the gymnasium turned morgue for processing. Each contained a corpse, some more than one. Since the discovery that spinal fluid from the recently deceased contains an enzyme, which reverses aging and heals afflictions modern medicine could not cure, his job as coroner had become more concerned with milking the dead and less uncovering the cause of death.

Shaking his head, he returned his attention to the body in front of him. Holding a long syringe inches from his face, his eyes seemingly examined the instrument. His thoughts, however, were far from the job at hand. His mind drifted back to a memorable day when news broke of a chance accident dripping the fluid into a cut onto another coroner's hand. Within an hour, a once wrinkled and arthritic hand looked and felt as it had when it was thirty years younger.

Glancing at his own wrinkled hand while running the other through his snow-white hair, he could not understand the obsession with toying with the natural order of aging. There was no evidence the miracle fluid would extend life expectancy. It merely erased the outward signs of aging and removed unsightly scars and blemishes. He viewed the signs of age as a badge of honor, a testimony to the life he had led.

In the furor surrounding the great discovery, sufficient testing had not been performed. Big money from pharmaceutical companies spoke volumes to politicians. Those politicians in turn pressured the Food and Drug Administration for a quick approval. The end-result; a youth and healing serum, commonly referred to as Juice, with potentially dangerous consequences was released for use on the general public.

Plunging the long needle into the spine, Landon extracted the precious fountain of youth. Once the vial was filled with the pinkish yellow fluid, he placed it in a case with specially designed, padded pockets. Casting a sympathetic gaze toward the cadaver, he offered an apologetic grin, and began pushing it toward the section designated for corpse disposal.

Nearing the area where the dead waited to be loaded into a transport vehicle, he noticed it had become overflowing with corpses. Landon had never seen the disposal section so crowded. Normally, Otis, the attendant responsible for removing them, kept the bodies moving. On occasion, he had fallen behind, though only by a few bodies.

Something was amiss. His first thought was a band of illegitimate Juice dealers had broken into the facility to steal a few of the fresh corpses. It had happened before. The theft, however, had been performed furtively without any disruption of normal processing functions. It had not even been discovered until the end of his shift when the body counts did not match. Nevertheless, thievery seemed the only explanation that made sense.

Exiting the door to the transport loading area, Landon set out to find Otis and uncover the reason for the delay in removing the corpses for disposal. Nearing the loading bay, he heard what sounded like a few men having a humorous and friendly conversation. His curiosity piqued, he craned his head around the corner. There on the back of the opened transport vehicle sat Otis with Sam, Mack and Cletus, the men whose job it was to deliver the bodies to a warehouse for disposal.

"Otis! Sam! Mack! Cletus!" Landon shouted in a loud and authoritative voice. "What the hell are you doing? The milked bodies are piling up in there. You guys need to get them out before they spill over into my area."

The men glanced briefly in his direction. They cast confused stares at one another. Then with a shrug, they returned to their rousing dialog.

"God damn it, Otis!" Landon yelled louder in an angry tone. "Get your ass in there and start hauling out those bodies... And you three goof offs better help him out."

Once again, the men sent perplexed stares in his direction but failed to respond.

"Either you do your damn jobs or I'll fire you all on the spot."

The men fell silent, staring at him with befuddled expressions. Finally, Otis opened his mouth to speak. "Who the hell are you talking to?"

"I'm talking to you, Otis, and those other lazy asses sitting with you," Landon responded growing more agitated with each passing second.

"Sorry, old man. We don't know the Otis, Sam, Mack, and Cletus you're talking to and ain't none of us know what damn job you're talking about. So just get the fuck away from us before we have to hurt you."

Landon's features bristled with anger. If the men were playing a prank, he did not find it amusing. "Cut the shit, guys, and do your god damn jobs."

The four men stood, and began walking toward the agitated coroner casting menacing glares. Taken aback, Landon backpedaled a few steps. Feeling less in charge and more imperiled, fear replaced the agitation written on his face. As the intimidating men came closer, he turned and ran back inside the building, locking the door behind him.

With a locked, steel door separating him from imminent harm, his anger returned. He had time to report them to security and let armed guards deal with them.

Landon stared in disbelief at the phone in his hand. The call to security had not gone as he had thought. In fact, it had been just as frustrating as his dealings with the men on the loading dock. No one in security admitted to being themselves, and seemed confused when told to remove Otis, Sam, Mack, and Cletus from the premises. Was this an elaborate joke or had everyone at the facility except him gone mad?

Perplexed, he dialed the number to the main office. Since he was unable to get any cooperation from the staff at the facility, perhaps his superiors' involvement would succeed where he had failed. He was certain they would be even less tolerant with the shenanigans than he was.

To his dismay, no one answered his call. He tried calling repeatedly, hoping it was simply a case of the main office being flooded with inquiries. In each instance, the phone rang numerous times but went unanswered. *What the hell is going on around here?* He grumbled in his head.

Throwing his head back in disappointment, he considered the predicament. There were four menacing men on the premises, seemingly looking to do him harm. Each had possibly lost touch with reality and refused to do their jobs. The building's security staff had gone mad. It was a certainty they would be of no use if he found himself in peril. He was unable to contact anyone at the main office to report the insanity that had gripped the facility. The only reasonable thing he could do it seemed, was to leave.

Less than a mile from the facility, he noticed some strange happenings. There was mass confusion everywhere he looked. Cars sat motionless in the streets with drivers staring with dumbfounded expressions. On the sidewalks, he witnessed several people having heated exchanges. Rolling down his window, he eavesdropped on a few of the cross conversations. What he heard gave him cause for great concern.

A man appeared annoyed with a young child claiming to be his son. From what he overheard, Landon was able to determine the man was attempting to convince the little boy he was not the child's father. The young lad pleaded with the man with tears streaming down his face, adamant that he was

indeed the man's son. No matter how he sobbed and implored, the man refused to accept the little boy's claim.

Further up the sidewalk from the man and child, another man and a woman traded harsh words and appeared on the verge of becoming violent. She claimed to be his wife but he insisted she was a stranger to him. When she grabbed his arm to force the issue, he jerked away and appeared ready to strike her. Instead, he screamed for her to let him be. Then with an irate stare, he claimed to be an unmarried female with a boyfriend.

He overheard many more such altercations. Men and women insisting to be someone other than the person another child or adult claimed them to be. It appeared the insanity he witnessed at the facility had spread to the outside world. Shaking his head with horror, he sped up his car to get home as quickly as possible to escape the madness.

Landon turned into his driveway and sat in his vehicle for a time, feeling relieved to be home. All along the way, he had observed countless bizarre incidents of identity confusion. Inside his house, he could isolate himself from the turmoil creating havoc in the streets. As he exited the car, he could hear shouting coming from yards of several of his neighbors. Closing his ears to the commotion, he hurried through the door hoping to escape the insanity of the world in the company of his wife.

As soon as he stepped inside, he heard whimpering coming from his bedroom. "Edna? Is there something wrong?"

Receiving no response, he made his way into the bedroom to find her crouched in a corner with tears raining down her cheeks. "What's the matter, honey?"

"Who are you?" She asked, looking at him with fear covering her face.

"Not you too, Edna," he responded in horror. "Don't you know me? I'm your husband."

"I've never seen you before in my life," she barked. "You'd better get out of her before I call the cops."

Landon released an exasperated sigh. "Please, Edna. You've got to remember me. We've been married over twenty years."

"If that's the case, why do you keep calling me Edna? I'd think you'd know my name after twenty years." she snapped in a harsh voice.

Shaking his head briskly, hoping the nightmare would end and he could awaken, he cast a heartbroken gaze her way. Home was turning out to be just as it had been at the facility and on the phone with the main office. Either he or the majority of the world had gone insane. He was uncertain which was true. *Maybe if I question her... Maybe find out who she thinks she is... Maybe I can figure out what the hell is going on.*

"Okay, then. Your name's not Edna," he began in a calm voice. "Can you tell me who you are and what you're doing in my house? Maybe I can help you figure out how you got here and get you where you're supposed to be."

"My name is Sherryl and I don't know how I got here. I just sort of woke up and found myself in this strange place."

Landon mulled over her reply. It did little to explain anything but perhaps further dialog would reveal something to help him piece together the mystery. "We're getting somewhere. What's the last thing you remember before you woke up here?"

"I remember driving my car to the store to pick up a few things for dinner..." she started then abruptly stopped as her face fell grim. "I was in a car wreck. Someone crashed into my door. I remember feeling terrible pain all over. There was blood all over and..."

Sherryl went silent again. All the color drained from her face and a look of disbelief reflected in her eyes. "I saw the top of my skull laying in my lap. I remember thinking I was going to die."

"But I didn't die... Did I? I mean, I'm not a ghost... Am I?"

It was his turn to become pale. It seemed impossible yet her story could only lead to one conclusion. Though his brain connected the dots cruelly in his thoughts, his heart refused to accept it. After all, that would mean what had happened to his beloved Edna was entirely his fault.

A sickening feeling rumbled in his gut. It was if the horrible truth would spew from his stomach. He had milked a corpse whose name was Sherryl who had died in an automobile accident. The top of her skull had been sheared off by metal from her door. Damning him further, he had skimmed a vial of her spinal fluid. Afterwards, he had given it to Edna after weeks of prodding, to reverse the effects of an illness that had aged her face badly.

Turning his eyes toward the bedroom dresser, he spotted the empty vial. Tears pooled in his eyes, realizing the bitter truth. The consciousness of Sherryl had been transferred to Edna through the former's spinal fluid. Collapsing to his knees, he began sobbing like a baby. The awful truth was more than his heart could bear.

Returning his attention his wife, he noticed a handgun aimed at his head. "You...you did this to me," Edna stated in a shaky voice.

Her trembling hand squeezed the trigger. A loud bang and a bright flash preceded an instant of immense pain. The air turned pink, and then ran blood red.

Landon awoke covered in a cold sweat. The sun had yet to begin peeking through the bedroom window. However, a dim light from a streetlamp cast a faint glow in his room. Wiping the sweat from his forehead, he felt a good deal of relief to be awakened from the horrible nightmare. He knew his wife would be sound asleep but he needed to tell her about it.

"You would not believe the horrible dream I just had," he began, nudging his wife gently with an elbow.

She sluggishly opened her eyes, released a long yawn, and checked the time. "It's 4am. Couldn't you have waited a couple more hours, Chuck?"

About the Author:

Maynard Blackoak is an author living on a small ranch in Oklahoma. The greatest influences in his writing are the works of Poe and Dickens. He draws inspiration from the sounds and shadows of the night and processes them through a deep abiding affection for the classics to create his tales.

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After the death of his parents, William had moved in with his Grandpa. There'd been no other choice. Grandpa was his only living relative, but the arrangement suited neither of them. William considered his Grandpa a nasty old bastard, treating him like a slave. Fourteen-hour days, no pay and forced to sleep in a drafty, damp room at the back of the store. Grandpa considered his grandson a waste of space, a good for nothing parasite, constantly goofing off.

As William moved from teenager to adult, the hatred had grown, but he was obliged to stay; this was 1938 and, while the economic effects of the Great Depression were easing, jobs were still hard to come by. William had to keep working in the store, but he wanted nothing more than to rid himself of the old man. Then he would inherit the store and he could run it any way he damned well pleased.

It was October and the weather was cool. William sat in the neighborhood bar with his good buddy, Martin. They were the same age, but Martin was doing better than William. His father's connections had helped him get a decent position at the local radio station. As they nursed their beers, Martin spoke.

"Have you been listening to the Mercury Theater broadcasts on CBS? The ones we broadcast on Sundays?"

"Naw, don't listen to the radio much. Grandpa puts it on for the news, not much else."

"I love those shows, I can't wait for the one this Sunday."

"Why?"

"Every week they adapt one of the classics. This week they're doing War of the Worlds, my favorite. Mr. Jenkins at the station says they're going to pretend that the Martian invasion is real, they're planning to do mock news broadcasts. Mr. Jenkins says Mr. Welles is hoping to scare the pants off people. It's Halloween, I guess that's why."

That was when the idea popped into Williams head. The perfect way to get rid of Grandpa.

The next few days found William carrying out research. He'd borrowed a copy of War of the Worlds from Martin, but quickly gave up. He wasn't much of a reader and he couldn't follow the story. He had the gist of what happened from Martin, so he decided he didn't really need to read the whole book. Instead, he picked up the science fiction pulp magazines in the store, the ones Grandpa disapproved of, but still sold because they were popular with the neighborhood children. He had to read these stories after the store was closed or when Grandpa was upstairs. If Grandpa caught William reading them, he'd make him pay for them. The stories in these magazines provided the final piece of the plan. His disguise.

The evening of the 30th of October came 'round quickly. The store didn't open on Sundays; in the morning they both went to church and then the rest of the day was spent inventorying and restocking the shelves, ready for the week ahead.

As he stacked tin cans onto the shelf, William reviewed his plan. Nothing could go wrong. The clock in the hall chimed five. Grandpa looked up from the accounts and closed the book.

"Time for supper. Bring it upstairs when it's ready."

He rose and headed to the stairs at the back of the store that led up to his bedroom.

"Close the shutters, so we don't get none of those pesky kids coming 'round tonight. If they want candy, they can come in tomorrow and buy it."

"Will do, Grandpa."

After supper had been delivered and grudgingly accepted, William crept into the kitchen. Turning on the radio, he tuned into the local CBS affiliate, the one where Martin worked. He turned the volume down and listened carefully. The broadcast was everything Martin had promised. It was perfect. William kept listening, waiting for the right moment. He decided it was time. He walked at the bottom of the stairs.

"Grandpa! Turn your radio on! There's something happening in Grover's Mill. That's only forty miles away."

He silently thanked Mr. Welles for setting his tale so close to home. It was perfect.

"What you saying, boy?"

"There's a news report! Turn your radio on."

He heard footsteps clumping across the room above and the radio being switched on. It took a few seconds to warm up, then William heard the voices from the radio. Grandpa would be fooled by the format of the show, no doubt he would believe it was real.

"I'm just going outside, Grandpa. See if there's anything happening."

There was no response from above. William headed to the storeroom to find his disguise. The one that would give good old Grandpa a heart attack. He'd fashioned a crude helmet from a discarded garbage bin. He'd stuck on fake eyes and antennae. Reading those pulp fiction sci-fi stories had given him the idea. A robot from Mars would give his poor old Grandpa enough of a shock to kill him.

He quietly climbed the stairs.

At the top, he paused on the threshold of the door that lead into Grandpa's domain. The plan was simple. Grandpa would be sitting facing the radio, his back to the door. The volume was turned up, Grandpa was nearly deaf. All William had to do was creep up behind him and surprise the old coot. The radio show, combined with the shock of seeing a metallic face leering at him should be enough. If it wasn't, William could chalk it off to a joke. It was a win-win situation. Grandpa might suspect foul play, but he couldn't prove anything.

William peeked around the door and was greeted with a vision from hell. A nightmarish, glowing pumpkin head lurched out at him. Involuntarily, William stepped back. He was too close to the top of the stairs and he fell. He crumpled at the bottom, his neck snapped.

There was a laugh from the top of the stairs.

"Trick or treat, William! Thought you were smart, huh? Guess I tricked you good and proper. You should've known, your old Grandpa is smarter."

Grandpa held the pumpkin head, the one he had carefully carved in anticipation of William's stupid trick. He'd suspected for days that William was planning something. He lifted a finger and spoke to his dead grandson.

"First, your buddy Martin has been telling everyone about the broadcast. Stupid kid, excited by a dumb radio show."

William's head, still encased in the garbage can, lolled back onto the wooden floor with a metallic clunk.

"Two, I saw you reading those stupid magazines. That's the first time you've ever willingly read anything. I read the magazines myself. Robots, invaders from Mars. Stupid crap. Three, I noticed the garbage can was gone. I took a quick look and found your stupid costume. That was when I knew you planned to scare me into an early grave. So, I did some preparations of my own."

Will didn't respond.

Grandpa smiled to himself. He'd only planned to scare the bejesus out of the boy, but overall, he was satisfied with the outcome. It was the perfect crime. Once the tin can was removed and the pumpkin destroyed, he would call the police. His story would be straightforward and believable. Poor William must have slipped at the top of the stairs. The police would have no reason to suspect otherwise. It would be deemed a simple accident. Then, at last, he could employ someone decent to help run the store.

About the Author:

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

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

An ABERRANT MIND



KEN MACGREGOR

Available on Amazon, CreateSpace, and Smashwords

Monsters | Geoffrey A. Landis

I saw Count Dracula
dangling from a tree
his pointy teeth protruding
from a goofy smile
underneath a googly-eyed stare.

His skin was a pale green
and his tuxedo was perfect.

In front of the next house
three laughing ghosts glowing
like 60-watt bulbs
hovered over an inflated pumpkin.

Your myths have been defanged.
Spooks are cross-eyed and harmless
and the boogeyman is afraid of you.

When goblins take pratfalls
and only want to be loved
how could terrors lurk
invisible in the shadows?
Your head full of Count Chocula
and pixelated bumbling snowmen
you will never see
what steals up behind you.

Dracula's skin was not green
and he never wore a tuxedo
nor a crooked grin.

If you can't see me
that doesn't mean I'm not there.
My tattered cloak wraps me in darkness
black as the shadows of a moonless night
silent like wings of a bat
and in the night I am
watching.

And very real.

Halloween Haiku | Geoffrey A. Landis

The candle
glowing in the pumpkin
holds darkness at bay.

The werewolf moon!
But we are safe
Inside.

Halloween on Mars:
Winds of a dead planet blow
pumpkin-colored dust.

My cloak wraps me in darkness
silent like the wings of a bat
in the night I am watching.

Cold air, thick quilt--
through the bedroom window,
moonlight.

Crows:
an explosion
across the jigsaw puzzle sky.

Frost on a pumpkin
gleams like pale moonlight on the
fangs of a werewolf.

Tritena: All Hallow's Eve | Geoffrey A. Landis

The day to come is blessed with hallowed souls,
but night is time for goblins, ghouls, and spirits—
candles in pumpkin skulls hold dark at bay.

Ghosts haunt the cloud-streaked dark; tonight wolves bay
up at the moon, to send chill through the souls
of costumed revelers drinking cider laced with spirits.

Children race door to door with reckless spirits;
as parents give advice they won't obey—
the call of candy sings to greedy souls.

The Vampire Laments | Geoffrey A. Landis

The vampire remembers:
blood and fire and the bodies of enemies rotting on stakes.
A day when a man needed only a sword, a shield,
a strong right arm
and a heart to pump blood.

Cars, metal war-machines that know neither passion nor mercy, frighten him.
Above him, huge silver beasts roar across the sky.

The vampire remembers:
Roman soldiers in their capes and segmented armor,
arrogant with their banners and tamed eagles.
The pomp and distant echo of their horns.
The richness of their blood.

Cities, concrete towers glowing in all the colors of neon,
have forgotten the meaning of night.

The vampire remembers:
the shattering rumble of tanks crushing crops and corpses alike into the mud.
The smell of diesel fuel and burning, burning.
The stench of dead so numerous even the vultures were sated.
The famine following the war, when blood was thin.

Men, who work in offices, whose hands are soft, whose skin is pale as his,
now kill with a telephone call, not hearing the voices of their victims.

The vampire remembers:
the face of a woman
dead of the pox a thousand years ago.
The burning, pleading eyes.
The faint, quivering pulse.

He no longer dreams,
for dreaming is for the living,
But sometimes he, who will not die, wonders:
Would death be a dream?

About the Author:

Geoffrey A. Landis is a scientist, a science fiction writer, and a poet. He has won the Hugo and Nebula awards for fiction, and the Rhysling award for poetry. He has published two poetry collections: "Iron Angels" and "The Book of Whimsy". He works for NASA on developing space technology, and is part of the Mars Exploration Rovers Science team.

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“911, What’s Your Emergency” | Dusty Davis

The first thing Gary Everson noticed when he walked into his apartment building was the body. The man hung from the third floor railing by a thick rope wrapped around his neck. His face was puffy and a bluish purple shade. Gary gagged at the smell that permeated from the man. It reminded him of the time when his ex-wife Susan had accidentally left a package of raw hamburger sitting on the counter while they went away for the weekend. Choking down the bile that threatened to escape his throat, Gary took another look up at the corpse hanging above him. The man was wearing a light gray suit that was stained with grass and mud, like he just crawled out of the grave.

The door closed against his back, knocking him further inside the building.

The storm must have knocked the power out, Gary thought as a loud clap of thunder shook the walls of the building.

He scrambled up to the third floor. Gary found the rope securely tied to the metal railing that served as a barrier from going over the side. He reached down, stretching his arm, trying to get to the body. Gary had to make sure the man was dead. He couldn’t lose anyone else, like he lost Susan. Another boom of thunder crashed outside, shaking his insides. The emergency lights flickered and then winked out. The building was cast into complete darkness.

The power came back on in the building a few seconds later, nearly blinding him. He peered back over the edge of the railing, but the body was gone. The rope dangled into the empty space between floors. “Where did he go? He was right there,” Gary said to himself.

He fished the keys out of his pocket and unlocked the door, letting himself into his apartment. He slammed and locked the door behind him. The apartment was small and cramped with over twenty years of crap that he accumulated, shoved into the space.

He had left a lamp on, dimly lighting up the living room. He crossed the room to the end table and picked up his bottle of Xanax. Shaking out a couple of pills, Gary threw them into his mouth and chewed them. He tried to lick his parched lips, but his tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth. Susan was right, he needed to get help, but he didn’t know how to ask for it. Being a dispatcher for 911, he saw and heard too many things. It was hard to turn that off and lead a normal life.

Gary peered out his peephole. The rope was still securely tied to the metal railing, but he could no longer see the bottom end. *Maybe it was left there for me.*

Outside, rain pounded against the window as the storm raged on. Something on the coffee table in the middle of the room caught his eye. Gary rushed over to the table and picked up a picture frame. Inside the frame was a photo of Susan, her blonde hair, blowing on a breeze as waves crashed to the beach behind her. It was the same one that he kept in his wallet. He could still see her, running along the beach, laughing.

The picture was turned upside down in the frame, so Susan’s head was facing the bottom. *I didn’t move the picture.*

A low whining sound issued from the bedroom making him drop the frame. It bounced off the carpeted floor with a thud. It sounded like a woman sobbing.

The noise came again, louder. More urgent.

His body trembled, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. *Something was wrong.* Gary headed toward his bedroom. The door was slightly ajar. With the tip of his shoe, he pushed it completely open. The room was dark. Rain tapped against the window pane, reminding Gary of skeletal fingers tapping the glass. He shook the image from his mind as he took another step further inside, even though everything in his being told him to run away.

On the bed against the far wall lay a woman. Her back was to him with her dark hair draped over her face. Her sheer, white nightgown shook with each violent sob she made.

“Ex...Excuse me. What are you doing in here? Who are you?” Stepping closer to the bed, Gary reached out a trembling hand and grabbed her by the shoulder. Her skin was icy to the touch. Gary rolled her over onto her back. He stumbled back from the bed as he saw her clutching her midsection. With the moonlight streaming

in through the window, Gary could see that her entire front side was soaked in blood. There were several gashes up and down her torso and arms.

"Help me. Help me," she said between sobs barely audible over the storm outside. Gary placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. *What should I do?* Another boom of thunder shook the apartment and the lights flickered, then went out.

The power came back on a few seconds later and Gary found the bed empty, like it had been since Susan had asked him to leave their house. The woman was gone but the plain white sheets were sodden with blood. Gary stumbled backwards, but managed to stay on his feet that time.

"What the hell is going on?"

"911, what's your emergency?" A voice echoed throughout the apartment. Gary recognized the voice immediately. *That's my voice.* He spun around searching the apartment, but he was still alone.

"There's somebody trying to get in my house," a female voice whispered. Gary knew that voice too. It was a call he answered the week before. A home invasion.

"What's your name ma'am?" Gary's voice played throughout the apartment.

"Lori Waltman. I live at 957 McKinnon Avenue." The sound of glass breaking cut her off. Inside the apartment Gary flinched like the first time that he heard it. *They were breaking in.*

"Ok, Lori there is an officer nearby, he is in route. He will be there shortly. Just stay on the line with me and I promise I will get you through this."

"Help me. I'm so scared. Please help me."

"Ok Lori, I just received word from the officer that he is on scene. Go to the front door and he will meet you. You're safe now, Lori."

Hollow words.

Gary heard the phone bounce off the floor as she ran to the door expecting to be saved by the police officer. *Why the hell did the officer lie to me? It took him ten damn minutes to get there!*

Lori screamed, as she was shoved back into her home. Her safe haven. Two male voices also came through. They were nasty.

Movement.

Footsteps pounded on the hardwood floor. A grunt sounded in his ear as he clutched the phone receiver so tightly, his hand began to ache. He found himself saying a silent prayer as he listened. And Susan still wondered why he was so distant to her.

"Help me. Help me," Lori whispered as she laid bleeding on the floor. Heavy footsteps ran away. It was another two and a half minutes before the officer arrived. The longest one hundred and fifty seconds of Gary's life.

Gary Everson shook remembering the phone call. He ran to the front door and flung it open. Standing just outside the apartment was the dead man. The rope was still wrapped around his neck. Gary's legs buckled nearly giving out on him at the sight of the man. *You're not real.* The bottle of Xanax rattled in his hand like dice.

The corpse raised his head. His neck cracked with the movement. Eyes, frozen in death stared at Gary.

"You promised her Gary. You promised her that she would be alright, that help was there," the dead guy said. His face was so bloated, Gary thought that it would burst. Flies buzzed around his head.

"I tried to save her. I wanted to save her. Just leave me alone! Get out of my fucking head!" Gary rambled, not sure who he was trying to convince.

"I got the news about my wife at work an hour later. I was selling some guy a lottery ticket when the police came in and told me that Lori was dead."

"I-I don't know what to fucking say anymore! You want me dead too, don't you?"

"I could never live with the image of her lying there in that casket. The makeup people had covered up the bruising around her neck. So you couldn't see the marks. Well I could see them," the man said as a worm shimmied its way from his throat. Gary watched it hit the floor and bounce toward him.

Gary pushed past the corpse to his neighbor's apartment. *He felt too real.* With both fists, he pounded on the door. The rustling sound of the man's suit sent a chill up Gary's spine. It sounded like bones rattling together. *Not real. Someone please help me!*

"Of course, her dress hid the stab marks. Three of them, in her stomach. They... Never caught the guys." Gary turned around to the man with his back against the door. *Not real.* "She was a good woman, would never hurt anyone."

"I tried! I wish it turned out different... But I didn't do it, okay! Leave. Me. The. Fuck. Alone!"

The corpse stretched his arm out and grabbed Gary by the shoulder. His fingers were rough, digging in to his flesh.

"You're not real. Can't be real." Gary shook his head, but the fingers of the corpse still wrapped around his shoulder. He pulled him in close. His breath smelled like death. The corpse's sausage-like fingers found Gary's throat.

"You were supposed to save her. But. You. Didn't! You promised her. Now here you are, alive. Lori is gone. I thought I would find her after I was gone too, but she isn't here, and you can't help me. You can't even help yourself. I had a happy marriage," he said with spittle flying out of his mouth. "Lori was happy with me, she accepted me. I couldn't go on without her. And you shouldn't either."

Gary closed his eyes blocking out the bloated face that stood in front of him. He pictured Lori Waltman pleading, begging for his help as she was butchered for no reason. *I promised her that she would be okay, that she would be safe.* Gary dropped the bottle of pills. He raised his hands to his temples and rubbed his head trying to make the voices stop.

"Help me. Help me," Lori said.

"I can't live like this anymore, Gary. You need to get yourself some help. We need some time apart, a fresh start." Susan's voice whispered through his head.

Gary opened his eyes. The man was still there in front of him, his fingers were gone from his neck. The rope was gone too. Bringing his own hand up to his throat Gary found the rope around his neck, secured tightly in a noose.

It's the only way to be free.

Gary wrapped the loose end of the rope around the railing and tied it off. He pulled on it to make sure it was secure. With one last look at the dead man, Gary climbed over the railing and dropped. The noose stopped his fall with a jolt, but didn't snap his neck. He dangled there for several minutes before his heart stopped beating.

Darkness surrounded Gary. He opened his eyes and found himself hanging from the rope. There was no pain. He twisted his neck and saw Lori's husband hanging next to him. A smile formed on the man's lips as Gary realized that it wasn't over. He would never be free now.

About the Author:

Dusty Davis is an author of poetry and horror fiction living in East Liverpool, Ohio. When he is not working on a story, he can be found hanging out with his wife and two kids.

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Swarmed | B.B. Blazkowicz

This is the last straw. I am filing a complaint with the health department. Something needs to be done about these rats. My bedsheets are ruined, my favorite pair of onesie pajamas are covered in blood. I knew that mongrel horde has been getting worse. Scratching, clawing and running up and down inside the walls. I am going to be late for work now that I have to bandage my wrists up after waking up with my hands covered in blood. A fool was I, to think that time I dropped a fresh hot mug of coffee on my crotch would be the worst way to put a little pep in my step as I start the day.

Missing a day's work is never fun when you live paycheck to paycheck, but I do admit I was relieved. I was at my cubicle no more than 20 minutes before the boss saw my bandages.

"Your arms look like shit, Leon. Take the day off, go to the hospital and get that checked out. I don't want to have to put a good employee down because he got rabies, again."

I would love to have gone to the hospital, but peons in the cubicle like me don't qualify for health insurance. Instead I went and bought a bunch of rat traps and a bottle of rot gut for myself.

A few of the other tenants asked why I had so many rat traps. Apparently, they were not having the same problem I was having with those vile rodents. How could they not? It's like the white noise between radio stations on full volume every night anymore. They must be lying because they are embarrassed. Who can blame them though? This apartment complex is not exactly beach-front property. I immediately began setting up the traps in every nook and cranny of every room.

It took a little longer to set them all up than I originally thought. The damn things are touchier than my ex-wife and just as prone to snapping at me for no reason. Still I got it done. *Let's see those rat bastards try to bite me now.* I rewarded myself with the bottle of whiskey. No shot glasses, no chasers, straight from the bottle. It will put some hair on your liver. Maybe emptying this bottle will finally push the image of his lifeless eyes from my mind. So, I turned on the TV to whatever was closest and tilted the bottle from bottom to the ceiling.

What time is it? The clawing in the walls must have been at a fever pitch, that or I can't handle a hangover the way I used to. *I don't remember turning the TV off. Wait! The Traps!* I frantically run around the house checking them. All of them were untouched. *Damn.* Then I remembered I put one right in front of that hole in the bathroom sink, where those bastards probably came in and bit my wrists. A gleeful smile spreads across my face as I get ready to open the door below the sink. *There is no way this didn't get one of those vermin.* The trap had gone off, but there was no rat inside. *No! There is no way it can be.* My stomach twisted into a knot. Carefully placed in the trap was the gnawed off ring finger of the man I killed. I could contain it no more. I power vomited all over the bathroom floor. My stomach was a tumble dryer and it felt like somebody threw a brick in it. *It has to be a coincidence.* I did not mean to kill him, it was dark, and I didn't see him until it was too late. I panicked and drug him into the nearby sewers under the bridge by the apartment building I live in. *Why? Why now?* The rats began scratching at the walls again. There must have been an army of them inside the walls surrounding my bathroom. I cowered on the floor expecting the walls to buckle from the weight of their filthy bodies. I heard a snapping sound. *A rat trap.* Another snap, then another. They all started going off in a rapid-fire succession until the entire apartment fell completely silent. My whole body shook from a mixture of shock, hangover and weakness. I had to lean on the walls for support as I forced myself out of the bathroom. My stomach felt like I swallowed a block of ice and I had to keep stopping to wipe cold sweat from out of my eyes. The traps were sprung and all they contained a little something. I let out a weak moan. There was an empty wallet, his ID, keys, a couple fingers, a pack of cigarettes, his lighter. *They knew! Those vermin could sense it! How did they find me?* They were here too, in the apartment with me. Just beyond what little moonlight shown in through my dirty old windows. Scores of them, all staring at me!

The trial was short, I admitted guilt right there in my living room among all the evidence. I tried to run and show the cops where I hid the body, but my running did not go over well with them. After I had been sufficiently tackled to the ground and handcuffed they allowed me to tell them instead. Everything found in my apartment matched the missing body perfectly. The police did not believe me about the rats knowing despite my manic cries. A thorough sweep of my apartment after my arrest did show that it had indeed been infested

with the vermin, but none remained anywhere in the vicinity. Behind these prison walls, everything is solid brick and metal, no room for the prying eyes of rats. Despite this, every night when my mind wanders between the waking realm, and the world of sleep, I see them. Piles of greasy, furry bodies with sharp claws and fangs. Their eyes burn into the back of brain causing an itch I can not scratch no matter how hard I dig my nails into my skin. I found a way to end it though. If I tie my shirt around the bedpost, wrap it around my neck maybe then I can finally be free of them.

About the Author:

B.B. Blazkovicz is a horror fiction writer currently tied to a chair in an Antarctic research facility. A bearded man who smells of Scotch says one of us is assimilated. If you are reading this please send me transportation to your densest population centers.

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Emmelina Goes Trick-or-Treating | C.A. Yates

Emmelina smoothed down her costume and smiled at her reflection in the mirror. ‘A sexy doctor’ the packet had said, and like a sexy doctor she felt. She lifted the plastic stethoscope from where it dangled around her (suitably heaving, she thought) chest and twirled it like a burlesque dancer. Oh, yes. This was perfect. She felt *very* healing. Scooping up her pumpkin-shaped bucket, she turned to her friends.

“What do you think?” She gave them a twirl but neither responded. Emmelina pouted but resisted the urge to stamp her foot. Pushing her shoulders back, she raised her chin and smiled sweetly. “Well, I like it. Do you think I’ll get any candy?” Again she received no response. Emmelina could feel her temper slipping and she did not want to get angry, no she did not... but something had to be done. Good manners open doors while bad manners close them, that’s what Grandma Junebug had always said (although Emmelina had often wondered if her grandmother didn’t steal her epithets – a thought she had once voiced and still bore the scars from) and Emmelina agreed. She crossed the room to the large bucket of water, mostly filled with apples and only partly filled by a human head. Pulling the head, quite departed from its body, from the water, Emmelina looked it square in the face.

“I forgive you, Timothy, but this means you have to go back into the refrigerator with the rest of you. Just until you learn your lesson, you understand.” She paused for a response and this time she was sure he nodded. It was enough to lift her mood. “I’m going to let Leonard stay where he is for now to rest. He’s had a busy day, after all, and we don’t want to overtax him on his first day. Besides, I have an elsewhere to be.” She headed out of the room to the kitchen, leaving behind Leonard, who was unconscious and still strapped to the bed. The lower half of his naked body was a red and brown abstract expression of Emmelina’s earlier fury at his failure to find her attractive. She had forgiven him but the price had been heavy. His chest rose and fell very gently, life there, but barely. Footsteps in the corridor echoed through the otherwise empty room as Emmelina, humming a little season-appropriate Saint-Saëns to herself, headed out.

“Bye then, Leonard,” she called, perfectly cheery now as she left the house, pulling the front door shut behind her with a thud. It was not enough to wake Leonard. Nothing would be.

About the Author:

C.A. Yates has written lots of odd stories and poetry for the BFS Award winning press Fox Spirit Books, and her last story appeared in the Kristell Ink anthology *Hanging on by Our Fingertips*. She has also narrated for podcasts such as *Pseudopod*, *Cast of Wonders*, and *Star Ship Sofa*. Her old lady dog, Miss Maudie, sadly passed away earlier this year. She remains the evil genius we should all fear.

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...Forced to survive the night alone in the desert with an
aberration of nature...



Available for Purchase or Borrow Exclusively on
Amazon

With Dreams Come Nightmares | Bryan Kelly

As I close my eyes for bed,
Nightmares that infect my head;
Creatures lurking in the night,
Have they come to take my life?

Will I live to see tomorrow?
Or has my time just been borrowed?
Across the room I heard a creak.
I fear my chances may look bleak.

Chills flow through me as my head spins.
That's when I see its evil grin.
With one quick blow it cracks my bones,
While it's shrieking wicked tones.
It pulls my limbs off one by one.
Whispers to me, "I've just begun"

This will surely be my last.
With damnation coming fast.
It reaches down to snatch my head;
That's when I awoke in bed.

I strike a match for a flicker of light
Nothing around me, at least... not in sight.
Holding the match till the wood burns away,
"God protect me," I begged and I prayed.

Strange noises linger while I sleep.
Into my nightmares they do creep.
Now at night I lie awake.
Will my nightmares turn into my fate?

About the Author:

Bryan Kelly is old soul who has an affinity for the dark and mysterious. With interests such as drawing/painting, writing, and singing, Bryan tries to dabble in multiple artistic platforms. Step into his mind, but be weary, stay too long and you'll surely go mad.

Facebook: [Bryan Kelly](#)

It didn't matter how you counted it, she was still \$90 short of the rent, and two weeks late. Mr. Andropolos had been very understanding the first time: "That's all right, Katrin. Pay me when you can. I trust you," and a little less forgiving the second: "Well, Miss Savoy, I can give you until next Tuesday, but that's the best I can do," and downright surly this month: "If I don't have my rent by Friday, I must ask you to leave."

Katrin Savoy couldn't really blame him. She wasn't sure she would put up with her excuses either if their positions were reversed. It didn't matter that the explanations were true.

So what if things were in a slump at work? Who cared if she'd unexpectedly had to replace her paid-off jalopy with a new car and its requisite insurance, delivering a deathblow to her carefully projected monthly budget? Why should Mr. Andropolos suffer because she had been rushed to the emergency room for an unscheduled appendectomy that had eaten what little cushion had been left in the bottom of her savings account?

Katrin ran distracted fingers through her long blonde hair, wincing as she caught a tangle and accidentally yanked harder than she'd intended.

God—give me a break! she pleaded silently, but God wasn't picking up His messages.

"There's got to be something I can do," she muttered to herself, methodically searching each room of the apartment for any forgotten cash stash or portable, pawnable item that she hadn't already hocked. There wasn't much—two or three lousy CDs that nobody wanted, and a couple of broken gold chains.

What the hell am I going to do?

She didn't have the figure for exotic dancing, and she wasn't any good at poker. The start-up cost was too high for dealing drugs, and the threat of AIDS too terrifying to consider hooking, though she'd always privately thought getting paid for sex had a marvelous sound to it.

Katrin sank down onto the couch, drawing her knees up under her chin and hugging them miserably. *I'm just about at the end of my rope, hanging on by the tips of my fingers and dangling above a bottomless pit...*

It was clichéd, but she couldn't afford originality.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door, startling her to her feet in one jerky motion.

"Jesus, he said I had until Friday!"

She muttered under her breath, trying and discarding excuses as she made her way to the door—so sure it was Mr. Andropolos, she stammered awkwardly when it was a complete stranger framed in the doorway. "Uh, hello. I-I wasn't expecting... I mean I—may I help you?" she finally blurted out.

"Oh no. No, no, no," the little man smiled, raising a hand as if to stop her questions and shaking his head. "I am here to help *you*."

His voice was vaguely accented and his mannerisms reminded her of a young Roddy McDowell, but she couldn't remember which movie.

"Excuse me?" Katrin asked politely.

"Oh my, yes! I have come in answer to your prayers."

Katrin stared. "You mean..." She pointed upward with a dazed expression on her face. She couldn't quite bring herself to put the full question into words.

"No, no, my dear." Suddenly he wasn't so loveable Roddy McDowell anymore. With a broad grin, that showed an uncomfortable number of very sharp teeth, he pointed downward.

Katrin gulped. She had never been a big churchgoer, though she did have a nebulous belief in a Supreme Being, but Hell was another story entirely. She had no doubt whatsoever about the existence of Hell.

"I see," she murmured softly, the words catching like spider webs at the back of her throat. "Well, I really don't think—"

"Yes, yes," replied the demonic messenger. "That is precisely the point, my girl. You don't think, and so I have been assigned to do it for you. Aren't you going to invite me in?" he asked pointedly.

She hesitated. *Maybe demons are like vampires. If I don't let him in, maybe he will just go away and leave me alone.*

"Come, come, Miss Savoy. I do have other clients."

Katrin looked at the man's expensively tailored suit and custom leather briefcase. Demon or not, he definitely had money, and this was one time she was too desperate to worry about the risk. *If he's here to murder me, hey—at least I won't have to pay the rent.*

"Come on in," she sighed, stepping back from the doorway.

"Thank you." The messenger crossed the threshold with such a decisive movement Katrin decided she must be right about the need for an invitation.

What do you know, there's protocol even in Hell, she mused.

"Can I offer you anything, Mister...?" She trailed off, not having been given a name. This whole thing was rather outside her realm of hostess expertise.

"Mr. Iscariot will do."

"Like in the Bible?"

"You make one little mistake and it follows you through eternity." He was clearly upset by the reference.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply."

"Of course you did. Everyone does. No one wants to hear my side of it. But that's neither here nor there, my girl." He sat down on the edge of the couch and opened his briefcase, glancing through a stack of papers as he spread them on the coffee table. "You know, that grapefruit soda in the refrigerator would hit the spot quite nicely," he continued, looking up at her with a bright smile.

Katrin groaned inwardly. *I was saving that for a particularly lousy day. Those sodas always make me feel better, and they are hard to find these days. Trust him to pick the one thing that I wouldn't have freely offered. But hey, you can't deny a demonic messenger, now, can you?*

She fetched the soda and a glass and set them on the table beside his open briefcase, then sank down in the chair opposite the couch.

The demon took a sip and smacked his lips. "Ahh. Delicious! Thank you, my dear."

"Umm...you're welcome."

"Now, let's see what we can do about your little financial problem, shall we?" He scanned a document, frowning thoughtfully. "Hmm, I see." He flipped the page. "And...ah." A nod and another page flip. "Oh dear, dear, dear! We have been a naughty girl."

Katrin shifted uncomfortably. "I wouldn't say that. I—"

Iscariot shot her a steely glance and she flushed. "Well, I wouldn't," she mumbled. "Thoughtless maybe, but not naughty."

"All a question of semantics, pet," he soothed. "Well, I think I get the gist of it." He shuffled through his papers and slipped a form from the pile. "Here we are."

The demon placed the paper before her. "I am prepared to offer you \$30 million cash toward solving your problems."

"Do I get that in silver?" she mumbled, unable to resist.

"I heard that," Iscariot snarled. "It wasn't funny then, and it's still not funny."

"Sorry," Katrin apologized, face flaming scarlet.

"No one need know where the money came from and, in return, you pledge your eternal soul to the Master whenever he chooses to claim it."

"Now wait a minute," Katrin protested. "How do I know he won't claim it tomorrow? What's the good in getting the money just to have it taken back again like that?"

"Clever girl," beamed Iscariot. "You do have a point. You would be surprised how many clients miss

that one. We pick up quite a few quick returns that way. Let's see now..."

An elegant ballpoint pen appeared in his hand. "What do you feel would be a fair term length for the contract?"

Looking into the future from the safety of her twenty-five years, she chose a number that seemed like eternity to her. "Fifty years?"

"Excellent choice," he commended her, making a notation with his pen. "Enough time to have a full life but not long enough to get bored with it all."

Katrin began to relax. *He is really a very decent man. Maybe this whole thing isn't as bad as I've always been led to expect.*

"Oh!" she cried, as a thought hit her. "And put in there that 'I don't want to get old' thing. You know—the 'eternal youth' clause. I mean your boss doesn't want a decrepit old soul, does he?"

Iscariot nodded. "Very wise. You haven't done this before have you?" he teased her.

Katrin giggled despite herself as he made another revision. *Yeah, this isn't so bad at all. That fire and brimstone thing must be an exaggeration.*

"Now, is there anything else you can think of?" he asked politely.

Katrin shook her head.

"Fine. Here you are. If you could just sign there, and initial the changes." He indicated a dotted line with the tip of his pen.

Katrin picked up the contract.

"What are you doing?" he asked, suddenly flustered.

"Don't worry. I'm just reading over the contract."

"You don't need to do that!"

"I'll sign it, don't worry. But I want to see exactly what I'm...what does this 'suffer the torments of Hell' mean?"

"Oh, that's just contractual rhetoric. Nothing to worry your pretty little head about." He made a grab for the paper and she moved it out of his reach.

"I, Katrin Elaine Savoy do hereby render to His Satanic Majesty, Lucifer—no ego on this dude, is there?"

"Please, Miss Savoy!" Iscariot was clearly shocked.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. 'Do hereby render...blah, blah, blah...one soul to be collected in fifty years time. In return, I will receive the sum of thirty million dollars and the gift of eternal youth.' Sounds like a plan to me."

Katrin signed her name with a flourish.

Fifty years had seemed like an eternity to a twenty-five year old girl, but as the end of her contract grew inexorably nearer, Katrin began to have second thoughts. She was having far too much fun to meekly acquiesce to fulfilling her part of the bargain. Oh, she had no complaints about the way the Other Party had lived up to his; she had never aged another day, and—with a little careful finagling—had managed to conceal that fact from the rest of the world. But now, with slightly less than a year to go until the expected payoff, she spent every night poring over her copy of the contract, searching for a way out.

The thirty million dollars, conveniently explained away by the death of a non-existent aunt (*Oh yes, terribly sad. I was heartbroken. We were inseparable when I was a child*) had long since expanded into ten times that sum. She could easily return the money but, somehow, she didn't think that was an option.

What am I going to do?

The answer came to her one night, just days before the collection date, as she sat in the twilight shadows of Central Park brooding over the clauses of the contract indelibly etched into her brain. It was so simple she smiled to herself then started to chortle softly, and then guffaw out loud from sheer relief.

The pregnant girl with the desperate eyes sitting on the bench opposite her looked over in dull

surprise. It was the opening Katrin needed.

"When are you due?"

"In two weeks," the teenager replied, her voice as lifeless as her hair and eyes. The girl was no more than fourteen, all skin and bones except for her distended belly.

She looked hungry, and amenable. Katrin knew that look well.

"Would you join me for dinner?" Katrin asked, rising to her feet and holding out a hand. "I'd like to tell you a little story."

She had to give the child credit. The girl frowned and shook her head, drawing deeper into her thin jacket.

"I don't think so, ma'am."

"Would you do it for a thousand dollars?"

The girl gulped. "Are you crazy?"

"No, just rich." Katrin shrugged. She held out her hand again, but this time it contained a folded stack of bills. "What do you say?"

The girl looked at the bills in Katrin's hand. Her soul was in her eyes. Tentatively, she reached forward, drew her hand back, and then snatched the bills and stuffed them in her pocket. "Dinner. That's all."

"But, of course, dear," Katrin purred, slipping an arm around the girl's shoulder.

The expected knock came a few minutes earlier than Katrin had anticipated. She wasn't quite finished with her task.

"Just a minute!" she called out. "I'll be right there!"

This is harder than I expected, she grunted to herself, rocking the knife blade through a particularly tough bit. *Ah, there we go!* She reached inside the cavity and lifted out her prize.

The knock came again, more impatient in its tenor.

"I'm coming!" Swiping the damp hair from her forehead, Katrin left a smear of blood behind her hand.

She opened the front door. "Come in, Iscariot." She stepped back, expecting him to follow with the unconscious arrogance her money had bred into her.

Iscariot glanced at the bloody wreck on the living room floor and shook his head indulgently.

"Having a final bit of fun?"

"I don't think so," Katrin smirked, thrusting the squalling infant into his chest. "Here you go. Payment in full."

"What?" He clutched the baby automatically, face twisted in almost comical dismay. "Are you daft, girl? You signed a contract. You sold the Master your soul in exchange for a substantial amount of cash."

"Oh no, my friend. You are mistaken. Look at your copy of the contract. I promised your Master *a* soul. And there it is."

She pointed a gory hand at the tiny infant, slashed from its mother's womb. Her eyes glittered as she laughed the jittering laugh of one who has been to the edge of the Abyss and only come partway back. "Consider that \$30 million rent money."

About the Author:

Rie Sheridan Rose multitasks. Her short stories appear in numerous anthologies, including *On Fire*, *Hides the Dark Tower*, and *Killing It Softly* Vol. 1 and 2. She has authored twelve novels, six poetry chapbooks, and lyrics for dozens of songs. She tweets as @RieSheridanRose.

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It's a Mexican thing. You have to be Mexican to understand the mixture of sadness, joy and resignation we associate with death. We don't want to die, but we respect our relatives who have gone before us, we cherish them, they are not forgotten. The 2nd of November the *Día de los Muertos*. Not the Carnival, the colourful, exuberant, uninhibited celebration in February. Not Halloween, the childish western celebration. No, the Day of the Dead is older than that, thousands of years older, first celebrated by the pre-Columbians, and now in many Spanish-speaking countries. Here in Mexico it's a big event and when did us Latins need an excuse for a *fiesta*? Unfortunately, somebody has to keep a watch on the festivities and this year my number had come up.

The night-time streets were crowded with happy, slightly drunk people, perfect conditions for the predators, the pickpockets, con men; all sorts of criminal activity would be going on. I was in plain clothes as usual, following the crowd past the cemetery, the dead center of town. There they were, a typical gang of disaffected teenagers, hanging around the wrought-iron gates, climbing on the pillars, looking for weaklings in the herd, skateboards at the ready and mischief in mind. I was impressed by their costumes, but then the new digital fabrics make almost anything possible. They were dressed as skeletons, as was traditional, but they were very convincing. You could still tell the girl skeletons from the boy skeletons by the way they moved. They all left faint residual splashes of stardust as they walked, it was exquisite, ethereal, they were unusually quiet for that age group.

Some of the crowd were entering the cemetery, the men carrying the makings of the altars they would build on their loved one's graves, the women carrying food and drink for the deceased. They even had sugar toys for dead children. The majority were making their way to the Cathedral for the special Requiem Mass. There was a lot of singing and laughing, and noisemakers, bocina horns, football rattles. The 'Skeletons' *los esqueletos* pushed off into the crowd and I moved faster, trying to keep up with them. Some were skating, some boarding and the rest free running. Where do they get the energy?

They grabbed at people as they passed them, pulling and poking them, turning and taking liberties with women's breasts, licking people's faces. The Skeleton girls were cupping men between the legs, but people mainly ignored them, shrugged them off or brushed them away.

We arrived at the cathedral and I lost track of them, they'd gained on me. I hung around with the people standing at the back, smelling the incense and listening to the service.

Ah, there they were, hanging under the mezzanine floor, where the choir sat, or perched on top of marble statues. There were two on the altar mimicking the priest and crossing themselves, laughing and shouting to each other, although I couldn't hear them over the ambient noise. Two more were pretending to copulate on the altar, while the priest ignored them and chanted his way through the Mass, calling out the prayers, waiting for the responses. The Skeletons meantime were drinking the communion wine, toasting each other's health, pulling skeletal faces at the congregation.

Two of them, one taller than the other, walked up the aisle hand in hand and stopped at the altar rail. A third, wearing a black biretta on his head, seemed to be performing a wedding ceremony. The boy skeleton placed a ring on his partner's finger and the rest of the gang applauded enthusiastically. Again, I couldn't hear them, the choir were singing a hymn, and the congregation were joining in. The mass ended and people stood and gathered their belongings. The Skeletons were off again, running, leaping, skating, boarding down the aisle and out through the main doors. It was lucky they didn't knock anybody over. I followed but they soon outdistanced me again. The crowd moved on towards the plaza but the Skeletons had headed back towards the cemetery, against the flow. I made my way as fast as I could, showing my badge and easing people out of the way. The Skeletons were

already there when I arrived. Most of them were climbing on the gates or sitting on the gate piers, kicking their heels. Just the two who were newly 'married' walked up to the gates, still hand in hand, moving slowly, looking into each other's eyes. *Es muy romantico*, I might have allowed myself a few tears if I hadn't been on duty.

They stopped before entering the graveyard, and seemed to speak in sign language, their hands animated, shedding whorls and streaks of stardust as they 'spoke'. The boy took the girl's hands, and they stood silently, while the rest of the gang dispersed over the wall and through the paths between the graves. They kissed and held each other for a long time then turned and walked in. I followed them along the path as the boy led the girl to a grave decorated with sugar skulls, sweet bread, and flowers. After a few moments he dropped her hand, kissed her forehead, turned and walked away. She stood watching him as head lowered, he walked towards a more elaborate grave about twenty meters away. As he reached it and paused for a moment looking at its decorated altar I looked back, but the girl was gone, so was the boy as I returned my gaze. He must have slipped behind the polished marble stonework.

