

The Sirens Call

October 2019

issue 47



*A Dark Fiction &
Horror eZine*

*Short Stories, Flash
Fiction, Poetry,
and Artwork*

*Featuring Artwork by
Robert Elrod*

*An Interview with
Featured Author,
Ramsey Campbell*

*An excerpt from
Ramsey Campbell's
'The Influence'
plus a link to the
trailer for the new
Netflix film based
on his novel!*

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Brett Flint spent the last day in October slaughtering cattle for winter. That night, he fell into a deep, troubled sleep that he afterwards described as being more like a trance. His dreams were drenched with the scarlet of the blood he'd shed that day. As he slept, the Lord of the Dead filled his thoughts with visions of burnt offerings given high up on a hill, as close to the sky as any man could get with his feet still upon the Earth. And he called out to Brett to join him there, along with Brett's first-born child.

Just before dawn, Brett rose and wandered through into the twins' little bedroom without disturbing his wife Radclyffe. He lifted the dark-haired twin, Nicholas, out of the cot and left the blond-haired twin, Constantine, soundly asleep. Brett wrapped a soft, woollen blanket around the sleeping toddler and cuddled Nicholas into his chest. He carried the lad down the stairs and through the parlour of the ancient farmhouse and out of the front door.

Brett felt nothing as he walked along the gravel path in his bare feet. He passed the deep well in the middle of the driveway that circled Blackacre's farmhouse. His mother was sleeping down in the dank waters, with his daughter, Little Narcissa, tucked safely into her coiled-up tentacles. He set off round the back of the house and through the gardens, with Nicholas sleeping in his arms.

Brett walked past the ornamental tree garden, with its black pond of cannibal fish, and past the orchard of trees laden with bitter fruit that the Flint family knew better than to try to harvest. He lifted the latch on the iron gate that led into the fields and slipped through it with his son resting on his chest. He walked through the fields, letting the cattle that had escaped the slaughter stand aloof from him. He still reeked of the slaughterhouse and they wouldn't approach him until the smell of death had left his body completely.

Black Tor was on the far side of the moors. Brett wandered across the fields, passed the cattle and climbed over the stile that led to the moors. He could see the place in the distance. The sheep were bleating to each other. They stood watching him with serious eyes as he hiked up the path, past the purple heather and yellow gorse bushes, towards the place the Lord of the Dead had told him about.

The huge bonfire that the Flints had made next to Black Tor hadn't taken last night. Brett had doused it in petrol and thrown match after match onto it, but it hadn't set alight. Hours later, disappointed that their beacon wouldn't join those of the surrounding farms in warding off the dark on Samhain night, the family had drifted back down to the farmhouse and gone to bed early.

The rocky outcrop loomed dark above the smooth slopes of the ridge. Brett paused and stared up at it. It had been there for millennia and a bonfire had been lit every Samhain for thousands of years. He walked to the foot of the ridge. The black stones sat squat and timeless on the summit. Brett tucked his son under his arm and used his other to grab at rocks and roots to help pull himself up.

The dark rainclouds whipped across the valley towards the hills. Rain poured down, drenching Brett and his son. The wind whistled around Black Tor and Brett took shelter behind a square rock halfway up the slope. He cuddled Nicholas into him and turned away from the driving rain. A thunderclap was followed seconds later by a burst of lightning.

The rain passed and Brett stood staring into the grey dawn, across the valley south towards the Irish Sea, and Lancaster further to the south. From here he could see for fifty miles in each direction by the cold, clear light of the rising sun. To the north were more upland farms. Some of their beacons from last night were still smouldering. A couple were still ablaze. To the west lay the cultivated lowlands around Whiteacre and, further on, the lake country around Darkwater.

Brett resumed his climb up the hillside. He reached the flat summit and stood next to the unlit bonfire catching his breath. A second sheet of lightning forked out from the heavens and struck the bonfire. It flamed into life.

A voice in Brett's head said, "You should give him up to me completely."

Shaking his head, Brett tried to free himself of the intrusive thoughts. He heard a deep, throaty laugh instead. He put Nicholas down in the lee of a small, flat rock, out of the wind. He knelt down on the wet grass and curled himself into a ball.

The Lord of the Dead opened the door to the Otherworld and beckoned him inside. Brett closed his eyes and tried to resist, but he was powerless in the face of so much evil and darkness. He sobbed and rocked gently as he lay curled up in the foetal position. He knew what the Lord of the Dead was going to ask him to do, and he wouldn't be able to fight it.

The Lord of the Dead entered Brett's mind and invited Brett to submit to his will. He told Brett to accept his supremacy. He offered to protect his other two children if he would agree to give up his eldest child. Tears streamed down Brett's face and he rocked back and forth compulsively, willing himself not to move.