I walked over to read the inscription, and suddenly remembered. It had been about ten years ago, while I was still in uniform, driving a black and white, a motorcycle accident, the two riders killed. He was from a well-to-do family and thus the Harley Davidson. Too much, too soon. It had been big news at the time. His name was Martin Riley, his father owned several golf courses outside the city. She was Estella something, not exactly trailer trash but definitely from the wrong side of the tracks.

I walked to a bench some distance away and sat thinking about my report, it was routine really, nothing untoward, no damage, no crime, no accidents. Just the usual youthful high spirits, and now the excitement was over for another year. I lit up a cigarette and stared at the grave ahead of me, the headstone read, 'Police Lieutenant Arthur Rodriguez, hero of the state, shot in the line of duty'. There was an altar with a sugar gun and holster, a sugar police badge and a blaze of orange marigolds decorating it.

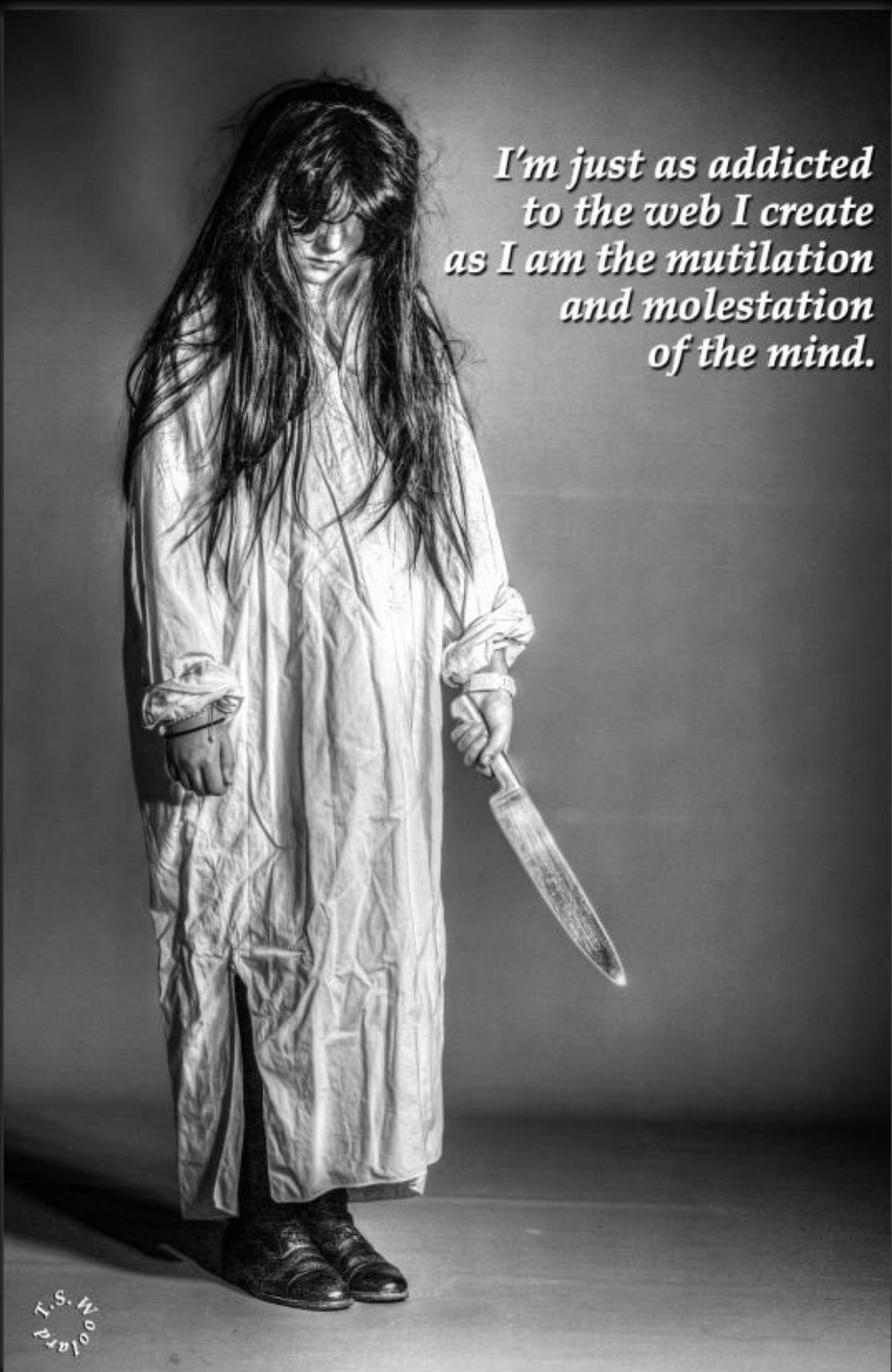
The Sun edged over the horizon, its early, near horizontal rays probed the cemetery, highlighting the altars festooned with colourful, pierced paper decorations, now blowing across the paths. Feral dogs, tramps and bag ladies were already eating the sugar skulls, sweet breads and piles of tortillas left on the graves for the occupants. Crows hopped as close as they dared and picked at the discarded food.

A homeless man picked up a half-smoked cigarette from where it lay on the ground near the empty bench, he took a grateful pull. A last swirl of stardust lingered, but the sun was too bright for him to notice.

About the Author:

Roger Ley was born and educated in London. He worked as an engineer in the oilfields of North Africa and the North Sea, before joining the nuclear industry and later pursuing a career in higher education. His stories and articles have appeared in about a dozen ezines this year. His book 'Chronoscape' is a well-received science fiction novel about time and alternate realities.

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*I'm just as addicted
to the web I create
as I am the mutilation
and molestation
of the mind.*

T.S. Noland

Melissa picked up the candy bowl and gave it a shake. About half the treats were left, which was a good thing. The trick-or-treaters were out in force tonight, since the weather was so good. It had turned out to be one of those crisp fall nights that made Melissa glad they had moved from Arizona to the Midwest.

The doorbell rang and she went to answer it. As she pulled the door open, a little girl cried out, "Trick or treat!" Melissa pretended to be frightened, jumping and giving a little scream.

"Oh my gosh! Are you a real zombie? I'm scared of zombies!" she said. The little zombie giggled.

"No, Mommy, it's me!" her daughter, Hannah, said. "I'm back from trickier feeding."

Hannah's husband, Gavin, smiled at his wife, over their four-year-old daughter's blond head.

"Yeah, Mommy, we trickier feeded all up and down the street," he said. "We're ready to come home. But you need to give us a treat."

Hannah held up her orange plastic pumpkin. "Fill it up, Mom!"

Melissa grabbed a fistful of the snack-sized Snickers bars and dropped them into Hannah's bucket. "How's that?"

Hannah grinned. "Yay! Best I got all night! Thank you, Mommy!"

Melissa bent down and gave her daughter a hug. "Okay, come on in, you two."

She shut the door after them. Hannah kicked off her tiny shoes after putting her pumpkin on the coffee table.

"Mom, can I have a piece of candy now?"

Gavin stepped forward. "Not quite yet. Daddy needs to check out your candy first, see which ones he wants."

He snatched the candy bucket up, making Hannah giggle. The little girl jumped in the air trying to grab her bucket back. "Daddy! No fair, that's my candy!"

Melissa laughed. "Daddy will take one piece, then the rest is yours. That's his fee for walking you around the neighborhood."

Hannah smiled sweetly at her dad. "Okay, that's fair. But you can take only one piece, Daddy. I'm watching you!"

Gavin laughed. He was actually checking the candy for tampering, something he hated to do, but he felt was necessary. He knew it was an urban legend that crazy people tampered with Halloween candy, but this was his daughter, and he couldn't take that risk. So he was sorting through Skittles and M&Ms, looking for what? Razor blades? He felt like a fool.

"All done!" He put the bucket back on the coffee table. Hannah cocked her head. "You didn't take a piece. Did you forget?"

"Yes, yes, I forgot. Silly me!" He grabbed a pack of Skittles and waved them in the air. "Oh, ho! My favorites!"

Hannah rolled her eyes. "I have lots more, Daddy." She turned to her mother. "Can I have some now, Mom?"

Melissa nodded. "One piece. Then it's time for your pajamas. After we take off that zombie makeup. You don't want green all over your pillow."

She smiled and Hannah laughed and shrugged. "It could be kinda cool, Mom."

Melissa shook her head. "No way, dude!"

Hannah laughed again and put her hands into the orange bucket and started digging around.

"I'm going to hit the shower," Gavin said, after kissing Melissa. "Be right back."

The bell rang again and Melissa passed out more candy. When she turned back from the door, Hannah was holding a small piece of white paper in her hand, her forehead wrinkled, as if she were trying to read it.

"What's that, buttercup?"

Hannah shrugged and handed the paper to her mother. "It was in my bucket, but it's not candy."

Melissa took the slip of paper. It felt like copy paper, not waxy paper from a piece of soft candy or slick plastic from hard candy. She turned it over and saw four words written in capital letters. "Can I come play?"

She turned the paper over, but the other side was blank. The lettering was in blue ink, neat and regular, not like that of a child.

"Hannah, do you remember where you got this?"

Hannah shrugged. "Nope. I thought I only got candy. Maybe it was the big kid?"

Melissa frowned. "What big kid?"

"Oh, this big kid. He picked up my bucket when I dropped it."

Melissa smiled at her daughter, who had chocolate smeared around her mouth, on top of the zombie green makeup.

Gavin entered the living room, wearing pajamas and with his hair wet from the shower. "So, what did you choose, zombie girl?"

"M&Ms, of course!" Hannah shouted, pumping her tiny fist in the air.

Her parents laughed. Yes, Halloween had been a success. Melissa remembered the note from Hannah's candy bucket.

"Gav, did you notice this when you were picking out your candy?"

Gavin frowned at the note. "No. Was it in the bucket? Or in her pocket or what?"

"In her bucket. She found it."

Gavin squatted down next to Hannah. "Do you remember who gave you the note, sweetie?"

Hannah shook her head. She was done with the candy. She yawned and rubbed her eye with her fist.

"You getting tired?" Melissa asked. "Let's go wash your face."

Hannah nodded and followed her mother into the bathroom. Once they were gone, Gavin searched through the candy bucket again. He didn't find anything but candy. *Weird. Who gives a kid a note like that?*

Melissa had tucked Hannah in and was back in the living room when the doorbell rang. She scooped up the candy bowl and opened the door to three kids dressed in regular clothes instead of costumes. One was a couple inches taller than Hannah, the other two looked like they might be fifth or sixth graders.

"Hi!" she said. "What are you supposed to be?"

They wore hoodies and dark pants. She couldn't see their faces clearly but they carried plastic grocery bags with a few pieces of candy in them.

She waited for them to say trick or treat but they stood quietly.

"Well, guys, the rule is you have to say trick or treat!" She grinned at them. They didn't look at her face. The smallest one finally spoke. "Can we come inside?"

Melissa looked around her yard for an adult. They seemed to be alone. Were they lost?

"Well, I don't think that's a good idea," she said. "Where are your parents?"

The middle child spoke up. "We need to come inside."

Melissa looked more closely at them. Under the dim porch light, she could see tears in the knees of their jeans and frayed edges on the sleeves of their hoodies. *I should let them in. They probably need the bathroom.*

The tallest child stepped forward. "We need to call our parents. They need to pick us up."

Melissa stepped back without thinking, leaving the door slightly ajar. The smallest child, she thought it was a girl, began to squeeze through and into the house.

"No, no, I'm sorry," she said quickly. Melissa gave the girl a soft push and closed the screen. "Where do you live?"

The middle one said "We need to come in. Can we come play with your little girl?"

Ice formed in Melissa's stomach. How did they know Hannah? She pulled the screen door firmly shut.

"No, you can't come in."

The tallest one, a boy, judging by his voice, put his hand on the handle of the door. Melissa quickly slid the lock on. He jiggled the handle anyway.

"We really need to call our parents," he said, his voice suddenly louder.

Melissa realized she was frightened of these children. She stepped back from the door.

"Gavin! Come here!"

The kids pressed forward, leaning against the glass. Melissa tried to see their faces, but their heads were still tilted downward.

"What's going on?" Gavin asked.

Melissa waved vaguely at the door. "These kids, they won't go on. They want to come in. They asked for Hannah."

Gavin took Melissa's hand and pulled her behind him so he could be closer to the door. "What do you want, now? Is something wrong?"

The oldest boy rattled the door handle again. "We need to come in. We need to call our parents."

The littlest one looked up at Gavin. Melissa heard him gasp sharply. "I want to play with Hannah."

"Who are you? How do you know Hannah?"

The other children looked into Gavin's face. "We need to come inside."

He stumbled backwards, nearly knocking into Melissa. He slammed the heavy inside door shut and locked both the doorknob and the deadbolt.

He pulled Melissa away from the door. "Holy shit!"

Gavin turned toward his wife. "Did you see their eyes?"

"No, they kept their heads down. They're so strange."

Gavin said, "Wait a minute." He raced to the front window and pulled the drapes back. He jerked back, and then Melissa saw him clench his fist at his side. "Damn it."

"What did they do?"

He let the drapes fall shut. "They're gone. They were just standing on the lawn, looking at our house. Another bigger kid was with them. Just after I looked out, a car pulled up and they got in. They're gone now."

Melissa shook her head. "How weird. How did they know Hannah?"

Gavin sat on the couch and dumped out Hannah's candy again. He sorted through it carefully. He dumped it back in the bucket. "I'm throwing this all away. We'll buy her new candy."

Melissa took the bucket into the kitchen and dumped it in the trash. She put it in the sink and turned on the water. She filled it with hot water and dish soap and scrubbed it. After putting it on the draining board to dry, she went back to Gavin in the living room. He was standing looking out the window again.

"They're not back, are they?"

He turned toward her. "No, hon, they're gone."

She walked to him and they hugged. "That was so strange, Gav."

He nodded. "Did you see their eyes?"

She looked up at him. "You already asked me that. What are you talking about?"

"Mel, those kids, their eyes were black."

She shrugged. Maybe they were just dark brown and in the dark they looked black."

He shook his head impatiently. "No, not the iris. I mean their entire eye was black. The whites of their eyes were black!"

Melissa shook her head. "That's not possible."

"I didn't think so, either, but I swear to God, hon, those kids' eyes were completely black." He still looked pale. Melissa gave him a little shake.

"Come on, Gavin, they're just bratty kids, trying to prank us. It's probably some sort of trick, the black eyes."

She suddenly remembered Hannah mentioning a 'big kid' who helped her pick up her candy bucket.

"Gavin, do you remember a bigger kid helping Hanna when she dropped her candy bucket?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I was chatting with Paul Carver up the hill, we were at their house, and Hannah dropped the bucket, it didn't even spill. Some kid picked it up and handed it to her. She thanked him like a little lady."

He thought for a minute. "Shit. He was wearing a hoodie, just like those kids. He could have slipped that note in her bucket!"

Melissa put her hands over her mouth.

"He probably heard me call her Hannah," Gavin said. He ran his hands through his hair.

"Do you think we should call the police," Melissa asked.

Gavin chewed his lip as he thought it over. "No, what can they do? Some kids acted creepy. I don't know who they were, we can't even describe them."

Melissa shivered. "Little jerks."

Gavin agreed. They put away their leftover candy and decided to watch television until bedtime. Melissa told herself she would start watching her daughter more carefully. Gavin considered a security system.

Outside their front window, three children watched them through a gap in the drapes.

"They'll let us in next time," the youngest one said. "I know they will."

About the Author:

Lori Safranek previously worked as a small-town newspaper reporter. She is fascinated by serial killers, mysteries and freak shows. She resides in Omaha, Nebraska, with her husband, Chuck, and two dogs, Scout and Arthur.

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Mary Roberts | Linda Imbler

Mary Roberts, are you alive?
I thought you were twitching.
Living eyes shifting and darting
as you study the room,
but you're made with skin of plastic,
your traveling cannot be.
You can only stay in one place.
Your eyes in that face cannot see.

Mary Roberts, are you alive?
I'm sure you were twitching.
Showing much more wrist than before,
hands stretched from the gingham,
fingers pulling on the stitching.
If your arms could rise much further,
just what could those hands do?
What is that lying on the floor?

Mary Roberts, you *are* alive!
I just watched you twitching.
Feet moving inside pretty shoes,
and those legs, if they moved,
could they possibly be creeping?
Warm liquid now on floorboard seeping.
Now prone, I hear feet being shuffled.
Now prone, I hear breath being muffled.
How did you get from there to here?

Josephine | Linda Imbler

Kiss Josephine's cheek
and smooth her hair
so she won't be afraid.
Yes, Mother.
Now,
tell her goodbye.
Yes, Mother.
The casket shut.
We drove home.
Josephine, I love you.

About the Author:

Linda Imbler is the author of the published poetry collections "Big Questions, Little Sleep," "Lost and Found," and "The Sea's Secret Song."

Her new e-book "Pairings" will be released soon from Soma Publishing. She is a Kansas-based Pushcart Prize Nominee and two-time Best of the Net nominee.

Her work has been published in numerous national and international journals.

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The kid cranked Morgan's key round and round, drawing her limbs in tight. He released her. She batted her polymer clay glass eyes and toddled forward in small steps. "I'm hungry," she said through a fixed resin pout. "Do you love me? Let's play." The kid kicked her onto her back and laughed at her useless legs bobbing up and down. Then he ran off to the next aisle before someone caught him playing with dolls.

Morgan's mechanical action wound down and she stunted to a halt. Morgan knew she wasn't one of the cool dolls. She wasn't an adolescent Barbie with shoes and cars and boyfriends. She wasn't a soft baby doll a child could cradle and love. Morgan was at a weird hybrid age that didn't exist, her face a disconcerting mix of infantile and sexy. Worse, she was a floor sample, never allowed to rest in her box, able only to dream of leaving the store. She would never be someone's favorite toy. She would never get out of the mall.

Empty storefronts stared across the corridor. The mall had grown deserted over the past few months. Morgan was already marked down, and the scarce shoppers didn't want a used doll with so many new left on the shelves. Morgan expected to rot away in the store, though not quickly since she was synthetic and built to withstand the inadvertent abuse of clumsy children. She'd last a long time, forever hungry, forever wanting to play, forever wishing to embody the love she was made to receive.

When a temporary Halloween store moved in next door, Morgan heard strange noises like nothing she had ever imagined. Screeches, howls and moans: things that should have terrified Morgan enticed her. The pinkness of her child-centered world seemed washed out in comparison with the thrill of red sounds leeching through the drywall. Morgan listened, and her dreams darkened.

In the night after the mall was closed, when the muzak was mute and the sound effects of the Halloween store were laid to rest, one special voice reached out for her. It was more of a need than a voice. It didn't speak to Morgan in words, but in images.

Morgan's dreams went from pink to red, and the redness was juicy and smelly and spurted all over the walls. Morgan understood removable parts for dolls: the voice showed her how parts were different when you removed them from people. Heads and limbs and liquid silky redness gave Morgan a more lascivious love than her thirst for a surrogate mother had ever envisioned. The voice said love and death were the same. *Come here and I'll show you.* Morgan practiced winding her own key and taking bigger steps. She made the journey further each night. She longed for the day she would embrace her lover and dwell in the strong arms of the salacious voice.

Morgan luxuriated in the Halloween store's screams until the mall shut down a few weeks later. Inventory was sold, scrapped or looted, and Morgan was left behind with the worst of the detritus. The roof corroded. Water leaked. Morgan worried her lover might annul his promise when he saw her ruined hair. She took heart that he was at least still here. She felt his need speaking to her and she ached for him as she inched her way closer each day. If only her foreshortened limbs allowed more fluid movement. But she was broken and stiff, a toy not worth stealing.

Fed on the images from her lover's voice, Morgan braved the bare aisles and collapsing displays. Urban explorers haunted the mall, a constant threat to her progress. One day a group of them tossed Morgan into a derelict penny fountain full of brown water to take her picture. They grinned and called her Dollface and said she stank. Morgan stayed quiet and didn't fight back. She was small and didn't even bend at the elbows or knees. She knew she didn't have a chance.

When the marauders were gone, the voice of her lover flashed like a sign. Together they might seek revenge. Morgan sloshed from the dirty water, happy for the first time in her life that she didn't run on batteries, glad to feel the tightening and loosening of her mechanical limbs. As she dried, her internal action gained force. The Halloween store came closer. She slipped underneath the metal gate.

When Morgan found her lover, she thought she'd made a mistake.

She saw a hockey mask with a cracked chin. It lay silent. Morgan looked around the store for anything else that might hold the voice of her true love. There was nothing. Green crepe witches, rat-gnawed plastic pitchforks and stale scattered candy promised none of the delights she'd labored so long to attain.

Morgan looked into the eyeholes of the hockey mask. They were empty. She nudged it with her foot. It rocked in place. Morgan's too-wide eyes didn't have the capacity to cry. Emotion burned her from inside. The pain in her chest resonated with her lover's silence, and Morgan wondered if he might be shy. Unable to bend at the waist, Morgan used her toe to flip the mask over and turn the concave side face up. No protest came, no images sang. Morgan backed up and mentally measured the angle and distance. Then she threw herself down face-forward, crashing her head into the hockey mask, inverting her nose and dislodging one of her eyes.

Flat on the floor and disfigured, Morgan had few words and none that fit. She wailed the only phrases her makers allowed. "I'm hungry! Do you love me! Let's play!"

The recording was uncouth and ragged. The mechanism was shot. Designed with nothing less absurd to express intense emotion, Morgan giggled. The warped sound of her decaying device echoed through the mall, and Morgan didn't care anymore who heard her and came to kick her and toss her around. *Let them listen. Let them come. Let them learn what they have created and tortured and killed. I'll kill you all if I get the chance.*

Morgan exhausted her voice box. The device inside her died. She rolled over to reach a place where she might be trampled to death and set free from a world with no love left for her.

Accustomed to rolling like a ridiculous pink log, Morgan was shocked by a terrifying flexibility in her joints, as if her body was flying apart. Inside the mask she saw black. It didn't fall off. The mask moved with Morgan and melded to her face. Her punctured nose fit perfectly into the shallow cavity of the mask's nub. Her un-socketed eye stayed in place from the firm pressure of the disguise. In the blackness of the mask, Morgan's eyes filled with the blood-drenched promises that had courted her and brought her inside of it. She became rabid with scenes of sordid delight, swimming in a realm of red: red passion, red love, red death. Morgan reveled in the new sensations flooding her body and explored the full range of movement afforded by her supple human limbs. She sat up. She stood. She grew tall and strong and fluid.

Somewhere inside Morgan's mind, an idea formed. Two ideas: two minds, two lovers with one goal.

She tested the strength of her hands with their mobile fingers and individual elastic joints. She picked up a twisted piece of metal and felt the power of muscles that defied the pull of its weight. Morgan hurled the metal far and savored the crash. Then she heard the sound of tires spitting gravel across the parking lot.

A truck pulled up. A batch of urban explorers arrived to invade and plunder. Morgan picked up another piece of metal. This one had nails sticking out of the end. Morgan strode across the mall. She waited behind shattered sliding glass doors to greet her guests. Morgan's voice box was broken but her lover sang from inside the shared hockey mask. *Do you love me? I'm hungry. Let's play!*

About the Author:

Author Joanna Koch writes literary horror and surrealist trash. Her short stories have been published in journals such as *Sanitarium* and *Dark Fuse*, and in several anthologies including the new Halloween anthology *Doorbells at Dusk* which has been called the "best Halloween collection of the year." Joanna lives and works near Detroit.

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Sleeping Oaks | Myk Pilgrim

This had always been a peaceful neighborhood. We spent our silent nights resting, lying side by side the frigid chill wrapped us like a blanket. Then he came bringing the unrest with him. The screams were faint at first; a minor annoyance. But when the ground took him, his high-pitched pleading spread through the moist dirt like toxic earthworms. We listened to the whisper of the shovels as they replaced the dirt. The soft hiss as soil covered the pine box while he banged his knuckles bloody within. I hushed him at first, even reached out to try to put him at ease. But some folks have to do things in their own time. He'll learn to relax soon enough.

Sheet Ghost | Myk Pilgrim

The diminutive sheet ghost stood on the street corner at the edge of Sleeping Oaks cemetery.

"Hey, you fat shit!" Billy Jones had never been one for subtlety, especially in front of his numerous cronies.

"Leave me alone, or you will regret it."

The high-pitched voice didn't match the beach-ball girth beneath the ragged filthy sheet.

Billy stuck an arm under the sheet bent on twisting the child's nose, but there was no nose. Instead his hand slipped into a wet frigid maw. Jaws clamped down around his forearm, Billy's world disintegrated into the sound of crunching bones.

It Stands | Myk Pilgrim

The room is bright, and sweet, and warm, but I know that will change the moment I turn off my bedside lamp.

Lying there, eyes balled tight as crumpled paper, I can feel it standing at the end of my bed. Every night it watches me in the dark.

I grit my teeth and roll onto my side, frustration transforming my temples into concrete blocks. Sliding my hand under the pillow, I find a moment's distraction in the sensation of the cool underside.

My mind begins to wander. I picture walking barefoot over frost coated grass. Crisp air bites at my nose, my cheeks aching, each breath a billowing fog.

A thump at the end of the bed snaps me back into the terrifying present. Again, I'm cowering; useless blanket pulled tight over my head. I feel it watching, but tonight, something is different. Something that makes the skin on my legs crawl like ravenous cockroaches.

The thing at the end of the bed moves. My insides transform into a bucket of writhing eels. It looms over me. The mattress springs groan compressing under the weight of its impossible body.

My juddering fingers scramble for the light switch, but the thing snatches my ankles and drags me down the bed. All I know is the prickly heft of its frigid body crushing me and the tang of its squalid breath. If there is another sound over my heartbeat, I can't hear it.

Hand desperately grappling for the lamp, I snag the power cord and jerk it into reach.

Light floods the room, and I am alone.

Hands locked around my saviour lamp, I sit for a year of minutes; frantic pupils scanning the corners of the room. I don't know when the pain wakes me from my torpor, but it does. I pull back the covers, jagged cuts encircle my ankles like I've been snared by razor wire. Pink ribbons of ripped skin dangle free; seeping crimson lines onto the sheets.

I know one thing — I will never turn off a light again.

About the Author:

Myk Pilgrim is a horror writer, or at least that's what he likes to tell people. He lives in a tiny village just north of the wall, where he spends his time, sharing cappuccinos with his inner demons, binge watching bad horror movies, shaving his head, annoying the locals, and generally just counting down the days until Halloween. Also, sometimes, he writes stuff.

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Salome | Helen Mihajlovic

A wild drumming filled the banquet hall; the sound grew louder as a black-haired young woman, with a touch of cruelty in her eyes, danced with the spirit of a tempest. She fiercely spun, her arms circling in a spiral by her sides and her dress rose to join them, exposing the curves of her legs.

The soles of the dancer's feet were covered in dirt and she wore a well-worn olive colored dress, its hem stained with mire. She jumped onto a table filled with chalices, kicking them out of her way. They fell with a crash, wine spilling onto the floor. The banquet guests gasped and her mother, Herodias, sat on the throne next to her husband with a look of disgust.

The thunderous stomp of her feet preceded the swaying of her head at the drum's maddening tempo; her skin ablaze as the music intoxicated her. She jumped down to the mosaic floor and in the corner of her eye she saw Herod wearing his crown, his regal robe embellished with a myriad of gems. His eyes held a lustful gaze. Herodias sat by his side with a crown on her long narrow head and a scowl at the corner of her cruel lips.

The dancer descended, slithering along the cold floor towards Herod's throne.

Herod leaned his stout frame forward as she moved closer. As the music's tempo slowed, then ceased, she tossed down her hair, sprawling her curls on the floor.

When she raised her head, a trace of resentment crossed her face as she looked into Herod's fixed stare. Her chest heaved as she caught her breath; she wiped her moist face and stood. A soldier whispered in Herod's ear. Herod looked at the dancer, beads of perspiration rolling down his forehead and cursed. He was being called away on an urgent matter relating to a man that was gathering large crowds not far from the palace.

"Salome!" called Herodias. "It is obligatory that you come to the banquet this evening."

"I will be at the lake," said Salome.

Herodias knitted her crooked brows.

"Herodias!" shouted an elderly woman across the hall. "Salome has grown to look akin to you when you were seventeen." She glanced at Salome and smiled. Salome gnashed her teeth.

"Perhaps that is why Herod is captivated by her," replied Herodias.

Salome screwed up her nose as she heard their laughter. She walked towards a fountain for a drink. A little boy running through the banquet hall collided with Salome and fell to the ground screaming; Salome rolled her eyes and continued to make her way to the fountain. While she satiated her thirst, her mother's voice struck her ears.

"She has grown to be a savage. Her behavior is shameful," said Herodias. "She pushes children without a care."

"She will change when she is a mother," said the woman who sat by her side. "Salome would rather rear serpents than children," said Herodias.

Salome looked at her mother, she hid a stab of sadness with a scowl.

Salome's bare feet trod on the cracked dirt, her soles burning as she walked to the dark green waters of a lake. She found it peculiar that this secluded lake was now surrounded by a crowd that were spellbound by a man. She could not see who they were looking at.

"I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness," his deep voice shouted.

A stifling wind blew through the crowds. As the heat became insufferable, an elderly woman collapsed in front of Salome. A few women near her rushed to her side, taking the old woman away from the tightness of the crowd. As they left, Salome took their position and was finally able to see him.

She raised her eyes to his tall stature; he had a narrow nose and brooding eyes with dark brows. She gazed with pleasure at his sculpted form, modestly covered with a cloth wrapped around his hips. The sun shone on his hair, accentuating the red tinge through his coarse curls. Salome moved closer.

"Make way, the new path comes," he said as he dipped a woman into the water.

Two of Herod's soldiers arrived on horseback, stopped briefly to watch the man and the growing crowds, then rode off. A young woman nearby let out a loud sigh. She appeared mesmerised by the man's every word, hoping he would save her soul. Salome's blood pulsed with jealousy.

"Is that John the Baptist?" asked Salome.

"It is him," replied the young woman, her attention still on the Baptist. "Have you come to be baptized?"

Salome shook her head. The young woman screwed up her face in confusion.

The intense sunlight was making Salome feel light-headed as she had been there the whole afternoon. She ran to seek shelter under a tree, not far from the lake. Towards dusk, she watched the crowds diminish and the Baptist who stared at her with intrigue.

That night, Salome furtively followed the Baptist to his dwelling. Hidden under night's dark cloak, she watched him enter through a decrepit front door. She walked around the back, found the door open and crept inside. Following the sound of his footsteps she found his bedchamber.

She undid the lace of her dress and it fell to the ground. Salome walked into a candlelit room. The Baptist lay on a bed, gazing out the window, deep in thought. There was a slight start in his eyes when he became aware that she was standing near him naked. He quickly stood up.

His eyes darted over her velvety skin, her bare navel. She could see his struggle not to look any further.

"Who are you?"

"Salome."

A cold sweat appeared on his forehead. "Herod's step-daughter?"

She nodded.

"You must leave!" He grabbed a blanket from his bed and covered her naked body, grasping her elbow and leading her out the door. She seized his hand with a strength that left marks on his fingers when she released him. She threw away the blanket and was once again naked. She watched his expression change: his breath deepened, his frown softened. His eyes revealed his inner battle, but he could no longer resist; his gaze wandered to her legs and his eyes drank in all the pleasure of her bare skin. He finally turned his head away and stood still for a moment in his torment. Seeing her dress on the floor, he picked it up and threw it at her.

"I want you to love me," she said.

"I will never love you."

Salome's eyes narrowed, her lips compressed; an inward torture assailed her and a deep anger spawned as she left.

The torches lit the vestibule with a delicate shade of gold as Salome walked through a giant archway in the palace. The loud tread of Herodias' footsteps drew near, her garnet coloured gown swept the floor and her forehead was always creased in anger.

"Salome, where have you been hiding?" asked Herodias.

Salome was silent; she looked away from her mother.

"Herod would like you to dance for him at the banquet this evening."

She raised her head with a glare. "I hate the way he looks at me when I dance." Her nails dug into her palm.

"He is your father! You must obey him."

"Stepfather!" she screeched. "He doesn't look at me like I am his daughter."

Herodias screwed up her long pointy nose, "Herod is like most men his age, he grieves for the loss of his youth. He recaptures it through you."

"What does he want from me?"

A look of concern crossed her mother's face.

"I will not dance for him again!"

Herodias shook her head. Salome turned to walk away, but Herodias grabbed her arm. "I have not seen you at the palace for several nights. Where have you been?"

"By the lake," said Salome, jerking her arm from her mother's grip.

"Where the crowds gather for the Baptist?" said Herodias, in a furious tone. "That mad man!"

"Why do you hate him?"

"He condemned my marriage to Herod. He tarnished my name."

"Perhaps his God does not approve of you leaving my father, to marry his brother," Salome's nails dug deeper into her palm.

Herodias face grew red with rage. "If I could ask Herod for one thing," she said with a sinister look in her eye, "I would ask for the Baptist's head on a platter."

A chill ran over Salome's entire flesh and she momentarily froze. When she finally stirred, she hissed at her mother before leaving her.

Several nights of loneliness passed before Salome yielded to temptation. She went to the Baptist's dwelling, entered through the back door and once again walked into a silent house. She found the Baptist in his bed tranquilly asleep. For a while, she sat at the edge of his bed and watched him sleeping. Then she crawled to him until her legs entwined with his.

His head writhed on his pillow, as if he was dreaming of something fearsome. She slowly laid a kiss on his bare chest, savoring the sweet taste of his skin. She moved closer; her mouth hovered over his and touched his full red lips, his breath heavy in sleep. She kissed him and to her surprise he returned her kiss; but she knew it was only because he slept and perhaps thought it was part of a dream.

She tightened her torso on his, but as their bodies began to meld, he woke. His eyes opened and she could see his need for her on his face and feel it on his body. But the longer he was awake, the more his thoughts brought forth reality and his countenance filled with anger. He pushed her away and she fell to the floor. He quickly stood up.

"Why do you resist me?" she asked, rising from the floor, her eyes lingering on his naked body. "Your God created this passion I have for you."

"If I see you again, it will lead to my demise. Don't come here again!"

She ran to him and hugged him, held him ardently against his will. He pulled her arms from his body. His rejection was ensued by her rage; she violently dug her nails deeply into his neck and scratched him until he bled. He shrieked in pain and dragged her out of the dwelling. She ran home in despair.

Salome's head pounded, her body weary as she walked past the groves of olive trees towards a canal. She heard loud breathing behind her and realised someone had followed her. She froze. A familiar hand traced the side of her neck to her shoulder. Feeling invaded, she bit the hand that touched her; digging her teeth deep until he bled. He screeched in agony, quickly pulling his hand away. When she turned around, Herod wiped the blood from the wound. His face filled with anger. But, his countenance weakened as he looked upon her raven curls and large dark eyes.

"Will you dance for me tonight?" he implored.

She shook her head. "I do not dance anymore."

"I have a gift for you." He took a bag from a pocket in his robe. "Perhaps this will inspire you to dance," he handed it to her.

Salome peered inside the bag. She took out a golden necklace that shone in her hand. Her fingers teasingly played with the necklace, she felt a pleasure in torturing him with the delay in her response. "I will not dance."

He grew impatient. "If you dance for me again, I will give you whatever you desire."

Salome was filled with curiosity. "Are there boundaries to what you will give me?"

"I will give you half of my kingdom if you ask for it," he said with desperation in his voice.

She looked at his lascivious stare. "No, I will not dance for you." She threw the necklace back at him.

He pursed his lips, "In time there will be something you desire," he said. "Then you *will* dance for me and I will provide whatever you wish."

She grimaced as she watched him head back to the palace.

Each day grew colder and the rain grew heavier, but Salome had not missed a night of haunting the Baptist's dwelling. She hid at the back of the dwelling and waited for a glimpse of him through his chamber's window. Every so often her eyes widened when his shadow flitted against the walls.

As the rain grew lighter, Salome heard a faint chatter of voices inside. She heard the soft voice of a woman. But the curtains were drawn and she could not see inside.

She followed the voices with growing agitation and soon heard the front door creaking open. Salome's blood raced as she listened to a woman's sweet voice speaking joyfully of her baby's baptism and the patter of her feet as she braved the cold to return home.

Salome's countenance grew wild with fury, shrieking loudly enough for the Baptist to hear. She tugged at her hair and entered into a spiral of anxiousness that became out of control, she felt her descent into madness. At the sound of the Baptist's footsteps, she released her hair. He stood before her. Salome breathed in deeply as his stare grew livid.

"What are you doing here?" he said. "You're not wanted here."

"Who is she?" Salome's voice quivered, as hints of the woman's perfume remained in the air.

His silence brought forth her temper as she assumed the Baptist was in love with another woman. She ran to him and pounded her fists on his chest where his heart lay. He pushed her away, she slid in the mud and fell. When he walked inside and slammed the door shut, she finally realized that he did not care for her and never would. An evil desire grew in her mind and she coveted a grave harm that could befall the Baptist.

Salome was unable to sleep for many nights. She wandered the white marble palace while everyone slept. She spent hours gazing at the frescos on the wall while the aroma of the day's feast lingered in the air. She could almost hear the wild drumming that accompanied each banquet.

She walked to the palace tower and watched as the red hue of dawn filled the sky.

Each time she thought of the woman's sweet voice at the Baptist's dwelling, she was overcome with a feeling of betrayal and an uncontrollable wrath anew. She was convinced he had chosen the woman over her.

"Salome," echoed Herod's mighty voice, from just inside the palace.

She dreaded his lewd behavior but steeled herself and poked her head from around the white marble column. Herod strode from the arched doorway carrying a bag in his hand. Salome looked at it curiously.

"It is a gift," he said as his portly hand passed it to her.

She opened the bag and peered inside. The bag held a shimmering delicate material, decorated with precious stones. It was so soft it slid in her hands when she touched it. She took out seven veils. Her breath quickened as she stood still, deep in thought.

"Would you like me to wear the veils when I dance?"

"Yes," he said, eagerly.

"And you will give me anything I ask for when I have finished the dance?"

He nodded.

"Then I shall dance tonight," she said, with a calculating countenance.

Salome's coiled hair flew as she danced into the banquet hall towards Herod's golden throne. She felt Herod's lustful stare penetrating the elaborate veils that concealed her body.

As Salome removed the first veil, revealing a mad look in her eyes, she saw Herod dart Herodias an anxious glance. Salome's feet struck the ground with each feverish note and she violently swayed her hips to the beat of the drumming. With a swing of her arm she pulled away the veils that covered her lithe neck and shoulders.

She looked where Herod sat, but he was no longer there, she had drifted into a fancy where the Baptist's face replaced Herod's. Gazing fervently at the red tinge in the Baptist's hair, she pulled away the veil that hid her enticing navel. The Baptist's face filled with a strong desire akin to his first sighting of her bare flesh.

The stormy tempo of the drumming possessed her as she removed the veils from both her breasts. She triumphantly watched the Baptist's eyes yield to her. Salome dropped her final veil to the ground. With a start she realized it was Herod that was before her. She stood still in front of him, naked, her hair resting on her slender shoulders and her small breasts. Herod's eyes traced the curve of her hip down to the hair that modestly concealed her. Salome lifted her head in time to see Herodias shoot Herod a peeved stare.

"I want the head of John the Baptist," Salome said shaking.

Herodias' look of disapproval suddenly changed to one of pleasure.

Salome's face was bloodless as she waited in her chamber for Herod to satisfy her wish. There was unease about her as she nervously scratched and fidgeted her limbs. She had been awake all night and dawn was soon to break.

She stood still, head cocked, as someone came down the hallway. Her heart pounded when a slave walked in carrying a platter. He stood before her for a moment and with a slight bow, lifted the lid and presented the decapitated head. She stared at it in disbelief.

"It is not him," she pointed angrily. "That is not the head of the Baptist!" But as she looked closer she noticed the red tinge through his hair. Her eyes filled with tears.

The slave laid the platter on the table. "It is the head of John the Baptist," he confirmed. "Queen Herodias had me place it on a platter." He removed a small bag from his pocket; it looked like one of the bags that Herod always filled with gifts. It was covered with blood and when he emptied the bag, something bloody fell to the ground. "And this is his heart," he said. "Herod said it is a gift." At her startled impression, the slave left the chamber.

Salome crouched on the floor, grasping the heart. "I just wanted you to love me," she said. She laid kisses on his heart, her lips covered in his blood. Her tears fell warm on his cold lifeless heart. She glanced back at his head. His eyes were closed. She looked at the full lips she had kissed. But when she imagined other women kissing those lips, anger rose inside her. She dropped the heart to the ground. She felt a wicked delight as she looked at his decapitated head.

"Now you are mine." She smiled with gratification.

About the Author:

Helen Mihajlovic is a published author. Her short story 'A Dark Love story' is in the book '100 Doors to Madness' available at Amazon. Other published stories are 'A Sinister Nature' and 'The Temptation of Eve'. All stories are dedicated to her mother and brother. She is grateful for a good editor Louise Zedda-Sampson and proofreader Roger Smith. Salome is dedicated to James my muse.



the wild bird | Linda M. Crate

he wanted
control
the upper hand, the last laugh;
he wanted to put her
in her place—

little did he know
she was the one that would
put him in his final
resting place,

and it wasn't hard;
he expected to be waited
on hand-and-foot
never to have to put a finger out
of place—

she gave him a cup of tea,
and he drank it slowly down
to see at the bottom the cup said;
"if you're reading this you've
been poisoned"

he laughed
thinking it was a joke
until suddenly he was choking on
his own blood—

she smiled sweetly at him
as he looked at her in horror and dismay,
"i told you i was a wild bird, you'd never cage me."

About the Author:

Linda M. Crate's works have been published in various anthologies and magazines both online and in print. She is a two-time push cart nominee with five published books of poetry and a microchap. She also is the author of *Phoenix Tears* (Czykmate Books, June 2018).

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THUMP, THUMP, THUMP | Charles Gramlich

November in the Ozark Mountains. Beneath a sky full of pregnant rain clouds, I hunted deer up and down the hills. Mostly I wished I'd stayed home in bed, hugging my pillow instead of lugging a Remington 30.06 through the damp woods.

Earlier, I'd tried sitting in my deer stand, but even in a hat, gloves, heavy coat and work boots, it was still frigid. Walking kept me warm, and I'd never been the most patient hunter anyway.

The cold kept the bugs away but the rustle of squirrels accompanied me. An occasional bird called. Deer tracks were plentiful; deer were absent. I found a hollow log torn open by a bear searching for grubs. I hoped he'd had better luck in his hunt than I had in mine, but since his scent lingered I hurried on rather than chance a face to face meeting.

Sometimes, hiking in the wilds takes on a momentum of its own. I ventured a long way from my truck into an area of the forest I'd never hunted. Birds and squirrels disappeared. Occasional showers pattered the woods, growing in frequency and intensity. The sky seemed ready to birth a downpour. That threat kept my eyes open for shelter.

The trees thinned. I came out on the edge of a rough meadow. The field's rectangular shape told me that it wasn't natural. Across the field stood the remnants of a house. The chimney looked in good shape. Otherwise, only partial walls and a piece of beaten-up roof remained.

Boomers of thunder rumbled. The biggest rain shower yet came thrashing over the field. I waited it out, then decided to check the ruin for a dry place to cower in the face of the coming toad-strangler.

Trotting across the field, I stumbled over ridges of once-cultivated earth. Such were a sign of old-time cotton planting. I couldn't imagine anyone had gotten very big yields from this bitter, mountainous soil. Leaning fence poles marked the cabin's front yard. An open well near the house endangered local wildlife; the stench suggested that it had already claimed victims.

The empty frame of the front door still stood, embedded in a cement porch slab. The porch provided no cover from the weather. More promising was a corner section of the house that looked relatively intact. Two partial walls butted against each other at right angles, with a sagging section of roof over them. I snuck beneath that roof just as the next shower hit.

The rain intensified suddenly, as it often does in Arkansas once the year's dry spells are over. The walls rattled; leaks poured through the threadbare roof. I found the driest place I could and sat down to practice patience. I wasn't going anywhere soon.

Lulled by the rain, and warm in my coat after my exertions, I slept. It was dark when I awoke. Instead of the expected damp and musty smell, my nostrils detected oil and leather. That wasn't right. I was lying on something soft, too, which gave under me as I sat up. How? I'd fallen asleep on a hard floor.

A door creaked opened. Light filtered in.

A voice said: "Honey, dinner's ready."

Twisting around, I found myself on a couch in a dim room where filled bookshelves lined the walls. A woman stood silhouetted in an open doorway at one side of the room, hair glinting in light refracted from behind her.

"What?" I asked, completely bewildered.

"Dinner," the woman repeated.

More light spilled in as she pushed the door wider. She was young, with a bright, clean face—terribly lovely. A smile claimed that she knew me well; the thought came that this was my wife.

"Well, come on," she said. "Before it gets cold."

Obediently, I rose and followed the woman as she walked away. Just beyond the door lay a small, intimate dining room. Old-fashioned kerosene lamps illuminated it. The soft light painted shine and glitter over crystal goblets and silver serving dishes.

The woman drifted to a chair, seated herself. Another place was laid across from her. I sat there. I studied...my wife. Her brunette hair was long and wavy, entwined with autumn strands of red. Her eyes were soft, dark, wide. She wore a vintage lace dress of white and gold that looked sweet as silk against her cinnamon skin.

Picking up a wine glass already filled with dark burgundy, she gestured for me to do the same. We touched glasses over the table. She drank. I drank. The wine was wet but had no taste. My wife laughed. I couldn't understand what was funny.

Her laughter cooled. "Are you all right?" she asked.

I took a breath. "I..." started, but could only finish with, "just tired, I guess."

She stood up, leaned across the table. "Something to eat will help." She lifted lids on a few serving containers, spooned morsels onto my plate. I scarcely noticed them as more than brown lumps against the porcelain.

"Your favorite," she said, smiling.

A fork rested beside my right hand. I speared a bite of food and put it in my mouth, chewed, swallowed. More bites followed. My 'favorite' had no flavor and little more than a mushy texture. But the woman—my wife—was looking at me with love.

"You like it?" she asked.

I nodded. "Delicious."

A soft sound filtered to me from above: thump, thump, thump.

I glanced up, frowning. There must be a room above this one, and something moving there. My wife had drawn back from me, her face shadowed. It gave her features a frightened cast. But surely that was ridiculous.

"What was that?" I asked, concerned more by her expression than by the sound.

She shook her head. "Nothing. I'll take care of it. You eat."

Rising, she moved quickly toward a set of wooden stairs that I hadn't noticed before. She disappeared up them, one hand on the railing, one holding up the skirt of her shimmering dress. A few long moments passed. I drank another swallow of wine but did not touch the food.

My wife returned, seated herself and smiled. I chewed my lip. She'd grown older. Her hair was less lustrous, her face slightly gaunt. Youth's roundness had faded. I would have sworn before that she was no more than twenty-one. Now I'd guess her to be in her late twenties, near my own age.

"Everything okay?" I asked.

She tossed her head. "Fine. Eat. I spent *ages* preparing tonight's meal."

I relaxed. I ate, drank more wine from a glass that never emptied. We resumed our conversation, though I could not say what we talked about. She looked at me with such love. She hung on my every word. Her smile made me happy.

Thump, Thump, THUMP.

I jerked at the sound. So did she. A droplet of her wine spilled, falling red in the glow, splashing on the tablecloth in front of her. I stood up, took two steps toward the stairs. Suddenly, my wife was standing next to me. Her hands grasped mine.

"It's nothing," she said. "I'll take care of it."

She pulled me back toward my chair, pushed me down. Her lips were cool and soft as moth wings when she kissed my forehead.

"I'll be right back," she said, and left me.

I sat cold at the table. Again, my wife was gone for only a few moments, but this time her smile seemed more strained when she returned. She sat but would not meet my gaze. I understood why.

She'd altered again. Her hair had shortened and coarsened. Her lips had thinned. Perhaps she'd taken off her makeup and lipstick, but would she have trimmed her hair? And her eyes! One of her brown ones had turned hazel, like mine.

Colored contacts, I thought. *But why just one?*

She picked up her wine, drank. I drank too, then stabbed up a bite of food but left it hanging on the fork.

"Something's wrong," I said.

She shook her head vigorously, hair flying. "No! Everything is right. Just right."

A smile lit her up, bringing color back into what had become a wan face. She began to chatter, about anything and everything. It was a forced gaiety that I could not share. I waited.

Thump, THUMP, THUMP!

I lurched to my feet, rushed toward the stairs. My wife called, wildly. I ignored her. I reached the first step, took a second. A hand clenched on my arm, clenched with incredible, almost painful strength.

"No, No, No! Let me. It's nothing!"

I paused, looked down. My wife's face was so earnest, her eyes so intense.

"Please," she begged.

I couldn't fight that look or that plea. My shoulders slumped. I nodded. She led me back to the table, urged me into my seat. She turned and went up the stairs, her back bent as if with immense labor.

She was gone longer this time, and when she seated herself across from me again, her gaze flared into mine, challenging me to remark upon what I saw. Her features were not...stable. They flickered, shifting like overlapping frames of film. Now I saw a younger woman, now an older one. Her hair grew shorter, then longer. Plush lips hardened and cracked. Her irises swirled with greens and golds and blacks.

I wanted to close my eyes; I couldn't. I wanted to say something; I couldn't. We sat still, without words, looking nowhere else but at each other. For the first time I heard a clock ticking in the house. It ticked and ticked—loud, incessant, but not as loud as the sound that I knew was coming.

The ceiling boomed.

THUMP, THUMP, THUMP!

Dust rained down.

I leaped to my feet, ran for the stairs. My wife grabbed my arm, her fingers digging like claws. I shook her off; I would not be denied. She screamed at me.

"No! Don't go up there! Don't!"

Then I couldn't hear her anymore, or feel her near me as I hurtled up the stairs. I reached a landing. A narrow hallway lay in front of me, no more than a dozen steps long. There was only one door ahead, its white paint cracked and graying.

I grabbed the doorknob, twisted it. Nothing. Throwing my shoulder against it, I forced it open with a screech of wood on wood. The door gave suddenly and I stumbled inside. The room was dark, but with a brownish stain to the blackness that suggested light seeping in from somewhere. Movement fluttered, like wings, or maybe a curtain blowing in a breeze. But no curtain would move so steadily *toward* me.

The cold, wet mouth of fear nuzzled my neck. I took a step back, and another. The movement continued, coming toward me, speeding up. I backed away, found myself once more in the hall outside the room. The light there daggered my eyes. The movement kept coming.

I backed all the way to the edge of the stairs. For a moment, a roil of dust filled the doorway to the room. It dissipated as something flitted past me, and through me. I couldn't see it; I only felt it—like a quick flush of heat from a furnace. Left behind on the floor of the hallway lay a discarded blanket. It was small, as if meant for a baby. Vermillion snowflakes spattered it. They looked like blood.

"I told you not to come up here," a voice said behind me. "I begged you! I didn't want this."

I jumped, spun around. My wife stood on the stairs below me. But only for a moment. Her features flickered, then stabilized. I was looking at myself—not the real me but something wearing my clothes and carrying my rifle.

"No!" I said.

I reached out. *My arm!* It was covered in the sleeve of a dress so yellow and brittle that it flaked into dust as I moved. A thin hand extended from the lace, the fingers curled into talons. I couldn't seem to breathe. I panted. A smell of mildew and putrefaction clung to me like a mist.

"No!" I said again.

The thing that had taken my form and given me hers turned and started down the stairs.

"Wait!" I cried.

The figure spoke without looking back: "It's all right. Someone will come. Eventually. You did."

Words slipped into my head that didn't seem to be mine, like dialogue in a play where I'd been cast as an actor. I had to speak them: "Don't leave me. I need you. I *love* you."