Brett felt the Lord of the Dead take control of his limbs. He reached out his hand and grasped the knife he'd used to whittle small pieces of kindling to get the bonfire going. He felt the smoothness of the ivory handle, and the coldness of the blade.

Crawling over to Nicholas, Brett laid the knife down upon the grass. He picked up the toddler and carried him towards the bonfire. He laid the child on the ground next to the flames and stared into his son's black eyes. Nicholas looked back at his father.

A white light shot out of the sky and struck Brett down. He writhed in agony clutching his left arm.

"Why are yer doing this to me?" Brett shouted into the heavens.

Brett doubled over and curled up into a ball. Pain shot up his arm and across his chest. He nestled his arm into his body and tried to keep as still as possible.

The white light began to drift downwards towards the tor. It hovered above Brett. He screamed in terror as it came closer to him. Gradually, he saw the outline of the twins' mother Eve Smyth appearing before him. She had died in childbirth, leaving Brett's wife Radclyffe to raise the babies as her own. Eve's face was contorted with unspeakable anger at what he was about to do to their son.

Brett shuffled backwards into the lee of the rock. He cowered against it and, overcome with shame, tried to avoid looking at Eve.

"If you harm our son, *ever*, I will take away everyone you care about, one at a time, and make you watch while I torture them. Starting with your wife. This *will* go on for eternity. You have no possible idea how long I will make that torment last. Is this clear?"

Brett nodded. He wiped the tears from his face. The pain in his arm was settling down into a gnawing hurt now the first shock of the blow was passing. It felt like when he'd broken it, aged eight, falling off a horse he'd been far too young to ride.

The white shape of Eve floated away across the valley. Brett stared around him. Nicholas was still lying next to the bonfire. The toddler pulled himself up and began stumbling towards the flames. Brett screamed to him to stop but the little boy walked slowly forwards and stretched out his hand towards the fire.

Nicholas put his hand into the flames. When he withdrew his arm, his hand was glowing red hot. He pulled away and held his hand out towards the sky. He gurgled with laughter and waved his hand back and forth.

A dark rain cloud gathered above the bonfire. It threw down all the water inside itself, and kept drawing more in from the surrounding air, but the bonfire burned more strongly than before.

Brett felt the presence of the Lord of the Dead draw near him again. The dark thoughts that had assailed him were back. He tensed all his muscles and thought very clearly about staying perfectly still.

Nicholas drew back his arm and flung a bolt of fire up into the raincloud. The fire bolt hissed. Nicholas threw another, and another, into the cloud. He waited for the cloud to absorb the full impact of each thrust before he struck again. The cloud was weakening. It was lighter than before. It wasn't able to draw any more water from its surroundings to dampen the fire.

Nicholas held up both his chubby toddler hands and looked up into the sky. He flung one last massive, two-handed fire bolt into the cloud. The cloud evaporated in a great explosion of steam, hissing as the wind caught it and it dissipated across the valley.

Brett crawled over to Nicholas and picked him up. Agony shot through his arm and he tucked the boy onto his hip and began sliding back down the hillside towards the farm.

Nicholas gurgled and grabbed the collar of Brett's pyjamas with his fat fists.

"Daddy! Mummy's there!"

Brett didn't dare look back over his shoulder. He could sense Eve's lingering presence at Black Tor. The heat from the bonfire was immense. He plunged onwards, gripping his son to his side.

When Brett got to the bottom the urge to look back was too much. He stood holding Nicholas and staring up into the sky. Eve's spirit was floating up into the heavens. Alongside her were the ghostly shapes of thousands of little children.

Brett realised that these must've been the infants sacrificed at Samhain every year, centuries back, to placate the Lord of the Dead. They were finally free. He felt tears prick his eyes and a lump rose into his throat. Their suffering was over.

"Yer did that, my boy, and yer can be proud of yersel," Brett told Nicholas.

Nicholas giggled and clapped his hands.

Father and son crossed the flat, wet, green fields. Brett was starting to flag carrying the boy along. The pain in his arm was worse now. The cattle came up to them and nosed Nicholas as Brett dragged across their pasture. Brett pushed on back to the farmhouse. He staggered around to the front, past the farmyard, and onto the driveway. He felt the gravel pierce his bare feet.

Radclyffe was standing by the dark well in front of the farmhouse. She turned and looked at Brett questioningly. His mother was bouncing Little Narcissa and Constantine up on her black tentacles. The children were giggling as they flew back into the air and dropped back down into her rubbery embrace, over and over again.