The retreating figure gave a violent shudder. Its body blurred, shimmered, then reformed. Venting a low moan, the thing that looked like me suddenly broke into a staggering run down the stairs. I leaped after it, screaming.

"Wait, wait, wait!"

We reached the bottom of the stairs, turned onto the porch. A screen door barred our way. The figure smashed it open, fled through. I clawed at its back, stumbled into the yard. Empty space opened beneath my feet. I flung out my arms, crashed downward. I tried to twist my body while falling but hit with one arm outstretched. It snapped like a termite-raddled branch. Agony shot through me; breath exploded away.

Consciousness dimmed but did not go out. Full awareness returned. I lay on my back—in the muck of the open well. It stank. Gray-shot darkness surrounded me but far overhead a circle of blue sky shone. The rain had stopped. The clouds had cleared.

That blue sky, that blue heaven. I wanted it. I prayed for it. I reached. A whisper turned my head. Meat still clung to some of the bones that were piled everywhere—the bones of rabbits, coyotes, deer. They were not what had whispered.

A skeleton dressed in bare tatters of rotted lace leaned against the stone wall of the well. Caged within the bones of the woman's pelvis were other bones, tiny, fragile. A skull smaller than a fist gazed at me with eye sockets as black as gun barrels.

My stomach heaved; my abdomen churned. Crying out, I grabbed my belly. It bulged. Something kicked from inside.

Thump, Thump, Thump.

About the Author:

Charles Gramlich writes from the piney woods of Louisiana. He has authored the Talera fantasy series, the thriller *Cold in the Light*, and the SF novel *Under the Ember Star*. His stories have been collected in, *Bitter Steel*, *Midnight in Rosary*, and *In the Language of Scorpions*. His books are available at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Wildside Press.

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Playing Dead | Brian Rosenberger

The children, the little ones and those that are too old for dress up,
But still pretending, running wild, chasing after the Moon,
Impersonating Devils, Ghosts, Pirates, Politicians,
No limit to their imaginations.
From house to house, in packs, filling their bags with candy.
But if you look close, if you pay attention, there's always one –
Clown, Skeleton, Witch, Scarecrow or wearing some other face,
A solitary shadow beneath a lone streetlight that has no interest in candy.
Not playing dead just pretending to be alive.
Beware the knock on your door.

Halloween's Over | Brian Rosenberger

Flashlight is dead.
Streetlight turned black.
What happened to the Moon?
Only Night, only Shadows.
No Treats. Just one Trick.
Hello Darkness.
Good luck getting home.

The Carving | Brian Rosenberger

As the knife descended,
Ready to slice,
She screamed,
"I'm not a pumpkin."

The Pumpkin People | Brian Rosenberger

They smashed our pumpkins. Did a good job of it.
The remains littered our porches, our driveways, our lawns.
A mess. Orange rotting guts. Everywhere.
Wasted hours, carving art.
Tradition. No respect for tradition these days.
Sad is what it is.
Thank goodness for security cameras.
Tonight our knives are sharpened.
We don't plan on carving pumpkins.

About the Author:

Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, Ga and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of As the Worm Turns and three poetry collection.

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Oh, I do Like to Be Beside the Seaside | Alyson Faye

"Used tombstone for sale." The ad drew her eye.

"Here read this, Luke." Roxie's red painted fingernail jabbed at the newspaper.

Luke was gobbling his fish and chips, before the marauding gangs of gulls located him, huddling in the bus shelter and watching the rain pelt down.

It was the third day of their Halloween mini holiday at the British seaside town of Bridlington. It had been advertized as a 'fun filled few days hanging with the ghouls and the ghosts of the town' with attractions such as the 'Bridlington Ghost Walk' and 'Charon's Ferry Ride' which turned out to be a boat ride around the harbor at midnight, with no hot coffee and a biting wind nipping at them.

They had managed an inadvertent re-enactment of the famous scene from Hitchcock's film 'The Birds', when Roxie had waved her second doughnut above her head and a flurry of adventurous seagulls attacked her, sending her into hysterics. Though when Luke filmed it and uploaded it onto YouTube titled as 'Home made horror - 'The Birds at Brid'. she'd gone mental with him.

The trip had seemed such a good idea back in the summer, especially with them both working extra shifts to save for a deposit on a flat. He and Roxie hadn't seen much of each other. Now though, Luke couldn't wait to get home to Leeds. Roxie had done nothing but sulk, moan and eat since they'd arrived. Why couldn't she just enjoy herself? He was trying hard enough to have fun. He watched her forcing more chips between her pink glossy lips.

"I'm going to ring up about it," she announced, screwing up her chip wrapper.

Luke eyeballed the nearest, cheekiest gull, who losing the staring match, flapped away. Around them stoic couples huddled under umbrellas, swaddled in macs and plastic rain hats. The wailing sounds of the pier's ghost train blared out; not a soul was aboard. Nor was there anyone on the Bumper Cars or the Vertical Elevator. Place was a ghost town. Even the ghouls had legged it.

Roxie was tapping her iPhone, eyes narrowed, chin stuck out. Luke recognised that look. He sighed.

"Hiya? I'm interested in buying the tombstone in the ad. Yeah. Right."

She'd put on her posh, phone voice, he noticed.

"OK, yes – 15 Havelock Street. We'll be round soonish."

She rang off and turned beaming to face Luke.

"It's a bargain at a fiver. Said to come straight over."

Luke gazed at her nonplussed. "You're kidding, love? What are you going to use a tombstone for?"

Roxie shrugged, her eyes blank and her hair dripping round her face. "Garden ornament?"

"We rent a terrace with a yard!"

Roxie was teetering along the pier in her high heels, with her raincoat clinging to her. Behind her something thin and gray slithered. Luke blinked hard.

It's just the dirty rain water running down the drains, he thought.

They took half an hour to find 15 Havelock Street – a thin sliver of a house tucked away amid a nest of others. Every other home on their route had a lit pumpkin in the window or fake ghouls peering out, except for Number 15. It appeared derelict and genuinely creepy.

"Hardly 'Ideal Home' material," Luke joked.

Roxie ignored him and knocked on the front door. She'd barely spoken on the walk over. The door opened a crack; one eye and a portion of cheek appeared. One was bloodshot, the other gray and dirty.

"What do yer want?"

Roxie hesitated, "We've come about the ad."

"Show us the fiver." A bony hand wriggled through the gap.

Roxie flashed the fiver, but dangled it too far away from the grasping fingers.

"Ok then. You'd better come in."

Luke didn't want to go in. His gut feeling told him no. Roxie stepped forward and he had to follow her. Even if she could be a moody mare he loved her.

"It's in here." The woman was wizened, scrawny and unkempt.

She pushed open the door to the front room and there propped against the unlit fireplace was the gray, granite tombstone of the newspaper ad; the room's sole item, dominating a space bereft of any furniture or decoration. There were marks scratched on the stone, worn and illegible.

"Looks old," said Luke.

Roxie stood transfixed, staring wide-eyed at the stone. She walked across the grimy linoleum to touch the granite with gentle probing fingers, whispering under her breath and shaking her head. Luke didn't know what was wrong with her.

"It's a good 'un," announced the lady of the house.

"We'll take it," Roxie stated firmly. Luke couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

"Hang on a minute, love. How are we going to move it?"

"Well very, very carefully and with respect." Roxie replied. She didn't have a smile on her face either.

Upstairs something thudded on the bare boards. No carpets in this house. The old woman jerked her head upwards.

She looked rattled, Luke thought. Why?

"Better hurry and take it then."

The sounds grew louder and more forceful. Luke realized something or someone was dragging themselves across the room. Stop, thud, shuffle, slither. Stop, thud, shuffle.

"Shouldn't you go and help them?" he asked.

The woman looked amazed. "Why in blazes would I do that? He don't need my help, not now any roads."

Roxie was stroking the stone. Tuned out. "Grab one end, Luke."

Luke bent and did as Roxie said. The tombstone was not as heavy as he'd guesstimated but he sensed his lower lumbar crack.

A low moaning cry could be heard coming from upstairs. When they lifted the tombstone, a furor of bugs scurried from underneath, fleeing for the darkest corners. Luke nearly dropped the tombstone on his toes when he spotted them.

"Um Mrs – er are you sure he or she is ok, upstairs?" He nodded towards the ceiling.

The woman turned her tiny monkey face towards him and he shuddered at her toothless gape. *Hadn't she been to a dentist in her life?*

"Best keep moving lad, if you know what's good for yer."

Roxie was laboring as he'd never seen before, edging along the narrow hallway, sweating whilst heading for the doorway. Luke wanted to rest and peek up the stairs. He sensed a presence on the top landing and he could hear a wheezing hiss, like a balloon deflating.

"Don't stop, Luke!" Roxie said. "Keep going."

Above them came a thump, a rustle and the sound of a foot hitting the top wooden stair board.

"Nearly there. Hurry!" The old woman urged them on.

Roxie reversed out the open front door, chipping the woodwork but keeping her grip on the stone's edges. Whatever was descending the stairs was halfway down. Luke could smell fresh earth as if the garden had been dug. Confused he looked down at the stone paving flags in the front yard of number 15. No signs of digging, no signs of a garden come to that. The old woman urged them on like they were pack horses.

As soon as his heel was over the threshold, the crone slammed the door on him. While Luke paused for breath, he heard the sound of long finger nails raking the wooden door before an eldritch screech pealed out. The door bulged outwards but held fast. Behind it he heard the woman mutter, "Get back!" to something or someone.

Luke and Roxie slumped on the nearby pavement gasping, both shiny with sweat. They cuddled the tombstone between them; a granite baby they wanted to adopt.

"Wonderful Halloween this is turning into!" Luke couldn't help himself.

Roxie, white-faced, eyes wet, hissed, "I had to have it. Look it's got my name on it."

Luke followed her pointing finger. He didn't understand what she meant. He made out scrawls and faint markings where once years ago letters had been.

Roxie shook her head, her makeup had rubbed away. She looked both younger and older in the street lighting. Luke felt his stomach flip flop with love.

"Don't mess with me. Can't you see? It says – 'Roxanne Stewart - born 16 September 198 - taken too soon from us - 29 October 20--'"

They stared at each other, confused and anxious. Behind their backs the house stood silent once again and seemingly uninhabited. Neither of them wanted to knock and ask the old crone for answers.

"Are you sure, Roxie?" Luke asked and Roxie began to cry, with great heaving sobs which shook her body.

They sat huddled holding hands, encased in their own thoughts. Luke kept remembering the sound of stumbling feet and the smell of fresh earth. Who had been upstairs? Or what?

Looking at his distraught girlfriend, he came to a decision, "We've gotta get shut of it, Roxie. It's cursed I reckon."

"What do you mean?" Roxie looked shattered, her skin waxy and stretched thin.

She's just tired, that's all.

"We need a churchyard so we can hide it amongst the other graves." He Googled the nearest church on his iPhone.

The trip to St. James' was long and tiring. They part carried, part dragged the stone, making numerous rest stops. On the way they passed gaggles of tiny ghouls, vampires and the odd pitch fork carrying devil. They were all carrying plastic pumpkin buckets overflowing with sweets. The spooks crossed the street to avoid Roxie and Luke. He didn't blame them. The parents muttered, "Aren't you a bit too old for Halloween?" or "Grow up, Frankie and Mrs. Dracula."

Any other night of the year we'd be arrested, Luke thought. He longed for the flashing blue siren to come and rescue him, but no such luck.

Between them they manhandled the tombstone through the long grasses of St. James' graveyard and wedged it face down in a corner, leaving it lying on its own. Isolated. Roxie cried non-stop. Luke had to peel her hands off the granite surface.

His girlfriend was on the point of collapse; her nails chipped and broken, her tights laddered and she was limping. Luke held her up on the walk back and hauled her into bed in the chintzy room at the B&B, just before dawn.

He half noticed a thin gray shape slither through the doorway after them, reminding Luke of the greyhounds his Dad betted on. When he blinked again the attenuated shadow had vanished and in the end his tiredness won. He let sleep smother him. Roxie was out cold already, snoring heavily and whimpering.

Hours later when he woke, the clock said 2pm and the rain was jack-hammering the streets of Bridlington. He stretched and kicked out, the aches in his joints reminding him of the physical labor he'd done the night before.

Roxie was a hump under the flowery duvet. He stretched out his hand, but froze in mid-gesture. He felt a chill coming from her body. Tugging off the duvet he saw her lying on her side. Her skin blanched to the color of candle wax and a gray caulk was cradling her body. Luke's screams brought the landlady to his door. The holiday was officially over.

About the Author:

Alyson lives in the UK. Her dark fiction appears in 'Women in Horror Annual 2', 'Stories from Stone' and on line at zeroflash/Tubeflash/Horror Scribes, Coffin Bell Journal 1.4, Ellipsis 2, and The Horror Tree. She has a short story in DeadCades, the latest horror anthology from the Infernal Clock.

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Matthews picked up the small pile of logs he'd just chopped, wincing slightly as a splinter lodged in his right hand. Despite his years living as a recluse in a dilapidated cottage deep in the woods, where he'd spent hours of each day performing such rough, manual tasks, the splinters always managed to find a soft spot amongst the hard skin and callouses. He walked back into the cottage, kicked the wooden door shut behind him, and threw the logs onto a small pile at the side of the fireplace. Then, carefully, using his penknife, he gouged out the splinter, causing a tiny bead of blood to appear on the surface of the punctured skin. It felt sore, but was more of an annoyance than a painful suffering. He wiped the blood across the filthy material of his shirt.

Walking towards the grimy window next to the door he peered outside. It was quiet now after the dreadful cacophony he'd been forced to suffer just as dawn had broken, a row which had lasted for a full hour, rising in its frenzied volume. It sounded like the screams and cries of souls in torment that had departed this world but had no spiritual place to travel to, trapped in a perpetual limbo. The sounds of his conscience in the form of dozens and dozens of hacking and baying corvids whose nerve-shattering, hellish music had risen to a crescendo of taunting accusation. He knew that the row would recommence, just not exactly when.

They had taunted him every day for the five years he'd lived in the woods. It was his ongoing punishment, he reasoned, from which there was no escape; for whichever route he took through the woods, towards whatever compass point, he would always end up back where he started. He'd been unable to leave the cottage since the day of his arrival; what he had hoped would be a refuge had become his prison.

The magpies were the worst, and certainly the most voluble. They perched high up in the branches of the oak and sycamore trees opposite his cottage and bobbed their heads up and down as they let rip with their harsh, blood-curdling screeching that cut through his nerves like a scalpel through diseased tissue. They were often joined by crows, rooks and ravens, who put aside any natural territorial disputes they might have and joined in the roaring wave of noise. He had to suffer in silence and despair, awaiting the time when it would cease and dreading the time it would all start up again. Weary now after his exertions, he sat down in the only chair he possessed and closed his eyes, soon falling into a heavy sleep.

"There is no need to leave your window open (I have often observed how force of habit compels you to do this.) I can fly through glass; I can pass through any man-made obstruction. After years of waiting for us to come to you, I am here for you at last. I am your servant, my destiny cannot be denied. As yours cannot. I am an emissary from the dark world, a kingmaker.

"To crown a king one needs a suitable monarch-elect. You, Matthews, are what we have been searching for, we anticipated your arrival eagerly. The fate of the dark world is at stake without a suitable monarch. Apologies for the melodrama but we had to be certain; I'm sure you understand.

"Matthews, you are suitably corrupt. You have committed murder (three counts, unless there are any we have missed?) You also embezzled money from the charity you worked for. Need I go on? Perhaps the homeless vagrants you have beaten up on several occasions should also be mentioned. We appreciate your propensity for meaningless violence, fuelled by that greatest of evil influences, alcohol. Praise be to the demon liquid.

"Your list of crimes is impressive. To have evaded your human laws and gone unpunished, and not being hidebound by morality reassures us that we have made the right choice!

"As you sleep I will settle upon your head and make your coronation crown from the black feathers of my wings, anoint you monarch of the dark world with the blood that will leak from a beak-gashed wound I will inflict upon my own skin. It will heal. This is a necessary sacrifice. With my blood I will pay homage to your greatness. Hail to thee, master of the night. Hail to thee, ruler of the world of everlasting evil that will banish light forever."

He awoke suddenly, feeling dazed and disorientated as he regained his conscious state. A nightmare...he'd had the worst fucking nightmare of his life. One of the corvids had visited him; had it been a

crow? It had crowned him king of the 'dark world'...what the hell was that? His rapid breathing was returning to a slower, more even rhythm and he breathed deeply, regaining his composure. It had just been a bad dream, nothing more. He stood and walked towards the door as the gray light of evening was giving way to the full darkness of night. *Fresh air*, he thought; *what I need is some fresh air*.

He stood on the threshold of the cottage, surveying the branches of the trees before him. He could make out their forms even in the failing light; dozens upon dozens of corvids, watching him, seemingly waiting for him, but in total silence. Not a single sound. It was then that he felt an itching sensation on top of his head; something had been placed there. He reached up and pulled off...

A crown, made of feathers the color of the darkest night.

The birds suddenly erupted into a deafening chorus: "*Hail! Hail! Hail the new king!*"

About the Author:

Dave Ludford is a writer of dark and horror fiction from Nuneaton, England. His short story collection 'A Place Of Skulls and Other Tales' is available from Parallel Universe Publications or via Amazon. This is his third appearance in *The Sirens Call* e-zine.

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Muse-iam | Lori M. Myers

Glenda stood in an unlit corner, watching me, her lips painted red, lids covered with thick black swirl. I smelled her perfume, heard the swish of her cloak, felt her obsession in my own as I walked from one exhibit to another, a collection of my work which, for years, I'd buried deep in backyard dirt or inside garbage bags festering at the landfill.

I owed this all to her. Her idea, her creation, my delight in seeing my prizes so beautifully displayed; some behind glass, others cordoned off by red ropes linked to shiny ball top stanchions. One, exhibit 6B, the foot of that screaming bank teller, my nicks and slices so perfectly perpendicular. The next, exhibit 7A, a torso torn from all it was born with, now a fleshy island nailed discreetly onto a slanted board covered in Japanese silk. She'd been an executive on a business trip and got lost in my part of town. Exhibit 7B, my first man. I made sure he was small and slender, easier to restrain him that way, his disembodied head now rested atop a milliner's pedestal.

I gazed back at Glenda, perplexed, not recognizing (or maybe forgetting all about) exhibit 8A, two arms – one from wrist to shoulder, another only to the elbow, resting on brushed velvet, still dripping blood into a crystal bowl. A recent triumph. Certainly, the most gorgeous display in the room. Glenda came out from the shadows, smiled at me, her aqua eyes catching the light, her trailing voile headdress covering her missing limbs.

About the Author:

Lori M. Myers is an award-winning writer, Pushcart Prize nominee, and Broadway World Award nominee of creative nonfiction, fiction, and plays. Her work has been published in more than 45 national and regional magazines, journals, and anthologies, and is the author of *CrawlspacE And Other Stories of Dark Fiction and Horror*. Lori is an adjunct professor of writing and literature and resides in New York.

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A pumpkin. She's a high school freshman, and her social studies project is to carve a freaking pumpkin.

Elaine hunches her shoulders into the wind. She should have been home from school half an hour ago, and her black zip-up hoodie is far too warm for Tennessee in mid-October, but she doesn't care about either. She hadn't asked her dad to take a job in this backwater and uproot her from everything, and the weather matches her mood perfectly: seething. Her teacher, Mrs. Leventhal, had described it as a 'lighthearted' project to take the class into fall break, but to Elaine it's a stupid idea, made more ridiculous by how desperately she wants to succeed at it.

When she gets to the corner, she pulls out her phone. Three forty-five. She should be at home trying to pull dinner together—*again*—but she wants to grab a pumpkin somewhere and get this project started, even if she's got to trudge all the way back across town to Piggly Wiggly.

Elaine stands by the stop sign and looks around, twisting a length of her inky hair around one finger. The street splits here: potholed pavement heading east into the center of town, red gravel heading west into God knows what.

Something flickers in the wind, catching her eye. It's a cardboard sign across the street, fastened to a tree just where the pavement yields to the gravel; it bears a crooked hand-drawn arrow pointing west, and big unsteadily-printed letters reading GOSTS 1 HAF MILE.

Gosts. Elaine squints and mouths the word. A bit of gravel crunches under her boots. Is that supposed to be *ghosts*? It must be some hick with one of those dumb haunted barns, she decides, but she doesn't want to go home yet. She checks her phone again: three fifty-three. Her dad won't be home until after five, and maybe it'll be something interesting. God knows there's nothing else around here.

She clutches her backpack. It's only half a mile.

The trek takes her out of town toward a wooded area, past fields of tattered corn stalks and wheat stubble burned into brown smudges. She's a decently fast walker even with her backpack, and after ten minutes, sweaty and mascara-stained, she comes up on a small, weathered farmhouse edged by brown-leaved maple trees that blur into the woods. There's a rickety split-rail fence surrounding it, a rusty mailbox, a bright blue tarp over part of the roof. A lone chicken pecks in the gravel at the edge of the lot.

And the yard is full of pumpkins.

Elaine stares, 'ghosts' momentarily forgotten. She'd never seen a pumpkin patch growing up in New Jersey. There must be dozens in the carefully planted plots in front of the house—creamy orange and round as basketballs, releasing an earthy sweet scent into the sun-warmed air.

"Wow." In spite of herself, she's impressed. She sets her pack down—carefully this time—and unzips it, fumbling in the inner pocket for the little cash she's got on hand. Four dollars—no, six, she'd skipped the cafeteria slop again. *That's enough, right? Surely it's enough for one that's not too big.*

"You need somethin', li'l missy?"

Elaine wads the cash up in her fist. An old woman in a shapeless blue dress and patched half-apron is at her elbow, grinning like a skull, eyes clear green and flinty. Elaine hasn't heard a door open; the woman's been in the yard all along. A German Shepherd trails behind her, bristling but silent, gray-muzzled with age.

"Um." Elaine clears her throat. "Yeah. I need a pumpkin. For school. You know, to carve. Do you sell these?"

"Mmm. You ain't from here." The woman eyes her with the distrust Elaine's grown accustomed to seeing, but nods gruffly. "Carvers're up this way."

She walks toward the house. Elaine follows uneasily, looking around. The pumpkins growing in the plots near the house are a little larger than the ones she'd first spotted, their orange hue starker, and there's no hint of sweetness here. Instead, the odor in the air is meaty and faintly rancid, like cooked beef gone just a bit off. She wrinkles her nose, then catches a whiff of smoke and tracks it to a fire pit not far from the porch, overhung

by an enormous black iron pot that's the source of the smell.

She's a witch, Elaine thinks and chokes back a sudden giggle. *No, that's kid stuff. Just some old lady cooking outside because she's too poor to have air conditioning.* She shifts her attention back to the pumpkins. "How much are they?"

"Fifty cents a pound. Dollar a pound for them pie-makers you was eyeballin' back yonder." The woman coughs and spits into the dirt. "I'll go get the scales while you're pickin'."

"Wait," Elaine says. "Do you know anything about some ghosts? I saw a sign—"

"Hah!" The woman laughs, and it's an unpleasant sound. "Seen my sign, did you? My special ones, them are. My Ghosts." The capital letter is practically audible. "I hope you brung more money, li'l missy, them's five dollar a pound."

"Five dollars a *pound*?" Elaine blinks. "Pumpkins? Ghosts are pumpkins? Why the hell would they cost so much?"

She catches herself too late and shuts her mouth so fast her teeth click, but the old woman just responds to the profanity with another cough and another ghastly grin. "Growed special. Come on around behind the house, I reckon you can look."

Elaine hesitates. She only has six dollars, and a one-pound pumpkin won't be big enough to carve properly. Still, she can satisfy her curiosity. "Okay."

She lets herself be led, lifting her feet when she's told—"Mind them roots, ol' oak stump under the grass here"—and finding that the old woman's more nimble than she looks. Rounding the house, Elaine sees a yard that's mostly bare dirt, crossed by the fallen trunk of a lightning-scarred maple. She only sees the pumpkins when she's walked past the tiny slumped back porch into a solitary grassy patch.

Elaine gapes. "They're solid white!"

The old woman cackles and rakes her gray hair up wild. "Surely! Ain't that somethin'!"

Elaine squats at the edge of the grass. There aren't many pumpkins here, but they're just as full and hefty as their orange brethren, and pale as fresh snow. She touches the nearest one: warm, despite lying in the shadow of the house. The rind has a peculiarly leathery texture, and she could swear the supple vines have a pink tinge. "How do you grow them like this?"

"Aw, pumpkins come whitish natural," is the drawled reply. "Started these from seed, got 'em to grow seedless now. It's all in what you feed 'em, that's their supper I got stewin' in the front yard."

Elaine's not listening; she's too busy seeing a perfect blank canvas in her mind. She's got to have one of these, cost be damned.

She jumps up and dusts herself off. "You're right. I don't have enough money yet. But I'll be back, so don't sell any of these till I get one. I want to be first."

The old woman just smiles.

She gets home to find her dad's beaten her there.

Elaine groans at the sight of his car in the driveway and dredges up her phone: four-fifty. He's never home from the agricultural extension office before five-fifteen. Taking a deep breath, she mounts the steps and drops her backpack inside the open doorway of the screened-in porch. As soon as she walks into the house, she can smell vegetable soup.

"Dad? Dad, what gives?"

"I'm in here," he calls from the kitchen. He's standing over the stove making grilled cheese sandwiches—the kind, she notices a little guiltily, with too much butter and no crust. The perfect ones, with a pot of veggie soup bubbling on the next burner. "Lainey," he says, sighing, "where have you been?"

She bristles a little at the nickname. "I went walking. It's been a rough day."

He flips a sandwich. "Fifteen-year-old girls shouldn't have rough days."

Elaine sinks into a chair at the kitchen table and pillows her head on her arms. *Fifteen-year-old girls shouldn't have mothers who've been dead five months, or fathers who wither and hide.* She studies her father's

profile, the lines around his mouth and the gray in his hair that weren't there before her mom's car crash.

I miss Mom too, she wants to say, though she bites her tongue. It's a taboo subject. Instead, she fiddles with the skull-shaped zipper tab on her hoodie. "Um, look. I need a little money for a school project."

Her father's not frowning yet, but she can see it starting in his eyes long before it reaches his face.

"What kind of project?"

"For social studies. I have to carve a pumpkin." Elaine looks up hopefully. "I only have a week."

"For social studies," her father repeats dully. "Why—no, never mind. Fine. We'll go to Kroger this week and get one."

"Dad, no." She pushes back from the table. "I found a place outside town that sells white ones. I want a white one."

He's pulling soup bowls from the cabinet. "You went out to Hattie McClain's place? I can't even get you out of your room in the morning!"

"Dad," Elaine grumbles. "It's not far and it's important! This is for school and it's my chance to prove I'm more than just the dumb new girl!"

"Lainey—"

"It's been two months, Dad! Two months and to these hicks I'm still just the 'weird' one." She makes finger quotes around the word. "My mom's dead, my dad's a Yankee, I'm a 'vampire' with a funny accent—"

"Elaine." He plunks a bowl down in front of her. Soup droplets bounce out onto the tabletop. "I'm not talking about this right now." His voice has gone cold and flat. "We'll see about your project later. Not right now."

He drops a spoon beside her bowl. "Now eat and go clean up and do your homework."

Elaine has geometry to do, but she's pushed that aside. She can't concentrate on it now.

We'll see. Of all the answers her dad could have given, it had to be the one that means 'no' without making him actually say it. It's practically the only way he's responded to her requests since June. Allowance? *We'll see*, no matter how many chores she's done or meals she's cooked. School supplies? *We'll see.* Jesus, she only got clothes for the start of the new school year because her Aunt Tina had taken her shopping before they'd left Jersey for this podunk.

She sits down at her desk and thumbs her phone. One email to Aunt Tina and within an hour, she'd probably have more money than she needs sitting in her PayPal account, but there'd also be a phone call to her dad about why he's not providing properly, and Elaine doesn't want to deal with that right now. Besides, she's pretty sure this Hattie McClain doesn't take PayPal.

She drums her fingers on the desktop, over the notes she's made for her pumpkin. Cut out the top and scoop out the goo. Cut out angled eyes, lowered brows, a mouthful of jagged teeth. Cut drawings into the topmost layer of the rind—crooked houses, leafless twitchy trees, arch-backed cats. Rub powdered charcoal into the lines and wipe the excess off. It'll look awesome. She's Googled it all. The only thing she needs now is the pumpkin, which takes money, and with the mood her dad's been in, she'll probably have to steal the damned thing.

Elaine's drumming stops. She's never done that before. Sneaking out, of course, just to be alone with her thoughts; her dad never comes into her room even to say goodnight, and this rinky-dink town is so quiet, she knows she's perfectly safe. But not stealing. For a pumpkin. A fucking pumpkin.

The thought makes her giggle, but not for long. There's no way she'll pry fifteen or twenty bucks out of her dad for a white pumpkin, not when he'll argue she can buy an orange one for three dollars at Kroger and paint it. And those white pumpkins have such soft, flabby stems—her fingers twitch, recalling the oddness of it—that she's positive her craft scissors will do the job. Her scissors, a small flashlight, the compass on her phone. That should be enough.

She'll need her hoodie, her boots, and her black sweatpants to keep from being seen. This is a single-story house, so there's no climbing down from the window, and since her dad always goes to work and leaves

her alone to walk to school, she can sneak out and grab a pumpkin, sneak it back in and carve it, and get it to Mrs. Leventhal with no trouble at all.

No one will even notice she's gone.

Elaine shivers despite her too-warm clothes. Having so many stars overhead when she looks up is dizzying, but using the flashlight to keep from stumbling over a lump of fresh roadkill makes her feel too visible. Except for brief snatches to check her phone, she's made the trek by sheer memory. Her calves ache.

Elaine leans on Hattie McClain's fence for a moment to catch her breath, then begins to pick her way through the front yard. The woman's got a porch light on, yellow and dim, and all the windows are dark. Even so, Elaine shies away from the house as much as she can until she reaches the back. The tiny patch of white pumpkins is visible even by mere starlight.

The one she'd picked out earlier is still here; Elaine recognizes the shape. She squats in the grass, as she had before, and nausea hits almost immediately. The weird meaty smell from before is suddenly all around her, only now it's shit and blood and spoilage, magnified by the day's heat seeping from the ground. Flies buzz, and something squelches under her feet. She pinches her nose shut with one hand and turns on her flashlight with the other. The pumpkins are swimming in a stew of rotten meat, moldy scraps, and thick pink liquid. The patch looks like a crime scene.

Elaine gags and spits, breathing through her mouth as she lets go of her nose and fumbles out the scissors. She'll have to work fast.

She gasps in air and grabs the pumpkin stem, but it feels different now—thicker, almost veiny. She squeezes gently and gets the impression it's full of liquid. Wincing, she finds a thin spot in the stem and slips the scissors around it. Another squeeze, and the stem tears with a ripping sound, fluid gushing over her hands.

Elaine yelps and jumps to her feet, dropping the scissors. Her boots are covered in liquid stench. She vomits helplessly and stumbles back.

Something explodes beside her.

It's the back door, slammed open against the house. Before she can gather strength to run, Elaine is pinned in place by a powerful flashlight beam and the muzzle of a double-barreled shotgun shoved into her belly. Hattie McClain leans over her, looking enormous in her wrath.

"Well. Li'l missy. Out-o'-town," the old woman growls, jabbing her with the gun. "I reckon you thought you'd make off with one o' my babies."

"Please." Elaine's voice squeaks. "Please don't shoot me."

"Why not? You think you can hurt one o' my babies without me knowin' it, when I feed 'em from my own hands? You think they ain't gonna cry for me?"

"You're crazy." Elaine sobs, which gets her a harder jab. "*Please!* Just—please let me go! Let me go home and I swear I'll never bother you again! I'm sorry!"

"Sorry, all right." Hattie grunts. "Get your ass in the house 'fore I blow it off."

Elaine stares. "What?"

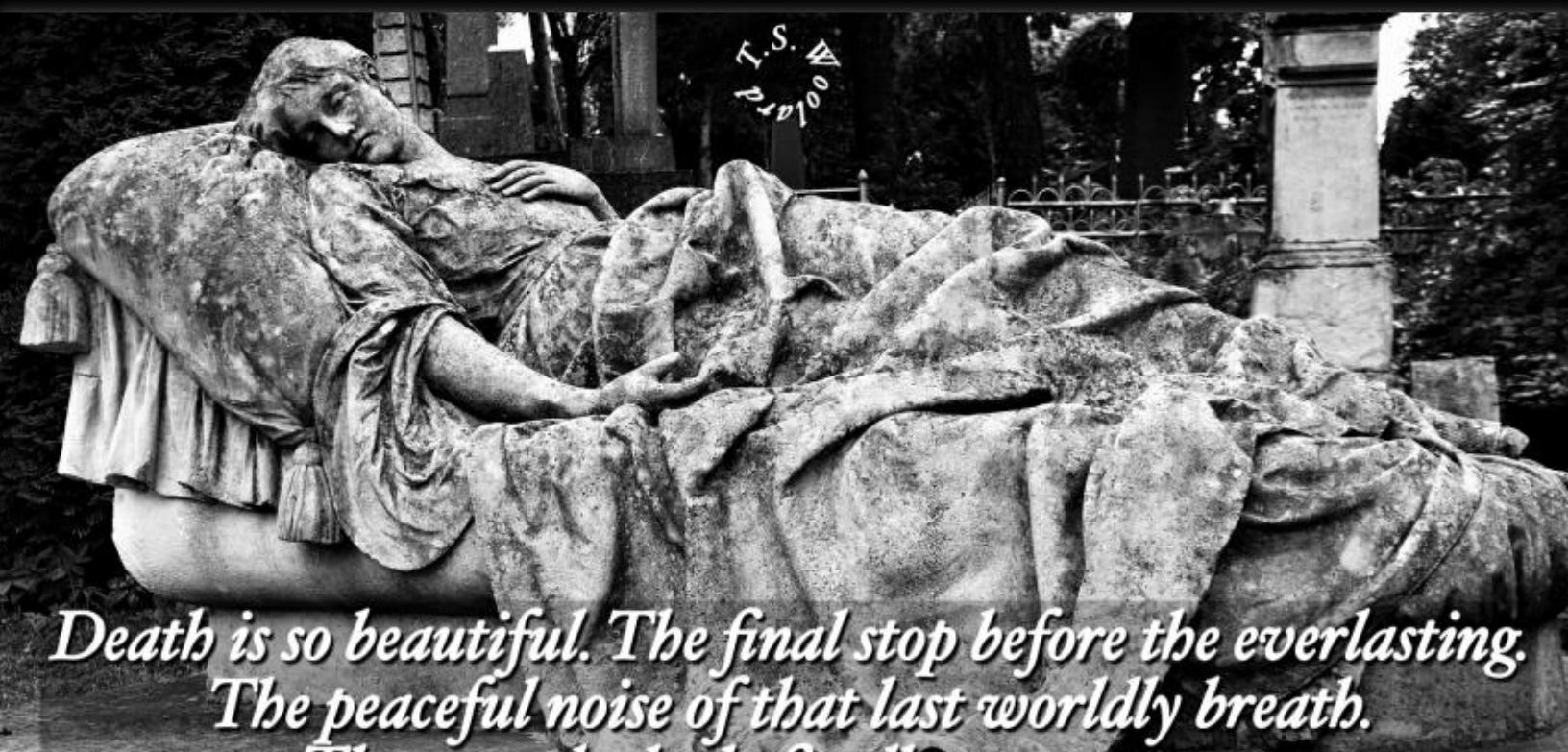
The shotgun gets lowered, but only for Hattie to tuck it under her other arm and seize Elaine's collar. "In the house," she repeats. "You're gonna feed my babies."

About the Author:

Scarlett R. Algee's fiction has been published by Body Parts Magazine, Pen of the Damned, and The Wicked Library. Her short story "Dark Music," written for the podcast The Lift, was a 2016 Parsec Awards finalist, and she was contributing editor of the bestselling sci-fi anthologies *Explorations: War* and *Explorations: Colony*. She lives in rural Tennessee with a beagle and an uncertain number of cats.

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*Death is so beautiful. The final stop before the everlasting.
The peaceful noise of that last worldly breath.
The way the body finally comes to rest.
The coolness of carelessness folding over the soul.
Death is so beautiful behold
that we are all blessed experience it one fateful day.*

Night of My Life | Katherine Brown

Out for the night
Out with friends
The moon is bright
We have grand plans
With heels so tall and clothes so slight
We hit the Halloween party, candy binge
Eventually my friends are out of sight
Another drink followed by a sudden twinge
Out to the bushes I race in fright
Coughing up my stomach contents
Embarrassed I flee from the light
Smack into a stranger around the next bend
He smiles and bows, at first so polite
Escort he offers and arm he does lend
Alas when I point left he pulls me right
I protest, but he only grins
I pull away with all my might
But the handsome stranger now has me pinned
I make to scream and try to fight
Then gasp in horror as his fangs descend
Nothing I do stops his first bite
And it is a bite that never ends
So now to the night I'm condemned for life
Never to go home again

Witchnapped | Katherine Brown

Eyes so purple they suck you in
Blood of animals dismembered
Oozes repulsively along her skin
Hair red as embers
Dress as black as sin
I'm wracked with violent tremors
My scream is trapped within
How I got here I can't remember
The witch looks at me and grins
Her teeth are silver and they shimmer
Her wand she pulls from her nose, both are long and thin
With a wave the deep cauldron between us starts to simmer
I gulp in fear, sure I've reached my end
Another flick of wand reveals a table set with two places for dinner
My heart stops at her next cackling words, "You're mine, Baby, dig in."

Hunter's Moon | Katherine Brown

The moon, it beckons
Howling I greet the deep night
My master has called

About the Author:

Katherine Brown lives with her husband and step-daughter in Texas. A passion for books from the time she started reading led Katherine to dream of writing books. As a teen, Katherine discovered a new joy in composing poetry. Publishing her first two children's books in 2017, Katherine hopes to continue writing long into her future to inspire in others a love of reading.

Blog: www.katherinebrownbooks.com

Heart Shaped Box | Pippa Bailey

My naked body froze, legs splayed on the hospital bed. The stink of bleach and decay stung my nostrils and marred my tongue. A masked doctor slid the lower scissor blade into me—slicing. He split me from pelvis to neck. A jagged wound of effluence. My heart no longer of use, was torn from its resting place.

His fingers caressed a golden box of puzzle and sin. It spewed forth a slick undulating black which filled the aching void that was my broken heart. Replaced with a darkness that consumed all thought, all feeling, and would know no bounds.

About the Author:

Pippa Bailey lives north of the wall in the Scottish Highlands. Principally a horror writer, YouTube personality and independent reviewer at Deadflicks with her partner, Myk Pilgrim. She's known for supernatural horror, with a vile sense of humour, and her stories have featured in anthologies and magazines. You can spot her drinking too much tea, making terrible puns, and bothering the local wildlife on Twitter.

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The sleepy pioneering town of Fettersville boasted itself as ‘the last stop to the Rockies’. Folk here provided staples for wagon trains and gold miners heading west, but, just now, Fettersville was working through hard times. Spring rains dried long before summer. Crops withered. Wells ran dry. Livestock dwindled. People grew thin. Travelers steered clear, abandoning Fettersville to its dust-covered fate. A festering sort of tension consumed everyone. Hollow faces drifted about town and wandered through the hills.

One family seemed fine and dandy, though. As autumn came on, people kept talking about Big Don, Cassandra, and their daughter, Red, who had a mane of dark red hair. No one in her family—nay, no one in the area—had red hair. Not such a big deal, except she also had a ... way ... with roots, herbs, and flowers. Not a person for miles hadn’t been cured by one of her special teas, but then there was that ugly purple mark on her cheek. A witch’s mark, some said. Now people were adding things up, and dark whispers followed Red everywhere.

‘Twas dusk on Halloween eve. At Sam’s Hardware store, the family business, Timothy was zipping through his work, so he and some friends could make good on their plans to scare old Mayor Jeb.

Then Timothy heard the ruckus.

Plastering his freckled nose against the storefront window, he could see everything on the square. Nothing was going on at Martha’s Diner or Dean’s Corner Grocery, but dust billowed something fierce from tramping feet in front of city hall. The outrageous clamor told Timothy that Fettersville had given birth to a full-blown riot.

Atop the steps stood Big Don, Red’s dad, holding her by the base of her long braid. Next to him, Mayor Jeb was working up the crowd—as he often did—but, whatever he was saying, made Red weep and bury her face in her hands.

Timothy would have run out, but his mother staid him with a gentle touch. He was glad she did, because, a minute later, Mayor Jeb led a swarm of humanity down Main Street. Slung over Big Don’s shoulder, Red screamed as her dad boomed, “Justice for my murdered wife and baby!”

Echoes of ‘justice’ pounded against Timothy’s ears. He couldn’t imagine Red killing anyone. What were they thinking?

In that moment, Red caught Timothy’s eye. Held it there. She mouthed, “Help me,” then vanished amidst the extreme emotion and gesticulating bodies.

Ignoring his parents telling him to stay, Timothy threw his work apron on the counter and ran out the back of the store.

Keeping to the scrub, then going tree to tree, Timothy distantly followed the torch-carrying mob into the gathering darkness.

Midway up Fetters Hill, a great moon arose, appearing as large as a barn. People froze in place, staring slack-jawed at the phenomenon. A buzz emanated from the crowd. The bright-as-day moon confirmed everything to the crazed people. Red *had* to be to blame.

Timothy shuddered, feeling like all the forces of darkness had drawn together to pull the moon down to Earth. A finger of doubt crept into his mind. Could it be that Red actually *was* a witch?

Like a caught fish, Red flung herself out of Big Don’s grasp, out of the crowd. She made it almost to Timothy’s hiding place, then she stumbled, fell, and came to a rolling stop.

He *could* have stepped out. He *might* have grabbed her hand and helped her escape.

But he didn’t. Instead, he breathed in the dangerous air of the mob in great gulps and moved not at all as the dazed girl wiped a trickle of blood from her forehead. Timothy felt, rather than saw, the engulfing crowd.

Their evil-mindedness curdled his blood, but he’d missed his chance.

Caught and now complacent, Red was taken to the rocky peak where they tied her by the wrists between two trees.

Timothy wanted to sob, to stand up, to stop them somehow. But his feet felt clamped to the ground. His voice caught in his throat.

“Please,” Red implored, “I was only trying to ease Ma’s pain from the breech baby. Nothing could be done.”

Breathing heavily after his trek up the hill, Mayor Jeb said, “Girl, we’re done with your witchy ways. All your Ma’s babies died. Now she’s dead, too. We *know* it was you. Time for you to *pay*.”

Leaving her there, the self-righteous people sang a stupid hymn as they made their way down Fetters Hill, as if they’d left the weeping girl as a sacrifice for God.

Silence overcame the area as if something more terrible were coming.

Though goose bumps crawled across Timothy’s skin, he took tentative steps toward Red. A low growling, the awful concert of predators encircling their prey, stopped him. Spikes of fear ran up and down his spine as wolf shapes formed from the shadows.

Howls filled the air.

Then a strange sound silenced them all. It was more of a haunting, howling song with both wolf and human qualities. And it came from a buffalo-sized man-wolf standing on two legs at the apex of Fetters Hill. The enormous moon shone behind him like a backdrop, and he moved his arms as though he were an opera singer. His face was, at once, human and beast, dark yet exhilarating. His magnificent, silver-gray fur moved in silky smoothness with his outpouring emotion.

Timothy had never seen or heard of anything like it. But he *had*. In a story about a ... werewolf. He gulped.

Now ignoring the apparition, the wolves tightened their circle and fell on Red, ripping chunks from her body and shredding her flesh.

This time, Timothy grabbed a fallen branch and charged into the fray. As he beat down the wolves, fear vanished. But the wolves didn’t take it kindly. They whipped around like a many-headed monster, biting and scratching him. Finally, one jumped from a chair-sized boulder, knocking him square in the chest. He went down under a mass of claws and teeth.

Curling into a ball, Timothy protected his neck with his hands. Time elongated, and Timothy prayed for a quick death.

Through a haze of sound and pain and blood, he became aware of wolves yelping. Someone was plucking them up, one by one, throwing them against the rock wall as if the predators were stuffed toys. After a few minutes, the rest ran off.

Timothy peered through the blood dripping into his eyes.

The werewolf, who had sung to the moon and saved Timothy’s life, was pacing nearby. The fur on his arms and face was saturated with blood.

Timothy looked at Red. A pool of blood spread under her. Was she dead? He peered intently at her. Light puffs of fog formed near her mouth and nose in the now chilly air. Timothy breathed again.

A wispy woman with gold and deep-red curls appeared out of nowhere, and the werewolf stopped pacing. With apparent authority, she took over the scene.

Timothy *should* have been afraid, but something about this woman calmed him. She cut Red’s bonds with a knife from her skirt’s waistband and gently laid the shredded body on the ground. Murmuring something that sounded ancient and rhythmic, the woman dragged her wand across Red’s skin.

The obscene wounds stopped bleeding.

When she did the same to Timothy, it felt intoxicating, euphoric. Finishing, she threw back her head, and howled like the werewolf had, only higher and sweeter.

Not long after, a bat—no bigger than Timothy’s hand—fluttered and circled around the woman’s head. Then it dove for Red.

To Timothy’s shock, it crouched in Red’s blood and drew it up from the ground through its fangs. When it finished, the bat wobbled drunkenly, zig-zagging toward the werewolf.

“Go ahead, Verin,” the woman whispered to the werewolf.

Staring intently at her, Verin parted his nasty fur and slit open his arm with his fangs. Thick, sticky blood spilled from the wound, which the bat, again, drew in with fangs. Then he flew to a boulder.

Vivid blue smoke formed around the bat. He grew bigger, hazier.

Timothy blinked. Once. Twice. Three times.

Now, smoke dissipating, a middle-aged man with drooping eyes and dark red hair sat on the boulder, looking euphoric.

"Reginald," the woman drawled, taking him by the hand.

Opening his eyes, he smiled at her, and said, "Ka-a-at, it's been too long." He stood, swept her into his arms, and dipped her back.

Kat groaned with pleasure as Reginald sank enormous fangs deep into her exposed neck. Finishing, he gently lay her near Red and gazed at Timothy, whose insides twisted and convulsed. Was he next?

Reginald smiled, "I don't need *your* blood, kid."

Timothy scuttered back. "What are you doing then?"

He chuckled. "Kind of tough to understand from your perspective, I guess. The short of it is, I'm making venom from supernatural blood."

Timothy's eyes grew wide. "Venom?"

"Yeah, well, that's what I call it. It'll change her, you see. Not kill her, mind. Just make her more ..."

"... powerful." Fully alert, Kat finished his sentence. She touched his cheek with a fingertip as if checking for doneness on a cake, then jerked it away, snapping her fingers as if she'd grabbed a pan out of the oven without mitts. "I think it's ready," she grinned, eyes wild with an insane light.

Then Reginald bit Red's neck. When Timothy tried to run to them, Verin caught his arm and Kat's voice surrounded them. "Her life essence will pull toward the triple-magic venom, curl around it, become saturated with it." She winked. "Powerful."

Was Kat saying they were *healing* Red? Was this wrong? Timothy didn't know.

After Reginald stood up, Kat turned to Red and murmured something as she waved her wand.

Red's clothes shimmered and transformed into a clean blue dress and red cloak.

The witch spoke, "Welcome back, Red. Or, should I say, 'Fiery Red ?'"

Growing strong, Red stood up. She swished her dress around admiringly.

Timothy wondered why the witch might call her that and caught his breath as he realized her witch's mark had gone. How was that possible? Then, to Timothy's terror, Red levitated three feet above where she'd been left to die. She raised her arms, and the moon turned blood red, casting eerie light across the land. As she did so, she looked calm, at peace, comfortable with her extraordinary abilities.

Timothy ran.

Branches hit his face. Rocks made him stumble. Behind him, Verin sent spine-trilling howls chasing after him. How could such a thing happen? How could she *survive* the wolves, let alone *levitate* then change the entire *moon*?

As if in answer, Red zoomed ahead in that unnatural way with her feet *not* touching the ground. Verin followed, his huge paws and hands pounding the trail after them.

Timothy lost sight of them, but, a few minutes later, he heard a man screaming. The screams faded as though the person were being carried off.

Timothy ran faster.

As he approached town, Timothy saw Kat fly across that bloody moon on a broomstick, waving her wand over her head. He slowed to a jog as gray clouds tinged with that eerie blood light shot out of the wand and swirled through the sky like a mess of fishing worms.

Then he slammed into 'nothing' and bounced off it.

It didn't matter where he moved or how hard he punched, that 'nothing' gave like someone's stomach but wouldn't let him into town. Exhausting himself, he finally sat, defeated. But he could see Red, levitating above the steps of city hall, Reginald and Kat behind her. Standing guard over a wailing Big Don and a bawling Mayor Jeb, Verin snarled at gawking people, who collected in the shadows.

"I did nothing to you but help," cried Red. "You watched me grow from a baby. Then you left me to DIE."

No one answered.

The supernatural beings howled together, an exotic music that—at once—excited and terrified Timothy.

They stopped, and she whispered in a way people heard only in their minds that made Timothy's skin crawl. "Now, I'm so much more than a witch."

It was like someone had stomped on an ant hill.

People ran.

Red raised her arms, and fiery blood rained from the horrible moon, over and around the clouds, and onto the town. Women screamed. Children cried. Buildings caught on fire. Brimstone fell like hail, cracked the clouds as if they were glass, and exploded when they hit the ground.

Now Timothy *knew* why Kat called her 'Fiery Red'.

Chaos reigned.

When men shot their rifles and six shooters, their bullets bounced off the supernatural beings.

Kat shot back with lightning from her wand. The men weren't so lucky.

Some of the buildings looked like cakes iced with fiery drips of blood. Oddly, some of the buildings—like Sam's Hardware—remained untouched. Anyone who had marched up Fetters Hill was struck by the fiery blood. It clung to them like death, no matter how furiously they tried to wipe it off or where they tried to hide. Verin and Reginald chased down those who ran away and dragged them across town to join Big Don and Mayor Jeb.

When all the would-be murderers had been collected, Fiery Red stared them down.

"Guilty, one and all," she snarled. She raised her arms again, and Fettersville's private fiery blood storm drew together and intensified as if coming from a fire hose and blasted the kneeling people, knocking them around like cattle caught in a flash flood.

Timothy could no longer see them through the burning blood.

When everything subsided, Timothy stared at the aftermath.

Big Don and company looked human yet hardly human, their skin and arms and legs having melted like wax. Yet they lived.

They looked like stubby candles with flapping fish mouths and flailing stumps, moving around like molten, waxy worms.

Timothy pitied them.

Fiery Red did not.

She snapped her fingers at the sky and again at the writhing, tortured people.

The clouds drew together like a giant bag and descended on the wretched souls. Then it grew smaller until it was the size of a marble bag with the perpetrators inside. Red picked it up, placing it in her skirt pocket. Then she drew her hood over her red hair, and she and her new family walked away into the night, taking the bloody hue from the moon with them.

From that day forward, the wolves protected Timothy and his descendants. Sometimes—of a full moon night—Timothy saw Verin howling atop Fetters Hill. And, to this very day, the moon turns blood red over Fettersville on Halloween night when Fiery Red visits to release her vengeance on anyone foolish enough to harm the innocent.

About the Author:

Stacy Fileccia—freelance editor and writer—acts like a sweet baseball mom by day but enjoys writing horror stories by night. A coffee and chocolate addict, she strives to intertwine interesting life experiences with fantastic imagination to deliver pure entertainment. Winner of Horror Addicts' 2016 Wicked Women Writers contest, she has been published in previous editions of *The Sirens Call* and in *Through Clouded Eyes*.

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Sheila dashed across the back stretch of her neighbor's winter-bare yard. She crouched quickly once she reached the garbage cans. "Damn bastard," she mumbled to herself. "Damn bastard, you think you can do this to me? You piece of crap." She ran once more, her muscles stiff and tight, and glanced up—the sky was lumpy and gray, the first flakes of a flurry swirled like mindless moths.