Brett let Radclyffe take Nicholas from him. The relief of handing over the little boy's tiny weight was enormous. Brett curled his broken arm into his body and shielded it with his other arm. He winced at the pain of moving it.

"I woke up and you weren't there."

"Something very weird just happened on Black Tor. I need yer to drive me to Lancaster Emergency Room, please, right now, to get this seen to."

Radclyffe cuddled Nicholas into her. She looked into his black eyes. He gurgled and reached out to stroke her brown hair.

"If the Lord of the Dead thought he could take Nick's soul, he picked the wrong kid to mess with," Radclyffe murmured.

About the Author:

John C Adams is a Contributing Editor with Albedo One Magazine, and Reviewer with Schlock! Webzine and British Fantasy Society. You can read their fiction in Horrified Press, Lycan Valley Press and many other anthologies. A non-binary writer, John's fiction appears in The Horror Zine, Devolution Z and many smaller magazines. John's horror novel 'Souls for the Master' is on Kindle and free on Smashwords.

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Shrimping | *Garrett Ray Riggs*

I was ten and my job was to shine the light over the boat's side so my dad could see the shrimp running.

My dad gave me a boozy grin. "We'll eat good tomorrow, kid."

The Gulf of Mexico stretched around us—endless, dark, and deep as the night sky.

There was a soft thump on the boat's hull.

"Shine that light over here," Dad said.

Hundreds of red shrimp eyes glittered below, scattering from a pale, not-quite-human face. She had dozens of needle teeth.

"Baby, I told you I would bring him back to you," my Dad said.

More Tricks Than Treats | *Garrett Ray Riggs*

It doesn't get cool until after Halloween. Mom makes us pick our costumes carefully—nothing that'll make us too sweaty and no accessories. No fur, no swords, no capes. Nothing good. The pale girl steps out of the woods that edge the park. Her costume breaks all the rules. Her dark hair brushes against the velvety cape. She carries a walking stick topped with a silver skull that glints in the moonlight. She moves like a shadow. Before we know it, she's enveloping us in her leathery wings. Her claws tear at us. Shaun's plastic pumpkin falls and rolls away.

About the Author:

Garrett Ray Riggs is a writer and illustrator who lives in Florida with his family and a herd of cats. His work has appeared in Quail Bell Magazine, Another Chicago Magazine, and Mary: A Journal of New Writing.

Author Blog: [Garrett Ray Riggs Writer and Illustrator](#)

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It's time to let the monsters out!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Amy hated the annual community Scarecrow Festival. It wouldn't be so bad if the scarecrows that the farmers made for the contest were cute. But no, somehow it turned into a competition to see who could make the creepiest straw man in the county. Amy hated walking by the display once the sun set. Lit only by candles, the scarecrows were staked into the barn floor in a circle, as if facing off against one another.

Since her parents didn't like leaving her alone at night, Amy was dragged back to the Johnson farm for the evening festivities that took place after dinner. The adults drank apple cider and danced and got silly, while the kids ate the candy apples and popcorn balls Mrs. Johnson always made for them.

Henry sat on the grass next to Amy. They had been friends since they could toddle around their yards, chattering to each other through the fence that separated their farms.

"I bet the scarecrows still creep you out, don't they, Amy?"

"So what if they do? That's what they're supposed to do, moron."

Henry laughed, knowing he had gotten a rise out of her. Amy had always been afraid of the scarecrows, especially at night. She even hated the one that loomed over the field in the middle of her parents' farm for the past year. Scarecrows were replaced every year, the night after the festival, when everyone took their creations home after judging.

"Let's go look at this year's scarecrows and bet on which one is going to win tonight. You have to stop being afraid *sometime*."

"No, let's just stay here. I don't care which one wins."

"Sissy! I'm going to go look. I'm hoping my dad wins this year; he could use the money. I even helped him with it this time; he finally said I was old enough."

Amy heard the pride in her friend's voice and sighed. Henry was her best friend, and she would do anything for him if it would make him happy. Even go look at big creepy dolls made out of straw and old clothes. "Okay. But just for a few minutes — I want to see what my parents made, too. Hopefully it's not as horrible as last year's."

Henry got up and reached for Amy. She took his hand and they snuck through the shadows to the barn. Kids weren't allowed to go in the scarecrow barn at night.

The barn door was locked, but Henry knew where there were a few broken boards they could squeeze through to get inside. They crawled inside on their hands and knees, then stood up and looked around. Amy gasped and grabbed Henry's arm.

Most of the candles were burned out; hardened wax dotted the hay-covered floor. The few candles still lit flickered in the darkness, the straw men's shadows danced upon the wooden walls.

"They're horrible," Amy whispered, as if afraid they would hear her.

"I think they're cool. Come on, check out the one I made with my dad. I think it's going to win."

Henry walked into the center of the scarecrow circle, stopping in front of the most horrific one. "It's this one — check it out!"

Amy joined Henry in front of the scarecrow, then backed away a little bit when she saw its expression. Although its hat cast a shadow on its face, Amy saw its eyes — they seemed to glare at her from under the brim. The eyes were completely black, and Amy could tell they were not crafted from old buttons. Henry left her side to look at the other creations, and Amy peered at Henry's scarecrow to figure out what the eyes could be.

The scarecrow winked at her.

Amy screamed and jumped back. Henry went to her, and she clung to him, crying.

"What happened? What made you scream like that?"

"The scarecrow winked at me!"

Henry laughed. "Be serious. I know they're creepy, but they're not alive, for crying out loud."

"It really did! Can we get out of here? I'm scared."

"Just a few more minutes. I want to see what your parents made." He smiled at her. "You're really spooked, so you probably imagined that happened."

"Okay. But just to see what my parents came up with this year." She brushed a tear from her eye and smiled back. "I probably did imagine it."

They looked at the tags hanging from each of the thirteen scarecrows until they found her parents' names. Amy looked behind her at Henry's scarecrow, but it didn't do anything. She sighed with relief. *I'm such an idiot.*

"Found it—wow, it's amazing!" He looked at the scarecrow in awe. Although spiked into the dirt, its feet, stuffed into heavy work boots, touched the floor. Gloved hands hung to its hips. The head lolled on its side, resting on its shoulder. Empty black holes occupied the space where eyes should be, yet it seemed to be staring right at Amy. The scalp was smooth, not lumpy like the others that were stuffed with newspaper. A line of stitching ran across the head from front to back. The mouth was sewn shut. A trench coat covered the body.

"I don't like it. It's too scary. Scarier than the one they made last year. Now can we get out of here? If we're caught, we'll get in big trouble." She casually glanced back at Henry's scarecrow, but it still didn't move.

"Yeah, okay. I bet your parents win the money this year."

Amy heard the dejection in Henry's voice. She knew his dad needed the money. "I'm sorry, Henry. I think your dad's scarecrow is really creepy. It could still win. I mean, look at the others—they're ugly, but not really scary like yours."

"Whatever. Let's go."

Amy started for the barn door, but Henry grabbed her arm. "We have to go the way we came, or they'll know we were here."

They turned around to go through the loose boards at the back of the barn. Before they could leave the circle, every scarecrow's arms rose up, touching one another's, barring the kids from moving past them. Amy fell on her butt trying to get away.

"What do we do? What is going on?" Amy cried, too scared to move.

"I don't know. They must be mechanical or something. The grown-ups probably know we're here and are trying to scare us. Let's just crawl under their arms."

Henry got down on his hands and knees, grumbling at the adults under his breath. His plans to finally kiss Amy were spoiled for the night. He got halfway out of the circle when the trench-coated scarecrow stomped on Henry's back with its boot. There was a loud SNAP and Henry screamed. Blood shot from his mouth, spattering the hay with red.

Amy opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out. She crab-walked away, knowing she couldn't help Henry. She could only think of escape. She looked up at the scarecrow as she scuttled back, but this time did scream when it grinned at her. Ragged teeth jutted through the burlap as the stitching ripped open. It reached out for her, but Amy was able to run under another scarecrow's arms towards the barn door.

She pulled on the door—forgetting it was locked. She beat on it with her fists. "Help! Help me!" She turned to look at the scarecrows. They were off the stakes, walking towards her. Amy shrieked, then ran over to the broken boards. She wriggled out, scratching herself on the sharp edges, but didn't notice. Finally free, Amy ran screaming to the adults.

But they were gone.

The lights were out and the music silent.

Amy looked back at the barn, only to see the scarecrows emerging. She turned and ran towards her house, screaming for her parents. She could see her breath in the moonlight as she ran, panting with exertion. She heard footsteps on the dirt road behind her, but didn't dare turn around. She knew they were following her.

She sprinted across her yard to her front porch and turned the knob on the front door. It was locked as well. She knocked on the door, bruising her knuckles, yelling for her mom and dad to save her. The porch light turned on, bathing the yard in a yellow glow. The scarecrows stood in a semi-circle in front of the house, silently waiting for something.

The front door opened, and Amy threw herself into her mother's arms, sobbing, relieved to be home. She knew her dad could take care of the scarecrows.

Her mother pushed her away, none too gently.

"You and Henry shouldn't have gone into the barn. You knew it was forbidden." The woman looked down upon Amy, no warmth in her eyes.