She reached her own fence and crept along the perimeter, trying not to step on the thorny sticks that were Al Lorenzo's rose bushes. She went to her knees and crawled around the corner post, scrambled on all fours to the front gate where she'd be hidden by cypress bushes from the view of their upstairs bedroom window. She eased the gate ajar and slipped into the narrow garden area beside the garage.

Sheila waited. There wasn't a sound. Not even a dog barked. "Your ass is toast," she whispered. She remembered leaving work in nearby Wilmington on a pretext, driving home to Glenmoore in the middle of the day, deliberately parking two blocks away. "I know something is going on, you bastard," she said to a mental image of her husband. "And I'm going to catch you."

Sheila made her way to the back deck and quietly climbed the steps, paused, opened one half of the french double-doors. Once inside, she froze. The air smelled musty and stale and she couldn't hear a thing. She roused, curling her fingers into fists, and walked briskly through the dining room.

She climbed the stairs. "How long have I been doing this?" she asked herself, feeling uneasy. She didn't know how to operate or set up or even where to buy elaborate spying equipment; so she was using a baby monitor in reverse, the receiver in the small spare-room that was supposed to be for a baby. The transmitter—a beige, plastic wedge-shaped device that looked like a radio—deployed in their bedroom.

Sheila took quick, precise steps down the hallway, opened the last door on the right, closed it behind her. She didn't switch on the light. She settled on the rug in front of a white antique dresser they used to store old clothes, and removed her shoes, folded her legs into yoga position. The little LCD screen of the receiver—which was propped in a stand on top of the dresser—glowed in the gloom. Sheila watched it and waited. As she'd done each day. Day after day, seated on the blue shag rug, waiting for the first sounds.

There was a crackling, static-charged burst, and then she could hear something gently, softly moving. "Yes, yes," Sheila whispered. *Doug, Doug, are you sure you want this?* "Yes, oh yes," Sheila mouthed. She listened to the crinkling of the mattress cover, the shifting of the comforter's plump, silvery folds. *You are so sexy and beautiful*, she heard her husband say. *The husky voice of a strange woman* oozed in answer, *You want it? You want it? I'll give it to you.* There was a string of distorted and distant words—Sheila couldn't understand them—followed by kisses, grunting and mumbling, flesh hitting and grasping flesh. Sheila rose to her knees, her fingertips gripping the edge of the dresser top, her face turned upward, her lips puckered feeling swollen and warm. *I told you, I wouldn't put up with it!* Another, a second woman, was abruptly shouting. Sheila's heart pounded. "Oh my god," she breathed. *You bastard, you goddamn bastard. I saw you with her. I saw you. You think you can use my home, my own bed?* "Oh, shit," Sheila said, listening as her husband began his usual denials. *What the hell are you talking about? You are one crazy bitch!* The bed heaved, the mattress rebounded; there was a muffled thump as his bare feet hit the carpet. Sheila stood, her arms hanging, her head bent, her cheek resting on the cool dresser top beside the receiver. "I told you, don't you ever do that to me."

Don't you ever cheat on me, lie to me. I told you I'd kill you first before I'd let you leave me for some stupid piece of ass," Sheila and the second woman intoned as one.

Confused, stumbling steps, the mattress again; was someone bouncing on it, stomping across? A drawer could be heard, pulled open, slammed closed. *What the hell? What the fucking hell?* her husband bellowed. *What the hell is that?*

"It's my snubby," Sheila answered, straightening. She unzipped her jacket and pulled it out. "My Smith and Wesson J-frame with the fuchsia grip. Isn't it cute? A .38 special, just for you!" Pop, pop, pop-pop-pop cracked from the receiver, bounced wildly off the walls, exploded in her ears. "Ahhhhh," Sheila moaned, her free hand yanking clutches of her tangled hair. "Oh Doug, poor Doug," she whispered. Her chest expanded and contracted so violently she thought her ribs would break. Her heart banged like an alarm bell. "Doug, Dougie," she yelled, and spun around. She charged for the door.

She sprinted down the hallway as fast as she could but it seemed to take forever. She reached their bedroom and flung herself across the threshold. "Doug!" she cried. Her whole body began to convulse and shake. Water streamed from the corners of her eyes, her nose. She sniffed and sniffed, her eyes wide and startled. She turned in place. "Doug, Dougie, where are you?" she whimpered.

No one was there. The stuffy room glowed a sullen gold color, ambient light filtering through amber roman shades and drawn curtains. The bed was only a cherry frame. There wasn't even a box spring resting on the old-fashioned slats. The place smelled sharp and acrid. Whole sections of carpet were gone, like missing pieces of a life lost forever. Sheila swept her gaze back and forth. "What is this?" Something caught her eye. She leaned to the side, focused on the wedge-shaped object sitting unobtrusively on the floor at the foot of the second nightstand. She walked over to it, recognized her transmitter, still plugged in, still working, broadcasting. She stared at the device; her thoughts began to crack and split. She put the cold muzzle of her snub to her forehead. A horrible pain bloomed in her brain. Darkness like oozing ink saturated her mind.

Sheila dashed across the back stretch of her neighbor's winter-bare yard. She crouched quickly once she reached the garbage cans. "Damn bastard," she mumbled to herself....

About the Author:

Rivka Jacobs lives in West Virginia. She was born in Philadelphia and grew up in South Florida. She has sold stories to such publications as *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and the *Women of Darkness* anthology. In the last few years she's placed stories with *The Sirens Call* eZine, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Fantastic Floridas*, and the *More Alternative Truths* anthology. Rivka most recently worked as a psychiatric nurse.

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Zombie Girl Again | Michael S. Walker

The little zombie girl
From that movie
Has come to kill me
But I'm not
Your damn mother!
I yell
As she raises her garden spade
Like a Catholic chalice
It doesn't matter
She is thinking with her teeth now
And eating with her brain
She has student-loan debt
The size of Stage-4 cancer
Her real mother
Is a tweaker
In Camden, New Jersey
And her father...
So here she comes
With a whole Bonus Army
Slow on her muddied heels.

About the Author:

Michael Walker is a writer, artist, and musician living in Columbus Ohio. He is the author of two published novels: *7-22* a young adult fantasy novel and *The Vampire Henry* a "literary" horror novel. He has seen his work in numerous publications, including *PIF* and *Fiction Southeast*.

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My Pretty Girl in Red | Andrea Allison

The last time I saw my mother was on a Tuesday. She ran a brush through her hair. Eyes brightened when I walked into her bedroom. We only spoke a few words in kind before I walked away. When she stepped out into the world, it swallowed her whole. The phone call came a week later.

"My pretty girl in red, we speak again. If only you had given yourself to me, I wouldn't have to take a consolation prize. You have the same eyes and smile. Her head on my mantle will keep me company until we meet again."

About the Author:

Andrea Allison currently writes and resides in a small Oklahoman town. Her work has appeared in *Trembling With Fear*, *Speculative 66*, and *DeadCades: The Infernal Decimation Anthology*.

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Not a single poke. Charles frowned at the barren messaging board on his social media page. He did not have many friends, but he had expected that the few casual acquaintances he had logged over the years would at least take ten seconds to check in and acknowledge his birthday.

"Dicks." He pushed his keyboard away and headed to the kitchen where his charred breakfast sizzled and smoked, ruined as he fumed over the lack of well wishes.

His eggs were over-salted and rubbery, having sat too long on the gas stove. His coffee left a hint of vinegar on the palette; he had cleaned his aged machine just the day before but had forgotten to cycle fresh water after the process. His shower had been a messy light drizzle that erupted into a red colored sludge while his rusting pipes clanged behind the wall.

Needless to say, he was having a dreadful birthday, and he was beginning to think that he would be better off just crawling back into his rumpled covers and ignoring the world for the next 24 hours.

He winced at another sour sip of tepid coffee when there was a knock on the door.

"What now?" He stood and stomped to the front door, his stocking feet slipping on the cold floor, his tattered and worn bath robe flapping in his wake. He stood on his tip toes peeking out of the cloudy glass peephole. On his porch stood a courier in matching knee-high shorts and a button down short sleeved shirt, an off-center ball cap perched atop his white-boy afro. Charles could almost smell the cannabis fumes that surely infused his unkempt uniform. He held an envelope and whistled away to the tunes that pumped through his earphones.

Charles grumbled and unlatched the series of deadbolts securing his sanctuary from the outside world. He pulled hard on the door and dug its sharp-edged corner into the middle of his big toe. He yelped and hopped around, grabbing at his wounded foot.

The courier, his headphones cranked loud enough for Charles to hear through the door before he even opened it, barely took notice of the dancing man. The man in blue, half turned away, still whistling, turned to face the scene of Charles whooping and hollering as he gyrated in pain on the other side of the door.

The confused courier pulled one earbud from his head. "You ok, man?"

"No, I'm not ok. Fuck! What do you want!"

"Huh. Well, is this Charles A. Muir?"

"Yes, what is it?" Charles pulled back his anger, struggling to suppress the tear that had crept to the surface during his struggle with his throbbing toe.

"Oh, cool. I have a letter for you." The young, floppy-haired courier nodded and held out a yellowed, oversized envelope with Charles' name and address scrawled across the front.

Charles stood tall struggling to balance, supporting his weight on the door. "Who's it from? I'm not expecting anything."

"Don't know man. No return address, just this weird stamp on the back."

The courier blinked his doe eyes at the frumpy vision that stood fuming at him in the doorway. He held out the weathered envelope, displaying first the front with the delicate calligraphy writing, and then flipped it over to reveal a wax stamp with an intricate crest pressed into the center of the envelope's flap, securing its mysterious contents from the world.

Charles pushed his pain and frustration to the back of his mind and leaned forward a bit to get a better look at the curious delivery.

"And you have no idea who this came from, you say?"

"No clue, man. I just deliver what they give me. So, is this you or what?" The courier fidgeted, waiting for Charles to accept the envelope. He had a long day of deliveries still, and this weird, B.O. laden hermit was holding him up.

"Well, yeah, that's me. Do I need to sign something, or...?"

"Nah. Just take it and it's yours." The boy stood, his hand out, offering the letter, a broad smile splashed across his face. His head gently bobbed to Def Leppard coming from the dangling earbud.

Charles was curious but ultimately cautious about strange deliveries with no return address, and on a day that was going so wrong to begin with, this could just as easily be a summons or letter that he is getting audited, or a response from that Nigerian prince he had been exchanging emails with. He hemmed and hawed for another few seconds while the delivery boy's impatience grew.

"Either take it or I gotta go, man. I got a lot of other people to see today." He thrust the letter forward, waiting for Charles to take it off his hands.

Charles bit his lip nervously and squeezed his fist open and closed at his side working through his decision. "Fine!" He grabbed at the envelope, but the boy suddenly whisked it from his clutch.

"That'll be forty-two cents, COD." The boy grinned wide at Charles, clutching the letter to his own chest awaiting compensation.

"Oh, Jesus Christ, kid!" Charles tapped his foot, ignoring the pain shooting up through his bleeding toe. His fists balled on his hips, mouth wide with astonishment at the kid's gall.

The boy stood firm, beaming his stupid smile back, the letter held securely against his chest in one hand while his other outstretched eagerly, waiting for its \$0.42 tithe.

"Fuck!" Charles called as he spun in the doorway and limped off to retrieve the pittance that it would take to scoot this menace from his stoop. He grumbled through the house, pushing furniture from his path, punching the wall in his frustration on his way to his dusty, finger-smudged change jar that was sunning in the kitchen window.

A crash rang through the house as the jar slipped from his grasp, shattering and spilling its contents around and down his kitchen sink. Glass and metal coins scattered and settled into the remnants of last night's dinner that was still clumped throughout the landscape of the rusted wash basin.

"You ok, dude?" The boy called from the entryway.

"I'll be right there!" Charles yelled, managing to hold back the further string of slurs and swears that hung on the tip of his frustrated tongue.

He scanned the mélange of coins that peeked back through the catsup and burger leavings that pooled in his sink. He spied two quarters teetering on the edge of the drain. He drove his hand to retrieve them as they slipped away into the dark abyss. His fingers squished together, securing the two coins before they were gone, the only good luck he had been granted all morning. He breathed out in relief and smiled, sweat beading on his forehead.

"Dude, I gotta go. Are you gonna pay me or not?"

"Bite me, you snaky little shit!" He hissed under his breath. "I'll be right there!" Charles snapped back at the kid as he pulled his hand from the drain. He rinsed off his fingers and the coins, towed them dry, and hobbled back to the door.

"Here. Keep the change," Charles said, as he dropped the coins into the waiting hand.

"Pleasure doing business with you." The boy handed over the envelope.

Charles snatched it up and quickly slammed the door on the snaky boy. "Asshole!"

He retreated to his den to proceed with the opening ceremony.

He plopped down into his well-used leather chair. As he settled his weight down, air pressed from the inflated cushion and it conformed to his familiar shape. The letter stared up at him from his desk. He studied it. The envelope had a traveled air about it. It resembled a hand-crafted envelope you might find in a specialty store. The cream-colored paper was discolored and marked with darker blotches, presumably water stains. He felt the texture of the heavy gauge paper. It was obviously of high quality with a grain that indicated it was made in smaller, artisanal batches, unlike the mass-produced envelopes that he and the rest of the world used on a daily basis. He lifted it up and smelled its earthy musk. It smelled of dirt and trees, with no trace of paper plant chemicals.

The more he discerned from his investigation the more his curiosity grew. He could not imagine anyone that would utilize such materials and go through so much trouble to convey a message to him. He flipped the letter over revealing the strange crest on the back, tracing his fingers across the waxy exterior, exploring the ridges and valleys of the intricate design.

He flipped it back over and laid it flat on the desk again to continue his query. A light sound pricked his ears, a small scratching that etched the air in the room. At first, he thought there was a branch scraping his window, blown around by a light breeze. Then he realized the sound was coming from in front of him. First just a few gentle scratches, then the frequency and intensity grew. He looked around the desk searching for the source of the sound, hoping a mouse was not loose inside his desk drawer.

He placed his hand on the corner of the envelope to move it out of the way of whatever was making the racket. He felt a sharp sting and looked down at the jarring sight of empty space where his finger should have been. Shock coursed through his body as he lifted his bleeding hand up, his index finger replaced by the pulsing spray of blood.

He looked down to the scratching that had now turned to a scuttling sound and the letter was gone. He scanned left and right, frantically searching for the letter, already forgetting about his missing appendage that surged blood, splatted onto his wooden desk like a decorative piece of modern art.

“Holy fuck!”

The scuttling stopped and there was a squishy chomp. Charles yelped in pain as his calf disappeared in a single bite from the serrated mouth where the envelope's flap had been. He screamed and scrambled back in his chair, the floor slick from his own blood. The letter bit, then ran and bit and ran and bit and ran. It pockmarked his body with its violent dining pattern, insatiably tearing at his flesh.

He scrambled to escape, his life draining away as the letter enveloped him, one sloppy chomp after another. It gnawed on his arms, his stomach, his back. It climbed his face and plucked out his eyes, lapping up juices that dripped from his wounds, gorging itself on his stinking flesh. He scrambled, and the creature's veracity grew, clamoring to taste more of him, lapping up every morsel it touched. It clamped onto his throat and his horror filled screams jumped two octaves as the monster fed on his fear-filled yips that devolved into wet gurgles as Charles' throat filled with blood and he clawed at the unyielding envelope's papyrus textured skin.

Weakening, he clawed at the beast on his throat, trying desperately to free himself from the creature's bite as it drained the final breaths from him. He slumped to the floor and the beast continued to feed on Charles' twitching body until he went still, and it dined in peace.

The rest of the day the envelope fed and drank every last bit of Charles. It moved through the den, lapping up the stray dribbles of blood that had escaped in its initial attack. It crunched the bones and ground away at the cartilage of his body, taking in every ounce of flesh and blood. By the time the creature had finished with its brunch, there was not even a hair or a fingernail that managed to escape its appetite.

The envelope wafted out the den and slid itself under the front door, a gentle burp escaping as it settled on the ratty welcome mat that had greeted little else than insurance salesmen and Jehovah's witnesses to Charles' sad world. The wax seal replaced itself securely across the creature's mouth, and the name and address that had been so carefully written on the opposite side faded away, leaving just the textured paper with its yellow and brown markings.

The courier stepped up to the porch, retrieved the letter and whistled off down the street, accompanied by the muffled buzz of KISS playing loudly from his earbuds.

About the Author:

John Dover is the writer and creator of Johnny Scotch, a pulpy, jazz-noir comic book series and novella series. Outside of the Johnny Scotch world, John has been a regular contributor to Mythmachine.com and also published as a horror writer in a number of anthologies including “Tales From the Braided Pony” (Alucard Press), and “100 Word Horrors” (KJK Publishing).

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I remember one of the neighbors, who was just too nosy for his own good, quizzing Grandma at the annual harvest festival in the village, about how our family had made their money. His wife blushed with humiliation, conversation died in the marquee. A voice stage whispered, "*What did he just say?*"

Grandma was cool, she just smiled at him and said, "We sell fruit for consumption in various forms. Drinks and such." She looked at me as I was trying to hide behind a dried flower display, "What do the young people drink now?" she clicked her fingers, "that's it ... *smoothies*."

He just smiled, uncomfortable at the stifled laughter around him, but I'm sure I saw a flicker of fear cross his face. As soon as he turned his back on her she growled under her breath. We wouldn't see him for a long time.

Grandma had an orchard that she would patrol in hobnailed boots every winter and tiptoe barefoot in summer. I would watch from the open window of my room as she chatted away to herself, chewing blades of grass which she would then spit up against the tree trunks. The vivid green mucus blobs would harden in the sun. Rose bushes grew at the end of every row, with deep red flowers and thick thorns. "They protect the trees" she would say, as she sniffed the heady odor from each bloom. At dawn she would examine the apple blossom as the summer mists floated around her long skirts. It would drift like confetti from the branches as she passed.

In the pocket of her shabby overcoat she would carry a cell phone, an old one, clunky, with buttons and an evaporating battery life. Every time it rang she would rush into the study, lift a battered ledger from a drawer and drop it onto her desktop. I would listen at the closed door, as she interrogated the caller. She would always ask who had referred them, what they wanted and how many. Money was always, "Up front in June. No money? No apples and that's that."

It was after the incident at the festival that she decided to teach me the family business. I asked her why? She replied, "Because you were nosy." She'd known all along I was on the other side of the office door. "Unfortunately, I can't live forever and our business needs someone to carry it on, otherwise we go under ... literally."

I didn't ask her what she meant by that.

I dropped out of school, which I hated anyway, and began my education. She taught me about the orchard. What type of apples we had, the varieties, when they began to fruit, when they were dormant. On the winter solstice in December, she tapped on my door to wake me. I was so tired, and even considering going back to school, when she whispered, "Hurry up, there's something we have to do. You'll enjoy it!"

I stumbled out of bed and got dressed. This early in the freezing weather, was not what I would class as 'fun'. She was waiting in the yard, sat on some crates. A lantern illuminated what looked like bottles of wine.

"Morning. We're going to feed the trees."

"What?"

"Feed them. The old trees get tired about now. They need some pep! You know how gardeners use blood, fish and bone to feed their flowers and crops? We do the same except we just use the blood."

Grandma stood up, making the crates rattle. She took hold of one of the bottles and shook it a little. The thick, viscous juice inside barely moved. I felt my stomach balk.

"Is that blood, Grandma?"

"Yes. From the ... abattoir. Very fresh. The trees need it so they can fruit."

She popped the lid off with a bottle opener, sniffed the content then emptied it around the base of one of the gnarled apple trees. I swear I saw it move. A quick shudder as it imbibed its nourishment. The blood seeped into the roots and the ground undulated slowly.

"Each tree gets a full bottle. Don't mess up. This has to be done by sundown today."

"Why?"

The weird was becoming the normal.

"Because the days become longer after the solstice. Summer's on the way. We have to make sure each harvest is a bountiful one. Especially those first fragile fruits that drop off the branch."

She popped the lid off another bottle and began pouring.

"Hurry up!"

I lifted one of the bottles from the crate and flipped off the lid. The smell was fetid, but I did as I was told. Grandma began to laugh.

"You'll get used to it. Besides, you think this stinks, wait until the summer and we collect the fruit!"

She wasn't wrong. That summer the orchard seemed to boil in the heat. There was a miasma of stench as the trees began to bear fruit. Balmy nights became unbearable as windows remained closed in the house as wasps searched for the sugary ooze of ripening skin. The smell worsened, and I realized why she grew the roses with their hypnotic and overwhelming perfume.

To stay out of the heat, I offered to help with administration. Grandma thought for a second, then nodded and handed me the pencil that usually sat behind her ear. The wood was worn smooth and blackened from the many fingertips that had touched it. It had been sharpened with a knife and the lead was soft.

"Whatever you do, don't lick the end of this" she mimed licking the lead like they did in old films, "and *definitely* don't chew the other end. Ok?"

I nodded.

"Why?"

The phone began to ring,

"Because it's made from the wood of one of the trees. It's as old as the orchard ... Hello? Of course I'm taking orders. Cash before the end of June."

I scribbled down the details as she said them. The pencil burned my fingers as I wrote. I closed the book and let my fingertips drift over the cracked leather cover of the ledger. She took it from me and placed it back in the drawer.

"Now go and wash your hands, dear."

"Why Grandma?"

"It's covered in skin, not leather."

I nearly fell off the chair.

"Don't look at me like that! He was a witchfinder!"

She must have seen the horrified look still etched on my face.

"It was a very long time ago! Different times, dear."

I stared at my hands, then raced to the bathroom. I could hear Grandma laughing downstairs. She shouted, "I'm only joking, sweetheart!" but I'm not sure that she was.

That summer seemed neverending. Then, mid-August the weather broke with the loudest thunderstorm I had ever heard. Grandma looked up from her newspaper with a serene look on her face,

"Tomorrow, we'll begin picking the apples."

"But they aren't ready, Grandma."

She dropped the newspaper on the floor, then wafted her black lace hand fan around her face and under her armpits. The skin that hung from her arms was mottled and almost transparent like bluebottle wings.

"They're ready girl. Just *you* be ready for a long day. I should really phone the sisters ..."

She disappeared into the office still waving the fan around her.

I wondered if there would be any apples left on the branches after the force of the rain and the anger in the wind. The house rattled and unlocked gates banged all night. It felt like the orchard was having an enormous tantrum.

Next morning, before the sun was even up, she was banging on my door to wake me. Outside, a large marquee, the one used for the harvest festival, was already erected on the back lawn. Three women who looked just like grandma, silently laid out baskets. They didn't speak or smile, so neither did I. I waited, dazed at what was around me, to be told what to do. Grandma threw me a basket.

"Follow me and watch where you walk."

We walked up to the first apple tree, a particularly ugly one. She held a finger up to her lips telling me to be quiet and pointed to the orchard. The ground was covered in apples. Not the juicy ones I could see beginning to bloom with scarlet, they were still on the branches, but the little scrawny ones, shriveled and brown with rot. She began to gather them quickly, laying them in her basket.

"Come on! Hurry!"

"But grandma, these are ..."

"These are what we want. The runt apples. The cast offs. The ones no one would want except the insects and the earth. The windfalls!"

We collected the fruit. I was stung by wasps, scratched by rose thorns and almost fainted with hunger and heat, but we gathered our crop. By the end of the day, we collapsed on the ground. Grandma seemed content.

"That was a good day. Are you tired, dear?"

I nodded, barely able to speak, my shoulders ached and my back burned with pain. She took out the mobile phone from her apron pocket and slowly sent a text message. Within minutes a tractor driven by one of the sisters came toward us, pulling a long trailer. The other two sisters wearing black sun hats like umbrellas, sat within it.

As the tractor stopped, they nodded and climbed down. For a second I thought they glided as though they had large black crow's wings, but I put it down to exhaustion and too much sun.

The sisters began to collect the bulging baskets we had left by each tree, placing them reverentially onto the trailer. Grandma and I walked back to the house, arm in arm in the purple light of dusk.

The next morning I woke late. I opened a window for the first time in months and could hear familiar chatting from the large marquee. Its faded red and white stripes billowed with the gathering winds. As I stepped outside there was a slight chill of the dying summer. I felt like I was going to the circus or a freak show.

Inside, Grandma was sorting through the baskets of windfalls, writing names on brown labels that dangled from the handle. She checked each one off in the ledger.

"I thought I'd let you sleep in. You wanna check these with me? Make sure my old eyes haven't got these wrong."

"Have you ever got an order wrong, Grandma?"

She stopped and thought, "I would never admit it!"

I gazed at the apples. They didn't look like the fades from yesterday. They had grown, bloomed to three times their size, and they were the luscious vermillion of a fairy tale. I reached into a basket to greedily grab one and sink my teeth into it. I lifted the apple to my mouth, seeing my reflection in the deep red skin and opened my mouth to bite. I felt a slap on the back of my hand as the apple flew.

"Owww!" I whined, "What did you do that for?"

Gran grabbed my jaw squeezing my cheeks together to peer inside my mouth.

"You didn't take a bite did you? Spit it out if you did!"

I couldn't speak properly so I just shook my head. She released me and as I rubbed my face, I could feel her finger marks beginning to appear on my skin.

"Those apples ..." she shouted, "are *not* for you. *Understand?* They're for the paying customer!"

I nodded quickly just in case she grabbed my cheeks again and waited for her to calm.

"Grandma? How did they get like this?"

I couldn't believe it was the same fruit. The marquee had become humid, as though the storm was returning.

"They just ... grow! You know that bit in that fairy tale? The haggard old witch carries a basket of rosy red apples to poison her pain in the ass stepchild? Where do you think they got the story from? Every fable has a seed of truth to it dear. We provide the apples that certain customers use in their own particular way and if anybody gets too close to the family secret, we just ...well, we put them to good use."

She took hold of my hand and led me out of the marquee toward a path I had never seen before behind some old sheds that I had been told were dangerously dilapidated. We reached the newer, gated and locked orchard. She handed me a key and told me to open it.

"How come I didn't know about this place?"

She pushed open the gate.

"Because you didn't have to, until now."

It was for the seedlings she said, the ones that didn't need feeding just yet. Grandma closed the gate behind us and pointed toward the first tree. It was small and reedy, the leaves had already begun to turn a rusty brown.

"Don't know if we'll get anything good from that for a long while, but we can wait. Recognize him?"

I covered my mouth, I didn't know whether to stifle a scream or a laugh, either way I couldn't speak. It was the nosy man from the harvest festival. He was buried past his neck in the soil. The skin on his face had wizened with the weather, and his eyes had rotted into his skull. His jaw bone had collapsed and through his obscenely open mouth, protruded the apple seedling. His teeth had embedded into the swelling trunk.

"His wife gave him one of our windfalls. In a smoothie. She was trying to get him to eat more fruit ..."

There were about eight other trees, all growing from the guts of someone who had pissed Grandma and the family off. A fresh autumnal breeze scattered the rose petals from the flower heads and in the distance we could hear a car horn beep. We turned back to the house. The sisters waved to us. Customers had begun to promptly arrive ready to collect their orders.

My introduction to the family business was complete.

About the Author

Donna Cuttress is from Liverpool, U.K. Previously published by 'Crooked Cat', 'FoF Publishing' 'Firbolg Publishing', 'Latchkey Tales' and 'Flame Tree Publishing'. Her work for 'The Patchwork Raven' 'Twelve Days' is available as an artbook and paperback. She was included in The Sirens Call WIHM 2018 ezine as well as previous issues, and was a speaker at the London Book Fair 2018.

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Blood | Mark Steinwachs

Blood spatters decorate the room. Heaviness thickens the air, hot crimson humidity. Her broken body is sprawled on the bed. I spin the knife in my slender hand, a few droplets spin off, imperceptibly adding to the scene.

The spurting ceased scant minutes ago as her life waned. Her hoarse pleas didn't matter. Nothing mattered other than metal and flesh. This is not a crime of passion. Not temporary insanity, this is textbook cold-blooded murder—and it's amazing. The visceral feeling of piercing skin is more exhilarating than even I imagined.

I've killed before, but never like this. The control... making someone wail and scream in different ways. Slowly cutting elicits whimpered pleas while a sharp slash gets a primitive shriek and the final wet-breathed bawl as I twisted my knife inside her. The human body is much more than blood; heat emanates from the organs I've exposed. I wipe the viscous fluid on my pants and brush my bangs back with my fingers. My job is done. I'll never return to the way I did things before, not after this.

Money makes the world go 'round. It waits for me in an account with a name I'm assuming. I grab the passport, social security card, and driver's license, pausing to look at the picture.

Her face, my face, indistinguishable since we were born.

Money can't buy happiness, but it can buy anything else. It just bought me a new life. All it cost was hers.

Final Moon | Mark Steinwachs

The clouds break to expose a perfect moon on this crisp fall night. I will myself to hear howls in the distance that don't exist. It would be far too cliché to meet my maker under a full moon ripped apart by a creature of fantasy. No, my time ends at the hands of the noxious, silent death that has overrun Earth.

Leaning against a tree, my ankle throbs, purple and swollen. Why did I leave them? I should have known I was too average to survive on my own. Making it this far was more luck than skill, being in the right place at right time kind of thing.

The stench of death assaults me before I hear their shuffle through dry fallen leaves. My finger slides over the trigger of the pistol I learned to use not long ago.

I see one, then another, and more beyond them. They know I'm here through glazed over eyes. I point my gun at the first one and hear others close in around me. There are far too many. I put my gun down, why fight the thing I will become?

My death will be like my life, another one amongst the masses.

About the Author:

Mark Steinwachs is a former roadie that has retired to shop life as General Manager of Bandit Lites 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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As I pen this letter, I am stationed at my desk in the upstairs study, staring through the window at the silhouette of Jack O' Lantern Hill, a dark swell of earth framed beneath the gleaming moonlight.

The timepiece to my right informs me it is a quarter past three in the morning. On cue, the first twinkle of yellow light – that annual harbinger of death, capable of sending the coldest of shivers down my spine even after a decade – shines on the hill. Here again is another.

The looking glass I keep on hand serves me well this Halloween morning. Through it I am able perceive in detail the horrible visage of each lantern as they flare to life. My stomach is in knots, my heart near palpitations as I consider what those leering displays – crafted by forces dark and immortal – represent.

I can no longer live with our cowardice. A decade ago, in an act of ego and greed, the council of Hedgemoor Bluff entered into this pact. To my shame, I was a willing participant, blinded as I was to the hidden legalism in that document offered by our seemingly benign benefactor. Overwhelmed by promises of wealth and long term prosperity, I too sold some part of myself to this sinister bargain.

If only we had we realized the cost.

Doubtless this letter would not be written had we bothered to approach our dealings with an eye for greater clarity. Alas, we suffer for our folly all these years later, bound eternal to fulfill our obligations, lest the wrath of that shadow individual fall upon us all. Even now, the consequences suffered by the family Wendell (good friends and neighbors) last October linger as a terrifying, cautionary memory. Those of you reading this will recall his effort to burn Jack O' Lantern Hill in hopes of exorcising whatever evil lays dormant in its soil year-round. Images of the torn flesh and blood-stained earth discovered among the ruins of his home are forever seared in my mind, alive within those secret places where the most fearful imaginings reign.

Another lantern has come alive, a baker's dozen now shining their dreadful light down on our tiny village. No creature comfort is worth what we've been forced to give.

I almost wish they were being taken in their infancy, those innocent souls. Horrible as that might be, it would at least allow us the mercy of losing a part of ourselves we only knew for a short time.

This way – taking our young in their thirteenth year – is particularly brutal on the soul. Every happy event, every familial milestone, is tainted with the poisonous knowledge we will one day have them stolen from us. The time we have with them only serves to deepen the wound.

Still more have come aglow on the hill. I now retire the looking glass, having neither the will nor the stomach to bear witness to any more. At my count, close to eighteen have lit. Eighteen points of light, illuminating twisted smiles and shrieking grimaces, masks of frozen hysteria. Each of them representing a family who will weep over the lifeless body occupying what should have been a safe bed.

I have left the door to my den open scant inches, waiting to hear the dread sounds of sorrow which will inevitably occupy my own household. My boy Daniel has turned thirteen this past summer. Those of you reading this will know that.

What you may not have known (only Clarissa, my beloved and erstwhile partner, could perceive the depths of my pain) is how diligently I endeavored to mask the hate and terror threatening to overwhelm me. Horrible anticipation has underscored every moment since Daniel's birthday. That such a traditionally celebratory occasion has been corrupted by despair and foreboding only serves to deepen our suffering.

You are not without your share of accountability in these matters. Indeed, your very unwillingness to act has wrought these dire happenings. I had pleaded with those of you on the council, but you were too frightened (or, I suspect in the case of certain individuals, too enraptured by your material gain) to challenge this curse.

I contended with you on behalf of my son and those other families whose children will be taken today. You turned a deaf ear and an icy heart to my protestations. In doing so, you've brought what transpires next upon yourselves.

My wife shares my grief and weariness living with this nightmare and has chosen to perish with me tonight. We will consume a bitter potion upon my completion of this missive, which shall be sealed and placed in our sitting room. The envelope has been marked for the eyes of the council. By the time you have deduced who is responsible and discover this letter, the damage will have been done.

I write the following with candor: I am *glad*. As the poison saturating the treats Clarissa and I so generously supplied your annual All Hallows celebration brings your own children to their knees in terminal agony, we are steadfast in spitting the last of our breath at you with the venom of a viper. You do not deserve to have them for thirteen years. Tonight your sons and daughters will die in concert with my own blood.

A low sobbing drifts to me now through the crack in the door. My wife is shedding tears down the hall and I need not step out of this room to know she is with our son, holding his cold hand, her heart torn.

I am taking one last look at the hill, my need to know for certain overriding my disgust with the act itself. The glass does not lie. Nineteen Jack O' Lanterns now stare back.

Daniel has joined them.

Damn you. Damn all of us for this deal we have made.

I can only hope what lies beyond for my wife and child is peaceful and pure, a respite from the cruelties this life executed upon them. For myself, I fear I shall enter the afterlife under condemnation, my soul forever a prisoner of those cruel, inhuman faces again haunting Jack O' Lantern Hill.

About the Author:

D. S. Ullery has been published in multiple magazines and anthologies, including *Siren's Call*, *Disturbed Digest*, *Journals of Horror: Found Fiction*; *When Red Snow Melts*; *Paying the Ferryman* and *Final Masquerade*. He is an Affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association and lives in West Palm Beach, FL with a black cat named Jason, who was born on Friday the 13th.

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O'Leary's Drive Thru | Ed Ahern

The sign at the entrance ramp
explains it all.

Welcome to O'Leary's Underway Wakes.

Please tune your entertainment system
to www.dearlydeparted.dom

Please select a dead person
from the drop-down menu.

Text condolences to the number shown.

Donations for eflowers, more eco friendly
than floral arrangements, can be made
using your cell phone.

Corpse viewing at 5 mph.

A second drive thru is available
at no additional cost.

Enjoy!

About the Author:

Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had two over hundred 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 editors.

Amazon Author Link: [Ed Ahern](http://www.amazon.com/author/edahern)

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A Story for the Boys | John Teel

"Tell us a story, Mom," Paul said, his sleeping bag already rolled out beneath him as he threw another stick into the fire. "Dad always comes up with some really scary ones."

"I wish he was here," Danny said with his head hanging.

Jackie tried all day to get him out of his slump, but Danny was almost a teenager now and he knew that his parents weren't getting along. He could hear the fights and he was angry about it. He was afraid, too. He didn't want to be one of those kids alternating weekends with his divorced parents and pretending to like their new significant others. The double Christmas presents wouldn't be so bad, though.

The campground was always the boys' and Daniel's favorite vacation, filled with fishing, farting and pissing on trees. Jackie, on the other hand, was never a big fan of camping. The bugs, the inconvenience of going to the bathroom, sleeping in a tent on the hard ground. But she knew how much the boys loved it and she wanted to spend some time, just the three of them. Mostly she wanted to take Danny's mind off his worries for the weekend. So far it had been a total failure.

Jackie smiled at Danny and said, "You know your father is on a work trip. You'll see him soon."

"He's always working," Danny said. "I guess work's more important than us."

"Danny," Jackie said, "you know that's not—"

"Come on, Mom. Story," Paul blurted out.

Jackie sighed. She wished there was more she could say to Danny, but she knew it was pointless. He was pissed at both of them and there wasn't much she could do to change his mind. "Alright you little pain. You want a scary story? I got one."

Paul smiled wide and tucked his knees to his chest. Danny stared off at the trees.

"When I was a little girl, Pop-Pop used to take me and Aunt Candice out here. This campground is where I met your Dad. That lake we always take you guys to, well that's where we, uh, decided to have you, Danny." The memory of Daniel taking her there on the grass beside the lake made her smile.

"Come on man," Danny said, disgusted.

"What?" Paul asked.

"Anyway," Jackie said, moving on, "there was always talk of these woods being haunted. People said they saw things. Ghosts. But that was all crap. It wasn't a ghost that haunted these woods. It was something else." She paused and on cue the wind picked up and the branches overhead rustled and swayed. When the wind stopped blowing Paul spoke. "What was it?"

Jackie grinned. The orange of the campfire mixed with the shadows gave her face an eerie glow.

"Not that long ago, there was a couple who lived around here named Robert and Sheila Kissel. They were pretty wealthy, owned a few businesses. That diner we used to go to was theirs. They had the biggest general store in the county, when there were still general stores. They had a daughter named Abby, about your age, Paul. She was the best thing in their lives and they loved her, loved her so much. She was smart and beautiful and caring. Just a really good kid, like you two boys. Everything was perfect and things looked even better when Sheila became pregnant with their second child. Abby was beside herself with happiness at the thought of having a little brother or sister, the one thing she'd always wanted.

As the months rolled on, Sheila began having a hard time. There were complications with the pregnancy. The contractions were so bad she thought the baby was gonna burst through her stomach, like the dinner scene in *Alien*. When the doctor did the ultrasound, the baby's hands were all wrong. Instead of fingers, it had three long, curved claws, like tiny meat hooks. The head was big and misshapen and it had a long tail that curled and uncurled around the thing's crooked legs. The doctor

told them to abort it, said he'd never seen anything like it before. Later that night when Abby heard her parents discussing it, she talked them out of it. She told them all things deserved a chance, even if they're different. And so they decided to have the baby."

Danny's arms were uncrossed and he was hanging on every word.

Gotcha, Jackie thought with triumph.

"This is great," Paul said, "But how about some s'mores?"

"Got the stuff right here," Jackie said, handing him a marshmallow and a stick. "Got some of my homemade chocolate bars, too."

Paul's marshmallow was already engulfed in flame on the end of his stick. "This is the best camping trip ever."

Jackie offered Danny a stick and a marshmallow. "Come on, you gotta have one."

He flashed her his handsome smile that made him look so much like his father, and took the stick, holding his marshmallow above the fire, turning it over and over, evenly distributing the char. She gave them each a square of chocolate and two graham crackers and got on with the story.

"Where was I?" Jackie asked.

"The mutant baby was being born," Paul said as he chomped down on his s'more, white goo sticking to his chin.

"Right," Jackie said. "The Kissel's had the baby at home instead of the hospital. They didn't want anyone to know that they had birthed a monstrosity for fear of their businesses losing money."

"Jerks," Paul said.

"What did they do with it?" Danny asked in between bites.

"It wouldn't take milk from a bottle. It would make high-pitched animal sounds day and night and whip its tail at them and hiss like a cat, a trail of thick, green drool pouring down its chin. Sheila tried breastfeeding, but the thing had these razor-sharp teeth and when she pulled its face away, she had cuts all over her breast, the thing licking its lips and wailing because it wanted more."

"More what? Blood?" Paul asked.

Jackie nodded.

"Gross," Paul said.

"So after that they decided to lock it in the attic without food or water. Kissel took an old chain and collared it to the thing's neck and padlocked the other end to a thick, wooden support post. They decided to let it die up there and bury it in the back yard like it'd never existed.

"But Abby couldn't let that happen. She would sneak up there and unlock the door and pet its long head or the place on its neck where the chain prevented it from scratching itself. Sometimes she would sing to it, its body swaying and moving to the gentle sound of her voice. It would let her hold it, falling asleep in her arms as she serenaded it. Abby could tell it was hungry. She tried giving it raw meat, but it wouldn't take it. It whipped a bottle of milk out of her hands. She thought it was hopeless."

The wind blew in again, rustling up some leaves and making the boys jump. Jackie giggled.

"I can stop if it's too scary for you guys," she said.

Paul's eyes scanned the woods for any mutant babies. Nothing.

"I gotta hear how this ends," Danny said. He yawned and then popped the rest of his s'more in his mouth.

Jackie could tell the boys were getting tired. *Have to wrap this up*, she thought.

"One night while she sang to the thing, a tiny mouse darted across the floor. It saw the mouse and it stood, its tail shooting straight out like a lance and spearing the mouse into the floor. It went into a frenzy when it saw the blood, tearing at the mouse and swallowing every bit, lapping at the tiny

droplets of blood on the floor. Abby stroked its head. And then she had an idea. In her bedroom were the gerbils she'd gotten for Christmas. She brought the cage up to the baby and it started growling, a deep, guttural sound bubbling out of its throat. It threw itself at the cage, the chain around its neck jerking it to the floor. It jumped back up, the tail whipping back and forth like a cat about to pounce. Abby shushed its growling and placed the gerbils in front of the baby. In the blink of an eye, it tore through the wire cage with its claws, grasping the gerbils and ripping their bodies apart in its jaws, holding them high and letting the warm blood drip down its throat."

Paul's mouth was agape, mid-chew, his eyes wide, like he'd just seen a naked girl for the first time.

"From that moment on she vowed to keep her brother alive. To take care of him. No matter what."

"This is sick, Mom," Danny said, smiling in spite of himself and finally enjoying their time together. "Can I have another s'more?"

"Have as many as you want, kid," Jackie said handing him another piece of chocolate and the bag of marshmallows.

"This is way better than any of Dad's stories," Paul said.

Jackie laughed. Paul took another marshmallow from his brother and stabbed it onto his stick. "There's one thing I don't understand. You said that it haunted these woods," Paul said yawning loud, exhaustion creeping in. "But how did it get out of the house?"

Jackie lowered her voice and moved closer to the campfire.

"Abby was only a little girl and she only had so many things to feed it. The gerbils. A stray cat here and there, but after a while she had nothing for him and he would wail and moan and thrash about on the attic floor in agony. Seeing the poor thing in such pain finally sent her over the edge. Abby knew what she had to do. So she wrote her father a note and left it on the kitchen table. When Kissel got home from work, he found the note and read it.

It said, 'Dad. I don't know if I can ever forgive you and Mom for what you've done to the baby. He's different, but he's a part of our family. I've never asked you for anything, but I want you to do something for me now. I want you to promise, REALLY PROMISE ME, you won't hurt him. Ever. He is a gentle, beautiful little thing with feelings just like the rest of us. And he needs to be fed like the rest of us. You wouldn't do it so I had to. Even though I'm mad, I still love you. I always will. Love, Abby.'

Kissel ran to the attic, but he was too late. Abby had cut herself, the sight and smell of the blood too much for the baby to control its hunger. When Kissel got to her, the baby had already eaten most of the meat from Abby's face and neck. And the baby was sleeping, blood-stained and calm, cuddled up in its sister's lap, the only place it ever felt safe."

"Kissel didn't kill it?" Danny asked, his voice drowsy and far away. Paul was already fast asleep, sprawled out on his sleeping bag.

"He wanted to. He put it in a box and took it to these woods, tossing it out into the trees. He wanted to take his gun and blow its head off, but Abby made him promise not to kill her brother and he couldn't bring himself to break a promise to his little girl. But sometimes people break their promises. Sometimes for good reasons. Other times not so good. Like how your father broke the promise he made to me on the day we took our wedding vows. He decided the girl he'd been going on his 'work trips' with was worth breaking up our family over and I just can't accept that. Kissel wasn't strong enough to do what needed to be done, but I am."

Jackie looked at her two boys slumped over in the dry Autumn leaves and wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Anyway, it's just a story."

The crushed up sleeping pills she mixed into the chocolate bars took effect a lot faster than she thought they would. She carried her sons, one at a time, to the car and sat them upright in the back seat, buckling them both in and kissing their faces.

"I love you boys," she said. "I'm glad we got to do this one last time."

Leaving the boys, she closed the door and walked around to the back of the car, popping the trunk. Daniel's eyes were open, dry blood staining the pale skin around the slash in his throat. Her husband's corpse was wrapped in a tarp and she pulled it out of there, his body hitting the ground with a loud thud. He had a smudge of grease on his cheek, probably from the spare, and she wet her shirt with her mouth and wiped it off. When that was finished, she lugged his body into the front seat and strapped him in, kissing his mouth and caressing his cheek.

"I forgive you," she said.

Jackie walked back to the fire pit and dumped some water over the flames so as not to cause a forest fire, the sudden blackness enveloping her. She got in the car, starting it up and taking a look at the boys breathing softly in the back. She didn't feel angry anymore at her husband for what he'd done to her. She didn't feel sad or inadequate or hurt.

Jackie put the car in gear and drove toward the lake, the place where she met Daniel. The place where they'd started their family. The place where it all began. It was fitting then that it was the place where it would eventually end.

Jackie felt calm, at peace. She had her men with her, the only men she'd ever loved, and once the water came rushing in through the open windows, filling the car and washing over them, no one would ever be able to take them away from her. Down there, it would just be the four of them, the way it was always meant to be.

About the Author:

John Teel is a union ironworker from Philadelphia. His work has appeared in Dark Moon Digest, The Literary Hatchet, Shotgun Honey and Pulp Modern. When he isn't working he spends his time with his two kids and the ugliest rescue dog you've ever laid eyes on.

Facebook: [John Teel](#)



T.S. W
orld

*He clawed and scraped
at the inside of my mind.
There were things there
I wanted to leave behind.*

*The broken pieces of hate,
I held onto as memory,
were shadows and demons,
and shades of sensory.*

Vintage | Eliana Gradishar

romance Halloween—
put your head in the guillotine
of my love with no exit,

they call me Trainwreck Electric,
chivalry, in all its forms, expected.

kneel to lace these boots
in a crowded street,
it's nobody else's business.

volatile festival,
with wilder colors than skeletal rot,
spark a polychromic, spurt-effect, in my heart,

a passion eccentric,
all the dead holidays strung taut.

the death-stop | Eliana Gradishar

waiting for a body
to take me home,

a worm spun, memory-foam-coffin,
that i can get comfy in,

in order to set
fresh blood afloat.

don't mean to be morbid,
but such good limbs are hard to find,

and, i'm looking for the clearest sign
to guide me back to the grave.

skeletal ruse | Eliana Gradishar

my zombie baby muse
bleeds music in the bayous
of a skeletal ruse.

whippoorwill trills
give asylums a thrill,

wait for the cries
as our melodies
tighten passion's noose,
it's that zombie baby juice.

together we free
every cemetery song,
trust me it won't take long,
come along, come along...come along.

roses and bones | Eliana Gradishar

lover,
obscure
the grave,

scour
sodden earth
to reach the heart of it,

harness
fertile
the stone,

let
beak-bone
disperse verse,

under
witch shine
of clean summer moon,

as roses rise
in wild petal tongues
to cultivate a thorn mess,

where kisses,
tinted with skeleton blood,
sow fruit for our cemetery garden.

About the Author:

Eliana Vanessa is originally from Argentina and moved to New Orleans, Louisiana at a young age. She recently participated 100,000 Poets for Change (2018) and served as part of a panel of poets in The Jane Austen Festival (2017 & 2018). You can find her work online at *The Horror Zine*, *The Rye Whiskey Review*, and *The Sirens Call* eZine.

Facebook: [Eliana Vanessa](#)

"Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the lord my soul to...to..."

"Well, go on and finish, Marjorie."

"I don't wanna! I don't want him having my soul and I sure don't wanna die before I wake!"

"Marj, quit being so difficult. Just finish your prayers and get to bed. I'm too tired for this. Your grandma will come in here if you continue this racket."

"I don't care about her! I hate her! You let her be mean to us!"

"Marj, finish up and hush!"

"I never had to say them before!"

"Well, we never had to live here before now did we! Your damn father...never mind. Just finish!" Her mother whispered harshly as she looked over her shoulder to the bedroom door. Marjorie felt sad for her mother and relented.

"Can I say it in my head then, instead? I hate saying it out loud."

"Fine, that's fine. Just make sure you do it, ok? I gotta get to bed. I got work early. I love you, Marj." Her mother rubbed the dark circle beneath her eye to catch the tear that had begun to slowly slide down her sunken sallow cheek.

"Love you too, Mommy."

Marjorie waited until her mother closed the bedroom door and then hopped into her bed. *Why should I give him my soul? It's not his to take and I'm not ready to die either!* She didn't understand the whole religion thing. A few weeks ago, her grandmother made her drink holy water after she confided in her that she had a dream about being pregnant. When she told her mother about it, she snorted and told her it wasn't a big deal she had drunk it all the time.

But it was a big deal to Marjorie, because even at 9 years old, she didn't believe in all the mumbo jumbo her grandmother did. Perhaps she was like her father, an Atheist he had once said. She had no idea what that really was, but she didn't believe some guy died on a cross and watched her every move. She hoped not anyway, because she had done some pretty terrible things lately. She had been calling her daddy even though she was told not to and she even stole some of her grandma's coins out of the big old green jug she kept in her bedroom and put them in her own piggy bank.

Marjorie pulled the covers up tight to her chin and thought about the prayer. Her grandma told her it was important to say it every night in case. She had asked in case of what of course, and her grandma had responded in case you were to expire in the night and then you might end up in Hell. She was scared only a little, but also angry at her grandma. *Who was she to make me say prayers that I didn't even believe in? And who was she to make me wear a dress every Sunday, go to church, and then to awful bible class? How could she believe in prayers or forgiveness, when she's always hurting Mommy and me! She's mean and evil! I'll never say the prayer again! She can't make me!*

Her grandmother lived in a musty old house that she limped around in all day on account of her bad hip, cleaning everything with vinegar and newspaper. She only watched old movies, game shows, religious shows, and the news while pouring herself drinks all day. Her mother said they would only be there until she could find a place to live that they could afford, but they had been there for 5 months already. She wasn't allowed to do much of anything, except read, mostly from bibles or Reader's Digests. Her grandmother had so many bibles, *how many bibles could there be*, Marjorie wondered. She was allowed outside, but only if her mother was home and able to go out with her.

She mostly made up games and played with what few toys she had pulled from boxes. Her grandmother hated toys and didn't want to see them lying about. She had thrown one of Marjorie's favorite dolls in the trash because she left it on the floor and she also cut her go fish cards into little pieces and then flushed them down the toilet. She even cut the head off her stuffed dog, Rupert, and left his headless body on her bed to which she had told her, "Leave any more of your childish toys laying around, and I'll burn them."

She always had an evil smirk as she did stuff too. Her mother stood by helplessly with tears in her eyes, she was afraid of grandmother, that much Marjorie could tell. She hated her grandmother and wanted to live with her father, but he said he wasn't ready for that yet when she called, whatever that meant.

As she lay there, she could still feel the throbbing under her chin where her grandmother pinched her earlier. She had forgotten to ask to be excused from the table after dinner and before she could finish sliding off her chair, her grandmother pinched the skin under her chin and told her to sit back down.

"Ask to be excused before you leave this table, Madam Phe Phe. Have you already forgotten last night?" Her grandma smirked.

Tears brimmed her eyes as she looked to her mother, pleading, and then back to her grandmother. The pinch felt like a hot poker being held under her chin and she waited in protest until she couldn't anymore and sat back down. She sat at the table for a good while before she mumbled to be excused through gritted teeth

"What was that?" her grandmother asked.

"Can I be excused?"

"Come again, I didn't hear a please in there." She smirked.

"Can I please be excused, master?"

"Why you little...go brush your teeth and get ready for bed, you insolent little shit", she spat.

She hadn't forgotten last night, not even a little bit. Last night she found out she wouldn't be able to participate in Halloween, which was a few days away. Her grandmother said it was the Devil's birthday and no granddaughter of hers was celebrating it in her house. Halloween was Marjorie's favorite holiday, her and her daddy would dress up and go begging for candy together. She had called him to ask if he was taking her this year, but his voice sounded funny and it cracked when he told her he was not.

She decided to be a witch and she was excitedly telling her mother about it at dinner last night. Her mother pushed the food around her plate and never looked at her face.

"Mommy, I wanna be a witch for Halloween this year! We could go to that one big store and pick out costumes! You know the one where we always went to with Daddy with all the cool stuff inside? He would stomp on all the buttons and those things would pop out and scare us? Since Daddy isn't going this year, you and me can dress up as witches! Normally you just hand out candy, but grandma can do that and we can..."

"Hold it right there missy! I will do no such thing. I never celebrated that Satan worshipping holiday in this house and I don't intend to start!"

"Mother, please, it's just Halloween. It's just fun for kids. Even the church has a little get together."

"It's more of a fall festival and it's not on Halloween, it's on November 2nd."

"Well, whatever. It won't hurt a thing if I take her out to trick-"

Grandmother put her hand up and slammed her glass on the table. Her black eyes burned into both of them and spittle flew in every direction.

"You just stop! Stop it right there, Joanne! You let that man you married poison your mind! I just said I never celebrated it before and I don't intend to now! I do not celebrate that damn Devil worshipping holiday in this house! Do you understand?"

"Well, Mommy and me won't be in your stupid house! We'll be outside, and you don't own outside!" Marjorie cried.

Her mother didn't get to her in time before her grandmother slapped her so hard her teeth rattled and she bit her tongue. Tears stung the raw welt that rose on her cheek and blood filled her mouth.

"Mother! You can't..."

"I can't what? Discipline my own grandchild in my own house? A child you both so clearly never had control over? She's lucky that's all she got with that nasty mouth of hers! I'll tell you what, not only will she not celebrate Halloween, but she will take that day and read from the bible until I tell her to stop! She'll fast and only be allowed water. Is that clear? Answer me!"

"Mother, she's just a child. I...yes... Mother."

"But, Mommy! Please, Please no! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!"

"You shut your mouth, little witch! Now, get out of my sight! Or else your other cheek will match!" Her grandmother rose her gnarled hand.

Marjorie knocked over her chair as she ran from the table and into her room. She waited for her mother to come and comfort her, but she never did. She fell asleep in the moth ball scented closet that night holding her throbbing cheek and crying into the scratchy carpet. Her grandmother had left her dinner plate on the table from the night before and forced her to eat ice cold mashed potatoes and meatloaf for breakfast. She gagged on the coagulated bits of gravy and flinched every time she heard her grandmother chuckle from behind her.

"That's what you get, Madame Phe Phe. No one wastes food in this house."

Marjorie finished the plate and even though it was a weekend she was not allowed to go outside to play. She was to be punished and had to stay in her room until dinner. At dinner she ate quietly, wincing as she chewed with

her sore mouth. She had stubbornly not asked to be excused as part of her protest against her grandmother's tyrannical rule, but as usual she failed to gain a win.

Marjorie seethed as she tossed and turned. She touched the welt under her chin, then she touched her cheek and winced. She got up and quietly opened her door and peeked out. She could see the TV blinking from the crack of her grandma's bedroom door. Her mom's door was shut.

She crept out of her room and into the kitchen. She carefully slid open all the drawers until she found what she was looking for. She slowly walked to her grandmother's bedroom and looked into the sliver of door. She was propped up on her pillows, still awake, watching some show with the volume down.

Marjorie went back into her room and quietly shut her door behind her. She opened her curtains, then got back into bed and lay down on top of the covers. She held the cool steel against her cheek and grinned in the yellow moonlight that bathed her room.

She lay like that for a long while, comforted by the ticking of the clock on the wall. When the clock read 2:00 am she slunk off her bed and went into the closet. She pulled down a long black coat and black scarf. The coat was too big and drag on the ground behind her. She draped the scarf around her head and looked in the mirror. *It would do*, she smiled at herself. She left her room and quietly, very quietly, entered her grandmother's bedroom.

The TV was on mute and lit the room enough for her to see. Her grandmother slept propped up with her mouth open. Marjorie winced at the smell of her breath as she noisily exhaled. Her bible lay on the night stand with a bookmark in it and on top of it lay a sweating drink. Candy wrappers littered the bed. She stood in the dark over her grandmother before she began to whisper.

"Now I lay you down to sleep, I pray for Satan your soul to keep, and you will die before you wake, I pray your soul for Hell to take."

Her grandmother's eyes fluttered only slightly before the knife cut deep across her neck. Marjorie admired the blood that poured out over the gold crucifix around her grandmother's neck and watched as it turned her white night gown dark red. She waited until her grandmother stopped making gagging noises, placed the knife on top of her, and then left the bedroom. The coat scraped along the carpet as she walked down the hall and went into her mother's room.

She slipped into her mother's twin bed and lay down. Her mother stirred only a little, moving over to let Marj have more room and then whispered in the dark,

"Marj, You ok You have a bad dream?"

"I'm ok, Mommy. I finished my prayers."

"That's nice, Marj. That's real nice, honey," her mother said dreamily and then began snoring softly. Marjorie fell fast asleep beside her mother with the coat wrapped snugly around her and the scarf draped over her head. She slept the most sound and peaceful sleep she ever had.

About the Author:

Vivian Kasley lives in the land of the extremely strange and unusual, Florida. She was an educator for several years before she left to write and travel (mostly in her mind). At a very young age, horror welcomed her with open arms and she never looked back. She has published work with Dark Moon Digest, Perpetual Motion Machine Publishing, and Sirens Call Publications with more on the way.

Facebook: [Vivian Kasley](#)

Candlelight Grin | Kameryn James

Screams bellowed, yet Jack O'Lantern heard nothing, for he had no ears.

A knife glinted from her determined hand.

Jack O'Lantern watched with unblinking eyes that flickered with candlelight. Only he saw the grievous act, the feeble attempts to block her unapologetic rage, and the blood dripping from the crimson blade.

Jack O'Lantern grinned.

Skeletons on the Porch | Kameryn James

Mr. Morgan heard the excited scampering of little feet across his wooden porch before the doorbell sounded their intent.

"Trick-or-treat!"

He recognized the voices of the neighborhood twins from beneath their superhero masks. Their father smiled a greeting from the bottom of the porch steps.

"I like your skeletons," said the Iron Man mask.

Mr. Morgan beheld his Halloween decorations, sitting bare-boned on the wicker furniture, staring with empty eye sockets; their mouths forever locked in deathly grimaces.

He chuckled to himself. This never gets old.

Every year, everyone thought his skeletons were fake.

Mommy, Take Me Trick-or-Treating | Kameryn James

"Mommy, can we go trick-or-treating?"

Her voice, sweet like wind chimes, whispers in my mind, embraces my heart, and thunders in my soul.

I sigh and pull my sweater tighter in futile attempts to warm the chill of dread. "No, darling, you know you are not well."

"But, Mommy, we have so much fun."

Silence.

"Please? I promise I'll be good."

I know she will be good; she always has.

"Mommy! Take me trick-or-treating!"

I click on a flashlight. I plunge the shovel into the grassy dirt of her grave.

"Alright, darling."

About the Author:

Kameryn James spent her childhood in Louisiana, where everything is haunted. She now finds herself displaced and riding her bike around Lowell, Massachusetts in search of urban places to write.

Kameryn wrote the supernatural horror novel, *Doll House*, and later pieced her short stories together in *A Book Full of Terrible Things*. She enjoys iced coffee, exploring, and thunderstorms.

Facebook: [Kameryn James](#)
Instagram: [@alisonwrites_stuff](#)

Freaks and Treats | Mathias Jansson

I love Halloween
the candy, the costumes
all the people around me
staring and pointing
whispering in horror:
—Did you see?
—What a scary mask
—Shit it looks so real

I love Halloween
the only day of the year
when I don't have to hide
and sneak in the shadows
in an ugly disguise

I love Halloween
it's the only day of the year
when I can be myself
a day when people come to me
admire and praise my look
a day when the kids give me a high five
and say: You are so cool
but they are such fools
they don't realize
Halloween is the only day
I can go out on the streets
dressed as myself

About the Author:

Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines such as The Horror Zine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock and The Sirens Call. He has also contributed to over 100 different horror anthologies from publishers as Horrified Press, James Ward Kirk Fiction, Source Point Press, Thirteen Press etc.

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

She sat at the table, hand shaking as she lit the cigarette. Why would he do this to her she asked herself. She always thought she had been a good wife. Yeah some of the thrill had worn off but after two kids what did he really expect? How could he just not come home...how could he just take her kids and not come home?

They had met in college. She was pursuing a degree in nursing; he was majoring in criminal justice. Although they didn't see each other much around campus they bumped into each other regularly at Java Jubilee, a café nearby where students went to socialize and study. Three weeks of 'bumping into each other' at the café and he asked her out. A year and half later they were married. She remembered the night he proposed like it was yesterday.

He had taken her to the dinner on the boardwalk, after which they acted like teenagers going on every Amusement ride they could find. They then spent the night on the beach laying in each other's arms. As they watched the sun rise, he dug around in the sand for a strategically planted shell. She remembered him telling her to put it up to her ear and listen to the ocean. Playing along she did and, as she put the shell to her ear something inside rattled. Figuring a pebble or something had gotten inside she started to shake the shell. A stone fell into her palm in the form of a diamond engagement ring. She looked at him in shock as he kissed her and asked if she would marry him.

Tears streamed down her face. How could he just leave her like this?

A few days later she came home and found a woman in the house. She was attractive, in her late forties, and dressed in business attire. She had been given a key. Was this the woman who had taken her husband away...was this his mistress? Yet, even as she thought it, she wouldn't let herself believe that Dylan would cheat on her.

She walked into the living room to confront the woman. *Not attractive and definitely not Dylan's type*, she thought as she introduced herself, "I'm Ellen McNamara. I live here. Now would you mind explaining what you're doing in my house?"

The woman got right to the point and said "Ellen. You can't stay here any longer. The house is going on the market. It's what Dylan feels he needs to do, and it would be best for your family if you didn't stand in the way."

Sell the house? How could he even think of selling the place without even talking to her about it? Well this wasn't going to happen no matter what this woman said. Best for her family...how the hell did this witch know what was best for her family?

Sensing that a confrontation was coming, the woman stood up to leave.

"Well I don't know who you are or what my husband told you, but this house is not for sale," she said, anger rising in her voice. "And the next time you decide to let yourself into my home, I'll call the police."

Looking around the house at all the furniture they had bought...how they had furnished the rooms in different contemporary styles. *He could leave if he wants to*, she thought, *but I still own part of this house so if he thinks I'm leaving he has another thing coming.*

She sat down on the couch looking around the living room. She thought of Christmas morning two years ago. It was the first Christmas that the kids could really embrace the full experience of the holiday. She remembered Kayla and little Ryan coming down the stairs. Poor Ryan had gotten so excited thinking about what Santa Claus had brought him that he wet his pants on the way down the stairs. She cherished the sense of wonder that little kids bring to Christmas morning.

This past Christmas gave her just as much joy. Kayla singing as she played with her Hannah Montana dolls...and Ryan pushing his Monster Trucks across the floor with his battery powered Batmobile in pursuit. She and Dylan had made Christmas dinner together and later, after the kids had gone to bed, they made love. The thought made her smile through welling tears. Even after two kids and six years of marriage, they still made love with the passion of newlyweds. That's what made this so hard. How could they have lost that kind of love?

She couldn't control it any longer. She began to cry uncontrollably. *How could he do this?* When she was able to get her composure, she eyed the phone. She needed to contact an attorney. There was no way he was taking her kids...no way he was selling the house. Her father would know a good attorney. There was no way he'd let Dylan get away with this. Of course, that was another thing. How would she tell her parents? They were both so fond of Dylan. She remembered her mother telling her that she couldn't have found a better catch. What would they think of him now? Damn you...Damn you for doing this to me.

She thought about calling him. She deserved some kind of explanation. She was sure that whatever it was they could work things out. Picking up the phone, she started to dial his number than decided against it. She would wait to hear from her father. See what her attorney had to say about the whole situation.

The woman was back again. From the bedroom window Ellen could see her standing on the lawn. She was putting up a real estate sign officially putting the house on the market. After pushing the metal sign into the grass, she let herself in the house. Incredible! *How could this woman just walk in like she already owns the place? The nerve of people*, she thought.

"Get out!" Ellen yelled at the woman. "I'm calling the police!"

"Ellen, you don't need to be this way. You need to accept this. You need to accept that it's all over and you need to move on. I understand that it is difficult under the circumstances, but it is really for the best."

Ellen was losing control now. If she wasn't careful she was going to end up hitting this woman. The woman must have sensed this because she said, "Ok Ellen...what is it going to take to get you to accept this and move on?"

"Move on? I'm not moving on." Ellen screamed at the woman.

"Ellen, listen to me. If you love your husband...if you love you kids, you'll accept this. It will make things easier for them."

"Make it easier for them; how can being taken away from their mother make things easier for them?" She responded infuriated at this woman's audacity. "I think I can decide what's best for *my* children."

The woman backed off a bit, her face filled with sympathy and just a little intimidation. "Ellen..." the woman started.

"I don't understand. Why is Dylan doing this? I wasn't a bad wife...I wasn't a bad mother. I loved him with all my heart." She could feel herself breaking down in front of this woman who was trying to take her home from her. "What did I do that was so wrong? Why is he doing this to me?" Ellen cried.

The woman looked at her...stared at her with tears welling up in her eyes as if she could empathize with everything Ellen was feeling. "Ellen we've been through this before...all of it. I can see no matter how many times I try to convince you that there is only one way you are going to listen."

As if reading the woman's mind Ellen responded, "Yeah...have him come tell me. Have him come and look me in the eye and tell me that this is what he wants. Have him come and tell me what it was that I did so wrong."

The woman stood and looked at Ellen. "Ok. I see it's going to be the only way."

Ellen's nerves were rattled as she stared out the window at the two cars pulling up to the house. One, the Lexus, belonged to the woman...the other was Dylan's Grand Cherokee. Her stomach jumped when she saw him walking towards the house. Even with all he had done to her she missed him...longed for his touch...his smile. Yet she knew she couldn't let that cloud her judgment. What he was doing to her was wrong and she was going to make sure he knew it. She gave herself some hope figuring maybe once he saw her he would realize he had made a mistake. She wished the kids had come with him, but she figured if they were going to fight the last thing she wanted was for her children to be exposed to it. She knew Dylan would feel the same way...or at least thought he would.

The woman stood talking to Dylan outside. Dylan nodded at the woman taking in everything she was saying. Ellen got some relief in their body language. There was nothing between them except business. If he was having an affair it wasn't with this woman. However, it still perturbed Ellen when he invited her inside. This was something they should be discussing alone. Anger rose up inside her again as they came through the door.

"How could you?" Ellen cried as she moved toward him.

The woman interrupted. "Ellen, Dylan has something for you to see. You need to sit down."

"If you don't mind...I'll talk to my husband. You can stay out of it or leave," Ellen said, her patience for this woman coming to an end.

She looked at Dylan as he sat down on the couch. She sat down across from him. Staring at him, looking into those deep blue eyes that had warmed her heart on so many nights, she waited.

"Ellen...this is difficult." Dylan spoke slowly. "I love you so much."

Ellen was caught off guard. She didn't expect this; she was expecting accusations or some kind of resentment. *He loves me?* "But if..." she started.

"Ellen...I don't want to hurt you. I don't want you to suffer anymore."

"I don't...I don't understand...suffer...how?" She said.

The woman looked at her, "Ellen...Dylan has something to show you. It will be difficult, but you must accept it. It's the only way you'll understand. Unfortunately, we can't change what happened."

Ellen was growing more and more confused and frustrated at the woman being there. She looked at Dylan. "Just tell me...already...Dylan; just tell me what the heck is going on."

She watched as Dylan, with a trembling hand, laid a newspaper on the table. Tears were welling up in his eyes.

She glanced at the paper suspiciously. What was it going to say? What was going on? Slowly she looked at the newspaper. It was the local news section and was dated February 10th 2018...eight months ago. There was a picture of a car crash on a snow-covered highway. The headline read 'Local Woman Dies in Crash'.

An uneasy feeling began to rise in her stomach as she read the article further:

In a statement released by New Jersey State Police, local woman, Ellen McNamara age 28, was driving her SUV northbound on Interstate 295, when her vehicle was struck by a large truck that had lost control on the snow-covered highway. Rescue workers spent over an hour trying to extricate McNamara from the demolished vehicle. Despite their best effort to save her, Ellen McNamara was pronounced dead at the scene. She is survived by her husband Dylan, daughter Kayla, and son Ryan.

She finished reading it...then read it once more before looking at Dylan. He hadn't left her. She had left him. Tears were streaming down his face. Gently she reached out to touch him, overwhelmed with the grief he and the kids must have felt. When she did she heard him whisper "I love you. I will always love you."

She whispered, "I love you," to him as she embraced him. "Take care of my babies," she said as she kissed him. She understood now. It was time for her to go.

About the Author:

Shane P. Carr is an Emergency Medical Technician working in southern New Jersey. He is an avid fan of all types of Horror, Fantasy, Scifi, and Thriller fiction. He is currently at work on a Time-Travel Fantasy novel set during the Salem Witch Trials. 'Ellen' is his first published story.

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***This everlasting nightmare
will not let me catch my breath.
It punishes without care,
ushering me to my death.
Songs sang by the crow,
I feel deep in my bones.
I refuse to go,
running from cold tombstones.***

Silver Screen Horrors | Shyla Fairfax-Owen

In the dead of night, *It Follows*
The Fog closing in, exacerbating your wallows
Halloween lingers in the air
Trick 'r Treat and a bit of gory flare
Candy Corn and *Ginger Snaps* stuffed under your bed
You're sure there's a *Scream* or two stuck in your head
It's all festive and sweet, but it's no *Child's Play*
"You're Next," it whispers as you lay
The Others might be hiding in your shed
After all, it's the *Night of the Living Dead*

About the Author:

Shyla Fairfax-Owen earned a Master's Degree in Film Studies, specializing in Gender and Horror. She has built a career as a Technical Writer, occasionally submitting fiction pieces for publication. When it comes to creative writing, Shyla tends towards short, speculative fiction, and themes of Otherness and female relationships. She currently lives in Ontario, Canada.

Blog: [Words & Stitches](#)

Self—Portrait | B.E. Seidl

Painted shortly before the artist's death, the self-portrait is a radical departure from the romanticism of Sara Benn's prior works. Dabs of deep red frame a face in which cut-out holes replace the eyes, giving way for the beholder's gaze to penetrate the image. The distorted head is crowned with a scalp. Arranged in dark clots, the hair attached to the piece of skin emphasizes the painting's realistic effect. Transmitting the essence of the painter's spirit, the mixed media composition of non-traditional materials taken directly from the subject marks the self-destructive endpoint of Sara Benn's oeuvre.

About the Author:

B.E. Seidl is a bilingual writer and literary researcher. Her work has appeared both in print and in online magazines such as Flash Fiction Magazine, Tethered by Letters, Microfiction Monday Magazine and in several issues of The Sirens Call.

In her writing she seeks to collect Kafkaesque moments and transform them into mysterious tales. She lives in Vienna, Austria.

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Halloween Night on Crybaby Bridge | Sheri White

"We know you're lying, kid. Just tell the truth, and maybe you won't spend the rest of your life in prison."

"I did tell you! Something in the creek grabbed Hank. You've got to believe me! It pulled him into the water!"

Detective Grant slammed his palm on the table, rattling the boy's handcuffs. He leaned into Kyle's face.

"Come on, Kyle! When we found you, your clothes were tattered and bloody and you were screaming that you killed your friend."

Kyle hung his head. Tears dropped into his lap. "I meant that it was my fault he got killed. I didn't do it, though," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "He didn't want to go to Crybaby Bridge, but I called him a chicken shit."

Kyle looked up at the detective. "*I'm* the chicken shit. I left him there to die."

Detective Grant pulled out his chair and sat down, crossing his arms. "Okay, kid. Just tell me one more time what happened."

Kyle pulled his beat-up Toyota onto the side of the road, parking in the dirt so it wouldn't get hit by any other vehicles coming around the curve. He leaned over Hank and popped the glove box open, grabbing his flashlight.

"Hank, man – let's go. It's almost midnight."

Hank just sat in the passenger seat, his face pale. "I don't want to. Fuck it, call me chicken shit, I don't care. Something bad is going to happen tonight."

"Look, I'm sorry I called you chicken shit before. But come on – this is our last Halloween together before we graduate. We've done something cool every Halloween since we were little kids. Don't bail on this one."

"Fine, but I don't want to be here long. If we don't hear the cries a few minutes after midnight, we head to Jessica's party."

"Deal."

They walked through the woods, Kyle's flashlight showed them the way to the creek, only the cracks of twigs they stepped on breaking the silence. The water ahead shimmered under the moonlight.

"Okay, so we just stand on the little bridge and at midnight we should hear the ghost baby cry for its mother."

"Do you think the legend is really true? I mean, that a mother actually threw her newborn baby into the creek one Halloween?"

Kyle shrugged. "Yeah, it's possible. Seriously, I doubt we'll hear any cries, but it will be a cool story to tell at the party later. Everyone else has been too chickensh— Sorry. Nobody else has done this."

They walked onto the wooden foot bridge and leaned over the rail. The creek bubbled quietly over smooth stones. Hank looked at his watch – 11:59. "All right, Kyle. You've got until 12:05 and then we leave. You don't really believe we're going to hear a baby crying, do you?"

"Doesn't matter. We're going to tell everyone we did."

Hank rolled his eyes. "We could've done that without coming here."

"Yeah, but this way we can give some real details."

They leaned as far as they could over the rail and looked into the water. Then they heard it, a lowly wail, as if an infant were nearby.

"Holy shit, Kyle! It's real! That *is* cool. Now I'm glad you dragged me here."

Kyle shivered, goose bumps raised on his arms. "We have to go. There's something creepy here."

"Funny, Kyle."

Kyle grabbed Hank's arm. "NOW."

Hank started to follow, then looked back at the water. "Hey, what's that?" He shrugged away from Kyle's grip and leaned back over the railing. A face looked up at them from under the water. "Did you see it?"

"Don't look, Hank! Come on!" Kyle ran, expecting Hank to follow. He turned when he heard Hank scream. A woman, her face fishbelly white and her hair wet and stringy, leaped from the water and yanked Hank by the face, her fingernails like claws slicing into his skin.

Kyle ran back and grabbed Hank by his shirt and pulled, but the crone was stronger. Hank disappeared into the water, dissolving streaks of blood the only evidence he had been there. The woman looked at Kyle, her eyes blacker than the night and hooked her nails into his shirt, tearing it and shredding the skin on his stomach. Kyle headed back into the woods, screaming.

"Those eyes. I feel like she took something from me. I think she took my soul." Kyle shuddered.

"All right, son. Take it easy. I'll be back in a few." He got up and left the room to talk to his partner, who had been watching them through the camera feed.

"Jesus, Marv. I think the kid needs a psych hold. He's in bad shape."

"Yeah, no kidding. Let's get some coffee and make the arrangements." Marv turned off the camera and the two detectives headed into the main corridor.

Kyle stared down at the table and chuckled, an inhuman sound that echoed in the tiny room.

About the Author:

Sheri White lives in Maryland with her family. She's a mom to three girls, ages 29, 23, and 20, and has instilled a love of all things scary in them as well. Her two-year-old granddaughter is next! Her husband Chris is very understanding.

In addition to reading and writing horror, she's also the editor of *Morpheus Tales* magazine.

Sheri's fiction has been published in many small press magazines and anthologies. Her first collection, *Sacrificial Lambs and Others*, was recently published by Crossroad Press.

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Sleep Tight | Michael S. Walker

He walked into his little apartment. He dropped the stack of bills he had just plucked from the mailbox on to the flimsy faux oak table by the door, the usual chorus of voices calling for blood.

It was hot in the apartment and he was tired and numb after another long day at work—working as a paralegal downtown, drafting depositions in another convoluted lawsuit.

Immediately he went about preparing, getting naked, shedding his Ralph Lauren slacks, his striped shirt and black tie. His sweaty bikini briefs also. All dropped them in a careless pile at the foot of the faux oak table.

Completely nude now, he walked into the long, rectangular living room. He was tingling with excitement. It really *had* been a terrible day at work and he was glad to be home. So looking forward to some quality time with his newfound playmates.

It really was hot in his place, but he did not go to open any of the windows in the room or switch on the central air-conditioning. No. Instinctively he knew that his new friends liked his place to be a little on the warm side, that they thrived under such conditions. So be it...

He went and sat on the gray couch that flanked one wall of his cluttered living room. The flat-screen TV in the opposite corner stared back at him with a dead rectangular eye, like some relic from a long vanquished and buried civilization. Outside he could hear the klaxons of what sounded, literally, like a thousand-and-one emergency vehicles, their insistent screams going up and down the scale of all possible sounds as if they were seeking some kind of egress from the world of violence, hate, and death they were forced to bear.

He knew that feeling well...

He lay his head against the overstuffed cushions, and spread his arms and legs out as far as he could get them. An invitation. He closed his eyes and let the court of chaos that ruled outside of his tiny bubble of an apartment slip away, vanish like a mirage. All of the impossible legalese that he stared at all day long with only shards of comprehension. The twisted streets of his city, streets that now seemed to resemble some Arabian bazaar of cul-de-sacs and dead ends. The klaxons in his ears faded and became cool, blessed silence.

It would be *soon*...

He was trembling all over.

This little waiting game, the prelude to the act, was almost (but not quite) as pleasurable as the experience itself. A lull, a meditation.

A summoning...

He waited that way, spread eagled on the couch, for several minutes.

And then, he felt the first ticklings against his right foot.

The tentative, frantic brushings of antennae...

He opened his eyes just enough to allow blurry light to reach his retinas. He looked down. This was how the little blissful game was played, had been played for the last three weeks or so. He had to pretend to be asleep. (Or actually in Slumberland). If not, they would not come and attach themselves.

There, now mounting his right foot, was one of his new friends, its six (almost transparent) legs moving frantically like uncoordinated spindly machines. It seemed to take quite a while for the first visitor to find its footing, but finally it managed to climb up on to his naked foot, where it paused. The bug was almost six or seven inches long, rust-colored. A parallel series of black bands ran across the top of its oval body. It had a small, prong-shaped head, almost blood-red in color. From this head two small antennae wriggled and writhed, taking in the landscape of his right foot.

It was a bed bug, of course...

As the bug continued to deliberate, procrastinate there on his bony foot, various facts about bed bugs (*Cimex lectularius*) drifted through his distracted mind like errant flakes of ash. They preferred warm houses and nested inside beds or sleeping areas. (Check). They were mainly active at night, but were not exclusively nocturnal. (Check). Adults grew to be four or five millimeters long...

Hmmm...

The bug, as if it were reading his thoughts and wished to obliterate them, was on the move now.

Very quickly, it mounted his ankle and climbed his naked shin. He watched it in expectation as it made an erratic beeline toward his calf muscles.

It would be *soon*. *Soon*. He knew it...

There, the bug stopped once again. Its short antennae wormed against his skin, making him shiver.

One more random...

Bed bugs subsist entirely on blood...

Check...

Suddenly, the bug plunged its bristled, dagger-like mouth (proboscis?) down, down, without any resistance, into the plump skin of his calf.

He shivered all over. There was no pain at all. On the contrary. It felt as if some conduit, some pure nerve of pleasure had been established between the point of the bite and his skull. A sharp, blissful tickling sensation ran up and down up and down his leg, his torso, exploded behind his eyes as the bug began to feed on him.

He could barely maintain the necessary illusion that he was sleeping. It felt so good, so good, so *fucking good*...

This was what he had been thinking about all day long, as he had bent over the stupid copy machine in the office, churning out one dry document after another.

Orgasm by bed bug.

The bug seemed to be in heaven too as it sucked and sucked at him. Its oval body quivered and its head seemed to expand like a balloon, becoming redder and more translucent with each passing second.

So good, so good, *so fucking good*...

He was dimly aware, as he surrendered to this pleasure, that about five or six more bed bugs had now appeared, and were climbing up his left and right foot, all set on joining their brother/sister explorer. One of the lovely bugs was almost the same size as his hand. Its black eyes looked just like tiny chocolate chips, popping out on either side of its shiny head.

The more the merrier... he thought. Imperceptibly, so as not to scare the host away, he stretched his arms and legs out just a tad bit farther.

So good...so good...so fucking good... he almost murmured.

Another waiting game. This one seemed to take forever, as the bugs took their sweet sweet time climbing up his body. (Mt. Paralegal—ha ha) The first bug was still at it, still dining on him, still sending salvos of unalloyed pleasure through his nervous system.

But he was greedy prey. He wanted more more *more*.

Finally, as if some silent signal had been communicated between the rest of the pack, they plunged their mouths, almost in tandem, into his waiting skin.

He almost cried out from the extreme pleasure that surged through his body. Like a million goosebumps in heaven. He felt his body, his mind, his ego crumble and dissolve blissfully like some sand castle, its ramparts being battered away by ocean wave after ocean wave. He had read that bed bugs, when they feed, inject saliva into their prey, full of anticoagulants and painkillers. Was that what was going on here? Or were they, maybe, injecting pure heroin into his bloodstream?

He did not know. *And* he did not care...

All he knew was that it felt *good*...

He watched the bugs feed on him through fluttering eyelids. There were nine or ten of them now, attached to him like seed pods on some exotic tree. He wondered, for a little under a second, what his dry coworkers in the law firm would think if they could see him now.

So right and so free...

They would probably run (jabbering all sorts of legalese) out of his apartment, out into the dead ends and cul-de-sacs of his broken city.

So be it. He thought it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

For several minutes the bugs supped on him like that, their mouths plunged into his skin like so many junkie needles. He continued to watch them surreptitiously, through almost hooded eyes. Their heads seemed to expand, much as the first explorer's had, becoming fat and translucent.

Red on his blood...

Ghosts of pure color started to drift across his blurry vision. Red, green, black. Back to red again. A symphony of color. A kaleidoscope. He began to feel dizzy, light headed. Should he be concerned? This was the first time in several fantastic weeks that he had ever felt this sensation, along with the torturous pleasure that kept him coming back for *more more more*... Perhaps his friends were over greedy now? Perhaps they were taking too much blood from him?

Was that what this was?

And then he thought, through his addled mind, *so be it. Let them drain the last lost drop. Let them have every bit of it.* He just wanted this pleasure to continue, forever and forever. He did not want to come back down anymore, deal with the long, lonely night ahead of him. Deciding what frozen entrée to pop into his microwave. Cleaning up several days' worth of dirty dishes. Thumbing through canned laughter and cloying ads on his TV eye.

Suicide by bed bugs...

And, really, would that be such a terrible way to go?

He did not relish life at all. His job. Staring at screens of nothing day after day, his sight fading, his hands buzzing with carpal-tunnel. He did not relish his shithole of an apartment, the linoleum floor in the kitchen a yellow bloom of wax buildup. No one ever seemed to come walking out of the dead ends and cul-de-sacs. No lovely face to put an end to that frustrating maze...

This, this alone was the only thing he had to look forward to...

For the third time, he stretched his arms and legs out...

The kaleidoscope changed with greater frequency now. Redgreenblack. Redgreenblack. Redgreenblack. The bed bugs siphoned his blood with gluttonous abandon, and he let them. He felt himself fading. Being snuffed out. Passing into some other, delightful, dimension.

It was then that there was a small, tentative knock at his front door.

Immediately the bed bugs scattered, disappeared. To where it was they nested in his apartment.

No no no...go away! Go away!

He sat there motionless, his eyes open fully now, scouring his empty place.

Come back. Come back.

Please.

They weren't coming back. At least, not today...

There was another more insistent knock on the apartment door.

Another klaxon surged somewhere in the streets, as the world crashed back down around him.

Knock, knock, knock.

He got to his feet, almost falling over in the process. Ghosts of redgreenblack skirted across his field of vision one final time and then flew off to heaven.

He sighed instead of screaming.

"I'm coming," he tried to yell. But his voice came out a strange, strangled cough. Something barely recognizable to him.

Knock, knock, knock.

Apparently, the interloper had not heard that he was doing his best.

To come.

He walked across the living room toward the door, the faux oak table, and his little pile of clothes.

His eyes continued to scour the room, the tan carpet, the peeling baseboards, for any sign of his playmates.

His only friends.

His redeemers.

There was nothing...

Knock, knock, knock

Who's there?

Broken pencil.

Broken pencil who?

Umm nevermind. It's pointless.

Ha ha.

This person was not going to go away. Not ever.

With difficulty, he managed to get his Ralph Lauren slacks back over his skinny legs. His skin was already beginning to itch, and later he knew there would be red weals up and down, up and down his feet and legs, each of them about the size of a quarter.

The price he had to pay...

He flung open the door.

"Oh...hi..."

It was his landlady out there. Kate Something Or Other. He couldn't, for the life of him, remember her last name, even though he wrote it on a rent check and had for the last five years.

She was standing there in the hallway, her delicate hand raised, ready to strike at his door again. A thin strawberry blond, dressed in a red polo shirt, Levis, and caramel-colored hiking boots.

"Hi," he said, a touch of irritation peppering his voice. What could Kate Something Or Other possibly want? Couldn't be the rent. He had mailed the check just a few days ago. What fresh hell was this? His landlady was a talker and her conversational tangents were often as annoying and confusing as the dead-ends and cul-de-sacs that swamped his city.

"Oh, hi..." she repeated. "Hope I didn't catch you in the middle of anything important? I was just down at the Farmers' Market and running some errands in your neck of the woods, and I thought I might see if you were home and..."

And? And? And? Get on with it, bitch...

"Yes?" he replied, politely, holding on to the edge of the white door for dear life. He was dimly aware that Kate Something Or Other was staring at his bare chest as if she had never in her three decades on the planet seen a half-naked man child. He was also dimly aware that at one point, in the ancient past, he had thought about her in similar stages of undress. She was reasonably attractive.

"Well here's the thing... Allison Wren in apartment G? Do you know her...?"

He knew none of his neighbors...

He shook his head. They came and went continuously here. Like the complex was some bad restaurant that couldn't keep a steady wait staff.

"Well she is a really great girl...getting a Master's at OSU in Art Therapy...surprised you don't know her...?"

He didn't. He could not tell Allison Wren from a bed bug.

Bed bug.

His eyes skirted, involuntarily, toward the top of the faux oak table. There was nothing there but bills and clutter.

"Well, Allison...she had a problem here recently with some critters...and we had to have an exterminator come in and spray..."

She would not stop staring at his bare chest...

"Ok?" he replied. *Critters? Raccoons? Rats? Cockroaches?*

Bed bug.

His eyes skirted, once again, to the faux oak table...

Dead as the moon...

"So anyways..." she replied, stirring a wisp of strawberry-blond hair with one index finger, and smiling apologetically at his chest. "Anyways...we thought...we thought we should be on the safe side and have *all* the units in here sprayed too. Allison says she hasn't seen any more ummm critters. But this place is old and these things can travel so...just to be on the safe side."

He stared back at her with the same shards of comprehension he reserved for tricky documents at the law firm. What was she saying? Exterminator? Spray? His apartment? Was she...was she talking, really talking, about killing his playmates? His friends?

His redeemers?

He wanted to reach out, then and there, and strangle her. Dispose of her dead body in some gruesome way. Perhaps feed it to his friends? But he didn't. He just stood there in the doorway, nodding stupidly, his legs itching like mad, as his landlady went on and on about things he needed to do to prepare for this pending visit.

Visit of the exterminator/executioner...

Destroyers of his bliss...

"And I know, I know this is going to be a big hassle and everything, but could you...would it be possible...could you put your clothes, all cloth items you own into trash bags and put them in the middle of your living room? Before they spray?" his landlady asked, stirring her hair like mad.

He was not listening. At all. Ghosts of redgreenblack were back, blooming behind his eyeballs. Lovely ghosts. And then, he found himself staring at his landlady's pale neck, at the blush of a green vein that coursed there like some secret, underground river. He wondered what it would be like, as his landlady continued to ramble, what it would be like to sink his teeth into that neck, bring that green river to the surface, and feed.

Like his friends did on him every day...

He found himself starting to drool.

About the Author:

Michael Walker is a writer, artist, and musician living in Columbus Ohio. He is the author of two published novels: *7-22* a young adult fantasy novel and *The Vampire Henry* a "literary" horror novel. He has seen his work in numerous publications, including *PIF* and *Fiction Southeast*.

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**THE DESERT SUN SHINES ON THE DEVIL'S SON,
BUT THERE'S NONE MORE DEMONIC THAN THE NUN.
SHE WANTS ME TO RUN, BUT I'M NOT THAT ONE.
I'LL PULL MY GUN WHEN HER LIFE IS DONE.**



PART I



I Once Had a Scarecrow Run Right Up to Me | Joe Lynch

I once had a Scarecrow run up to me,
panting and puffing he said it was she,
who is she? I asked, with a hesitant gasp,
the she who holds fear, tight in her grasp-
I did not know the she he feared so,
she must be bad, to scare a Scarecrow!

Then all of a sudden, from out of a tree,
A Raven swept down and whispered to me,
To run and hide in Hazeltop wood,
Ditching, Scarecrow if I could,
Without a thought or second glance,
I ditched the Scarecrow, no song or dance.

And yet a moment had scarcely went by,
When a Witch came swooping from high in the sky,
Giving me more than a Witch's fright,
To be captured inside the darkest night,
Then tied and held me in her kitchen cage,
The frantic Witch, boiling with rage.

Then flew the Raven down by my side,
And smile if he could with wicked pride,
For his whispered advice just wasn't true,
To trick me, was his plan to do,
The Ravens now warming by the Witch's fire,
So, pleased with his deed in his black attire.

So, if a Scarecrow runs up to you,
There is one thing that you must do,
Give him time to get his puff,
For his wise words may be enough,
To point you to a safer haven,
And never listen to a Raven.

About the Author:

Joe Lynch is poet hindered and enhanced by being Dyslexic. Joe lives and works in Belfast, N Ireland and started submitting his work summer 2018. Joe has had a previous poem accepted by 30 West Publishing House.

Vince shot her before I could stop him.

I crouched beside the famous psychic and ventriloquist we had come to steal from. She was clinging on to life, but she wouldn't last long. Her eyes were glazing over, a mirrored sheen descending. They were becoming like the eyes of dolls that sat there in the room we found her in. She'd been talking to them, making them talk back. We had meant to tie her up whilst we grabbed what we could. All I needed was enough for the engagement ring; Vince could have the rest.

But Madame Silvera had tried to run, and before I could intervene, Vince had pulled the trigger.

"I didn't mean to shoot," said Vince, shaking visibly.

"We're dead," I said. Blood pooled like mercury in the pale moonlight. I heard her sigh her last and knew she was gone. "We're so dead."

I looked up as if to follow her soul to the light spilling in through the window. It was then that I caught the reflection of Marian, her prized ventriloquist dummy, sat on her own central pedestal. Blonde hair and pretty plaid dress with china-white skin, Marian had been Madame Silvera's companion on every show, every performance, talking back, spirits talking through her. As I looked I could almost feel Marian staring me down, as if something was living behind those eyes, plotting revenge.

We had no time to lose. We decided to clean up, leaving no trace, and get the hell out of there. We hoped it would look like the murder was intended. Maybe she'd pissed off the Mafia or something; Marian might have been possessed by the spirit of someone they'd offed.

There was an eerie quiet in the house as we began our work. The light made ghosts of us as we locked the window tight again. We wiped the surfaces down as we went, looking constantly for somewhere a fingerprint may have wandered astray onto one of the great oil paintings that were hung on the walls, staring us down. We were highly strung, alert, careful.

We listened to each creak of the house, every rustle of tree branches outside. Maybe someone had heard the shot? We were miles away from town, but surely there were neighbors nestled in the nearby hills. If someone came looking, we were done for.

The hallways seemed to get colder. Fear put a hand around my throat and began to squeeze.

I started as a loud crack echoed through the house. "Just the wood shifting," I said to myself. I was sweating behind my ski-mask. I was on a knife edge, and it was stopping me from remembering where we'd been. I needed to calm down. I had to. I wiped down the outside of the doorway with the feeling of something crawling around inside my stomach.

The house groaned again. I wanted to be gone. *How much longer, Vince? How much longer?*

When I went to Silvera's doll room to check we hadn't left evidence amongst the dummies, I spotted something strange with Marian. I could have sworn that she had been facing the window, or how else would I have seen her hateful reflection? Now she was looking at me, eyes blue and cold.

Silvera's body lay in the same position, limp and lifeless, blood a small pool of black and silver. She was dead, yes, but I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something alive in there. I couldn't cross the threshold.

"I can't go in there," I said to Vince. "That doll there, Marian. She's looking right at me."

Marian's plastic eyes seemed to be dancing with malice as the trees shimmered light off their sheen. I shuddered, taking a step back from the doorway to Marian's keep.

Vince wasn't perturbed. He took a small hammer from his bag. "I'll smash it," he said. "Make it look like it was part of the job. Go keep an eye on the front door."

I went eagerly, flying down the wooden stairs, anything to be away from Marian's gaze. I couldn't stand it.

I peered through the window beside the large front door. Nobody was coming. Still, I felt watched, scrutinised. The portraits, all in their austere poses and rich oils, didn't faze me as much as the memory of Marian's evil eyes.

I was convinced then and there that she was alive.

I'd never been superstitious before. I never believed in ghosts; I'd even stopped believing in God when I was eight. But now, in the murder house, I felt as if there had been something behind those two plastic, painted eyes, that wasn't meant to be.

Suddenly Vince screamed. I scampered up the stairs, my blood cold. I was scared, terrified, of what I thought, what I knew, I would see. I hurried past the thousands of eyes as they followed me to the doll room.

Vince was crumpled on the floor next to Silvera. His eyes were wide with terror, hands at his throat, trying to claw an invisible hand away from it. Blood pooled from the back of his head to join Silvera's.

Marian sat on her little stool far away from Vince. She, and every other doll in the room, was looking at him. A jury, delivering a condemned man their verdict.

I fled the house without a second thought. Let the police try and deduce how the hammer ended in Marian's hand. I certainly didn't want to consider what I knew must be the explanation.

About the Author:

Kieran Judge is a writer for HorrorAddicts.net, and The Film Magazine, and also writes fiction and film reviews for Horror Addicts By The Collective. He has an MA in Creative Writing & Film And Television Studies, and is currently studying an MA in Creative Writing. He lives in rural Mid-Wales.

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Hunter's Moon | Katherine Brown

The moon, it beckons
Howling I greet the deep night
My master has called

About the Author:

Katherine Brown lives with her husband and step-daughter in Texas. A passion for books from the time she started reading led Katherine to dream of writing books. As a teen, Katherine discovered a new joy in composing poetry. Publishing her first two children's books in 2017, Katherine hopes to continue writing long into her future to inspire in others a love of reading.

Blog: www.katherinebrownbooks.com

Christopher's Last Time Trick-or-Treating | Ken MacGregor

Christopher was *supposed* to be Godzilla, but his dad didn't finish the costume on time. It was the latest in a long line of disappointments from Dad.

With a little help from Mom, Christopher made his own Samurai costume. Using cardboard, tinfoil and copious amounts of Scotch tape, he decorated his bike helmet. The armor was made of similar stuff and he already had a fake katana. That's how Christopher got the idea.

Looking into the mirror before he went trick-or-treating, Christopher gave his reflection his best warrior face. Then he grinned.

Two hours of walking in cold rain turned Christopher's Samurai into a garbage robot with a sword. Dragging his candy bag through puddles, Christopher approached the last house on the block. The light above was on, but the glass globe around it was so dirty it barely lit the porch. A cardboard cartoon skeleton hung in the open space behind the screen door. A wide, adult figure shuffled into view.

"Trick or treat," Christopher said without enthusiasm.

"What are you supposed to be?"

Looking up at the enormous person, Christopher tried but was unable to figure out if it was a man or a woman. The grown-up popped a bubble and the smell of cherry gum filled the air.

"Samurai, but my costume got wet, and now I look like a stupid garbage robot."

The huge belly shook with laughter and he (or she) opened the door. Held loosely in one hand, a plastic pumpkin rattled with bite-sized candies.

"Trick," said the adult.

"Wait. What?"

Christopher blinked up the other person.

"You gave me a choice. I choose 'trick'."

"It's just an expression," Christopher said. "Everybody knows that. Can I please just have some candy?"

The grown-up shook its head. The jowls sounded like Jell-O dropping on the floor.

"Trick."

"Fine. Whatever."

The orange, plastic pumpkin hit the floorboard, spilling Skittles packets at Christopher's feet. The huge person grabbed fistfuls of belly with both hands. Tendons stood out on its neck as fingers pushed through fabric and flesh. With gritted teeth, it ripped itself open. Blood poured out, covering the Skittles and splashing up on Christopher's shoes.

Backing away, Christopher almost fell down the steps, but caught himself in time. He opened his mouth to scream, but only choking noises came out. He ran, bag of treats forgotten, clutching his plastic katana like he was heading into battle.

Behind him, the huge, genderless hulk chuckled.

"I love that trick," it said as it stuffed its guts back where they belonged. Picking up a packet of Skittles, it tore off one corner and dumped the candy in its mouth.

About the Author:

Ken's work has appeared in dozens of anthologies and magazines.

He has two story collections: *AN ABERRANT MIND*, and *SEX, GORE & MILLIPEDES*. He has also written, directed and acted in a zombie movie. He is the Managing Editor of Anthologies for LVP Publications. Ken drives the bookmobile for his local library. He lives with his kids, two cats, and the ashes of his wife.

Website: ken-macgregor.com

Facebook: [Ken MacGregor](https://www.facebook.com/KenMacGregor)

A misty forest scene with tall, slender trees and a body of water in the foreground. The water reflects the trees and the misty atmosphere. The overall color palette is warm and golden-brown.

ONE BAD FUR DAY

K. Trap Jones

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

Thirteen Halloweens | Brian Rosenberger

Another year of rubber bats, cheap plastic masks, carved pumpkins. Thirteen years.
His parents, few friends. None fully understood. Said he was too old.
He loved it. Lived for it. Yet always questioned – where's the fear?
He planned for months. He studied. The books and the films.
The perfect mask. The perfect costume. Not to be.
They cancelled the Halloween contest. They cancelled Halloween. Said it was unwholesome.
Oh, the horror.
Not quite midnight.
Thirteen years. Thirteen Halloweens.
His silhouette captured in the curve of his claws.
Just like the films but better. No longer a mask.

The Carving | Brian Rosenberger

The Carver, wrinkled as a forgotten suicide note, creases mistaken for deformity. Yellow-toothed, slow as cancer, patiently he carves.

His art: leather-skinned, demon-grinned, narrow-chinned, amber-eyed, dangerous, close to the bone, a delusion of size, a distortion of shape, a mad geometry beneath his rusty, trusty blade.

Each with its own personality, grinning, scowling, smiling, disfigured children, awaiting rebirth.

Things born of nightmare and under his steady, ready hand and sharp blade, carved flesh, chiseled bone, name-your-asking-price.

Await the revelation – the truth of humanity, without sins, without shame, without skin. The beauty unveiled – the skull and all destinations betwixt and between.

The Horror Film | Brian Rosenberger

The patrons, on edge, made more nervous by the man in the front row. The screen images: disturbing, haunting, unforgettable. Those sitting closest to the man squirm in their seats, uncomfortable, a sleepless night in their future, not disturbed by Murnau's film but by *him*. Five people have already complained to the manager to no avail.

The man in the front row bought his ticket, same as everyone else. He's seen moving pictures before but none such as this. He delights as the vampire creeps towards his victim. The *Impaler* hasn't laughed so hard in years.

The Guests | Brian Rosenberger

Beneath an October moon, a mother and son prepare themselves for their nocturnal visitors. They scoop orange guts and carve eyes where there were none, place a candle to serve as substitute brain. Bowls are filled with chocolate ears and peanut butter eyes, licorice worms and gummi rats. The son samples a candy tarantula, his teeth stained an unnatural red. Outside stationary skeletons stand sentry while cheesecloth spirits dance in strobe light. All is ready. Almost.

“Can I put on my costume on now,” asks the son already half dressed.

The mother nods her approval. The son dons the rest of his costume and adjusts his mask.

“How’s it look?”

“Almost human,” The mother grins, an army of needles not quite concealed behind her smile.

Sweet Tooth | Brian Rosenberger

They each play their role to the hilt – Vamp and Vampire.

She in her cherry-red lipstick, four-inch pumps, plunging neckline, and inviting throat.

The villain of the story, pale as parchment, clad in black leather, cloaked in shadows, come-hither-smile, and silent as ancient films.

She laughs at his attempts at humor – candy corn fangs – yellow, orange, and white at the tips, a phony accent mumbling the expected lines – “I vant to zuck your vlood.”

Too handsome to resist, neck bared. The candy corn disguised fangs, obviously fake.

Her scream, all too real.

About the Author:

Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, Ga and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of *As the Worm Turns* and three poetry collection.

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Veil Between Worlds | Vivian Kasley

Carved turnips, rutabagas, gourds, and beets littered our red brick steps and led to our doorway. They were also placed around our home. One of us almost always nicked ourselves in the process, usually carving a rutabaga, and this year it was me. As I sucked the blood from my thumb, I had to admit it was fun to sit with my brothers and carve them. We laughed at some of the ones that were pretty silly looking. My mother told us to take it more seriously, a hint of smile on her face, and then walked away humming a haunting tune and finishing up baking the soul cakes.

The smell of cinnamon and nutmeg filled the house with joy. Mother was the only one on the block to hand out these little cakes she decorated with a currant cross and most of the neighborhood children loved them. She put some aside for what she said were for, "The hungry ghosts who get to walk the Earth for just one night."

We rolled our eyes and stifled a laugh as we each ate a warm little cake. Mother bandaged my thumb and then told us to get ready to go begging later. I made sure to wear my watch to keep track of time. I didn't want to miss our yearly ritual of throwing some of the soul cakes into a bonfire that Mother built in the backyard. We always called out the names of those we loved and lost as we threw them in, we always called our fathers first. Mother said we were ready this year for something special, but when we asked for what she just smiled and said to go get ready.

Mother made our costumes this year. I ran down the stairs as a witch and my brothers as vintage clowns. Mother was also a witch, and she looked beautiful in a simple long dark purple velvet dress, cloak, and black hat. She winked as she swept us out of the house with her gnarled wooden broom and told us to be careful. We made our rounds with our beat-up pillow cases and they were nearly full as we hobbled home, our arms sore from carrying our sugary loot.

Back at home we placed our sacks on the couch and made our way to the back where the bonfire was already roaring, the heat warmed the cool October night as its arms reached up towards the sky. Embers spat and licked at our feet as we twirled around holding hands. Large stones painted with symbols were placed in a circle around the fire. We were still twirling around dizzily when my mother came out holding a basket of soul cakes. She smiled as she handed all of us one, they were still warm. She shook her head at my brother, who lowered it from his mouth and pouted only a little before we all stopped and looked into the blinding flames.

We threw in our cakes and said our names and Mother threw in bundles of sage and other herbs. The fire jumped as if it were angry, and smoky beings emerged causing my brothers and I to yelp and jump back. They billowed around our trembling bodies, undulating and churning, and then my mother began to slowly hum and dance. We watched her for several minutes before we relaxed enough to join hands with her. The beings and us all danced and danced and the fire roared and roared. As the fire began to die, the smoky beings floated up and mingled with the smoke that rose into the dark sky and towards the stars. We all watched in awe and Mother kissed each of us on our foreheads and said,

"Until next year."

About the Author:

Vivian Kasley lives in the land of the extremely strange and unusual, Florida. She was an educator for several years before she left to write and travel (mostly in her mind). At a very young age, horror welcomed her with open arms and she never looked back. She has published work with Dark Moon Digest, Perpetual Motion Machine Publishing, and Sirens Call Publications with more on the way.

Facebook: [Vivian Kasley](#)



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Halloween Candy | John P. Collins Jr.

The witch prepared the chocolate peppermint treats for the children. Carefully removing the one-inch squares from the wax paper that they had cooled on, she placed each piece in the middle of perfectly measured foil squares, folding the sections over each other until the candy was closed off. A drop of melted wax from a lite candle sealed the folds of the foil together.