"Yes, Amy. You could've ruined everything." Amy shook in fear at her father's stern voice. She had never heard that voice before, even when she got in trouble for skipping school that one time.

"But—what's going on? Mom? Dad? Please help me?" Amy's voice dropped to a whisper. "Henry's in the barn still; he's hurt."

"Henry has been taken care of. Now we must deal with you. All the other kids stayed away from the barn—it's too bad you couldn't."

Amy noticed they were wearing black robes. They pulled the hoods up, then stepped out onto the porch. The other adults in the community emerged from her house as well.

"The Scarecrow Festival is important to us, Amy," her mother said. "This is a prosperous community—prosperous for those who obey. Henry's father, Jim, didn't want to participate this year because it was his son's turn to be sacrificed. He made the scarecrow anyway, so sure we'd think he was obeying the contract after all, but we knew. We always know. And now not only has Henry been sacrificed, but his father as well."

Amy's father shook his head. "Because you are aware of our ways now, you must be sacrificed as well. I'm sorry it has to be this way, but nothing can be done for those who disobey."

He grabbed Amy by her arms and forced her down the porch stairs. Amy screamed, struggling against his grip, but he was too strong for her.

"Daddy, please!" Amy sobbed, her mind not comprehending what was about to happen.

"I'm not your daddy, little girl. You were only a means to an end."

He tossed her at the quiet, waiting scarecrows. They fell upon her as her screams filled the night. The adults in their black robes murmured, clasping their hands and bowing their heads reverently.

When they finished feeding, the scarecrows rose in the moonlight, blood dripping from razor-sharp teeth. They shambled towards their respective farms to keep watch in the fields.

It would be another great year for the community.

About the Author:

Sheri White has lived in Maryland all her life and has a big can of Old Bay in her pantry to prove it. Her stories have been published in many magazines and anthologies, and her first collection, *Sacrificial Lambs and Others*, was published by Crossroad Press in 2018. Her story "Mickey and the Pizza Girls" is now available in the *Tales from the Crust* anthology.

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A Good Night | Patrick J Wynn

Willena watched as the kids parked their cars and gathered together in the center of the old dirt road. The kids talked, laughed, drank and smoked their funny smelling stuff. Soon the group of kids began their walk up the hill toward the stonewall fence. One by one the kids climbed the fence and made their way into the graveyard. Some of the kids wondered around through the old tombstones while others ran around tossing their empty beer cans. One laughing boy finished off his beer and then broke the bottle across a tall headstone, he stood laughing for a second then kicked the headstone. The headstone snapped off at ground level and fell over, the boy laughed loudly and moved to the next headstone and repeated the process.

Willena shook her head as other kids peed on graves while others produced spray cans and began painting designs across the old headstones. Enough was enough she thought and stepped out from the shadows of the trees she stood behind. Tossing her leg over the long stick handle she cackled loudly and pushed off. Flying just over the tall weeds she passed over the rock wall fence and extended her long bony arm letting her skinny fingers stretch out. She caught a young girl across the throat ripping the girls head off. As Willena pulled up and passed over the other kids she could hear their screams of terror. She pulled to a stop hovering high in the sky, she giggled watching the kids run for their cars leaving the headless girl behind. Licking her lips she noticed a heavy set boy falling behind his friends as they ran and she leaned forward diving down. Wind roared in her ears and her long black stringy hair flowed out behind her. A high pitched laugh escaped her and drool rolled down her lips and chin as she closed on the chubby boy in the anticipation of a good meal.

About the Author:

Patrick J Wynn is an author of short stories that contain shades of horror, humor and are just a touch weird. His works have been published in *The Sirens Call*, *Dark Dossier*, *Short Horror*, *Weird Mask*, and *Trembling with Fear*. You can follow him on his Facebook page and look for his short story collections on Amazon.



Madeleine Koenig unlocked the door and entered her home. Her Persian cat, Dali, named after Salvador Dali, not the Dalai Lama like everyone assumed, was startled by her entrance. She had awakened Dali from his nap in the patch of sunlight on the beige carpet. He stretched and sauntered to his mistress

"Oh, Dali, did you do *anything* today?" Madeleine asked. She chuckled to herself as she bent down to stroke the cat. Dali rubbed his cheek, neck, side, and rear end along the old lady's stockinged leg.

Madeleine unbuttoned her coat and laid it on the back of the kelly-green sofa just inside the sitting room. She then watched Dali meow and slink back to his patch of sunlight.

"Oh Dali, you lazy cat." Madeleine smiled in his direction and walked into the kitchen. As she did, she glanced at the answering machine mounted on the wall beside the refrigerator. The tiny red light signaled to her like a beacon in the darkness. It seemed to shout, "Someone called! Someone knows you exist, even if it is just the pesky Democrats calling to see if you will be voting their way in the upcoming gubernatorial election!"