Every house in the neighborhood, she knew, had a familiar scene taking place. Handmade treats for the neighborhood children. Store bought candy for all the rest.

Her kitchen was filled with the scents of the still warm chocolate and peppermint, comfort smells she had once called them. Now they were cloying, her nose scrunched up.

With neat, thin, looping script, she had begun writing the names of the children on tags that would be glued to the front of the foil. The treats were piled on a small silver tray once the glue set.

Except for one. Slightly larger than the other pieces, it was set on a bone-white china dish, isolated from the rest. No name tag was glued to it. The dish was placed on the other side of the countertop, next to the vial of cyanide.

The families of Manor Lane took trick-or-treating very seriously. No one is sure where the tradition of personalized treats for each of the children came from or the rule that every home must have a jack o'lantern on display. Ask one parent, they will say it came from a PTA meeting. Pose the question to a child under the age of twelve and they might say that it's to satisfy a curse from a local coven of witches and warlocks. So serious the tradition, the home owners association makes it a mandatory requirement to potential future families looking to move there.

The children moved in packs going from house to house as the sedan pulled in front of the two story colonial. Fallen leaves dotted well-manicured lawns, the air had not completely chilled yet leaving much of the now golden foliage still attached to the branches above.

A tall man got out of the car. Dressed in a sports jacket and clean jeans, he stood still, looking at the house over the car's roof. Slender in his build, he hesitated at first, trying to will his next move.

Running his hand over his short cut blonde hair, he made his way for the driveway, navigating around a group of departing costumed kids. Many times over the last two years he walked up this drive, careful of the slight impression in the blacktop that he had stumbled over several times before.

Sitting a rocking chair behind the railing of the porch, sat a woman dressed in a witch costume. The peak of her black hat was bent in a forty-five degree angle, she sat there taking a sip from a large mug. Her eyes peering at him over the porcelain rim.

"Hello Michael. Happy Halloween." Her voice was soft, just above a whisper. Her words near bordering on lost in a gentle breeze.

"Happy Halloween, Susan. How are you?" He coughed, clearing his throat.

A smile grew on her pleasant face, her eyes never leaving him. "I'm fine thanks. Care for some candy?"

It was her eyes that hooked him, causing his breath to hitch in his lungs for a moment. Despite all that had fallen onto her, her haunted, sad eyes had always drawn him in.

"No thank you. I, ummm...I was just stopping by to say goodbye." He mentally kicked himself for stammering.

She continued to just look at him. Waiting patiently for him to continue.

"I took a job upstate and it just feels like a good move for me. A fresh start."

Fresh start? Is that possible? Is there any way that Susan and...everything else wouldn't just follow him. Upstate or Timbucktu, Africa, have you really kidded yourself into believing that all of this will just stay behind?

"How good for you. You've earned it," she said.

"Earned it?" He was stunned. How could she say that?

Susan saw the shocked look on his face. "No, I mean it. I know you did everything you could for Billy. Everything for me."

"Trick or treat!" A joyful chorus of high voices filled the air.

Six children stood at the first step of the porch. One Spider-Man, two Iron Man's, though one appeared to be a girl: Iron Woman. A ninja, football player and a witch rounded out the group. Their parents stood in the driveway, an uncomfortable look on a few faces.

A smile appeared on Susan's face, warming up instantly. "Well, Happy Halloween everyone."

"Happy Halloween," the children replied.

Reaching past Michael, she grabbed a large plastic bowl with one hand, a small glass tray with the other, the foil treats sat in the middle, from a small table next to her chair. A small china plate remained, another foil wrapped item sat in the center.

"You mind?" As she gently pushed the glass tray into his accepting hands.

Turning back to the kids, she placed multiple chocolate bars in each of their bags. Smiling as each of the children said their thanks. Spider-Man waited slightly apart from the others.

"Take this please." Turning back to Michael. Handing him the bowl, she took the tray in exchange.

"And this is for you, Scott. Happy Halloween." She smiled as she placed the foil-wrapped treat into his plastic pumpkin.

Spider-Man looked into his jack o' lantern for a long moment. Lifting his head towards her, he reached up and lifted his mask. "Happy Halloween, Mrs. O'Rourke." His eyes were wide, his skin losing the last of his summers tan. "I really miss Billy."

His last words came as a surprise that showed on her face. A gasp came from one of the mothers in the driveway as Michael winced. The slight chatter from the children went suddenly silent.

"Scotty!" An admonishing voice cried out from the drive.

"No, it's ok," Susan said, looking over the boy's head, the boy's mother wore a horrified expression on her face, focusing back to the boy. "Thank you," she smiled. "I miss him too."

Saying their goodbyes, the children returned to the waiting adults, Scott's mother looked at Susan, unspoken apologies radiating to the porch.

Susan just nodded. "It's the look of pity that drives me nuts." Her voice went soft, Michael wasn't sure if she was speaking to him or herself.

Leaning against the newel post, she stared at the departing children. A tear ran down her cheek that she didn't bother to wipe away. Months ago, she gave up hope that the weeping would eventually cease, now her tears were her companions.

She returned to her seat, the bowl on the floor, the china dish with its single treat on her lap.

She looked the same as the day Michael had met her that Halloween evening two years ago. A pretty face that was close to beautiful but just a little short of glamorous. Tiny in stature, she was dwarfed by Michael and nearly all the officers that responded to her frantic 911 call.

With a calm that worried rather than eased detectives, she answered all their questions. No, she hadn't dropped Billy off anywhere. Yes, I have a current photo. No, it's not like Billy to walk off without telling me. Of course not, her ex-husband wouldn't take off with Billy. Well yes, it was a rather nasty divorce.

She printed two photos for them. The first picture was from a Fourth of July picnic they attended over the summer. His large smile outshining the sparkler in his hand.

The second was from earlier that night, getting ready for trick or treating. The red devil costume made from shiny faux-silk and vinyl, a retro hard-shell plastic mask in his hands, not yet disguised for the evening.

Michael still carried the second photo in his breast pocket.

Susan had left to get more candy for the children from the other neighborhoods, she had run short the year before, with explicit instructions for Billy not leave without her.

Coming home, fifteen minutes later she found her home empty. She had known instinctively that something was wrong. Walking through the kitchen slow at first, her search grew frantic as she had flown through the house, a wild tornado knocking over lamps as she ran from room to room.

She ran out the front door, the cool autumn air biting at her face. Calling out his name in near shouts that grew in volume with repetition, her voice carried over the neighborhood. The other families came outside, some of the children already dressed for the night's festivities, all converging on her driveway to see what the matter was.

Fifteen minutes crawled into a half hour as the festivities ceased so that the parents could start searching for Billy. Spreading through the neighborhood like locusts, all of the available adults looked in the back yards, all the garages, any of the local haunts in walking distance where children played. The common thought that Billy had simply disobeyed his mother, despite the fact that everyone knew that he was very mindful of her.

When a plastic jack o' lantern with his name was written on the bottom in black permanent marker was found in a gutter, empty and discarded, the police were called.

Michael had shown up, the lead detective, with several uniformed officers in tow. Search groups were reorganized, groups assigned team leaders, call numbers and local media issuing an Amber Alert.

Susan remained calm as Michael coordinated from her kitchen, always keeping her in sight. She remained a rock in the storm that raged around her.

Rumors began to spread, unconfirmed stories about sightings of a stranger seen in the neighborhood, about Billy's father lying in wait, just biding his time for the right moment to snatch the boy.

Michael kept the possibility of a stranger abduction open regardless of the lack of any hard evidence showing otherwise. The boy's father, Susan's ex-husband, has lived three states away since the Billy was an infant, the only contact in the form of a support check. When Michael called his home number, the man answered on the second ring.

A red vinyl cape was found at the beginning of an undeveloped field, the search parties converged on the spot. Spreading out in a scrimmage line, the volunteers slowly made their way across the brush, Michael now in the lead.

The shouts and calls of Billy's name ceased when the search party came across a burnt out building. Barely four walls and half a roof, the plaster eaten away from time and the elements, the building appeared foreboding notwithstanding its derelict condition.

Michael approached the remains of the front door, pushing it open with his large flashlight. A large single room opened up, the smell of years of water damage, rot and animal dropping assaulted his senses. He coughed at the noxious smell, his eyes instantly watering.

Squinting, he rubbed his eyes, breathing hard as if he were having an allergic reaction to the very building. No one behind him said a word, made no move to help him, suddenly afraid of the building he found himself sitting in.

As his vision cleared, he saw a plastic devil mask on the floor.

And the lump of trash just beyond it, a bare foot scarcely visible in the poor light.

Michael shuddered at the memory.

Susan had remained in a state of shock upon hearing the news. Her new grief rendered her mute, near vacant through the funeral, the investigation that went nowhere, into a slow ascent into acceptance.

Michael worked the case to exhaustion. Leads ended in limbo, nothing turned up of substance, it was if the boy was the victim of a true phantom monster who had materialized enough to do its evil deed and then disappear into thin air.

Haunted by the memory of boy he never met in life, Michael had driven himself hard to the loss of his marriage and eventually, his job.

Another group of children approached, their costumes were a blur to him.

"Please take care of yourself, Susan."

She smiled and nodded, turning her attention to the gathering children. Slipping past them, he made his way to his car as they cried out, "Trick or Treat."

Susan's voice was pleasant as she greeted them. The polite chorus "please" And "thank you" were cut off as he closed his door.

Starting the car, he waited as the children left the driveway on their way to the next house, filing past the front of his car.

Looking back at the house, Susan was speaking to a child, her face filled with light, with joy.

Michael's breath caught in a hitch. Sweat soaked his skin.

The child was wearing a Red Devil costume.

He could see Susan pick up the china plate, the one with the single treat left. She was talking animatedly as the child looked up at her.

Kneeling down, she kissed the plastic mask and opened the front door. Following her inside, the child stopped at the doorway. Turning to look at Michael, a small hand raised and waved before entering the house.

A chill settled over him as he exited the car, running towards Susan's front door.

About the Author:

John Collins blames his mother for his love of monsters. A life long Horror and metal fan, he can be found staring at abandoned houses and historic cemeteries.

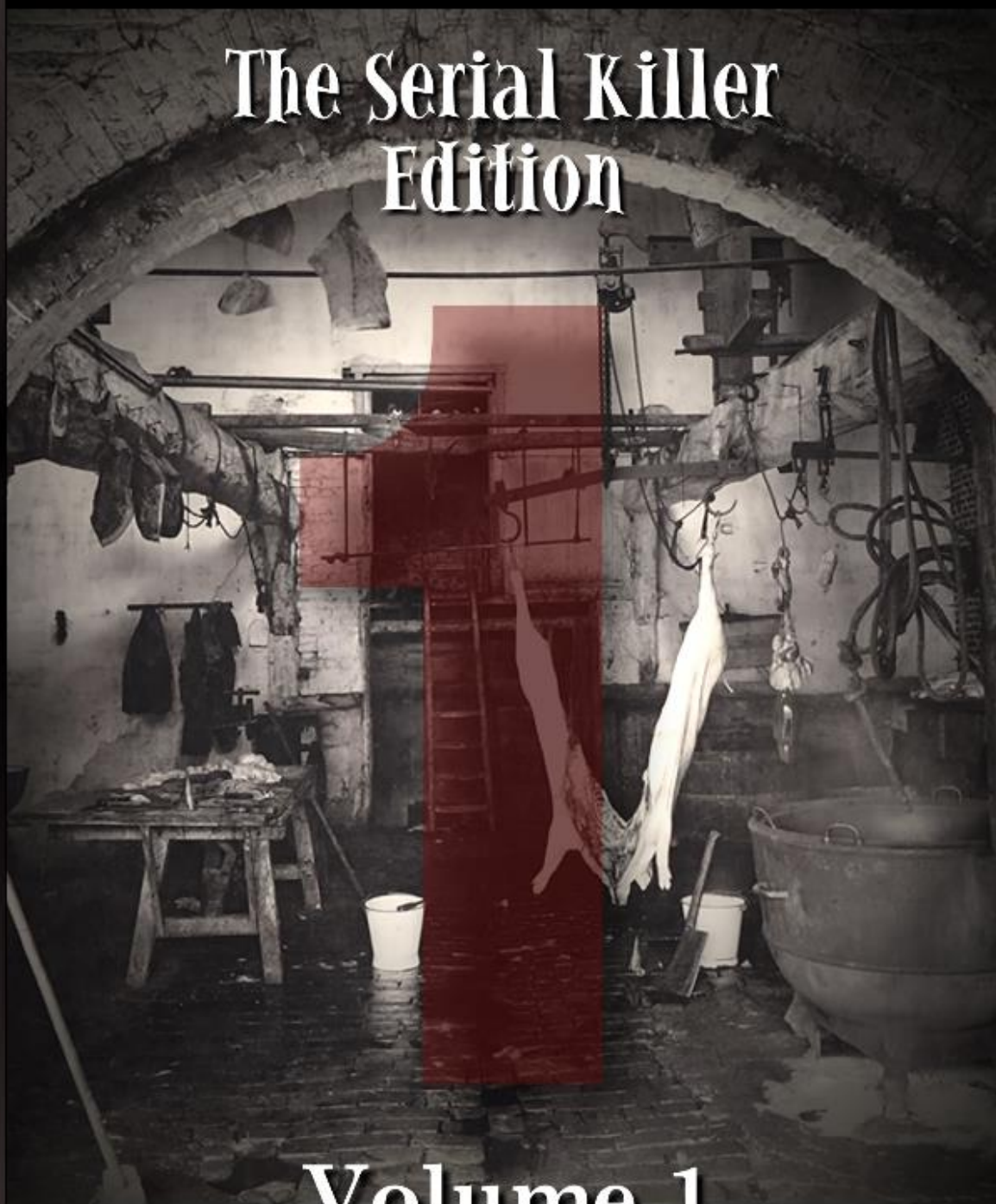
His fiction can be found in the Full Moon Slaughter 1 and 2, Afterlife 2 and Punk vs. Metal anthologies.

Facebook: [John P Collins Jr.](#)

What drives someone to become a Serial Killer?
Eleven authors spin tales of atrocity telling us just that.

Slaughter House

The Serial Killer Edition



Volume 1

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In a dark forest campground, two figures were lit only by a small flickering campfire. "Did you see the look on that kid's face?" asked one of the pair who was standing and dropping twigs onto the fire. "He almost pissed himself." Nasty laughter echoed through the trees.

The second person sat on a thick log, chuckling as he took a drag on a cigarette. Smoke curled over his lips as he replied, "Yeah he dropped that candy and ran so fast you'd think his mommy was calling him. I cleaned out old lady Stevens. Knocked the candy bowl out of her hand, on accident." The snickering he let out made it sound like anything but an accident. "Helped myself to most of the candy while I helped the blind old bat. We got a pretty good haul tonight. What else did we get, man?"

A wicked grin played over the taller gaunt individual. "Stole a six-pack from some loser at the Gas and Gulp. Guy left it sitting on the passenger seat while he went to pay for his gas." He reached into a plastic bag at his side, pulled out a can of beer and cracked it open with a sharp hiss. After taking a long drink, he got a second one and passed it over.

"Nice," the seated youth replied as he opened the can eagerly.

Both of the young men were in their late teens, with bad skin and messy hair. They wore ragged jeans and dark hooded sweatshirts. Gary, the taller of the two, had an open-mouth ghost mask tipped up onto the top of his head. Greg, the shorter and heavier boy had a half-mask shaped like a toothy mouth pulled down over his neck. His eyes were shaded with dark makeup with the intention to make him look frightening but the black smudges had run down over his cheeks, making him look more like an overly sweaty clown.

Greg pulled out his cell phone and laughed as he swiped through some pictures. "Did you see what Tina was wearing?"

"Oh yeah! The angel costume with the super short skirt?"

"Yeah, that's her. I got some pics when you jumped out of the bushes and scared her. Here's one where she fell over and you can see right up her skirt!"

"Damn, dude!" Gary exclaimed as he looked over at the phone.

"Pathetic..." a rattling voice echoed from the trees. The boys whirled around at the words, eyes wild and panicked.

"Shit!" Greg shouted as he scrambled to pick up his phone which had slipped out of his hand.

"Who's there?" Gary called as he squinted into the darkness.

"You whelps do not understand the true spirit of Halloween," the voice continued. It was a scratchy hiss, like the sound of a knife scraping over stone. Shadows shifted in the trees but didn't form into anything recognizable.

The boys tried to put up a brave front, but Greg's voice wavered as he called out. "You don't scare us, asshole!"

A tall, thin figure emerged from the flickering shadows and stepped up to the edge of the campfire light. Greg, still crouched down with his phone in hand, choked back a gasp at the sight. Gary back-peddled and stumbled over a log they had been using as a stool. The beer fell from his hand and thunked into the soft ground causing white foam to spill over his shoe.

What stood before them was impossibly tall and gangly. Tattered black clothing rustled in the chilly night air. Long sleeves draped down to cover the hands. Fitted dark pants covered its legs and it appeared to be floating a few inches off the ground. The most striking and fearsome aspect of this entity was its head. A bleached white pumpkin sat on top of its shoulders. The face was carved to look like a grinning skull and from inside the hollowed-out space there was a dull, flickering orange glow.

The voice rasped out from the gaping maw through jagged white teeth. "Halloween is a sacred time of year. There are rules and rituals that must be followed."

Greg had backed away slowly but Gary pulled himself up to his full height, and though he was well over six feet tall, he was still dwarfed by the shadowy figure. "Who are you supposed to be, slender man?" He let out a nervous laugh that was echoed uncertainly by his friend. The shorter boy seemed to gain some confidence from Gary's bravado and joined in with a derisive snort.

The nightmarish being loomed over them. "Insolent fools! I am the Lord of Halloween!"

Gary laughed again and added, "Oh! Are you going to sing us some songs" He began to dance around in a circle while humming a jaunty tune but his wordless rendition was cut short by a loud squelching sound and a choked scream. Greg looked at him strangely and then gasped as he saw something sticking out of Gary's chest, a gnarled hand made of twisted twigs and roots.

The impaled boy looked down at the hand sticking out of his chest as a low, rumbling cadence of unintelligible words echoed through the forest. Greg couldn't move. He couldn't even turn his gaze away as the hand started to glow with a sickly green light. With a sharp ripping sound and blur of motion, the Lord of Halloween pulled his hand back to leave a gaping hole in Gary's torso. Inside the space, the glow was still visible and began to spread outward in all directions until the boy's whole body was lit with an eldritch green illumination.

The light flared in Gary's eyes and his body shuddered, but rather than dropping lifelessly to the ground, it began to shuffle slowly toward Greg. This proved to be too much for the smaller punk. He lurched to his feet and ran into the trees, screaming in terror. Every branch that smacked across his face and pulled at his sweatshirt drove him into even greater panic. He was certain that those twisted gnarled hands were reaching out for him.

Instead, a pool of shadows formed in front of him and the lanky black shape rose from the darkness. Greg slid to a stop in the fallen leaves. His pants were stained with liquid fear and he was crying uncontrollably. He risked a glance over his shoulder and saw the shambling figure of his dead friend plodding toward him, eyes still glowing green.

A soft raspy voice made him spin around. "You stole from those who would give freely to you. You took from others while giving nothing in return." Greg's gaze traveled up and up the towering horrific form of the Lord of Halloween. The glowing orange sockets looked down at him and Greg whimpered again. He flinched as the hand rose slowly upward. The same glow that animated Gary's lifeless body pulsed around the long spindly fingers. Greg was certain that those wooden spikes would plunge into his eyes or pierce his skull, but instead they closed almost gently around his face. Instead of crying in fear, his sobs changed to a giggle.

The high-pitched sound dropped in pitch and turned more sinister as the glow rushed out and over his body, twisting and changing him. His form shifted to become squatter and more hunched. His skin darkened to a mottled green and his mouth split in a wide rictus grin filled with stained broken teeth. Gary stepped up next to him and waited silently.

The Lord of Halloween looked down at his newest servants and nodded. "A Ghoul and Goblin — how very fitting for the likes of you. There are many laws that govern the Accords of All-Hallows and you will serve me until you have learned them all. You pathetic fools violated the simplest one: *Trick or Treat.*"

About the Author:

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

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Blog: jwgrace.blogspot.com

**I STAND AND SAY, "THIS IS YOUR LAST DAY."
HER HEAD IS RAISED, LIKE SHE'S ABOUT TO PRAY.
SHE THINKS I'M PREY, BUT IT'S TIME TO PLAY
A GAME OF HATE. HELL IS HERE TO STAY.**

PART II



It's really getting out of hand lately, all this Halloween business.

When I was a kid, a Halloween party meant a couple of ghost stories, some bat-shaped gingerbread, and a bag of fun-sized Mars bars. That was it, job done. These days you have to decorate the whole house, get everyone fancy dress costumes, lay on enough chocolate to sink a battleship and buy boxes of specially-made black cupcakes topped with fondant-icing eyeballs.

And, if all that wasn't enough, you've also got to hire a professional children's entertainer. I heard Chloe telling her mum that some other girl at school was going to have one, although I never thought Kate would actually go for it. This is all going to add up to a small fortune.

The woman's dressed up as a witch, in the traditional pointed-hat-and-long-black-dress style. The gear looks like it's seen a fair bit of use, but it's proper quality—the dress is real velvet, while the cheap one Kate picked up at Romford market looks like it's been made out of old bin liners.

I went for Jack Sparrow myself; baggy white shirt, red tea-towel for a bandanna, some fake face-fuzz and a ton of Kate's eyeliner. At least mine's meant to look home-made.

I show the witch—Lucy, she said her name's Lucy—into the kitchen, where Chloe and her mates are shrieking and trying to eat jam doughnuts hung from the ceiling on strings. There's a hell of a lot more shrieking being done than eating, and a lot more jam in their hair—and on the floor, and the walls, and the worktops—than in their mouths.

Personally, I would've turned straight round and done a runner, but Lucy doesn't look fazed by either the mess or the noise. "Which one's yours, Mr Clarke?" she asks.

"Third Disney Princess on the left, right there. That's Chloe. And over there, sulking by the back door, is Jessica, our eldest. She's come as a Moody Teenager, in case there's any remote chance you couldn't tell.

Lucy smiles. "At that age, they don't need masks to turn into monsters."

"You're not wrong there, love," I say, and pretend not to notice Jess sticking her fingers up at me. "Well, anyway, I suppose you'll be wanting to get on with it."

"Indeed, yes. I do still have some other people to visit, tonight." She puts her big leather bag down on the floor and claps her hands for attention. "Tonight is Halloween," she announces. "On this night the veil between the worlds is thin, and the chosen among us may see through the divide."

Blah, blah, ghosts and ghoulies, usual nonsense. I start cleaning up some of the destroyed doughnuts while she does her stuff. She's got stage presence, you have to give her that. The kids are rapt. Bet she does amateur dramatics in her spare time. I can just see her doing Lady Macbeth. Out, black spot, or whatever it is.

When she's done with the speech she pulls a big silver mirror out of her bag of tricks and holds it up like a magician producing a rabbit. "Now. Who wants to see their future?"

A bunch of jam-streaked hands shoot up. Lucy sets the mirror on the table and chucks a thin bit of black cloth over it. "One at a time," she says. "And only one go. That's very important, now, so make sure you listen. You only get one free go."

I'm glad to hear that, since we're paying her by the hour.

The girls push and shove themselves into a queue. I guide Chloe towards the front—hostess' privilege, and all that—and lean in close to Lucy's ear. "You don't reckon you could do anything with Jessica, do you? Get her involved, somehow? Or at least, make sure she doesn't try and sneak out the back door?"

Lucy looks over at Jess, who's picking bits of polish off her nails and flicking them on the floor. She smiles. "Oh, I think I might be able to find something up my sleeve that would impress even Moody Teenagers."

If she can do that, she'll be earning whatever we've got to pay her and then some. "Good stuff. All right, we're only in the other room there, so give us a shout if you need anything."

She nods and turns her attention back to the kids. I nip into the living room with the idea of crashing out on the sofa for a bit, but Kate holds up her hand.

"Don't think you're done," she says. "I need you to come here and help me get these goodie bags ready for the girls to take home. Carol just texted to say she's on her way, and the rest won't be far behind."

At least we're in the home stretch now. I pick up a bag and start stuffing sweets and toys into it.

Kate's sister arrives to pick up her brood just as I pop the last plastic spider into the last bag. "Perfect timing," I say, and stick my head round the kitchen door. "Chloe, start packing up now, your friends are going to be off home soon."

There's a round of the usual groaning and grumbling, but within about twenty minutes the final mum's collected the final chocolate-smearing princess and we've got the house to ourselves again. I close the door and hold out my arms to Kate. "We made it."

She comes in for a snuggle. "It was touch and go around the time the cupcakes ran out, but yeah. We did."

The glorious peace doesn't last long, though, as Jess shoves past us and thunders up the stairs. She's obviously still pissed off that we'd made her stay home for the party instead of going round her boyfriend's. Mind you, I'm not sure I blame her. I'm not sure I wouldn't rather have gone round there myself.

I drop a kiss on Kate's neck. She smells faintly of raspberry jam. "Remind me why we did this, again?"

I feel her shrug against my chest. "I suppose it must have seemed like a good idea at the time. Babe, did you turn the heating off? It's cold in here."

"No, I didn't touch it. I reckon you must be feeling the loss of body heat from a house-full of kids." I pull her closer and rub my hands up and down her back. She's right, it's bloody freezing.

A few thumps and crashes come from upstairs. It sounds like Jess is wrecking the spare room. Great. It can match the wrecked kitchen.

I rest my chin on my wife's head. "Kate, seriously, what *did* we do this for? I mean, I like your sister's kids, but all that money, the mess—what the hell were we thinking?"

She leans back so that she can look up at me. "I really don't know," she says slowly, then frowns. "Darren, does it seem—darker, in here, to you?" She peers up at the light. "Are those new bulbs not as bright, or something?"

I look around. Now that she's said it, the edges of the room do look a bit more shadowy, somehow. As if the light's pulling back from the walls.

"That's weird," I say. "There must be something wrong with them. You check the rads, I'll change the bulbs."

I leave her fiddling with the radiator valve and walk towards the kitchen door. I've got a stash of new lightbulbs in the cupboard under the sink—I picked up a job lot on special offer a while ago, and there's at least five left. They're in a box on the left-hand side of the shelf, next to the bleach. All I've got to do is go and get the box, grab a couple of bulbs and change them. Easy. A few minutes, and it'll be done. No trouble at all.

Except that I can't see the cupboard, which I should've been able to do even without any light on at all. I can't see the sink, the units or the cooker. I can't see the table, which is about two foot away. Through the doorway, the kitchen is absolutely black.

I take a half step backwards. There's something wrong here. I don't know what, but I do know I don't want to go in that kitchen.

I turn round towards Kate. She's straightened up, the radiator forgotten. She cocks her head, holds up one finger. "Did you hear that?" The words come with white clouds of breath.

I look up at the stairs, start to say, "Jess was—" but Kate shakes her head.

"Not that, something down here. In the kitchen. Something—something slithering?"

I just know she's going to tell me to go and have a look, but I'm saved by Jess coming flying down the stairs. She grabs hold of her mother's shoulders, like she's going to shake her. "Where's Lucy?" she says.

"Who?"

"Lucy. The woman who did the party. With the mirror."

"Oh. Well... she left, she's gone. Jess, what's the matter?"

"You've got to get her back, right now. It's gone wrong. She's got to fix it."

Jess's fingers are sinking into Kate's arms, so I step forward and prise her hands away. Her skin's like ice.

"It's Chloe," she says, and her hands go to her mouth. "I feel sick."

She does look like she might faint; her face is white and her chest is heaving as if she can't breathe. Kate rushes forward and gets her down onto the sofa, makes her put her head between her knees.

I kneel on the floor in front of her and give her a once-over, but I can't see any signs of damage. She doesn't

look hurt, just scared. Kate sits with her arm round her, stroking her hair. “Shush,” she says. “It’s all right, you’re all right.”

“Jess,” I say. “Look at me. Calm down, now. Calm down and tell me what’s happened.”

She’s still crying, but her breathing’s getting better. “I looked in the mirror,” she says. “Lucy’s mirror. She said I could see the future, and I did. I saw it. I saw it all.”

I get up, looking around for the woman’s card. We need to have words. I’d told her to involve my daughter, not scare the living shit out of her.

“It’s my fault,” Jess goes on. “Lucy said you only get one free go and after that you have to pay, but I thought—I didn’t know, at first I thought it was just a game, and I said Chloe can pay for me, she pinches my money all the time, she owes me. You don’t know, you and Mum, you don’t know what she’s really like, she’s, she’s not—it’s like, you think she’s perfect and I—I just thought, it doesn’t matter, it’s just a game, it’ll be fun, but it wasn’t.”

She scuffs at her face, pushing snot and tears into her hair. “You’re going to lock me up,” she says. “You’re going to say I’m mad, that I need help, and put me in a hospital. A mental hospital. I saw it, and it was just—it was so horrible. So *real*. I told Lucy that was it, that I didn’t want to know any more but she said it was too late, she had to be paid, and she—she was scary, her face, it was—and then it got all dark, and it was so cold and there were things in the room, there were *things*, I could hear them, and then I ran, and then—”

I grab Kate’s handbag and tip it out onto the coffee table. Purse, brush, chewing gum, tissues, lipstick... but no business card. “I’m not having this,” I say. “Where’s her number? That Lucy. Where’d you get her from?”

Kate frowns at me over Jessica’s head. “I don’t know. I don’t even think I did. Didn’t you book her?”

Jess tries to struggle out of her mother’s arms. “Listen, it’s not that, it’s not that stuff that matters. It’s Chloe. I can’t find Chloe. She’s not here. And her bedroom—there’s nothing in it. It’s gone. Her clothes, her toys, everything. I think—I think Lucy took her, somehow. It’s the payment, don’t you see? I said Chloe could pay for me, and Lucy took her because of that. It’s my fault.”

“Shush, sweetheart, it’s all right.” Kate holds on tight, not letting her go. “You must have had a bad dream, that’s all. You must have fallen asleep and had a nightmare.”

“It’s not a dream, I haven’t been asleep.” Jess finally manages to jerk herself away and stands up. She looks from Kate to me. “What’s wrong with you? Dad, didn’t you hear what I said? Chloe’s *missing*. You have to do something. Get the police.”

Kate shoots me a helpless look. I shake my head. I’ve got no idea, either.

“Jess,” Kate says, reaching out for her. “Who’s Chloe, sweetheart?”

She speaks softly, kindly, trying to calm Jess down, but it doesn’t work. If anything, it makes it worse. Jess starts screaming, and she doesn’t stop.

About the Author:

Michelle Ann King was born in East London and now lives in Essex. Her favourite author is Stephen King (sadly, no relation), and she also loves zombies, Las Vegas, and good Scotch whisky. Her stories have appeared in a variety of anthologies and magazines, including *Strange Horizons*, *Interzone*, and *Black Static*. Her first two short story collections are available in ebook and paperback now.

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Daddy's Lil' Girl | Edmund Stone

Fire burns through the night, lighting the evening,
My heat unquenchable, my thirst unjust
This life was given to burn, bleeding flames from my skin
The fire I cannot stop, my needs are endless.

Once I was a normal person, with the same wants as anyone; same desires,
Before the experimenters took my life away.
They offered something better, but they lied, as men often do.

I was left with a thing my family and I couldn't control.
I started a fire that consumed the city; perhaps the Earth by now.
What is left of me is a heart of consummation, and the hell I have created.

My creation is growing, this physical world unable to stop it.
My unquenchable needs have resulted in the death of all I hold dear,
My home and livelihood, my perfect family, my baby.
She, so small, an innocent life, taken too young.

She called to me to stop, I still hear her pleas, haunting my every thought.
"Daddy? Daddy, please stop. Don't let me die."
"Daddy, mommy's dead. Please stop."
I speak softly to her, "I love you, but can't."

"Daddy, the fire is hot, and I can't take anymore.
Daddy, please stop, if you love me, please stop!"
I feel the pull on my jeans and know it's too late to save her,
Too late for any of them.

Her skin boils and burns, popping like kindling.
I know there is no breaking point, no ability to stop
She holds to me, a charred wreckage,
What's left of the life I once had.

There was no guarantee I could protect her,
My fate had been set before me, something I couldn't change,
She will be with me always, yet I will continue to burn for all to see;
And unfortunately, she will too.

My fire grows, lighting the eve; demonic blaze.
My family is gone, they burned along with the desire to keep the fire stoked.
They loved me, and I them, but some things are meant to be.
I never asked for this but was given it anyway.
I am the fire that consumes the night, there is no stopping the need to burn.
I will remember those who loved me;
Always the flesh is vulnerable to those in the normal world,
And though all will cringe and go underground,
I hope they understand, I didn't ask for what I am,
I only wanted to be a family man, but the experiments wouldn't let that be.

I will always carry the burden of the want for a better life,

A family I didn't deserve to have.
Now I own the flames and they own me.
I will always carry them, as they consume the world.
Burning the flesh, I remember and hold dear,
And my thoughts will keep the love alive for my little girl.

About the Author:

Edmund Stone writes at night, spinning tales of strange worlds and horrifying encounters with the unknown. He lives with his wife, son, three dogs and a multitude of cats.

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A Happy Holiday | Patrick J. Wynn

Julie walked through the front yard checking all the decorations making sure they were correctly placed. The mummies all faced the front walk, black cats prowled the yard and Frankenstein stood tall and proud next to the mailbox. A few of the hanging scarecrows still wiggled and kicked a little but that would stop soon. As Julie turned to head into the house kids were already walking the streets and she hurried to finish getting ready. Inside Julie opened the closet, grabbed the vacuum and went back outside. As she tossed a leg over the vacuum she let out a high-pitched cackle and flew up and over the trees. As she sailed over the terrified kids she knew no one could say she was old-fashioned.

Just Trash | Patrick J. Wynn

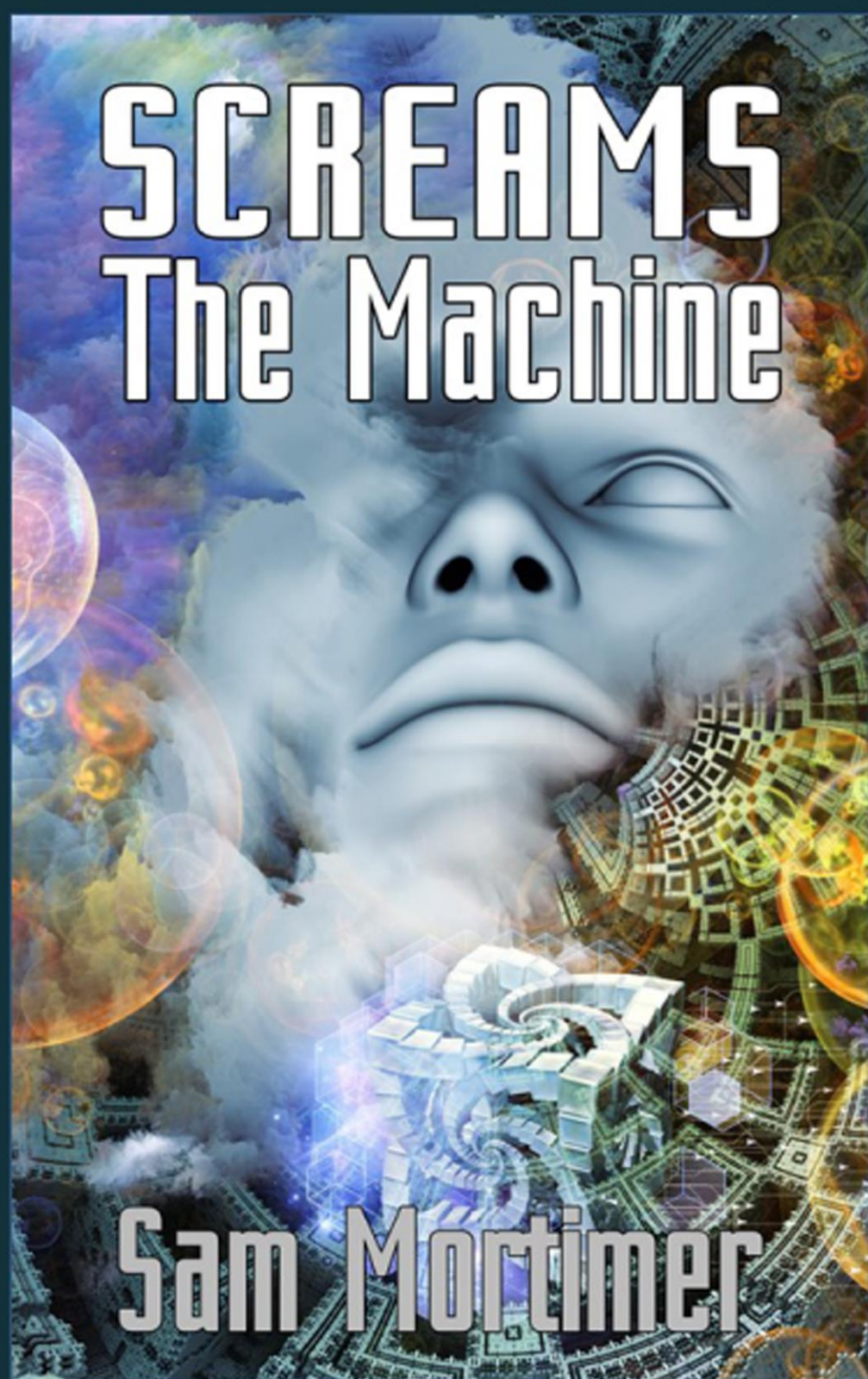
Steve stepped back as the truck made its turn and began backing up. The beeping from the truck as the driver shifted into reverse no longer bothered Steve, he barely heard the annoying sound. Steve raised his hand and the truck came to a stop. The truck engine roared as the driver shifted into park and engaged the power take off. The bed of the truck began to rise, and the driver hit the accelerator causing the bed to rise faster. When the bed reached the halfway point, the gate popped open and the trash began to fall out. Most of it hit the ground and rolled over the side into the massive hole and disappeared, but some rolled the wrong way or hit the ground with a splat and stuck.

Steve desperately wanted to rearrange his mask and gloves, but experience told him not to get his hands anywhere near his face. As the bed emptied, the driver reversed the power take off and let the bed begin to drop. With a loud crash the bed settled down on the truck frame and locked in place. As Steve stepped up to clear the rest of the trash over the edge he glanced up and stared at the line of trucks, they stretched down the road and disappeared around the bend. Steve did his best to breathe normal and stepped up to the trash. His partner for today, Hank, grabbed the arms and Steve grabbed the feet. They carried the trash to the side and rocked it back and forth, on the count of three they tossed it over the side. As Steve let go a bright red shoe with a cartoon face popped off and fell at his feet. He picked up the shoe and tossed it after its owner.

"Just trash, just trash," he whispered through the tears.

About the Author:

Patrick J Wynn is an author of short stories that contain shades of horror, humor and are just a touch weird. You can follow him on his Facebook page and look for his short story collections on Amazon.



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

It wasn't until after they buried Billy in the shallow grave behind the old farmhouse that Jesse started acting strange. More than once Lucas would be out on the crumbling, creaking rear stoop of the place, smoking a cigarette and taking a break from sorting the money they scored in the heist, and he'd hear Jesse talking to himself. At first it sounded like nonsense, and hell, Jesse was already chewed up by meth to begin with, but the ramblings started to sound more like the boy was apologizing to Billy for what they'd done to him.

Lucas followed Jesse's voice around the side of the house, past the rusty van they'd driven in the getaway, and found him kneeling beneath the big oak tree next to the half-collapsed fence out near the field, rocking back and forth.

"What the hell's wrong with you, boy?" Lucas asked as he approached. Though he hadn't been trying to be stealthy, Jesse jumped at the sound of Lucas' voice, turning around like some kind of animal trapped in a corner, eyes wide with fright. Lucas fingered the cigarette, repeating his question. Jesse gulped, saying nothing at first, before he wiped the sweat—or were they tears?—from his young, sallown face.

"Nothin', Lucas," he finally replied, his voice uneven. "Ain't nothin' wrong."

Lucas looked at the boy—barely nineteen and already a brain-dead specimen—and wondered, not for the first time, why he'd allowed Billy to talk him into letting Jesse in on the job to begin with. Jesse and Billy had been cousins, sure, but they were over ten years apart in age and not particularly close. Yet when Lucas told him they needed an extra set of hands for the robbery, Billy suggested the boy would be solid as the getaway driver, which had proven true enough, but Jesse's constant twitchiness had unnerved Lucas from the start. If only Billy hadn't started that argument over what he saw as an unfair split in the take and pulled out that gun...Lucas shook his head. No, he'd done what he had to, even if it left him alone at the hideout with a burned-out basket case.

"I heard you talking back here," Lucas said. "You begging forgiveness from that no good cousin of yours?"

Jesse wiped his cheeks again. *Yes, Lucas thought, those are definitely tears.* But Jesse just shook his head. "No forgiveness for what we done, Lucas. Holdin' up a bank's one thing, but we shouldn't have killed Billy. Now we're both gonna be pulled into the scarlet cloud. They're gonna pull us in, all those hands. They're gonna pull us into that cloud."

"*Christ,*" Lucas ground the cigarette under his heel and yanked Jesse to his feet. "Again with this scarlet cloud horseshit? How many times do I have to tell you it was just a damn dream you had, boy. Didn't. Mean. Nothing."

The night the two of them had killed and buried Billy, Lucas had been in the farmhouse's rundown kitchen drinking a beer and counting the money when he'd heard Jesse start screaming from the back room. The boy's cries were bloodcurdling, and Lucas half thought the police had somehow tracked them down and made their move. He'd snatched up the pistol from the counter and went charging back there, surprised to find Jesse alone, curled into a fetal ball in the corner. At first Lucas thought the little bastard was having a tweaker's freak-out or was going into withdrawal, but when he examined Jesse more closely, he could see the boy was wide awake, sweat-slicked and clearly beside himself with fear.

"It's comin'," Jesse said over and over, rhythmically. "I can see it. It's gonna start over the ocean, a scarlet cloud, and no one will know what it is. It'll move inland and sweep across the land, blottin' out the sun. When it comes over a city or town it'll look like a red fog, and people will think there's black birds flying down from it. But they ain't birds, Lucas. They're *hands*. Hands from the spirits of all those who've ever been murdered, and when that scarlet cloud drifts through a place, those hands'll grab at people, and if you're a murderer, they'll pull you up into the cloud with 'em and keep you there forever."

To Lucas it sounded like nothing more than some drug-fueled hallucination, some night terror. He gave Jesse a beer and talked him down until the boy was calm again, which took half the damn night. Lucas had been so tired by then he didn't finish counting the money, but there was enough distrust in him that he stuffed the bills he'd already sorted back in the canvas luggage he'd stolen and locked it in the van before passing out.

That had been three nights ago, but what Lucas first took as an isolated thing from Jesse had continued on the second evening, then the third, always the same pattern, always the youth spitting out his prophecy of doom and damnation.

But seeing Jesse under the tree was the first time the little shit's hazy apocalypse had spilled into the daylight hours, and as he led Jesse inside the farmhouse, Lucas's anger was boiling. He twisted Jesse's arm, shoving him onto the stained, vermin-eaten couch in the living room. The boy winced, but to his credit didn't cry out. Lucas jabbed a finger at Jesse.

"Look, you little bastard, you keep acting this way and you're gonna find yourself in a world of pain worse than anything you can dream," he snarled. "So far the cops ain't on us yet, but the way you're wasting my fucking time they'll catch up to us before we can get the hell out of here. So just calm the fuck down, shut the fuck up and we'll be gone by morning."

"But...What we did to Billy...It wasn't *right*, Lucas. It just *wasn't*."

Lucas groaned. "Your cousin was a two-timing shit and would've stabbed my back and yours. If we hadn't grinded him, he would've grinded us."

Jesse was quiet then. Lucas went into the kitchen, pausing into the doorway to look back at the boy. "And forget all that damn red cloud nonsense. Ain't no vengeance in this world. None at all."

After that Lucas drank the last beer and went into the back room, falling in exhaustion on the ratty mattress on the floor. A little past three in the morning he was jolted awake by one of Jesse's screams piercing the stillness. Lucas sat bolt upright, body shaking, and massaged his suddenly-pounding head.

"Fucking little *bastard*," he spat.

Another scream, duller than before, followed by the sound of Jesse's voice going on and on: "No no no no no..."

Then there was quiet, just as sharp as the screams had been, before Lucas heard something new—the sound of the van door slamming shut and the engine roaring to life.

"Shit!" Lucas scrambled from the mattress and out to the kitchen. The unsorted money was where he'd left it on the table, but the keys were missing and the main portion of the cash was still in the back of the van. Lucas dashed out the back door, across the rotting porch and into the tangled yard, the lights from the van blinding in the dark. The vehicle just started pulling away when Lucas ran over to the driver's door, pounding furiously on the window.

"What the hell are you doing?" He shouted. Behind the wheel, Jesse's face was emblazoned with terror.

"It's comin', Lucas! It's comin' for all of us!" I gotta get outta here! Gotta get away from it!"

Like hell you will, Lucas thought, rage supplanting reason as he opened the driver's door, stepped onto the running board and clutched a wad of Jesse's sweat-soaked tee-shirt, pulling him from the seat. The momentum of the action made Lucas lose his footing, and both of them went tumbling to the ground. Jesse rebounded faster, starting to run, but Lucas grabbed the boy's ankle, tripping him. Crawling atop the youth, Lucas pinned Jesse to the grass face-down, wrangling one of his flailing arms behind his back, twisting it until Lucas heard a tiny *pop!* from the elbow. Jesse screamed again.

"We gotta leave, Lucas!" He shouted, more into the dirt than anything. Lucas forced more pressure on Jesse's injured arm.

"*Bullshit*," he growled. "You were trying to split with as much of the take as you could, weren't you? You're a snake just like your worthless shit of a cousin."

"No, no!" Jesse was still trying to struggle, but Lucas reached his free hand down, pressing the boy's face into the earth. Yet Jesse still pleaded. "The scarlet cloud's comin'! For you. For me. For *all* us murderers!"

Jesse's entreaties went unheard. Lucas looked down at him, feeling nothing but that sea of anger churning inside. He flipped Jesse over, clenched his grip firmly around the boy's neck and squeezed, long and hard, forcing all his weight upon Jesse's throat. There was a gurgling sound, spittle leaking from Jesse's mouth before his tongue protruded and his eyes bulged. Lucas had no clue how long he choked the kid, but it was long enough to finish the task, and that was all that mattered. Afterwards he rolled off the corpse, his adrenaline spent, and collapsed on the grass.

It wasn't until the gray of pre-dawn that Lucas stirred. The van was still idling and a few feet from him Jesse's open-eyed body lay like a macabre contortionist, broken arm bent at an unnatural angle and hidden beneath his back. Lucas crawled to his feet, turned the van off and spit a glob of phlegm at Jesse's feet.

"I guess we settled *that*," he said, looking at the boy's purplish face.

He buried Jesse beside Billy and then took the remainder of the day packing up the rest of the money, leaving just before nightfall. A few hours later Lucas ditched the van, rented a car, switched the money-stuffed luggage into the trunk and drove down to Pasadena. It was a smooth, quiet ride; he didn't even listen to the radio. All he wanted was the silence and peace of the open road. Clear his head. Focus on getting the hell down to Tijuana with the take.

It was just past six in the morning when Lucas pulled into the diner's parking lot. His body ached from lack of sleep, but the need for more than beer and cigarettes in his system was too great, and as he walked into the tiny restaurant the sizzling scent of bacon and eggs and freshly brewing coffee was tantalizing to his senses. Sitting at the counter, TV blabbing from a perch on the wall near the kitchen, he began thumbing through the menu, waiting for someone to take his order.

It was after a few minutes that Lucas realized he was the only customer in the place, though when he looked around he saw there were still-steaming plates of half-eaten food on several tables, while on the floor were things he hadn't initially noticed—a spilled cup of coffee, a woman's purse, an overturned chair in the corner—that made it look like whatever patrons had been in the diner had left in a hurry. Lucas called out to the kitchen, but nobody replied or came out front. Grumbling, he set the menu aside and focused on the television.

The news was on, and a reporter was in the midst of some sort of calamity, a crushing riot of people stampeding through the streets behind her.

"...The situation in San Francisco is the same as it is all across the West Coast, as panic has gripped the city due to the appearance in the skies of the asteroid that unexpectedly diverted course despite what NASA scientists previously calculated and is now headed on a trajectory to strike California within the next few minutes..."

There was an abrupt scream from outside then, followed by another, before a whole symphony of nerve-shattering shouts made Lucas jump from his stool.

"What the hell?" Lucas said, going out to the parking lot just as a terrified crowd rushed down the sidewalk; seconds later cars on the street squealed to a halt causing a chain-reaction pile-up as drivers and passengers exited their vehicles, some fleeing, but most standing and staring up at the sky. Lucas turned around and couldn't believe it when he saw that enormous burning sphere in the distance, burgeoning on the horizon and growing larger each passing second. As the asteroid neared Lucas could see a halo of red around it from entering the atmosphere, like a scarlet cloud, and he closed his eyes, waiting for what was to come.

About the Author:

Having been exposed to the weird worlds of horror, science-fiction and fantasy as a boy, Damascus Mincemeyer has been ruined ever since. He's had work published in *Heavy Metal* magazine, Tyche Books recent anthology *Fire: Demons, Dragons and Djinn*, and has stories (and cover art) set to appear in *Bikers Vs The Undead* from Deadman's Tome.

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We drove together into a dark forest at midnight. Twisting wet black roads, drops of rain against the windshield. It was a cold and crisp moonless October evening. The trees were so tall I could hardly see the stars, if there were any.

This was the first night that I looked into this beautiful beast's emerald green eyes. I was unaware of the evil lurking behind them. With one hand on the wheel and the other on my knee he smirked at me with a fiendish grin.

Hand in hand he guided me through lush deep woods to an old picnic table where he worshipped me with his crimson kisses. My heart melted into his as he pressed me against the dampened grain.

He took me to his stone-cold castle filled with altars of sweet pomegranates and antiqued silver daggers. I settled right into his mysterious abode, soothed by the sound of his voice and the warmth of his breath on my neck.

Never had I felt so at home, never had I felt such joy, never had I felt so alive! For a thousand years I had searched for him and for my home.

Heady scents of musk, patchouli and cigarette smoke permeated my senses. Strange family photos covered the walls, candles were burning. We sipped on rich burgundy wine as he dropped red grapes delicately into my mouth.

He fed me his love too. In return, I fed him my blood.

He hypnotized me into his enticing velvet bedroom where I found my dreams hidden in a small silver pouch underneath his night stand. I lay back onto his bed as he spread his wide dark wings over my naked body, covering me with clusters of violet orchids as he whispered into my ear, "Be mine...be mine." I began my descent into madness and the necessity of his touch.

I followed my beautiful beast into nocturnal cemeteries where I knelt into a thousand crisp dry branches. They pierced through my pale skin and as I bled I took in every part of his being.

He took me through pitch-black caves where we walked together with his cold claw resting upon my shoulder guiding me to the opening into a field of luminous petals of stars. We rolled across saturated golden amber leaves.

As he kissed me I was taken aback by his swelled gray reptile tongue. He sunk his fangs into my forearm then he swished my blood around in his mouth. He drooled over me and declared, "I will consume you!"

He began to eat my toes first, one by one feasting on them slowly. He munched on my meaty calves, ripping apart every morsel, every tendon, every beating blue vein.

His fangs grew longer and sharper. I could feel his pain. It was mine now.

He then parted my legs and split me open, drinking me up like a starving monster. I flowed like a river into him. He made his way to my soft belly resting his demon head and horns, he took his jagged claw and pulled out my belly button rolling it around with his little finger, laughing as he paused to watch me squirm, then he popped it down his throat and smiled. I lay wide open, eyes hazy, half shut, fading slowly into his eternal embrace.

He grazed on my hanging loins. Flesh sunk in, I was begging for sleep, yet my heart was still pumping and still longing for him.