Madeleine rushed to the flashing red light and pressed play.

"Um, Mattie, this is Beth." The unmistakable raspy voice echoed through the kitchen. Beth, Madeleine's sister-in-law, had picked up the disgusting habit of cigarette smoking at the age of seventeen and hadn't thought about trying to quell it in the ensuing years. Beth continued hesitantly, "I hate to tell you this over a message but I didn't know how else to do it." She paused. "Mattie, George died..." The voice cut off as Beth choked out a sob.

Madeleine sat down on a kitchen chair and primly folded her hands on her lap.

"He died last night. It was a stroke." Beth paused. "I know you won't be coming to the service but I thought you should at least know." Another pause, then, "Goodbye." The answering machine beeped and the kitchen was once again silent.

Madeleine's bones relaxed into the chair as she processed the knowledge of her younger brother's death. Her heart beat normally as the news melted into her mind. This new information did not make her sad. She would not shed a tear for George or Beth. No, the days when she would cry for her brother were long behind her and about a thousand miles to the west.

"But what if I had a stroke?" she asked the empty room. As she contemplated the question her eyes grew large and her heart rate quickened. "If George can die that suddenly, what's to say I won't?"

In response to his mistress's voice, Dali sauntered into the kitchen. He looked up at Madeleine with his piercing green eyes as if challenging her to have a stroke then and there. The woman looked down at the feline and as she did, a thought blossomed just behind her eyes. It came from deep down, a memory she'd been trying to suppress for years.

At age ten, Madeleine and her annoying little brother, George, had come across a game of cat and mouse. They found their barn cat stalking, batting at and toying with a mouse it had already been playing with for a while. The children watched with fascination and horror as the mouse escaped the cat's sharp claws repeatedly only to be caught again and again. Finally, as if sensing the children wanted a show, the cat got down to business. It sunk its claws into the mouse's stomach, bringing forth tiny gushes of red and a final squeak. The cat pulled the mouse apart with its powerful jaw and claws. Mattie and George watched as the cat tore the gray skin, red tendons, and mousy flesh away, revealing miniscule bones. As soon as she could see the white of the bones, Madeleine screamed and ran from the barn. Since that day, the image of those tiny, raw bones had haunted her memory.

Now, as she looked down at her cat, her faithful, loving, Persian Dali, a picture began to take shape in her mind.

She could see herself sprawled out on this very floor, her white hair splayed around her head on the linoleum, her dress pulled up above her knees in a most immodest fashion. She could picture her carnivorous feline slink into the kitchen. She saw him flick his tail and sniff his way towards Madeleine's stroke-terminated body. And then, it would happen: Dali, would sink his sharp teeth into her aged yet still succulent body and begin to tear her apart, revealing the whites of her own diminishing bones. She wasn't sure if he would do it right away or wait until his food dish was empty, but she knew he would inevitably eat her.

She screamed the little-girl scream she'd issued forth in the barn over seventy years prior, and jumped to her feet. She covered her mouth with both hands to stifle another scream.

Dali sat back on his haunches and began cleaning himself, completely indifferent to his mistress's outburst. He brought his front foot up to his face, licked it, and rubbed his whiskers back with the dampened paw.

Madeleine watched him nonchalantly clean himself; this was how he'd clean her blood from his face once he'd had his fill.

Fear began to rise up from the pit of her stomach. She began to tremble and her heart thumped inside her frail chest. She knew if she wasn't careful, she might bring on her own stroke with these thoughts, but she couldn't suppress her newfound fear of being eaten by her house cat.

Frantically, she began to search around the kitchen. She couldn't allow Dali to eat her corpse. She knew he loved her, but she also knew that cats were led by their instincts and once his bowl was empty, her body would look like a perfect alternative. No, she couldn't let that happen. He couldn't be allowed to live any longer.

Madeleine's stomach churned, and without thinking, she ran to the counter and began to rummage through her utensils and appliances. She threw open the cabinets and found nothing but boxed and canned food. She pulled open a drawer and found her kitchen knives. She pictured herself snatching Dali up in her hands and forcing the knife into his warm body repeatedly, the blood splattering her linoleum, refrigerator, and walls like a Pollock painting.

"No, too intimate."

Keeping half her attention on the cat, she ran to the other side of the kitchen. And then it caught her eye. The microwave sat in the corner, gleaming white. She frantically went to it and wrenched the plug out of the outlet. Her breathing coming in and out of her lungs in shallow gasps, she turned and looked once more at the Persian who dared look her in the eyes.

"I know what you'd do. I can see through your cute act." She spat the words at her only companion. "You are *not* innocent."

Madeleine turned and gripped the microwave with her arthritic hands. She pulled it to her body and leaned back, allowing gravity to help lift it off the counter. It was heavier than she remembered. The white mouse bones all those years ago flashed in her mind and churned her stomach, sending a fresh wave of adrenaline through her body. Holding on for dear life, she teetered toward Dali who had stopped grooming himself and now sat watching her, curious but unbothered by her shouting and rushing around.

"You aren't going to eat me!" she screamed and threw the microwave at her cat.

Dali bolted from the kitchen and was already down the hall by the time the white appliance smashed into the linoleum. It landed on one corner. The door popped open, the back panel flew across the kitchen, the glass tray shattered, and the entire frame bent out of its perfectly symmetrical shape. The sound of the crash startled Madeleine from her craze. She took in a deep, faltering breath and let it out slowly.

"What have I done?" She clasped her shaking hands to her chest and knelt down on the kitchen floor, tears spilling from her eyes.

"George gave me that microwave."

About the Author:

Callie Walker is a freelance proofreader and part-time writer, living in Central Oregon with her husband where she enjoys looking out her window at the beautiful Cascade Mountains. Although she loves editing her peers' work, she finds it difficult to actually buckle down and edit her own writing (that's why her two novels sit untouched at this point in time).

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I slam the shovel into the mound of dirt. Sweat drips into the hole I've spent the last few hours digging. Today. There's no turning back. I'm not filling it in like before.

The chill of autumn cascades over my exposed shoulders. While I was digging, the breeze did nothing to cool me, so off came my shirt. How many times had I worked shirtless in the yard while Claudia was home next door? That doesn't matter anymore.

She'd talked me out of this plan so many times, told me to give it time, that they would figure out how to stop them. But they can't; their creation is out of control, the disease having mutated, spread too fast. I've never been one to delude myself.

Her body hangs out her bedroom window. My shot was true, but instead of knocking her back into her bedroom, it spun her and she flopped forward. Her dripping blood called to them, speeding up the inevitable. The creatures drank all that spilled from her and now circle my fence, drawn by my scent. They would have ended up here anyway. It just happened sooner than expected. I spared Claudia the agonizing pain of the end of days, just like I did...

I shiver once more, but not from the cold. Guttural groans, a cross between human and canine, surround me. Scratching sounds reverberate like gunshots as their sharp claws work on the barricade.

Shick. Shick. Shick.

"Fuck you!" I yell to no one. "Fuck you!" It's all I have left in me, nothing grandiose, only four-letter expletives. The world is coming to an end, and mine... mine's already gone.

I grab my rifle and march to the stepladder, climbing the four steps to peer over the fence at the half-human monstrosities. Clawed hands scrape relentlessly. Then one of the things looks up at me with glazed human eyes and bloodied teeth. I pull the trigger. Its face explodes in red mist. Others dive over to feed. The rest jostle for the meal.

"Fuck you!" I spit.

I throw the gun over the side, not that they can use it. I don't need it anymore. It was just a distraction to buy me enough time to finish the task at hand. After climbing down the ladder, I walk to my patio. I wipe my face, pretending it's sweat and not tears.

But by the time I reach the table, I can no longer lie to myself. Tears stream down my face. I slide my hands under the sheet and gently lift him, the last time I ever will. Three years, three years is all I got. It's not remotely fair. My vision blurs as I cross my backyard. I lay the sheet in the hole and slide in next.

Shick. Shick. Shick. The sound of clawing replaces the sound of their fighting. Not long now.

I sweep my arms wide and beckon a cascade of dirt into the hole. I start by covering my legs and soon am up to my hips. I keep pulling dirt over me. Covering me.

Covering us.

I lay my head back, reaching up like I've practiced. I take a deep breath as the dirt falls over my face, but this time I won't stop. They won't take us. I won't let them. I swore to protect him forever and I will.

I can't hold my breath any longer and pull my hands down. I gasp and dirt fills me, takes me to him.

Together.

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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My name is Jeremy and I think I'm going to die.

I'm locked in a small empty room. It's dark and there is no food or water. I don't know how long I've been here but I'm pretty sure it's Halloween. At least that's what it says on this phone.

Yes, I'm writing this on a phone. It might be mine but I can't really tell because everything has been wiped out. No contacts, no apps, no messages. There is a phone icon but it doesn't work. There's no signal and I get no dial tone when I activate it. The only other app is a notes function and that's what I'm using to write this.

The date on the screen is October 31st, 2019 and the time says 11:58 PM but that hasn't changed the entire time I've been here. I don't know how long it's been. It could be hours or days. At some point, I screamed until my voice gave out and I pounded on the cold metal door until my hands were throbbing and bleeding. I had to wrap them in strips I tore from my t-shirt.