He was deep inside of my aching core, and as he grew more powerful I had no choice but to submit. My flesh maimed, I was half dead, half alive. I gargled out my last "I love you."

The monster began to weep over my disjunct torso. I was dying. My soul began to float above him in ecstasy into the cloudy Autumn skies. I watched him devouring the last bits of my demolished carcass, disappearing into the dark forest below as he took out his longest pointed talon to his chest and ripped out his own blackened heart, holding it above his head. As he wailed below me I floated home.

About the Author:

Julia Still Rose is an accomplished writer, poet and fine artist. She has had poetry published in Gothic Beauty magazine and other publications. Her vivid descriptions make her writing come alive. She is a fan of the macabre and incorporates it into her artistic endeavors. Julia's art has been displayed in various locations, including The Damned Show in Detroit and Ward Nasse Gallery in NYC.

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This Moment | Claire Loader

I dreamt of it so many times. Blood filling up from my throat — slick, hot lacquer coating my tongue before it burst out from my eyes, my ears, my mouth... and then I would wake. Gasping, grasping, my fingers reaching to pull me back into reality. Once a week at least, I lay in the lap of destruction, maimed, alive, awaiting the sweeper to quieten those left writhing, awaiting the cool tip of his gun to meet with the side of my head.

Preparation perhaps.

For I lay now, on the cold earthen ground, and the pain, the pain was unbearable. But I wasn't alone. A figure sat over me as I listened to the screams and the cries. And he whispered in my ear, as they came ever closer and closer. "There is no such thing as time. You have always lived this moment."

"Can I not live another?"

"No."

Crunching now, the sound of flesh sheathing metal, forcing its deathly kiss.

The dreams had always been this way. Rendered immobile as darkness crept, gun in hand, just out of sight. And always he sat there with me, a strange angel of my sleep state. But I wasn't dreaming now. You can never smell in a dream, scenes so very real always rendered with the distinct odor of emptiness. But here, the metallic scent of death was undeniable, the memories of panic and fear too sharp.

Closer they came, like the slow trickle of water, like the slow drip of my blood on stone. And once again his voice. "You dreamt it because you have always lived it and very soon it's time to die."

"Will it be over then?"

"Oh no, it's never over. Welcome, my dear, to Hell."

Daddy's Little Girl | Claire Loader

He sat in the armchair, the light of the waxing moon sliding in through the open window, caressing the glass of whiskey he held in tired hands. His eyes closed, he sensed her before he heard her, the slow creak of the wooden floorboards preceding her feverish whisper.

"Daddy, I've done it again."

He took a deep breath through his nose, savoring the sweet pine that floated on the evening air. "Come on then, let's show me."

He followed her down the corridor, her dark curls bouncing in the fading gloom, her little feet soft on the aging boards.

"You'll be happy, Daddy. I know you will."

He couldn't remember the last time he was truly happy, the last time his smile wasn't forced through gritted teeth. He paused before the doorway, wavering, wondering would he ever feel it again.

She stood in the middle of the room, unable to hide her delight, unable to conceal the twinkle dancing in her eyes. Splayed out behind her, the dolls waited. Lined out in neat rows, their pastel hems touching. His eyes widened as he looked from doll to doll, looked to the empty space above them, to their perfectly severed necks. Row upon row of decapitated china dolls, and in the middle his little girl, so very pleased with her evening's work.

"Aren't you pleased, Daddy?"

He looked again around the room, unable to stop the smile from forming on his lips. For the first time in what felt like months, there was no blood for him to clean, no entrails on the carpet, no secret shame for him to hide.

Dolls, he could deal with dolls.

"Yes, darling. Yes, I am."

About the Author:

Claire Loader was born in New Zealand and spent several years in China before moving to County Galway, Ireland, where she now lives with her family. A photographer and writer, her work has appeared in various publications, including *Massacre Magazine*, *Three Drops From a Cauldron* and *The Ginger Collect*.

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Thorns tear at Janie's bare feet and legs as she runs through the dark woods. The only light comes from a full moon above, turning every shadow into a predator ready to pounce. For a moment, she becomes hyper-aware of her bloody feet and the gash across her forehead. Sticky blood drips down into her eye.

"Don't stop," she tells herself.

The thing is getting closer. Janie hears it snarling. She can't remember when the chase started, or how she got there. But she knows she has to run, has to find someplace to hide.

It's too late. The thing rams her at full force, knocking her to the ground. She rolls onto her back and the enormous wolf is on top of her. Its long snout and sharp teeth press against her face. She should be able to smell its rancid breath, to feel it as the creature drools and pants.

But she can't. She smells nothing, feels nothing.

Suddenly the creature morphs into something else, something more grotesque. It is humanoid, with oozing skin and jagged fangs. Gaping holes replace its eyes. She reaches up to the gash on her head, only to find it has been replaced with some sort of electrode. There are more, all over her head and face. She tries to rip them off, but the thing with the oozing skin restrains her. More come, crowding around her, some kneel on the forest floor by her side, others pace around them. They speak to each other in low, growling voices. She doesn't recognize the language.

Janie screams as the woods begin to morph as well. Bit by bit, trees, shadows, and the thick vegetation of the forest floor are replaced by white walls and high-tech equipment. There is flashing, beeping, and light glinting off shiny metal. Janie closes her eyes and screams again.

When she opens her eyes, she is in a hospital room, still screaming. The doctor and nurses do what they can to calm her.

"Where am I? Why am I here?" Janie sobs and gasps for breath. Then she notices him. The man in the corner. He is wearing an expensive suit and jotting notes on a clipboard. She remembers. Janie ignores the nurses and their questions and addresses the man, her breath still ragged. "How long was I under this time?" It is hard to speak. Her throat hurts from screaming.

"About ten minutes, but only the last two could be considered intense."

Janie weeps and begins to tremble. "How many have there been tonight?"

"Only three so far. The first couple weren't bad. You didn't even wake up. They tend to get longer and more intense throughout the night. There will likely be at least two more."

"Oh god. I don't know if I can do it again." Tears stream down her face, and a nurse hands her a box of tissues and places a hand on her shoulder before measuring her vitals.

The man shrugs and says, "You wouldn't be the first to quit on the first day. Not everyone is cut out to be a dreamer."

Janie looks to the bed next to hers. A young boy, only seven years old, is sleeping peacefully. They are connected by electrodes and long wires, and both are hooked up to a machine equipped with flashing lights and monitors. She sees her heart rate, and that of the little boy. There are two switches. The first one turns the machine on, so it can monitor their brain waves, heart rate, and other health indicators. Just looking at the second switch makes her cringe.

"How many more nights," Janie asked?

"We received word they may have found a donor. A girl will be taken off life support in the morning, after her family says their final goodbyes. After the surgery, it will be about a month before his new heart is strong enough to handle his own nightmares. For a week or so, he'll be on strong medication, and likely unable to dream very much, so that would be an easy week for you. Keep in mind, if you choose to resign, it will be a few days before we'll be able to get a replacement in for you. Of course, you are under no obligation to stay. Your employment is entirely at will."

She looks again at the boy. His eyes open briefly, and he smiles at her before drifting back into sleep. Tears stream down Janie's cheeks.

"I can't... I just... I can't risk his life. They're just dreams. I'll be fine." She takes some deep breaths and forces herself to relax against the pillows. She practices the meditation they taught her during the training. It's not too long before her heart rate returns to normal. She's already starting to forget the werewolf and the other creatures. She sips a glass of water, then hands it back to a nurse before adjusting her pillows and leaning back to relax. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees the boy begin to twitch and whimper.

"Are you sure," the man asks?

"Yes."

The man nods to the doctor who flips the second switch. The boy relaxes, his face the picture of serenity, with the exception of the wires.

Janie trembles and moans. Her eyes widen in fear, no longer seeing the room around her. The machine shows her heart rate rise. Eighty bpm...120...150...

She screams.

About the Author:

Veronica Schultz is a writer obsessed with speculative and supernatural fiction. She has several eccentric hobbies including roller derby, ghost hunting, wildlife photography and education, and the circus arts of trapeze and aerial silks. Many would say Halloween is a hobby of hers as well, but they'd be wrong. Halloween is a lifestyle.

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Final Wishes | Shyla Fairfax-Owen

I settle into the soggy grass beneath me; above her. It's the eighth time I've visited her grave. It will be the last. Carefully, I open the book to the page she'd left marked for me. My heart quickens. I begin chanting words unfamiliar to my ears and tongue.

The strangeness quickly fades. My stomach expands and deflates. Voice booming. Blood rushing. I sibilate the final words, as if they have always been inside of me, waiting to slither out.

"Rise! Rise! Rise!"

The ground beneath me grumbles; groans. Out tears a hand; one I know better than my own.

About the Author:

Shyla Fairfax-Owen earned a Master's Degree in Film Studies, specializing in Gender and Horror. She has built a career as a Technical Writer, occasionally submitting fiction pieces for publication. When it comes to creative writing, Shyla tends towards short, speculative fiction, and themes of Otherness and female relationships. She currently lives in Ontario, Canada.

Blog: [Words & Stitches](#)

Out Of Phase



**AVAILABLE ON AMAZON, BARNES &
NOBLE, KOBO, AND ITUNES**

The Shrine | Peter Fugazzotto

Ten days after Riggs had dragged herself onto the sandy beach, she found the shrine.

Each day since the shipwreck she had ventured deeper into the jungle, braving blood-thirsty mosquitoes and risking getting completely lost. But she had found nothing to eat. A few papayas rotting in oily pools at the foot of trees. No birds. No rats. Small brown beetles she could never catch. She needed food or she would die.

Maybe she should have remained on the listing yacht, but then she would have been trapped with his corpse and the memory of pulping his head with a wrench. In hindsight, accepting an offer from a nightclub playboy to sail the archipelago was a bad idea. Even so she hadn't expected to wake up drugged and naked.

But none of that mattered anymore. Only finding food mattered.

She was model thin to begin with, and now after a week and a half with no food she was skeletal. Her skin had turned gray and her dark hair had begun falling out. The hunger had made her gnaw her knuckles, a habit years of therapy had fixed.

That day Riggs plunged into the interior of the island, and after an hour she discovered the ruins. Vines strangled a squamous structure, formed of hewn blocks of dark lava. Shards of obsidian glittered at her feet.

In the center of the ruins, she found a table, as long as she was tall. She ran trembling fingers over the strange greenish stone. It was impossibly icy. She glimpsed the ghost of herself reflected in the polished surface. Furrows led to a drain in the center of the table.

An image hijacked her thoughts: a painted man driving an obsidian knife into a child.

"There's no one else here," she muttered.

Along the back wall of the ruins, she found a series of reliefs carved into the blocks. She brushed the images. They were formulaic. Each one showed a sketch being drawn onto the table, a blood sacrifice, and the drawing materializing on the table. An axe, a crown, a chicken, a portal.

She wondered what blood cult called this place home, and with all the spilling of blood, she imagined they exterminated themselves on that table.

Again an image of a fiendish, wild-eyed priest gutting a child filled her head.

Madness, she thought.

She swore she'd never come back.

Three days later Riggs returned. She had found nothing to eat. The bark she had chewed she vomited almost immediately. Her stomach hurt so bad she thought she had been stabbed.

She had tried to avoid thinking about the shrine but her mind kept returning to the relief showing a sacrifice that made a chicken appear. Pure madness. She knew that. But what choice did she have?

Riggs cleared mud and vines from the relief. It showed a figure drawing a chicken on the altar. What did they use to draw it? She glanced around. Then she noticed chalky white rocks at the base of the altar.

This was it, Riggs thought. Some arcane magic to make a chicken appear. She laughed out loud, shrill, wobbling, as if a certain degree of insanity was required.

She picked up a rock, and quickly sketched a cartoonish chicken on the altar. Nothing happened.

Riggs chanted, "Chicken, chicken, chicken."

She was met with the distant thud of waves.

Riggs swallowed a sob. "Where's my fucking chicken?" she screamed.

The panels showed a progression: a drawing, an offering of blood, and the item materializing.

She knew what she was thinking was not rational. She also knew she would be dead soon. She had nothing to lose.

She snatched a shard of obsidian from the ground, dug it into her palm, and ripped. The flesh tore open too easily, and the rush of blood almost made her faint, but she stumbled forward and squeezed her hand until the bright fluid covered the entire sketch.

And then just like that, it was there. A white feathered chicken, squawking, surprised, wings snapping. Riggs wasted no time with wonderment and broke the chicken's neck.

A day later, the hunger pains returned. Riggs had gorged herself on that chicken, roasted on a fire. But it was consumed in an evening.

She returned to the shrine, sketched another chicken, and sliced her hand open. No chicken appeared. She squeezed out blood until she became so light-headed that she collapsed.

Riggs tried again over the next several days but all she managed to do was lose more blood.

She stared at the reliefs. An axe, a crown. These things were useless. She drew a hamburger but only lost more blood. The remaining image was that of a portal. Maybe it would be a doorway back home. Even if not, anywhere else had to be better than this island.

Riggs drew a doorway on the altar and reopened the gash on her hand. Blood spilled, bright, sticky. But not enough to cover the image. She cut her other hand, deeper than she intended. Blood pulsed, impossibly slow. The world speckled in blackness, spun, and then Riggs was on her back, staring at the sky, no idea when she had fallen.

She looked at her hands. She had cut her wrist accidentally. Blood seeped between her fingers.

Riggs rolled on her belly.

In front of her, a portal had opened, outlined in shimmering light, a tear in the fabric of reality exposing undulating blackness beyond. A susurrant whisper beckoned.

Riggs screamed. She tried to crawl away but something slimy seized her ankle. She turned. Writhing tentacles had emerged from the portal and encircled her leg. She tried to kick free but, inch by inch, she was dragged towards the gaping maw. Still she fought, fingers plowing the ground. Then Riggs felt it: an ancient craving, greater than anything she could even imagine, an insatiable hunger. As she gave in, her only hope was that death waited for her on the other side.

About the Author:

Peter Fugazzotto is a genre fiction author who lives in Northern California with his wife and daughter. His stories have been published in Heroic Fantasy Quarterly, Grimdark Magazine and the Knee Deep in Grit anthology.

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Night of the Living Tenant | Hillary Lyon

If Robbie had reservations about this place before he moved in, he now had regrets. He nervously chewed the inside of his cheek. Not that he was an overly large person, but this space was really too small, too confining for someone his size. And the fact that it was already furnished—never again would he ever go along with *that*. Satin upholstery on everything! How very old-school Hollywood, when satin was oh-so-glamorous—it made him think of Jean Harlow: ultra elegant. But no more. Surely once upon a time this upholstery had been the very epitome of high fashion, but now it felt cheap and tacky.

He sighed. His mother always chided him about not reading the fine-print on anything, told him it would get him in trouble, sooner or later. Looks like it had. His stomach rumbled; he was distressed. Robbie considered writing his landlord a letter, pleading to be released from his rental contract. Mentally, he began composing an obsequious appeal:

My Dear Mr. (Langley? Langford?) L.,

As much as I adore this little place, with its genteel decor and cozy ambiance, I fear I have made a grave mistake, and one which I pray you, in the spirit of camaraderie and generosity, will heed and help make right: I signed a lease for the wrong place. I heartily acknowledge that this was entirely my error, as I obviously neglected to read the fine print in our contract. I assumed—yes, making an "ass" out of both "me" and "u," as the college kids say— I would be placed into a much larger space. Mea culpa.

Having said that, I would be eternally grateful if you would release me from this contract, so that I might look for more suitable lodgings. Of course, I understand I will lose any and all monies paid to you in rent, deposit, etc.

I look forward to meeting with you to resolve this matter, as soon as is reasonably convenient for you.

*With warmest regards,
Robbie (Bennington? Bedford?) B.*

Or something along those lines. He would finesse the letter into something his landlord could not resist; he was sure he could persuade the man. Robbie sighed again. The place had an unpleasant odor, too, but he decided it would not be politic to mention it to his landlord. Plus, this residence was much darker than he expected. Where were the light switches placed, anyway? Who designed this hovel? He shook his head. His landlord, Robbie decided, was looking more and more like a slumlord.

He stretched his arms, knocking an elbow hard against the wall. He would go stir crazy if he stayed there much longer. Robbie put his hand in front of himself to feel the wall; *what a ridiculous way to find your own front door*, he thought to himself. He brought his other hand up to the wall. No matter which direction he went, he soon hit a corner, and another wall—though this one was much smaller. He grunted and closed his eyes, trying to connect with his inner gyroscope. He realized he might very well be lying down.

And he was. Maybe this apartment was like one of those crazy pocket hotels, he mused, where Japanese businessmen basically rented glorified bunks for the night instead of real rooms. Would he have agreed to leasing something like that? Maybe it was in that fine print he neglected to read. Robbie moved his legs, and his feet knocked against the walls. He raised his head, and bumped up against what had to be the ceiling. Great. Barely any room to maneuver. He could imagine his mother snickering, with an "I told you so" embedded in her giggles. Maybe he was mis-remembering. Maybe he didn't lease this tiny space; maybe he was just here overnight, a businessman hunkering down for some shuteye in an economically priced pod. That was more like it. But where was his stuff? His briefcase, his suitcase, his suit—wait, he was wearing his suit. He ran his stiff fingers over the lapels of his coat, the tightly knotted silk tie at his throat,

the buttons of his shirt, his belt, his blended wool slacks. He patted his concave stomach; his innards cramped and gurgled beneath his hand.

But why would he sleep in his clothes? He'd be rumpled and wrinkled when he got up—no way to present yourself to the corporate world. Or any other world, for that matter. What business was he in, anyway? Robbie took a deep breath, wracked his brain. Was he a lawyer? An agent? A salesman? Why couldn't he remember anything? All this thinking made him tired and hungry. He should get out, find something to eat. Robbie felt along the walls for a latch or a door knob. Nothing. *Well*, he mentally grouched, *that was screwy, but predictable*. The place was so small he couldn't turn on his side to push against the wall. So he pushed against the low ceiling with his palms; it budged, but just a little. *Okay, it opens from the top*, he realized. He pushed again, with all his strength, and the lid popped open. He sat up.

Looking around, Robbie saw that there were a half a dozen other pod-rooms in this, a much larger room. The lobby, perhaps. This main room was dimly lit, but posh. He liked that. High ceiling, plush carpet, heavy drapes, and so very cold. The landlord must have really cranked the air conditioner. This outfit surely had outrageous electricity bills, he judged. So much for having a tiny carbon footprint by residing in a pod, if it was offset by this energy hog of a landlord! Nevertheless, he decided these pod-rooms were probably much more expensive than he first thought. He must be doing well financially, he happily mused, to afford space in this place!

With great effort, Robbie climbed out of his little pod. He was stiff from being in one position for so long. His neck cracked when he turned his head, his knees and ankles creaked and popped when he moved. His stomach growled so loudly he thought it would wake the other tenants, the ones he assumed were sleeping in their own pods. But no one else stirred—at least, not that he could hear.

All the pods, he noticed (including his), were made of fine, highly polished woods—ebony, redwood, cedar—and were obviously handcrafted, as the seams were snug, and some had ornate—though tasteful—carvings on the lid. Each sported shiny metal handles, probably for ease in relocation. Musing over those handles, Robbie supposed once you purchased your pod, you could move it to any location, anytime, you liked. What a clever real estate strategy! He must tell his mother about that.

His hunger rumbled for his attention: *Stop admiring your surroundings and find something to eat—now*. Robbie looked around the room. Nothing to nibble on in here, unless he wanted to eat flowers. Perhaps there was a kitchen, or cafeteria, or a vending machine on the grounds. At the worst, he'd have to trudge around outside to find a restaurant or cafe or food-truck. Or whatever.

Across the room, a sliver of bright light shone underneath the door; he saw shadows pass by. That must be the exit. He grunted and walked to the door—so much effort to place one foot in front of the other; he really ought to get more exercise. Before he could touch the door knob, it turned and a young man walked in, dropping his stack of identical books when he saw Robbie. Who was this kid? Not a security guard, as he didn't wear a uniform. And carrying books? A door-to-door salesman? Did people still do that? A missionary? Maybe—the kid was clean-cut and pale. And soft and pudgy. Meaty, actually. Robbie grinned as the young fellow tripped over his own feet in a blind panic. *This was more like it*, Robbie thought: *Room service!*

About the Author:

Hillary Lyon is founder and senior editor for Subsynchronous Press. Her stories have appeared in 365tomorrows, Eternal Haunted Summer, Night to Dawn, and Theme of Absence, among others, as well as in numerous horror anthologies. She's also an illustrator for horror & pulp fiction magazines. Having lived in France, Brazil, Canada, and several states in the US, she now resides in southern Arizona.

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**PAIN RIDES ON NIGHT, SETTLING IN FOR THE FIGHT.
THE NUN'S EYES ALIGHT, HEAVY WITH HORRIFIC SMITE.
I'M NOT CONTRITE. I WALLOW IN DELIGHT.
SATIATE MY DEADLY APPETITE, I AM SATAN'S ACOLYTE.**



PART III



Gazing into the seclusion that presented itself through a dirty window, Pym could not stop the past from intruding. Snow melting to sludge sent a steely ache within every bone in her body. She was the pessimist of the two sisters, and while May was away for the night, she continued to dread enough for the both of them. The babble of the coffee pot mingled with the permeating aroma served a crucial distraction as the anxiety gently coasted away. *A walk was essential at this point.*

Stepping onto the porch, the song of the chimes served a comfort that retold of her of days gone by. It was a warm feeling but not for long, the blustery wind swirled around her like a bitter soaked bedspread. She adjusted her furry hood and headed for the clearing. An involuntary grin made residence on her face as she strolled on through to the back fields. She was engrossed by the howling breeze teamed with the rustling branches. It was as if no one else existed on Earth.

Exiting the clearing onto the narrowing trail she captured a deep breath and treaded forward. A few hundred feet into the unknown corridor her imagination took an ominous turn. The wind moaned through the density of the brambles as she carried on. The woods tightened around her and if there was no evident foot path it seemed certain she would be lost. Twilight arrived quicker than she realized and there was a certain urging to turn around.

Shimmering metal caught her eye. Just off the path to her right was a steel trap, set and ready for seizure. Her mental notes went into hysterics as she twisted around. Her pace quickened as she counted four additional traps, two on both sides of the previous traveled footpath. Further increasing her gait, her eyes widened at the sight of a bloodied final trap before the clearing entrance. *These were not here earlier!*

The bolt back to the farmhouse was steady and strong as she scaled the steps onto the porch, slamming the door behind her. Pym gave a subsequent glance out of the frosted panes into the immense area she had just trekked. The property frowned at her as the shadows cast their darkness.

She was ready for this day to end; extinguishing all embers and unplugging the coffee pot, she strolled to the bedroom to curl up with a good book. Crossing the threshold, she detected a faint scratching within the walls. As she extended her arms to touch the wall, a faint vibration kissed her fingertips. She recognized it was closing in. No amount of literature would keep her attention that night but her hopes were to coil up on the couch in a well-lit house and clear her thoughts until May arrived in the morning.

As morning light invaded her rest, Pym knew the task of getting up would be an arduous one as she worked on her cerebral 'to do' list for the day. Back on the verge of sleep, a thud against the front door stunned her into panic. Covers flew as she crouched beneath the window of the front door. She waited there until her heart rate slowed and she began the laborious ascent to peep through the glass. Why? Frozen with fear, she did not move again until a crash at the back door jarred her from the safe zone. She sprinted as fast as her legs could carry her into the hall closet where she loaded and cocked the shotgun. Slow and cautious, she made her way to catch a glimpse of the damage through the back glass before tiptoeing outside. The blood trail began atop the back door, the impact site was obvious. It skidded around the side of the porch. Wary and tense, she trailed it around the corner. Weeping, she witnessed the mutilated remains. Much of the essence had been devoured but enough had remained to make a wicked mess. Wind crashed through the trees as Pym ran back inside and made her way to the front door. Much of the same was to be seen.

The moan approaching the closed door was so extreme it shuddered the walls to their foundation. She aimed the shotgun and fired. Instantly spotting the cockeyed shot, Pym observed the blast left the wall gaping open as she dropped to the ground from the kick. The door splintered in

pieces as the fiend thundered down the hall. Its teeth were bloodstained and its eyes were grimaced. It took only four steps to reach her leg as it yanked and hurled her against the wall like a rag doll. She pleaded in vain knowing her wails would go unanswered. They were miles away from the closest living soul. She tried to get up but her back was broken. Relief began to swell in her heart when the tiny dots started exploding into vision, welcoming the darkness.

Sliding in and out of consciousness, Pym felt the side of her face scraping against the cold rugged earth littered with tree branches, pebbles and slush. She woke herself as she coughed up blood but instantly sprayed up her nose. As she writhed in the panic of fighting for a breath, she lifted her head and looked at the back of the beast. It had her left leg in a vice grip while the right one shifted, bloodied and broken to the rhythm of its gait. She made a feeble attempt to reach for anything within her grasp that provided resistance. She sensed where they were going as soon as her head began to bobble on the large rocks. The rocks turned into boulders and the residual stones flicked across her face and chin as the monster plodded straight up the side of the mountain. It hurt too much to cry but the tears flowed and burned her tattered face as she was steered to her doom.

By the time her death ride was over, the entire backside of her form was shredded. Her legs dropped to the ground which sent a bolt of pain through her core. She wished it would just end. But it wasn't over yet. The colossal creature bowed around to look into her eyes. The face was elongated and encrusted with dried blood. Its breath was vile and reminiscent of rot. The odor lingered in the tiniest of crevices, stench that permeated all matter and could not be washed off. It knelt over her and as she felt his body weight on top of her, she was grateful again for the swirling stars becoming more intense. She yearned she would not recover from this round of blackness.

Weightlessness was the final sensation she had to embrace as she glided through the air off the peak. Although she could not move on her own, gravity shifted her forward as she caught sight of her mother's makeshift memorial cross just below her. The knowing was instantaneous that she would see her mother again. Pym traveled towards the cross with tremendous speed; the pressure of the rocks below released all of her anguish and fear.

The sight of the blood soaked porch struck a deathly fear into May as she ran to the residence. Every fiber of her being was against dashing towards the scene but she knew her sister needed her. In an instant, she knew and recited silently the curse that was their destiny. They had survived for so long, May never thought that the sins of the past would warrant their ruin.

*"In a time not long ago,
On the desolate lands of Cano,
There lived a boy named Marius Sling,
Who came back to visit every spring.*

*Long and lean, not a care in his mind,
Until the day he was discarded and left behind.
His friends became foes in a turn shocking and grim,
They just felt that there was no more room for him.*

*Cold flesh and bone,
Left all alone.
Near his head, a stone so bloody,
This event gave birth to Marius Nobody.*

*Found during the season's first thaw,
Triggering an effect that no one foresaw.
His parents went wild with uncontrollable grief,
Cursing man, woman and child in a moment so brief.*

O

*Their calls were heard by an unseen force,
And the supernatural calling would run its course.*

*Feared by all and for good reason,
As snow melts, it ushers hunting season.
For only one day, unknown each year,
The natives await the return of their fear.*

*Not bow, nor rifle, no bullets involved,
Innocence lost until sins absolved.
Sheer madness would rip, until life was no more,
Thick blood would run black to the tips of each shore."*

Spinning were her final thoughts before the camouflaged metal mass snapped her leg in half. The piercing shriek was masked by a guttural howl as the ground seemed to tremble at its arrival. May collapsed into shock while being transported through the familiar terrain; grit and branches tore at her like spears to her backside as the farmhouse faded into the distance.

About the Author:

Tina Swain is a native Texan and a graduate from the University of Houston with a degree in Psychology. Being a lifelong fan of the horror genre and growing up across the street from a literary influence, she made the decision to focus on the craft that has fascinated her since she could remember.

Amazon Author Page: [Tina Swain](#)
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Night of My Life | Katherine Brown

Out for the night
Out with friends
The moon is bright
We have grand plans
With heels so tall and clothes so slight
We hit the Halloween party, candy binge
Eventually my friends are out of sight
Another drink followed by a sudden twinge
Out to the bushes I race in fright
Coughing up my stomach contents
Embarrassed I flee from the light
Smack into a stranger around the next bend
He smiles and bows, at first so polite
Escort he offers and arm he does lend
Alas when I point left he pulls me right
I protest, but he only grins
I pull away with all my might
But the handsome stranger now has me pinned
I make to scream and try to fight
Then gasp in horror as his fangs descend
Nothing I do stops his first bite
And it is a bite that never ends
So now to the night I'm condemned for life
Never to go home again

Witchnapped | Katherine Brown

Eyes so purple they suck you in
Blood of animals dismembered
Oozes repulsively along her skin
Hair red as embers
Dress as black as sin
I'm wracked with violent tremors
My scream is trapped within
How I got here I can't remember
The witch looks at me and grins
Her teeth are silver and they shimmer
Her wand she pulls from her nose, both are long and thin
With a wave the deep cauldron between us starts to simmer
I gulp in fear, sure I've reached my end
Another flick of wand reveals a table set with two places for dinner
My heart stops at her next cackling words, "You're mine, Baby, dig in."

About the Author:

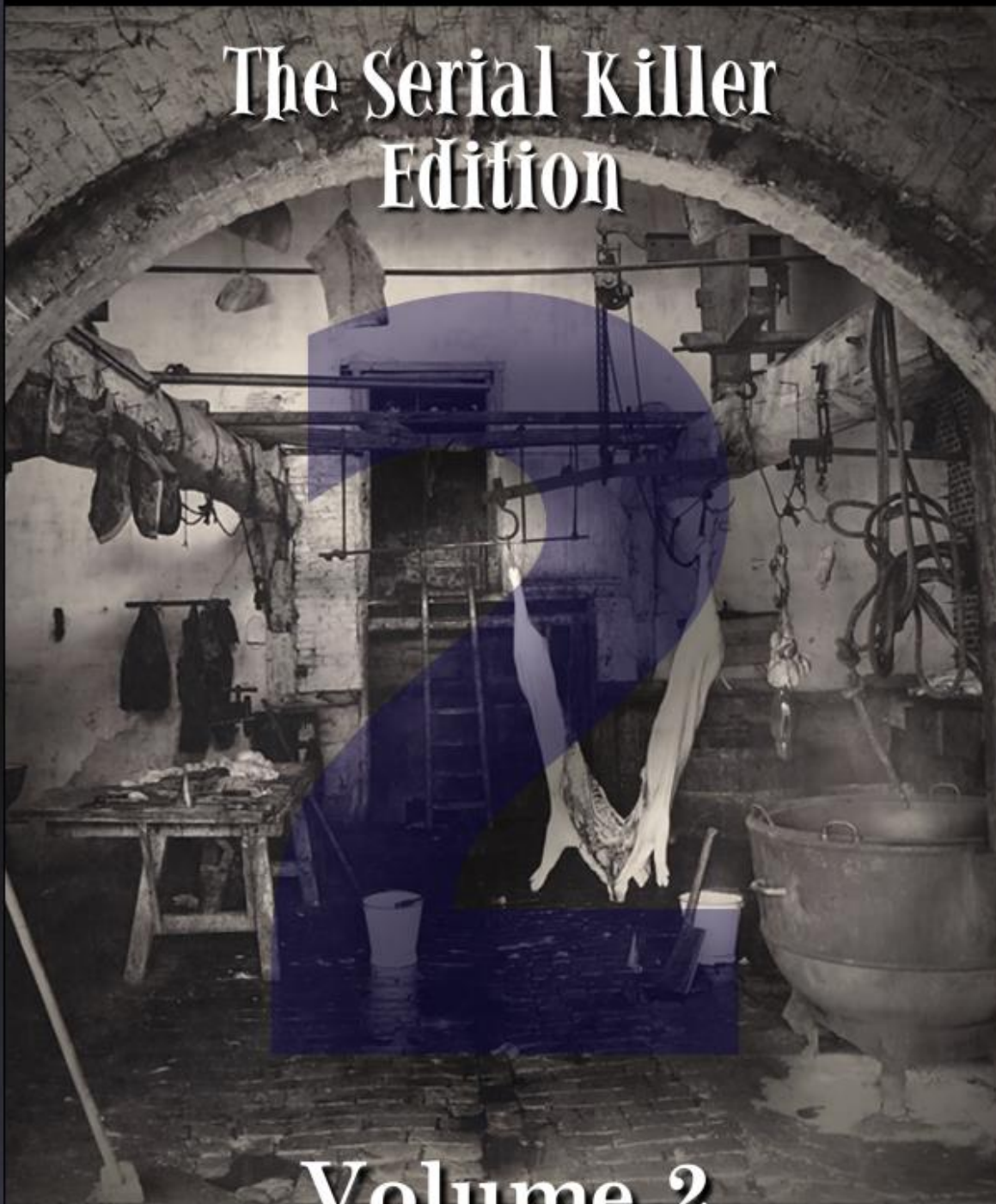
Katherine Brown lives with her husband and step-daughter in Texas. A passion for books from the time she started reading led Katherine to dream of writing books. As a teen, Katherine discovered a new joy in composing poetry. Publishing her first two children's books in 2017, Katherine hopes to continue writing long into her future to inspire in others a love of reading.

Blog: www.katherinebrownbooks.com

What drives someone to become a Serial Killer?
Eleven authors spin tales of atrocity telling us just that.

Slaughter House

The Serial Killer Edition



Volume 2

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Becky had never gone to work with a gun in her handbag before.

That's if you could call the family heirloom she'd pulled from her bottom drawer this morning a gun in any modern sense of the word. It looked like something she'd put together from a piece of old pipe and a tin can. He'd probably die of laughter when she pulled it on him, although that might be her best chance under the circumstances. Great Gramps swore he'd killed a German with this gun. Shot him right between the eyes, according to the story. Brains and bratwurst everywhere, he'd said. Becky wasn't sure how well guns aged, but there were only two bullets with it and she didn't want to waste one on a test run. After all, she might need them. Murder wasn't something she committed on a daily basis and she couldn't rule out the possibility that she'd miss. Not that there wasn't plenty of him to hit, but she wasn't taking chances. This day had been coming for a long time now and flesh wounds were not on the menu.

She'd use both bullets anyway, she thought. There was only one thing sweeter than the thought of shooting Darren Carver, and that was shooting Darren Carver twice. She could see it now, one small, dark, smoking hole in the space between his eyes, and another in his chest, a crimson blooming blood-rose seeping slowly into his shirt. If she'd had another bullet then the third one would've gone lower still. That was the only place you could really hurt a man like him.

She'd considered that option at length over the past week: whether to maim or to murder. Blasting his manhood into a thousand strings of gristle was a more-than-tempting thought – she'd have liked to see him dangle *that* into anyone's glass of pinot grigio at the next office party – but Becky knew that just wouldn't be enough for her, and besides, he'd only use it to validate what he'd said about her all along. She could hear him now, telling the sales clique how he always knew she was a freak, that there was always something creepy about that girl, that you should never trust a woman who owns more cats than pairs of shoes.

No. She couldn't have that. She had to silence that mouth of his once and for all. No more sneers, no more leers. No more taunts of Speccy Becky or Becky Bucktooth to endure. No more raucous laughter as she fell from a boobytrapped chair or spat her salt-laced coffee across the office. Just two smoking bullet holes and Darren Carver's brains spread magnificently across the wall.

There was only one problem with Becky's plan, and that was how to get Darren alone. It wouldn't have been an issue if she was Ros from accounts, the one who wore the tight pencil skirts that drew Darren's eyes like laser-guided missiles, or Stella, maybe, the one they called Miss Whiplash, who worked upstairs on the Director's floor. He'd have followed those two like a dog in heat given the chance, but not Becky. She knew if she even suggested they go somewhere together that he'd laugh himself into a seizure. Becky wasn't Darren's type, which meant she needed another diversion. Luckily, she had an idea.

The cold goods store was at the far end of the warehouse, a five-minute trek from the sales office. Becky didn't often go there on account of the sub-zero temperature, but occasionally the automatic labeller would jam, and as the only person on site who'd bothered to learn how to use the damned thing, Becky would be sent to check it out. She'd faked the phone call superbly, calling the landline from her mobile which was perched on her knee beneath the desk.

"What? The labeller's broken again?" An exaggerated sigh. "On my way."

She dressed quickly, pulling on the company-issue thermals in a flash. *It was the adrenaline*, she thought. Normally, Becky only had one gear and that was 'slow and steady'. That kind of pace didn't fit with the dynamic sales team, but then Becky didn't fit with them either. Her move into sales was

supposed to have been temporary, a brief sojourn from accounts to cover sick leave. That was over a year ago, a long, torturous sentence that she'd served with the minimum of fuss. Until now.

The heavy padded parka was ideal for concealing Great Gramps' gun. Darren didn't even look up as she slipped it from her bag into her pocket. His attention was on Miss Whiplash, perched lazily on his desk, one long, stockinged leg crossed seductively across the other, red patent heels hovering dangerously close to his thigh as she pressed him for this month's sales figures. Becky suspected they weren't the only figures on his mind. Miss Whiplash knew how to dress to impress, accentuating her hourglass curves with fitted suits and low-cut shirts that revealed the barest hint of bra cup lace. Becky had a name for women like that. So did Darren: easy meat.

The thought of meat brought Becky's attention back to the task at hand. She glanced around the office one last time, fingering the gun in her pocket. Two bullets. One target. She smiled and headed to the door.

Becky hated the cold goods store. It was like Christmas in Hell. She'd had nightmares for a month after her first trip down here, all those blank, lifeless eyes and pink, frosted corpses sailing by like some kind of macabre merry-go-round. She'd never eaten meat again after that.

It was lonely in here, too. The automated system that shunted the meat from storage to shipping bay negated the need for human input, and Becky was the only person in the building.

Darren had followed her down here once, back when she was new to the job and naïve to the lengths he'd go to for kicks. She'd made it halfway to the storage bay and then *blam!* – the lights went out. Becky didn't like to think about what happened next, but now she willed the memories to come. *Better to kill you with*, she thought.

She might've been able to handle the dark. She'd never been afraid of it, not even as a child, but it wasn't just the dark that she'd had to contend with that afternoon. Five seconds after the lights went out, the conveyor system fired into life. It shouldn't have, Becky knew that. All of the lorries had been loaded for the day, the new stock shunted into storage, but Becky could hear the loaded hooks rattling by, she could smell the meat and feel the chill as the frozen cadavers passed close to her head. She'd taken a step forwards, arms flailing wildly in the dark as she called out for help. Then someone laughed.

That sound in the darkness had wrong-footed her. She'd fallen forwards and landed face first against something cold and slimy traveling at speed in the opposite direction. Becky hit the deck in a shower of blood and spectacle glass to the soundtrack of Darren Carver's hyena-like laughter.

He'd passed it off as an accident, of course. He even offered to pay for her new glasses, but the company footed the bill in the end. She should have made more of a fuss, but the company had been so generous in giving her time off for her mangled nose to heal that she'd put it down to a practical-joke-gone-wrong and said no more. In doing so, she'd given Darren Carver a free pass to act as he pleased, and he'd been dining out on it ever since.

He'd be down here soon, she thought. The fire alarm had been wailing for almost ten minutes now, long enough for a role call to show that she was missing. Darren's fire marshal responsibilities didn't extend to search and rescue, but given the opportunity of playing the brave, dashing hero, especially with Ros and Miss Whiplash looking on, Becky knew that Darren wouldn't be able to resist.

She'd already turned the lights off. When the SOCOs came in it would look to them like a blown fuse. Thanks to her Dad, God rest his soul, Becky knew her stuff when it came to electrics. Such a shame that he died in the line of duty, fixing a dodgy plug in her room, and they'd argued that day too over something so trivial, only it had mattered to her at the time.

It had mattered to Becky a lot.

She suddenly froze. A dribble of torchlight appeared in the dark, moving to and fro as someone approached the cold store from the intersecting passage. She crouched as the door cracked open.

"Becky?"

Yes. It was him.

Sliding a trembling hand over gun metal, she shrank further back, nestling between two stacks of pallets. The door opened wider.

"Becky? Are you in here?"

A muttered curse as he stepped into the cold store. The door swung shut behind him. Becky shivered, but not through the cold. It was a delicious, unexpected shiver of pleasure as she realized she finally had the upper hand.

She could hear him shuffling forwards now, the torchlight swinging like a lighthouse beacon in the dark. He called her name again, an angry bark this time, as though he was summoning a disobedient dog. On instinct, Becky growled.

The torchlight swung violently. Becky ducked as it skimmed over the pallet stacks and came to rest a couple of yards to her right. The light quivered as it hovered there.

"Becky? Is that you?"

She could do it now. She had a clear shot, but it wasn't the right moment. She wanted him to see her, to look right into her eyes and know the awful truth. She wanted to see his fear.

"Becky? I swear to God, if you're—"

A loud crack behind him cut him off, and he spun a one-eighty, torch beam darting wildly. The chunk of wood that Becky had thrown had caught a strut of racking and skidded off into the darkness. She could hear his ragged breaths above the blare of the alarm now. Darren was getting scared.

As he inched further into the cold store, Becky took her chance. Running in a crouch, her soft-soled shoes making whispers on the icy floor, she used the perimeter wall to guide her towards the control room where the switch to the conveyor system was located. She turned and looked out into the inky blackness, watching the retreating blush of torchlight.

Almost there...

Almost there...

Almost...

Becky hit the switch.

A mechanical whine bled into the blare of the alarm. Compressed air hissed. Gears and pulleys rattled into life, carrying cadavers on an aimless parade. Somewhere in the dark, Darren screamed.

The torch hit the floor with a clatter. Becky took off, sliding across the frozen floor like a skater building to a showpiece. As she drew closer, her eyes adjusting to the gloom, she saw a dark shape on the floor, barely moving.

Darren groaned.

"Oh, shut up," Becky spat.

Careful to avoid the conveyor, she picked up the torch and shone it into his face. Darren winced, lifting an arm to shield his eyes. Whatever had hit him hadn't hit him hard enough. There was no smashed nose, no broken teeth, no blood. Oh well.

That was about to change.

"Get up," she snarled, pulling the gun from her pocket.

When he didn't move she kicked him in the groin. His strangled grunt of pain sent a warm glow of satisfaction to her core, so she did it again. Then she pointed the gun at his head and waited.

It took some time for his snuffling, snivelling bleats of pain to stop. Tapping one foot impatiently, she nudged his leg with her toe. "Are you done?"

Finally, Darren looked at her. Lowering the torch, she waited for his watering eyes to adjust.
“What the...”

Becky waved the gun, motioning for him to stand.

“Becky—”

“Up!” she barked.

She watched as he studied her, confusion morphing to caution, morphing to fear.

“Okay,” he said, rolling slowly onto his elbow and beginning to stand. “Okay, just take it easy.
We can talk about this.”

“No, we can’t,” she said calmly, then lifted the gun and fired.

There was a metallic click. Nothing happened.

Becky fired again. Another click.

Oh shit, Becky thought.

As the voices grew closer, Becky lay on the icy floor in a pungent pool of blood and vomit and smiled to herself despite her discomfort. The gash on her temple had ceased to bleed, the nausea, for now, had subsided. Her right arm hurt like a bitch though. Who’d have thought it would have taken so much strength to put him down. Only when the butt of the gun split bone did Becky stop. By then he was unrecognizable.

After disposing of Darren, she’d tossed the bloodied gun into the waste chute, then steadied herself, mind and body, before allowing herself to fall face first against the cold steel edge of a racking beam. She’d knocked herself out cold, coming to in the state she lay in now.

And that’s how they found her, bruised and bloodied but otherwise okay. Had she seen Darren? No, she hadn’t. The last thing she remembered was the lights going out. A blown fuse? Really?

As the ambulance crew attended to her, she kept a close eye on the electrician in the control room who was running diagnostics – checking fuses, inspecting wires, flicking switches.

Eventually, he came out and shouted to the workshop foreman, “Hey Pete, there’s something dodgy going on in the annexe. Wiring’s fried. Looks like one of the machines was overloaded. You want to check it out?”

Pete signalled that he would, then set off across the cold store to the annexe, where the meat grinding machines were situated.

Two minutes later, Pete came back. He was white as a ghost and sweating profusely.

“I think we need to call the police,” he said, wiping his brow. “There’s been a terrible accident.”

About the Author:

Kate Lowe is the author of the urban fantasy series *The Riley Pope Case Files*. A member of the British Fantasy Society, her short fiction has appeared in various zines, magazines and anthologies. She lives in Leicestershire, England with her husband, two demanding cats and an army of bears that have far too much to say for themselves.

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Let There Be Light | G. E. Smith

Luke climbed into his truck bed, unhooked the tie-downs, and pulled back the tarp. "Think it still works?"

"It's not an appliance, Luke." Charlotte took a slow step forward and put her hands on the tailgate.

Luke hopped to the ground. "Yeah, but it's gotta have *some* power, right?"

Charlotte shook her head and backed away from the truck. "It's creepy. That seven-sided star on the cloth is what gets me."

"C'mon, Charlotte. A kick-ass altar. A real one. Solid walnut, not crappy particle board. I couldn't build or afford something like this for our magic show."

"What's with all the candles still there?"

"The small ones are loose, but I don't wanna break them. Ruin the whole visual effect. I tried removing the big one in the middle, but it's stuck, like welded to the altar with wax. It has some sort of fiber in it. The smaller candles do too." Luke grinned "Or maybe human hair. Mwahahahaha!"

"Quit it," Charlotte said and swatted Luke's shoulder. "I'm serious. We shouldn't be messing with that thing."

Luke held Charlotte's hands. "I'll get to the auditorium early. Get some help unloading the altar and tell the stage hands to put it far back, center stage. I'll levitate you well in front of it. Deal?"

Charlotte hesitated, then nodded.

"Let's hear it again for Grace and her amazing ballerina cats!" The talent show MC led the audience in applause. "And now, please welcome Luke the Magnificent and his lovely assistant Charlotte."

A secondary curtain lifted to reveal the altar as Luke and Charlotte, hand in hand, took the stage. A CD of cello music started playing.

"Ladies and gentlemen, children of all ages, I will levitate my lovely assistant before your very eyes." Luke lit the larger center candle on the altar. As he did so, the other nine slowly sprouted a flame on their own.

The audience gasped.

"Was that supposed to happen?" Charlotte whispered.

"Just go with it," Luke whispered back and pocketed his lighter. He turned to the audience. "My assistant will now become..."

Charlotte's feet left the stage. Wide-eyed, she tried to speak.

As the audience applauded, the overhead lights flickered, then went out. A bit of murmuring, but open cell phones quickly dispelled the darkness.

The flames of each candle grew, giving more light to the stage area. "Charlotte," Luke whispered.

No answer.

"Making someone disappear in the dark?" someone called out. A chorus of boos soon filled the auditorium.

"Cut the music," Luke said.

Something began to glow high above center stage.

The crowd hushed.

Luke looked up, shielding his eyes against the brightening yellowish-white glow. There appeared to be a silhouetted figure in the center. "Charlotte? Is that you?"

"My time in this body is complete," Charlotte said. "I now join those who have gone before me."

The glow slowly faded until it was gone. The lights came back on, and a tenth candle began to form on the altar.

About the Author:

G. E. Smith has written silly, rhymed verse, gospel clown skits, and scripts for his hometown junior high PeaceBuilder and D.A.R.E. programs. His current writing focus is short, dark fiction. Mr. Smith's work has appeared in FunDead Publications, Lonesome October Lit, Trembling With Fear (Horror Tree), and Flash Fiction Magazine. He works in north central Illinois, where he lives with his wife Joyce and stepdaughter Wandia.

Facebook: [WritefullyMinded](#)

Heart's Desire | Lynn White

She said, I was her heart's desire
sometimes
she meant it
I think
sometimes
I felt it too.
But now I feel
empty
of desire
I feel
only strangeness
holding her heart in my hand.
I feel it pulsating with life.
I feel blood flowing like tears,
while she lies still,
so still,
empty.
Emptied of desire,
like me.
Only I wonder
what will happen next.

About the Author:

Lynn White lives in north Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. Her poems have been widely published in anthologies and journals such as Vagabond Press, Apogee, Firewords, Indie Soleil, Light Journal and Snapdragon.

Blog: <https://lynnwhitepoetry.blogspot.com>

Facebook: [Lynn White Poetry](#)

MARETHYU (a haiku)

The reaper of souls.

A darkened figure of fate.

The angel of death.



T.S.W
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A blinding, orange light forced its way into the chamber, illuminating the crimson droplets upon decaying walls. The air, thick with the aroma of death, slowly stole my breath, and yet I still preferred to linger within the confines of the Asphyxian demoness than face whatever glowing hell dwelled beyond the door. I cringed with each step, I could hear and feel the squish of brain matter, entrails, and bones beneath my boots.

As I made my way through the maze of remains, not only did the smell of decomposition grow stronger, but the beaming light glowed even brighter and began emitting an intense warmth. I continued deeper into the chambers, and the burning heat began to melt the walls. No longer could I stand the putrid scent of burning flesh and gore. I threw all of the weight I could find into the closest door, and no longer cared what entity I would face on the other side.

I gasped for a breath of fresh air only to find the smell was just as intense as before. Brimstone, sulfur, and rotting flesh permeated the slaughterous expanse. I could hear the screams of millions as my eyes found their way to the large, swirling light before me. It was a giant, orange whirlwind that reached high up into the heavens and then down beneath the molten seas, bubbling below, far beyond my vision.

It was within this strange vortex that I could see the millions of souls swarming each other, trying desperately to find a way out as their skin melted away from their bones. The screams of pain vibrating from below, up through my body and into my head, taking me back to the screams of the thousand harpies. Blood began to pour from my ears and eyes as I dropped to my knees and begged for mercy, not for myself, but for the incessant torment that dwells within the place.

I have found this sacred site somewhere in the middle of the earth, where most would never dare to venture. A bottomless pit of black and nothingness, and if you gaze into it long enough, you will see every nightmare you never knew existed. A portal of abominations, a breeding ground for mankind's darkest manifestations, and I am in no way better for this knowledge. The closer I moved to it, the heavier the air became. I distinctly recall the air was so thick, that it was visible, and it suffocated me. A feeling of complete oppression fell upon me as the swirling fog slowly crushed my chest, forcing the breath right out of me and draining my life force.

Despite my inability to breathe, I continued forward as if the gaping maw were a giant magnet, and I was nothing more than a tiny shred of steel. I stood at the precipice and peered into the abyss, and it wasn't long before I began to see all the horrifying things it had to show me. I could see billions of tiny, razor-sharp teeth, and a vast array of glowing red eyes staring back at me. Before I could make any sense of what I was seeing, I noticed the darkness in which I was staring was not a hole in the earth after all, but a giant mouth of inky, black, paper-thin flesh.

It was at this time that the torturous cries ended, and so began the incessant buzzing of flies. As the buzzing grew louder, the whirlwind turned from orange to blood red before evaporating into nothing, leaving every soul to drop below into the fiery belly of the beast. A sense of false elation took over me as I stepped back from the precipice, only to discover the buzzing wasn't from flies at all, but large, black beetles.

The swarm could smell death radiating from my pores and while I attempted to get a closer look, they latched on to me one by one. I could feel them sucking the blood from my veins, my body quickly becoming nothing more than a husk for my broken soul. My skin became hard and pale as porcelain and began to crack and peel as blood seeped out from the open wounds, and over the ocean of flames came hordes of hideous creatures.

I peered into the black eyes of Baphomet as he assumed the throne, in his hand his staff of jagged bone. Blood spilled forth from its fetid mouth, staining the snow white fur that covered its body. A sinister orgy of evil shall take place before the cloven hooves of the fallen one. From this bloody union shall the new race of demons be birthed as a curse upon humanity. Before time was a construct and Lucifer fell from the right hand of the Father, so it was written that sin shall fall upon mankind, as a great blanket of darkness over the world.

Beneath the barren wasteland of flesh and bone, beat the decaying heart of the beast of nothingness. The living embodiment of greed, lust, and wretchedness as he masqueraded as the everything. He is the charlatan of aeons in his sinister acclaim, and I shall refrain from the juggernaut of decadence and his tender symphony upon my ears. The fiends of debauchery roam like a plague and eternally we are blinded to the veracity of his sentence.

The oppressor beamed at the great decimation brought forth by his hand, and so weeps the one most high, for the tears of the Messiah will spill forth and wash away the sins of humanity. Erected from the ashes of death, stood tall the tree of life, and as the burning sun hung high above us all, the supreme divinity cast his shadow over the world as each new day birthed a new hell. Temptation is a cruel master, and upon beating hearts played the siren song of spectral strangers ever long. I no longer feared how the fire burns in my veins as I descend further into darkness, for these are the end of days, the fall of virtue and the rise of perdition. The sacred one retreated within the sanctuary of mourning, and our penitence shall commence at last.

As a torrent of blood appeared to rain down upon me, I could see at closer inspection the tiny droplets ascending from the burning void below. Pools of red spurting upwards, defying what little logic that was left in my rotting brain. A film cast over my eyes and within Gehenna I forever dwelled, listening to the souls burning beneath my feet as I suffocated in their echoes of agony.

About the Author:

Tawny Kipphorn is a Freelance Horror & Speculative Fiction author from Pennsylvania. She enjoys writing Supernatural and Psychological themed Verse, Short Stories, and Flash Fiction pieces.

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Invisible Spells | Jessica Rougeau

I brought cards with me
fanning in the cemetery
I like how you read them
How you turn kings and queens into
astrology.

I suffer from internal fictions
Eyes like sidewinders, a battered brain
when it all feels too much
Let's take a walk in the quiet, you say.

Consumed with night visions, we lie awake
collectively, I cannot tell you how it
calms me. Just us and freakish phantoms
howling in my heart.
Gives me hope in all my suffering.

While you manipulate energy,
praising past graves:
I leave stones for the moon.

I like that you find your way back
I live for more moments with the Accused.

No Shadows | Jessica Rougeau

How do I get from one place to another?
With no one to mark me, to tingle down my back?

The depth of that silhouette
reminds me you lurk there.
It follows, I focus
like Dracula on a neck.

As I perch and I work
on a wire and
rest like a crow.

I swear I know
the shade of the dark.
Draw it out like a demon
Three times makes it real:

Kill the evil behind you.
Kill the evil behind you.
Kill the evil behind you.

About the Author:

Jessica Rougeau is the author of *Witchdoctor*, a collection of horror poetry written during her recovery from a sudden near-death experience. She also loves to write scary short stories and screenplays. When she's not writing, you can find her at a horror convention, a brewery or the beach. Jess resides in New Orleans with her girlfriend and three-legged dachshund, Juice.

Blog: www.thisiswitchdoctor.com

Instagram: [@thisiswitchdoctor](https://www.instagram.com/thisiswitchdoctor)

Red ones always trigger it. But any color can. She freezes on the threshold of the meeting room – colleagues have organized a leaving-do. Moving on. That’s what she wants to do, but the balloons won’t let her. They rock on the floor, sway on tables, rest on chairs. The worst float in bunches like upside-down teardrops, the strings tangled together in fleshy cords. She tries to clear the images, the balloons, filling her mind. She knows her colleagues meant well. She knows she’s supposed to smile, say thank you. Instead, she begins screaming.

The first time it happened, she told herself she was imagining things. Balloons were nothing more than air-filled latex. There was nothing inside them. But she saw something in there. These balloons weren’t empty.

She has all her sonograms. Each one, from each time. Not just the standard ones taken at eight weeks and twenty weeks, but the others as well, taken because of problems, complications. Each time she puts the sonogram on the fridge and imagines her baby floating, cradled and protected inside her own red balloon. But each time the balloon ruptures, leaving crimson spots on her panties and dark clumps at the bottom of the bowl. She uses one hand to flush, the other covers her mouth, while she gags on grief and whispers umpteen sorrys.

Then she takes down the photo.

Says they need to try again.

Watches as they drift apart.

Sinks until she can’t try anymore, then tries to forget.

But these shoulda-beens don’t want her to forget. Or to be forgotten. They come to float before her, continuing to develop, crammed inside more durable vessels. She sees small, pallid bodies, legs tucked neatly under chins, tiny fingers and toes pressing against rubber. Their pulsing, bulbous heads stretch the rubber thin. When she finally tells the doctor what she sees, he tells her this is an irrational fear, a trick of the mind. It even has a name: globophobia. The doctor says knowing this helps.

The doctor is a fool.

She tries reasoning with her tormentors. Explaining she’s done everything right. It just happens sometimes. Balloons are delicate, fragile things. Prone to popping.

They. Don’t. Care.

They aren’t interested in her apologies or her explanations. They don’t listen to her words. But they hear her screams. And respond. As she stands on the threshold of insanity, the balloon babies open their eyes and look at her.

“Mommy,” they cry in unison.

They’ll follow her forever. Her very own bunch of half-formed, watery children. Gelatinous faces forever sealed inside these tombs. There’ll be no moving on.

If she never stops screaming, maybe she’ll drown out their cries, burst the balloons, or her heart. Perhaps even her head. She races to the kitchen, comes back with a knife. Her colleagues watch open-mouthed as she stabs each balloon. Red corpses litter the floor. From the corner of her eye she sees a balloon escaping out the window. She follows it.

About the Author:

In real life, balloons make Sherry happy, but in her fiction, it can go either way. She lives on a farm in the Scottish Highlands where she pets cows, watches clouds and scribbles stories. Her first published short story was about her Peace Corps experience in Ukraine and appears in *A Small Key Opens Big Doors*. Other published work can be found on her website.

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Where O Where Did Jupiter Go? | Michael D. Davis

The recording came over every telephone and answering machine in Hinchley. It said, "This is Chief of Police Gus Worby, at four-fifty-five Tuesday there was an escape from Cherry Gates Juvenile Detention Facility. Be on the lookout for sixteen-year-old Jupiter Janish, he is five-foot-five with brown hair, green eyes, and a jagged scar up his right forearm. He was last known to be wearing a green short-sleeved t-shirt and khaki pants. Jupiter is considered dangerous. If anyone sees him, do not approach and immediately call 911. Anyone with information as to the whereabouts of Jupiter may call the Hinchley police department. Please be sure that all your doors and windows are locked and don't open your door for anyone, but the police. If you see or hear anything suspicious please call and report it. Thank You."

Leaning heavily on his cane, Blake Graffin went from his driveway to his front door. Two plastic sacks of groceries weighed his free arm down. Blake's late wife (as he called her, she lived a county over with her balding, tight assed, retired proctologist of a second husband), had wanted him when he built the garage to connect it to the house. He said it was a waste of money and a ridiculous idea, she called him an asshole, he called her a bitch. Hunched over his cane two-thirds of the way to the door carrying groceries that will be expired by the time he gets there Blake wished he'd done it, but he still thought she was a bitch.

When he got to the door Black sat the bags on the cement with a swear. He wrestled his keys out of his jeans pocket swearing some more. Being a gimp made everything a goddamn production. Finally, inside, Blake took off his sunglasses but left on his ball cap and boots. He figured he'd rest a minute or two before trekking back out for the booze. He plopped down on an old wooden kitchen chair and rubbed his leg.

Blakes' hand stopped mid-thigh. He sat very still, fear not showing on his face. He'd only heard the floor creak once. He waited but didn't hear it again. Blake turned his head and scanned the room. His answering machine was blinking and something moved in the shadows.

On an average day, Blake didn't need the lights on, depending on which room he was in. There were enough windows that sunlight lit the room just fine. On an overcast day or if he was doing something special he'd turn on a lamp, but usually, it wasn't until late evening that the lights came on. Sitting in the kitchen chair Blake reached up and pulled the cord for the overhead light.

Nothing was there.

Everything seemed to be fine. Just as cluttered and messy as usual, but the door. The closet, on the far side of the kitchen, right before you go into another room, had its door open, just a few inches, only a crack. But it's never open. There was nothing in there that Blake or anyone needed.

Blake got up from the chair. He walked towards the door keeping his eyes welded to it. Standing in front of the door Blake touched the knob. The door came open with a slow loud creaking noise. The overhead kitchen light waded into the closet. The first thing Blake saw were two shiny dark eyes.

Blakes scream was more of a yelp as he fell onto the wooden floor. The dark shining eyes came out of the closet into the light revealing the face that held them. It was the cold, pale face of a teenager. He was dirty like he'd been rolling in the mud.

"What the hell are you doing in my house?" said Blake laying at the boy's feet.

The boy didn't answer. He just stepped over Blake like a dropped pop can. He went into the kitchen and started opening drawers. From the last one, he pulled out a long silver steak knife.

Blake had got himself up on his elbows. "What ya gonna do with that?"

"Shut up," the boy took a seat in Blake's kitchen chair. Pointing the knife at him, he said to Blake, "get up old man."

"That ain't as easy as it sounds."

"What?"

"I gotta bum leg either you're gonna have to help me or give me a chair to kinda climb up."

A smile spread across the boy's face as wide as a vulture's wingspan. Then he emitted a high-pitched laugh that could cause squirrels to attack each other outside and left Blake with a headache. "You can't get yourself up! Don't you old geezers have a button to push or a cord to pull when this happens?"

"Only if you want the police here."

Blake was bluffing, he didn't think seventy-two was old enough to have a direct line to the people who came and scraped old geezers up off the floor.

Laughing the boy said, "Well, I guess we don't want that."

He put the knife on the kitchen table and sauntered over to Blake, that horrible smile remaining on his face. He bent down grabbed the old man's arms and hefted him up.

Blake stood uneasily on his feet like he was ready to fall again. "My cane if you would."

The boy slid the cane away with his foot then stepped away from Blake to get it. Handing Blake the cane he said, "Why don't you join me at the table."

Blake nodded and followed him, he wanted to hit him in the back of the head with his cane but knew if he did, he himself would go down like a sack of taters.

At the table with the boy, again holding the knife Blake said, "So, you an escapee from Cherry Gates?"

The boy's smile vanished like a black dog in the night. "Why do you think that?"

"All the kids at the Juvenile Home wear plain green or maroon or whatever shirts and khakis. Also, you're a young shit holdin' me at knifepoint in my own home with my own knife."

The laugh was back again, if a preacher heard it he'd start preparing for the end.

"My name's Jupiter, you got anything to snack on in these grocery sacks?"

"My name's Blake and there's some saltines in one of 'em."

"Saltines?"

"Yeah, saltines."

"What am I gonna have, *soup*? Who eats saltines as a snack?"

"I've been known to."

"You got anything else?"

"I'm sorry, if I knew you were comin' I woulda stocked up more."

Again the laugh.

Jupiter, in a motion that was quick enough to have painted a fly's toenails without it knowing, cut Blake's arm with the steak knife. Blake screamed as the pain struck him. Jupiter closed his eyes sleepily and took it all in, a smile creasing his face.

"What the hell did you do that for?" Blood flowed over Blake's wrinkled skin.

"You know, there was this psychiatrist asshole at Cherry Gates. A real four-eyed prick he'd talk and talk such bullshit. One time I told him how I could feel his blood. Pumping, going from his heart through his veins to his fingertips and back. Back and forth, back and forth that human tomato juice of his surging into all his extremities. I can feel that flowing and it just takes the littlest thing to make that flowing... stop."

"You're one cold-blooded son of a bitch, kid," Blake said. "You slashed me open from tit to toe can you at least get me something to stop the bleedin'."

"That's not slashed open. Ha! Slashed open, you wanna see slashed open?" Jupiter put his arm on the table, palm up. The scar started just above the wrist and ended where his elbow bent.

"What happened there, kid?"

"My father."

"Your father did that to you?"

"No, I was tryin' to do somethin' to him, tripped and fell with the knife."

"Tryin' to kill him?"

"Maybe... after all at Cherry Gates, I got the reputation of the kid that killed his father and blamed his mother."

"That's not what happened?"

"No. My slut whore mother killed him. I swear it, but they all blame me because I can feel people's blood running that obstacle course through their bodies."

"Yeah, can you feel mine?"

"Yeah."

"What's it like?"

"Old, slow at times, but fast at others and sweetly weak. Right now it's runnin' so slow it reminds me of honey takin' forever to fall out of an upturned jar."

There was a knock on the door, both of them jumped.

"Who's that?" Jupiter said.

"How the hell I'm supposed to know?"

The doorbell rang then the knock again.

"Don't seem like he's goin' away," Blake said.

"Shut up."

Jupiter stood eyeing the way to the door. He held the knife in front of him like an afterthought. The doorbell rang again and Jupiter jumped nearly dropping the knife.

"Alright," he said to Blake, "get up and don't try anything funny or your blood's spillin' like a dropped glass of milk!"

Blake grunted a reply and stood, his blood covering most of his white pale arm. They walked the short distance through the house to the door. Blake felt the point of the blade resting above his kidney and Jupiter's breath on the back of his neck.

Blake opened the door a crack just enough to stick his head out. A very un-lowan thing to do, he thought, even if you didn't like the person and didn't chat long you usually walked them to their car. Of course, it was a police deputy. Blake figured the way the day was going who else could it have been.

"Hi, Blake."

"Deputy."

"How you doin'?"

"Good as it gets, what can I do you for?"

"Well, a kid escaped from Cherry Gates today."

"Oh, really?"

"Yup, had a report sayin' they saw him come this way."

"I ain't seen no one."

"Alright, well keep your eye out."

"Will do, have a good one."

"You too."

Blake started to shut the door.

"Oh, wait," called the deputy.

"Yes?"

"Could you come out here and tell me if anything's different, like if he got into your car or shed or somethin'."

The knife poked Blake's kidney a bit harder.

"Well, I feel like death warmed over today. My legs given me a bunch of trouble and it feels like there's a knife in my back." It poked him harder. "So, I just wanna go lay down if I could. From here nothin' looks touched."

"Alright, Blake sorry to bother just keep an eye out."

"Yup, see ya."

Blake slipped his head back into the house. He locked the door and turned around slowly. He wasn't there, Jupiter was gone.

"Where'd you go?" Blake said to the house.

"I know you're here, boy."

Blake walked forward leaning on his cane. He eyed everything, it all took on a frightful tone. Any of his possessions could be hiding Jupiter, the thought chilled Blake to the core.

Approaching the entrance to the kitchen Blake slowed in front of a recliner that had foaming at the mouth splits in its upholstery. Blake knew he could be hiding behind it. Probably in fact. It was large, easy to crouch behind, just the right place to wait, legs cocked, ready to jump at the pull of the trigger.

Reaching to a shelf Blake grabbed the biggest book he saw. A horror novel, large print, if it hit him right Blake could kill him. He inched closer to the chair expecting to see the glint of a knife. Blake's leg touched the bottom of the chair and he heaved the behemoth of a book over the back of it. It hit the floor with a thud.

Blake released a breath that he'd been holding. He went around the chair and bent over to grab the book. As his fingers touched the spine the sharp tip of a knife poked his back.

"You thought I was behind the chair didn't ya?"

Blake straightened up as he listened to that tortured cat laugh of Jupiter's.

"Where were ya then?" Blake said when the laughing quieted.

"Oh... around. This place you have here has many nooks and crannies for a person like me. After all, hide and seek was my favorite game. Did you like that game?"

"Not overly."

"Too bad, let's go back to the kitchen shall we?"

Blake kept his back to Jupiter as the knife urged him into the kitchen. He plopped down in the chair he was in before and put the book on the table. Jupiter didn't join him. He'd disappeared again.

"Now, where the hell are you?"

"Oh..." came Jupiter's voice from the right, "I'm around." This time it was the left, no, no, the right still.

"I've had it up to here with this vanishing act shit!"

There was the laugh again. It didn't come from the right or left. It came from everywhere. All directions! It was suffocating Blake, choking him. He was everywhere all around him. Everything hid him. Blake was surrounded by him.

Blake clapped his hands over his ears, but he still heard the awful laugh. Deep within his gut, Blake mustered all he could and screamed. "*Get out of my house!*" Just as he felt the knife again touch his thin skin.

The Jeep pulled lazily to the curb.

"This is the last one right?" The kid asked his mother behind the wheel.

She consulted the clipboard and said, "Yeah, this guy gets a B, and it says here he sometimes doesn't come to the door so, you have to go in."

Digging through one of the big black bags on the back seat the kid said, "Oh, hell no. Remember the last time I did that when we were up for Meals on Wheels. The old lady just talked and talked and wouldn't let me go. Old bat."

"Don't think you'll have that problem with this guy. He's the one that that Cherry Gates psycho kid cut up and nearly killed last year."

"Oh, yeah."

"Now, hurry up."

"Okay, but next time I drive and you jump out."

"Yeah, yeah Mr. Licence, hurry up will ya."

The kid jumped out of the car, pulled up his khakis which always seemed to slide down and made sure his green shirt which said, *'I know you care and that's sad'*, was covering his ass. He picked the plastic tray meal off the seat, closed the door and started toward the house.

He rang the doorbell three times and knocked twice, there was no answer. The kid wondered slightly if he'd find the old guy dead or sprawled out on the floor. He turned the knob and stepped in cautiously calling, "Meals on Wheels, anybody home?"

There was no answer. He wondered if he should get his mom, but decided against it. He left the door open and walked further inside calling out meals on wheels.

The kid came to a doorway and looked into the kitchen. It was empty. He started to turn around when he was hit in the back of the head. He fell to the linoleum floor, the tray of food skated under the table.

Blake stood over him the large print horror novel in his hands. "I knew it, I knew it," he said. "They said you left, but I knew you were still here. Just hiding, playing hide and seek you sick son of a bitch. I got you now, Jupiter, you're going nowhere. Three, two, one, here I come."

Blake brought the large brick of a book back down on the kid's head. Again, and again, until he no longer moved. The book was slick with blood, Blake tucked it under his arm and walked out leaning on his cane.

He closed his eyes and cringed as that sharp awful laugh pierced his ears. It surrounded him, boring into him, coming from all directions. That horrible, horrible laugh.

About the Author:

Michael D. Davis was born and raised in a small town in the heart of Iowa. Having written over thirty short stories, ranging in genre from comedy to horror from flash fiction to novella he continues in his accursed pursuit of a career in the written word.

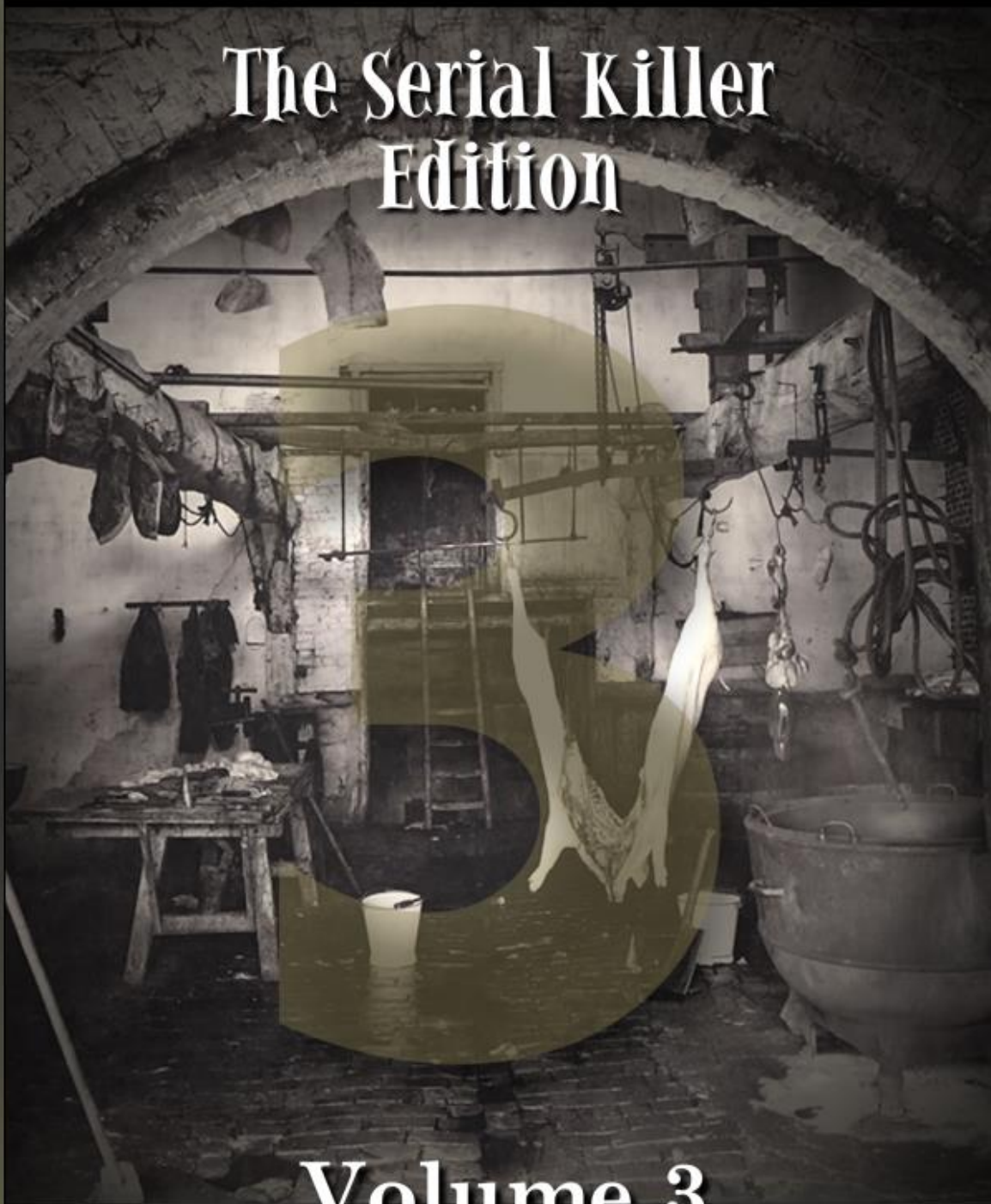
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The Intruder | Kahramanah

She tried everything she could to be as quiet as possible. Taking several deep breaths through her nose, she attempted to steady her erratic breathing. Her hands were covering the mouth of a little boy that she had been watching. He sobbed and muttered incoherently behind her fingers. They both sat on the floor in the closet. The louver doors allowed the nightlight to seep in, revealing the terrified look on the boy's face.

She didn't know how to calm him down. It was only a moment ago that she was reading him a story in bed. He whined for his parents and she patiently explained several times that they were at a party and didn't want to be bothered.

"It's just me and you, kiddo," she told him.

That was even truer after they heard the creaking floorboards downstairs. Once or twice wasn't enough to catch her attention. Houses made inexplicable noises all the time. She only began to take note of the noise after the creaks become too rhythmic. It was definitely someone walking around.

She grabbed the boy by the arm and yanked him into the closet. There was no use in trying to reason with him. He just kept crying for his parents.

"Be quiet," she whispered.

Slightly removing her hand from his mouth, he said, "I wanna go."

"Sshhh! Keep your voice down."

"But I'm scared."

"I know. I'm scared too. But, I promise, I won't let them take you. It'll be okay."

He wiped his eyes and nose with his pajama sleeve.

They hadn't heard anything since settling into the closet. She began to wonder if she overreacted.

"Stay here and be quiet. I'm gonna check if everything is safe," she said.

Opening the closet, she stepped out slowly into the bedroom. Pressing her ear to the door, she listened for any sign of life outside of the room.

"I'm so sorry I scared you. I might have just been hearing things again. That happens to me sometimes," she said.

"Can I come out?" he asked.

"Not yet. I'm just gonna look downstairs just to be sure no one else is here."

Before she could open the door, they heard a siren in the distance.

"Shit. Do you have an alarm?" She asked.

"Huh?"

"An alarm. A home alarm system?"

"I don't know."

"That's probably the cops coming here. We have to leave now."

"Why?"

"Because we're not safe!"

She searched the room for any weapon, but couldn't find anything among his toys besides a plastic baseball bat.

"Come here," she said, looking out the window. "The tree is really close to the window. I think we can climb down."

"No!" he shouted from the closet.

"Sshhh! Now come on. This is our chance to get away."

"No! I don't want to."

"Fine." There wasn't any time to waste arguing. She leaned out the window to grab a branch. "I'll go by myself. Don't be scared. I'll come back for you."

He watched her cling to the branch and shimmed her way towards the tree trunk. Once she was out of sight, he closed the closet door again and waited.

The sounds returned. He heard the familiar creaks of someone coming up the stairs, whispered voices, and doors opening. It wasn't long before the boy's bedroom door opened and heavy boots entered.

"Daddy?" the boy called out.

The light turned on and blinded him for a moment. Through squinted eyes, he looked up at a large man towering over him.

"I found the kid," the man said into a walkie on his shoulder.

He reached down and picked up the terrified boy and brought him downstairs and outside to his waiting parents. He held his mother tightly, and kept his grip as a second officer approached them.

"There's no one else in the house," the cop said.

"She left," the boy said into his mother's shoulder.

"We know, baby," the mother said, squeezing him tighter.

"Wait," the officer interjected. "Are you talking about your babysitter?"

"No," the boy said. "I mean the lady that hurt my babysitter."

"Oh my God," his mother said. "Did she hurt you too?"

"A little. She grabbed my mouth really hard. But she scared me really bad."

The officer put his hand up to silence the worried parents, and asked, "Did you see where she went?"

"Yeah. She went down the tree outside of the window. She tried to make me leave with her."

The parents watched as the officer whispered orders to two other men before rushing off to the back of the house to search for any sign of the woman.

"Don't worry, baby, you're safe now," the mother said.

"Mommy," the boy said.

"What is it?"

She clutched her son almost painfully tight when he responded: "She said she would come back for me."

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 stories have appeared in the anthologies *Manifest Reality* released by Hair Brained Press, and *Crescendo of Darkness* by HorrorAddicts.

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The Deceased of 120 Primorsky Street | Michael Carter

To the Last Resident of This Old House,

You don't know us, but we know you. Not your name, or your voice. We cannot hear you. But we've been watching you since you moved in years ago. So we feel like we know you.

We haven't seen you in a while, and we're concerned. We're hoping that by writing this letter we can reach out to you, or rather, you can reach out to us.

We live on the other side of mirrors in your house. We can see you through each one. We watch, and we wait, for someone like you to take care of this place. After all, it's our house, too.

Sergey was the first to die here. He was ninety years old. He lived a long life and became a crotchety old man. Sergey passed away not long after his wife died in the hospital from pneumonia. You could say he died from a broken heart, but he'll tell you he just had an old heart. He died peacefully upstairs. Don't worry, it didn't happen in your bedroom. He was in the guest room next door.

Little Anastasia is in the mirrors with us, too. She acquired a rare bone disorder. They moved her to the study downstairs so the doctors could more easily treat her. She too passed away peacefully after they gave her some elixir to subdue the pain. After she died, her family left the house and moved to the Urals where they hoped to forget about the tragedy.

The house passed through many owners before I bought it. My death is a little embarrassing, because, really, it's my own fault. I'd had quite a few bottles of Vasileostrovsky and was making my way down to the cellar for more. I wasn't drunk, but I slipped on the stairs and knocked myself out. I had a brain hemorrhage and died there. I should have just stuck with the Kvass.

They found me weeks later after the neighbors reported a foul smell coming from the house. I was living alone at the time, like you. I suppose that's why the others wanted me to write this letter.

After hearing about all these deaths you probably think this place is haunted. I don't think it is. We all died here naturally, it seems. The house is roughly five hundred years old, so three deaths in that amount of time isn't odd.

We've seen a lot of people come and go through the years, and we all agree that you have been one of our favorites. We've watched much of your life through the mirrors. From the living-room mirror, we could see out to the front yard. You took such great care of the roses. The lawn was manicured. You kept the hummingbirds coming every year with fresh sugar water in their feeders.

The other mirrors gave us snippets of your life, and they also showed us how you cared for this house. You kept it the cleanest. You were respectful of the property, and, in turn, respectful of us. You also put up more mirrors through the years, giving us additional windows to the outside world.

We're concerned because we haven't seen you for a while. We started worrying when we saw a man come in here with a sledgehammer. A while after that we saw families and small groups of people enter sporadically to wander through the house. A lady would often leave the front door open and stand in the kitchen waiting for them to come and go. Her likeness appears on the sign placed in front of the house.

The man with a sledgehammer could have been a man with a pipe wrench. That's what we'd like to think. Maybe you decided to sell and had the leaky plumbing fixed? That would make sense, but it wouldn't explain the presence of the police shortly after we stopped seeing you.

Months have passed and we're concerned. That's why we decided to write a letter. Hopefully you can see it pressed to the glass, facing out towards you.

Could you reach out and touch the mirror one more time, to let us know you're there? Could you touch it to let us know you're okay? Just reach out and touch the words before you. If you've passed on, we'll touch you back. And we'll take you in.

Sincerely,

The Deceased of 120 Primorsky Street
St. Petersburg

About the Author:

Michael Carter is a short fiction and creative nonfiction writer from the Western United States. He's also a ghostwriter in the legal profession, Space Camp alum, and a volcanic eruption survivor. When he's not writing, he enjoys fly fishing and wandering remote wilderness areas of the Northern Rocky Mountains.

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Tin Ceiling | Nina D'Arcangela

I lie in bed starin' at that pressed tin ceilin' every night. A comfort its scroll work has been to my addled mind as I wander down its pathways and off to sleep. As of late though, I been seein' a figure in that tarnished metal, one that stares right back at me. Each eve, it grows clearer, the face more distinct. I 'spose momma's words were spoken true – the eyes are the mirror to the soul, 'cause these eyes, they're deep and dark and evil, and in them, I see my own black core screamin' to get out.

About the Author:

Nina D'Arcangela is a quirky horror writer who likes to spin soul rending snippets of despair. She reads anything from splatter matter to dark matter. She's an UrbEx adventurer who suffers from unquenchable wanderlust. She loves to photograph abandoned places, bits of decay and old graveyards.

Nina is a co-owner of Sirens Call Publications, co-founder of the horror writer's group *Pen of the Damned*, and owner and resident nut-job of Dark Angel Photography.

Blog: [Sotet Angyal – The Dark Angel](http://SotetAngyal-TheDarkAngel.com)

Instagram: [@darcnina](https://www.instagram.com/darcnina)

Featured Author | T.S. Woolard

As a lover of horror, in all its sub-genres: traditional, extreme, bizarro, supernatural, true crime-based, and all the medias in which it's presented to the world: prose, poetry, art, film, it is quite the contradiction to admit that the thing that draws me to horror so strongly is the emotion. In my eyes, there is no other genre that can evoke as many different emotional responses, nor the depth in which they are felt. There is romance, and drama, and even erotica, that play on a person's heart, but those are generally limited to one or two major facets. Horror, oh, boy, horror attacks everything at once, if done correctly.

Now, that's not to say those genres are obsolete and not worth consuming. I draw upon their ways of building tension and pulling at the heartstrings of a reader as much as possible. I write romantic poetry often. There is always a place for that warm, safe feeling everyone wants to feel. It's an important ideal that feeds my daily, image-based poetry pieces. Find one emotion, be it fear, or adoration, or depression, or any one strong feeling, and attack the hell out of it. Use few words and pull as much as you can from them.

The image-based poetry is something I began doing a few months ago. I always felt as though I was a simple writer. I don't focus on sounding smarter or using over-reaching words that make someone google their meaning. I want the right word, not a lot of seven syllable words. I didn't realize until I started that it made the perfect writing style for the daily posts. I do a lot of work looking for the right images and the right words to go with them. Even the font and color of the text matters. I try to put it together in the most palatable way, like making a breakfast smoothie.

It's all geared to evoking emotion, and as much of it as I can. I want it to scare you. I want it to hurt you. I want it to make you swoon. I want you to feel. It's my ultimate goal, and why I love horror so much. I can do it all.

So can you imagine a story that makes your heart swell with love, shatters that same heart, glues it back together with a gnarled, shaky hand, makes that heart race from action and uncertainty, leaves you yearning for something for a person, and also scares the complete shit out of you all at once? I do, every time I write a story, in fact.

In my five years of publishing (this month—October—marks the fifth anniversary of my first time being published), and lifetime of writing, I feel as though this was, without a doubt, the best I ever did at capturing everything I wanted in one story. This tale stripped everything from me as a writer.

I remember how the idea for Heaven's Healer from Hell formed. I was writing a short story for an anthology. I listen to music while I write, and happened to be on a Nirvana kick at the time. I had their greatest hits album playing on a loop while I wrote. A line stuck in my head. I couldn't shake it, and became the basis for the plot line this story would be built on.

I wish I could eat your cancer when you turn black.

As soon as the other story was finished I dove head first into, what I called, "the healer story". I poured everything I had possibly ever felt into it. It had such an impact on me that I couldn't even look at it for almost six months, and for the first time in over seven years of writing every day, I *couldn't* write. Not even a word. The most I did in the form of writing was signing my name to credit card receipts.

Going back to edit the story I had to take breaks. There were so many times I felt mad at myself for putting Vince, the healer and main character of the story, through so many of the fears I had faced in my life. The fear of losing your family, the fear of losing everything you've worked your whole life for, the fear of the more questionable things you've done in your life biting you in the ass all at once, the fear of making a mistake and accidentally causing the person you love the most in the world to have to pay the price you owe to some form of unjust karma, poor guy took it all. How he went through it, and it nearly killed me to write it, I'll never know. So, when you read this, remember you're taking part of my soul in. I can honestly say I've never been the same after bleeding out for this story. I hope you enjoy it, and *feel*, feel as much as I did writing the book.

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From the critically acclaimed short story compilation "Psycho Circus"

HEAVEN'S HEALER FROM HELL

A NOVELLA



T.S. WOOLARD

Southern Tale Spinner

"You look like hell." Gerald studied his boss, Vince, for a moment. He dipped his head to get a better look into the man's eyes. "You need to rest."

Vince's chin hovered above his chest by a fraction of an inch. Sweat poured from him, beading and running, like his sallow skin was covered by car wax. His shoulders sagged, and his arms dangled in front of him.

"I'm fine," he mumbled. Vince staggered a little to the side, catching his fall against the cinderblock wall.

Gerald jumped to help him, to keep him from falling, but Vince had enough strength, barely, to stay upright.

"You damn sure don't look fine. I don't understand why you *have* to see these people. They're on Death Row," Gerald said.

"I know," Vince said. "Don't you think they need the word of God more than anyone in that revival tent did last night?"

"Not worse than Annette Michaels. She paid five-g's to see you."

"These people have just as much worth as Mrs. Michaels did." Vince pushed forward on a shaky leg. "They have souls just like her and aren't looking for the same thing she was."

"The bank or electric company doesn't accept souls, though." Gerald walked alongside his boss with one hand on the small of his back. "These folks don't pay our bills. You do, and your health is key."

"I'm doing it, don't matter what you say." Vince was firm. "I got to do this, so I can keep helping those people you say pay our bills."

"I don't agree with it, but I'll support your decision," Gerald shrugged.

"Thank you." Vince smiled at the older man.

"It's what I do, boss," he said. "Since we're on the subject of helping folks who can't pay, you reckon we can talk about taking a look at my pops?"

"I told you no before, and that's still my answer." Vince braced against the wall, again, as they made their way down the corridor. Each footstep echoed to the end of the hall.

"Why not?" asked Gerald. "He's a good man. He pays his taxes, goes to the old Methodist church down there on Wrong Hollow Lane. You know the one I'm talking about?"

Vince nodded.

"The only thing he does wrong is drink. It all started with a little nip now and then when I was a kid. The problem is the whiskey is killing him, boss, and he don't deserve it. You know he don't."

"I've told you time and time again, I'm a healer."

Gerald didn't cut Vince off, but he aimed for a well-timed pause, taking full advantage of the first one that came.

"That's right. You are. You have a gift from God. People worry you for favors, and they are always going to. But I've known you since you were in first grade. This is the same guy that gave you the birds-and-the-bees talk when your mother faltered. He gave you your first Bible and your first beer. He's *not* a stranger. Why don't you want to help him?"

"I can't," Vince breathed, drawing even with the cell door of the inmate he came to visit.

"You always say that." Gerald brushed his boss' shoulders off and straightened out his jacket, making sure he was looking his cleanest.

"Because it's the truth," Vince said. "I can heal only diseases. Alcoholism isn't a disease. It's a choice." He took a breath, which hurt him. "And I believe you're wrong."

"About what?" Gerald said. The saltiness he felt bled into his tone.

"I don't know if it's a gift from God or a curse from Hell."

* * *

The cell door slid open. The inmate, Trey Kris, lit up. He liked the healer, had learned a lot about the Good Book, and the message it conveys, from him. The inmate's grandmother would be so proud of how far he had come. When he was incarcerated for the murders of two police officers, he had been a young fool.

It wasn't without reason, however. When two of the cops he would eventually murder beat his brother to death one night, in the hottest part of the summer, it changed Trey. Before then, he was like any normal eighteen-year-old: trying to go to college, trying to make a few bucks to get by, trying to hook up with that girl down the street with the promising future and nice ass, and hero-worshipping his brother. Without a father, his brother, Wayne, was the only male in his life worth looking up to. The problem that was Wayne booted cars for a living.

Wayne wasn't a bad guy, despite his profession. He just so happened to be exceptional at it. By the time he turned twenty-one, the men running cars on the underground markets had heard all about him and were throwing offers of big money and his own crew at his feet. The underbelly of the City of Miami belonged to Wayne.

It all began late one night in the projects. Wayne tried to sneak in after hanging out, way too late, with his shitty-weed slinging buddies. All his life (even when he was deep in illegal activity) he wouldn't do or sell drugs. He didn't have an issue with people who did, but it was important for him to set a good example for Trey. Their mother, Pam, did enough drugs for the both of them. That life wouldn't follow the boys, if he could help it.

The day came, though, at twenty-six years old, when Wayne's luck ran out. In the middle of stealing a rare '69 Hemi 'Cuda convertible—one of the most recognized and expensive cars among enthusiasts—a rent-a-cop saw him working on the door locks. The job was for a man Wayne worked with almost exclusively by that time: Tony Tony—as everybody knew him.

Tony Tony hosted the car show the owner of the Hemi 'Cuda attended. It was the perfect way to get the man in a spot Wayne would have time to work his magic. Usually, the rent-a-cop would've reported to Tony Tony, or one of his underlings, but this one called the cops straight away.

What nobody knew was the bastard rent-a-cop was a plant. For two years, Tony Tony's biggest competitor, Mikey Russo, tried to hire Wayne out from under his boss. Wayne did a few side jobs, with big paydays attached to them, for Russo, and Russo wanted Wayne full time, convinced he was the key to Tony Tony's reign over Miami's car-jacking ring. When Wayne flat out refused, Russo figured it was best to get him popped, and pray he sang on Tony Tony.

Two racist cops showed up. They shouted for Wayne to raise his hands and freeze. He did as they asked, which seemed to piss them off. Knowing Tony Tony would have him out by the time they finished booking him, Wayne knew to remain calm and cooperate. A resisting arrest charge would only disappoint his boss.

The officers bent him over a neighboring '72 Impala and handcuffed him. They frisked Wayne and shoved him around a bit. He bit his tongue and grimaced when they elbowed him or mashed his face into the hood of the Chevrolet.

"He has what?" one of the policemen said. He sounded alarmed. Wayne couldn't imagine why.

"I found some cocaine on him, Sarge." The other officer produced a baggy full of fine, white powder.

Wayne flipped. "That's bullshit. You motherfuckers planted that on me. You know damn well you did, too!" He bucked and kicked at the men. He thought of Trey. His little brother wouldn't care if he got busted for lifting cars. They had done it together on a few ultra-safe jobs before. The cocaine charge would devastate him, though. And what would he do, claim he was framed? He could hear Trey in his head: *yeah, who wasn't.*

"Shut up, thug. Where did you get this from?" the first cop said.

"From you, pig. You know that shit ain't mine!" Wayne yelled.

Something happened, something no one but the two officers ever knew about. Wayne felt the handcuffs release. He thought, at first, he may have broken them from fear or adrenaline, but he grabbed the police officer closest to him and shoved him into the Hemi 'Cuda.

Wayne reared back to punch the man as hard as he could in the eye. Something thin and rock hard struck him in the back of the head. He thought, for a moment, he dreamed it, until his legs had no control and buckled beneath him. Blood oozed from the fresh wound and trickled out on to the ground. He whimpered and grinded

his teeth, the pain playing games with his muscle function. His legs had spasms, kicking out and flopping around like the tailfins of a fish on a dry pier.

The cocaine planting cop hit Wayne in the upper body and head repeatedly. At one point, when Wayne slipped away from this world, teetering between life and death, he could time the intervals between blows.

He didn't hurt anymore by the thirtieth shot from the man. Inside Wayne's body, it was peaceful toward the end of the chaotic display of violence, a sheer hate-fueled killing. It was a gift from God, or Hell—he didn't know which.

The news of Wayne's death reached Trey through their mother. She fell all to pieces when she got the call.

"My baby!" she roared and dropped the phone.

"What is it?" Trey said. "Is it Wayne?"

Pam nodded. Her already drawn skin tightened around her ribcage, spindly bones becoming ever more visible through the brown leather upholstery covering them. Trey rushed over to her as she collapsed to her knees.

"What happened, Ma?" He grabbed her shoulders and tried to pull her to her feet.

She jerked away from her only remaining son. Pam sucked a violent breath of air, sounding like it ripped her lungs apart, and pointed to the phone.

"Hello," Trey said into the receiver.

"Hi, yes, who am I speaking with?" said the woman's voice on the other end of the line.

"Trey Kris. Who is this?" he replied.

"I'm detective Trixie Jones, from Miami-Dade Police Department. What relation are you to the deceased?"

"The... what?"

"The deceased, Wayne Rucker."

Trey kind of let the words hang in the air, like if he didn't answer it wouldn't be true. The words the detective said seemed dirty, dangerous, even. He didn't want to accept them, but the woman asked the question again, this time with a nip of impatience in her voice.

"I'm his brother."

"Okay, well, can I speak with your mother again?" she asked.

"The news upset her pretty bad." Trey didn't recognize his own voice. Being man of the house was already affecting him. He felt detached, but strong enough to protect his mother. "She's crawling around on the floor, trying to breathe. I don't think she's much for talking at the moment."

"Oh dear," Detective Jones said. "I guess I'll just tell you then."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I need her to come down to the courthouse. There are some things revolving around your brother's death we need to discuss."

He understood his mother's reaction. It hit him full in the face. It hurt him, shattered him. Although Wayne only had four years of age on Trey, he always thought of him as twice the man. He spewed wisdom. You could feel it on his older brother like an aura. Trey lost the only person he would ever looked up to, until he met Vince.

The two met the detective on the stairs of the courthouse an hour later. They learned what happened to Wayne, and Pam, being the lousy house-whore Trey knew her to be, accepted money from the state for her silence. She blew through it in eight months. By the time she overdosed on a heroin and crack mixture, she was forty dollars overdrawn with the bank.

Trey, being the only family member left, decided to tear apart the family that destroyed his, starting with the assholes that killed Wayne. He targeted white policemen he knew had a questionable background. It didn't scare him. He was happy to rid the world of slime.

Through it all, Trey believed he wasn't racist himself—something he prided himself on. He accepted the healer as his own brother. He was, however, discriminate, unapologetically. To the very moment of his death, he felt right in his actions. The cops deserved it. Even the Bible said, he'd learn much later, an eye for an eye.

"Good afternoon, Pastor." Trey smiled at the healer as he struggled his way into the inmate's cell. "You don't look so good."

"I've had better days." Vince shrugged. "It's not a thing I can't live through. Only problem I have is: who does the healer call when he needs to be healed?"

Trey waited for the healer to flash a smile before he returned one. "Good question, Pastor, good question. I wish I could help you like you have me. You shouldn't have come in your shape. I ain't getting executed for another two days."

"It had to be today. I couldn't wait. I'm headed out of town for the revival show, so I won't be able to see you anymore," Vince said.

"In that case, I'm glad you came. I want you to be the one to save me. It will be special to me." Trey's eyes swam behind a wave of tears.

"You're the one who will save yourself, Trey. It's in your heart, whether or not you verbally give your soul to the lord. You don't need anyone's help or guidance," Vince reassured the inmate.

"But I *want* you to do it. It's my last request of you," Trey said.

"That's fair." Vince reached out but stopped just short of touching the man. "I hope you don't mind catching whatever it is I got."

Trey chuckled "Not hardly, Pastor. I got two days, remember?"

"That's fair, too." The healer grinned at him. "Clasp my hands and bow your head."

The men went through the routine Vince had completed thousands of times. He spoke. The inmate repeated him. The pastor felt tension and burden be lifted from the man's body. He also felt the sickness leaving him, flowed through his fingertips and into Trey's body. The cancer Vince consumed, stole, from Annette Michaels now killed Trey. It would never get the chance to finish the job, though. The State of Florida would claim Trey beforehand.

Vince left the cell and joined Gerald in the hall. He still acted on the edge of death, and Trey suddenly felt fatigued and a sharp pain in his stomach. Pancreatic cancer was eating him alive already, but it would die along with its host soon.

Gerald dropped Vince off at his house. He scraped his feet atop the cement sidewalk, while Gerald watched from his black Jeep Liberty. When he made it in the door, he sighed, slid his shoes off, and scurried to the sink to drink copious amounts of water, feeling parched.

* * *

"Thank the lord!" Gerald blurted out like he'd held his breath since the last time he saw the healer. "I thought you may be dead by now."

"I feel all grades better, thank you. I hate to disappoint you, but it's gonna take more than that to keep me down." Gerald loaded his suitcase into the back of the Jeep. "Ain't we got a plane to catch?"

"Sure do." Gerald pushed the glass shut on the SUV. "You don't even look like the same person."

"Daddy, Daddy!" A young brown-haired girl skipped across the pastor's lush, green front lawn. Her sky blue sundress whipped behind her.

A gorgeous brunette followed her through the yard, looking terrified—a stark contrast to the little girl's over-the-moon attitude about her.

"What's going on, Lindsay?" Vince asked his daughter.

"Momma said you can't go!"

"She's not lying, Vince. You can't." The woman went straight to the back of the Jeep.

"Why the hell not?" Gerald demanded.

"Because Momma said so!" Lindsay said with all the authority she could muster in her four-year-old body.

"Cut on the radio." Gina pointed to the dashboard of the vehicle.

Gerald turned the knob, and the speakers played a twenty-four-hour news station, his favorite to listen to when driving around Miami. The man talking spoke in a hurried, raspy voice. From his tone, it was apparent something big was happening.

"Again, if you're just joining us, it is September 11th, 2001. This day will forever live in infamy for all Americans."

Gerald had long since left Vince's services, unable to deal with his boss' refusal to help his father. By the time his dad died, he couldn't bear looking at the healer. He had built—or helped build—the empire Vince faced. Gerald was the man behind the man, and the man who got shit on. At least that's how it felt every time he saw Vince.

To his credit, Vince never wavered on his stance from the first time Gerald asked to the day his little helper left him. The healer remained firm on his feeling on alcoholism. That, at one point, made it worse for Gerald. It morphed from him understanding to the holy man blaming his employee's father. Every time he heard *it's not a disease, it's a choice* he lost a little more respect for the man saying it. By the time he left, he hated the healer. Watching his father vomit blood and shrink to nothing more than bones wrapped in a hide hydrated with cheap whiskey made him wish the healer dead.

Vince, on the other hand, lived well, despite his marriage falling apart not long after that September day in 2001. Gina had enough of the travelling and him never being a father. When he was home, he let Lindsay have and do anything she wanted, his excuse being that he never got to see her and wanted her happy while he was around.

As the stern parent often does, Gina became tired of being the bad guy, always being hated by their daughter and her husband taking the child's side. So, the week after Christmas of 2003, she went to her mother's house.

She wanted nothing more than to leave little brat Lindsay with her father to handle, curse him for the things he had done, but she loved her daughter and knew Vince couldn't take proper care of her. Not that he was a bad or neglectful parent. Gina knew, with Vince's job, he *couldn't* be a stable parent, not that he *wouldn't* be.

In the present, Vince got Lindsay every three weeks, for a week at the time. The two parents planned their schedules to fit his hectic life. He'd work shows and conventions for fourteen days straight then spend a week in Miami with his little girl.

Lindsay meant everything plus breath to her father. There wasn't a single thing she could do wrong in his eyes. Thinking of what God did for him, giving his only begotten son, he appreciated his God even more.

"Could you do it?" he asked Gina when she was there to pick Lindsay up after one of her weeks with him. The girl kicked a soccer ball into a net staked in the ground, with one of the neighborhood kids guarding it.

"I couldn't leave her with you, Vince. What the heck makes you think I could watch her be crucified for people I don't even know, half of which will hate me for it in the end?" asked Gina.

"That's my point!" He laughed and punched his hand like he'd won something. "What a gift given to us by God."

"Well, you would be the expert on God's gifts."

"I've always told you—"

"You don't know if it's a gift from God or a curse from Hell?" she finished his sentence for him. She knew the verse well enough it was like reciting John 3:16.

Vince nodded.

"Look at this huge house you live in, all the landscaping, and the black Mercedes-Benz you get chauffeured around the county in." Gina pointed out each thing to him as she named them. "I'd call it a gift from God, but that's just me."

"Look at what I lost because of it, and you know the sacrifice I have to make," Vince said, quieting his voice as he got to the second part of his statement.

"Yeah, I know," she agreed. She always hated thinking about his secret. "But there's more pros than cons."

"Easy for you to say," he sniped. "You already have Ted. People tend to find good in the bad when they're encased in love."

"Ted is... yes, Ted is my boyfriend, but that has nothing to do with it." She exhaled in frustration. "Look at what you do and provide for Lindsay. She's one of the most well taken care of kids I've ever seen. Plus, again, look around. Do I need to name off things again for you?"

Vince chortled. "No, no. I think I understand."

"Okay, good." She opened the driver's door to her Volkswagen Passat and slid in, cocking her head to the side, taking care not to bump her head on the A-post on her way in. "Take care of yourself, Vince. North Carolina is waiting for you."

They were, too. He received emails every day from his new personal assistant, Mitch. Every one of them started the same way.

How's the boss doing today?

Vince hated him, for the most part. He gave Gerald a hard time, but he would give a thousand Mitch's for one Gerald, clean trade. He didn't know why, but they just never clicked. He kept the young PA on payroll because he was the best of the rest to choose from; exuberant, and a damn good business mind.

The rest of the email said:

Mrs. Buffalo requested a meeting with you and your healing powers. She's offered \$25k upfront, and another \$25k if you truly heal her, which we know you will. That's a hell of a payday. Let me know what you think.

~Mitch

Vince thought about it. He knew he would do it when he heard the terms, but he was always skeptical when something seemed too good to be true.

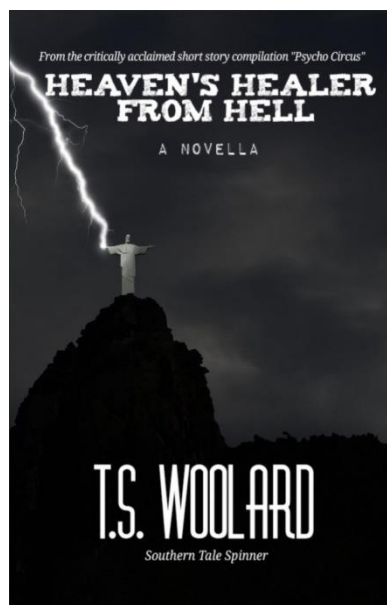
Mrs. Buffalo suffered from stage four Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. It ate her body alive within the first eight months of her having it. Her strain of the disease was more aggressive than most, and also more resistant to treatment.

The old widow was wealthy, obvious by the donation she offered Vince for his services, but a quick Google search of her name showed the healer Mrs. Buffalo's immense worth. She owned well over one-hundred-fifty acres of land, three apartment complexes, and was the main backer of a campaign for a state senator rumored to be in the presidential race of the next election. She had won his healing power. With any luck, the trip to North Carolina would make close to a quarter of a million dollars, with appearances, revivals, book signings, and the healing.

If he reached that mark, Vince would take some time off to spend extra time with Lindsay. He'd made that promise to her earlier in the year, at Easter. In his mind, he wanted to reach a certain number, and a vacation with his little girl would be his reward. Two-million dollars for the year, and by September, no less. With a good showing in North Carolina, he would have it.

Vince emailed Mitch back one simple word. Less was more, sometimes. With his PA, it was monumental.

Agreed.



***Heaven's Healer from Hell* is available on [Amazon](#)!**

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