I crawled around the room searching for anything. It didn't take long because the room is so small, maybe ten by ten. The only furniture is a bed with a musty, stained mattress. The springs screech and creak when I sit on it. There is no way in or out besides the door, but it doesn't even have a handle.

The only other thing I found was this phone and when I fumbled for the power button, I almost cried with relief when it turned on and lit up my surroundings. The light confirmed what my blind exploration had already discovered. The walls are concrete blocks, gray in color. The floor and ceiling are also plain concrete. I am locked in a cement box. High up on the wall opposite the door, I can see a small slit of a window but no light comes through there. There's a gap under the door but using the light from the phone doesn't reveal anything but more concrete floor. I can feel a slight movement of air so at least I'm not going to suffocate.

The glow from the screen has been my only comfort. Writing this has occupied my mind but I have become painfully aware of the battery icon in the top right corner of the screen. It is already depleted to a little over the halfway mark. I'm going to turn off the phone for now and see if anything changes.

I'm back and the time is still 11:58 PM. I've been sitting in silence for who knows how long. The only thing I hear is my own breathing, my heartbeat and the scraping sound I make when I shift positions. I haven't slept but I can feel exhaustion coming on. The room has taken on a new smell as I finally had to take a piss in the corner, farthest from the door. I hope I don't feel the need to do more than that anytime soon. I don't think I could tolerate the smell.

Writing is giving me something to do at least. You might be wondering why I'm not using the typical shorthand favored by people my age.

R U SRS? WTF? LOL

I hate that way of communicating. It sounds so stupid. I'm in no rush to write this all down so there's no point to taking shortcuts. The battery is still going strong, just under the halfway mark so I'm not going to degenerate into some hunt-and-pecking Neanderthal.

The last thing I remember was being at a Halloween party. We were all too cool for costumes but we all had drinks and ate tons of junk food while watching horror movies on my friend's massive TV. It was a good time but I had to leave early. I needed to be up early for work the next day. Somehow, I don't think I'm going to make it in. I'd call or text my co-workers, but that's not really an option.

I have no memory of getting into my car. Maybe someone grabbed me and drugged me? I have no idea. The next thing I remember was the darkness.

No... I do remember being dragged along a dark hallway. My heels scraping along the floor and someone pulling me from behind. But the memory slips away from me every time I try to get more detail. Someone did put me here!

I just spent another few minutes screaming but no one answered. There is only silence. After the first minute, I don't think I was even trying to get anyone's attention. I was hysterical. My throat is raw now. I don't think I could talk if I even wanted to. Where is everyone? Why am I here?

Why doesn't the time on this phone ever change?

You really should calm down.

What? I didn't write those words! Who is reading this? How are you talking to me?

Damnit, I've waited for a few minutes, but no other words have appeared. Did I write them without even knowing it? Am I going insane?

A raspy chuckle just burst from my chest and I actually jumped at the sound. The phone fell from my hand and I scrambled to pick it up. Luckily, it's not damaged.

That's good. You would be punished for breaking what doesn't belong to you. Again! Who are you?

I called out again but no one is answering. Not from spoken or written words. What is happening? I can't take this any longer!

WHERE AM I?

Jeremy, it is almost time.

I don't know how long, but I fell asleep. More accurate to say that I fell unconscious. The phone is now down to less than 25% and that message was waiting for me when I woke up. They aren't saying anything else but somehow, they can read what I write. I've been hearing soft shuffling and growling sounds, but I can't tell if the sounds are coming from outside the door or if they're only in my head. So hungry. So thirsty.

Wait... I do hear something. Music? So faint. A piano and a violin, maybe? I can just barely hear them, but I can't make out a tune. No chords. No melody. Just dissonant notes. I've tried to listen at the base of the door but the music is no louder there.

So far away. Is someone out there? Please?

A shadow just moved in front of the door! I couldn't hear anything but I swear it was there! I want to call out by my voice won't work. My throat is too raw and tight.

See you soon.

I'm looking down at these two words that just appeared slowly, letter by letter. My breathing has become painful in my chest. The clock just changed to 11:59.

Who are you? What do want from me? What is going to happen?

I can hear something outside the door. Heavy thudding sounds, getting louder, coming closer. No, is that my heartbeat? Gasping for air.

Or is that breathing from something at the door?

Battery almost dead. Icon red and blinking. Time still says 11:59.

Thudding louder now.

The door someone there.

Something.

Trying noto screamm.

Bacj to th wall.

Door ttyghgkbbklkm.

It's time.

About the Author:

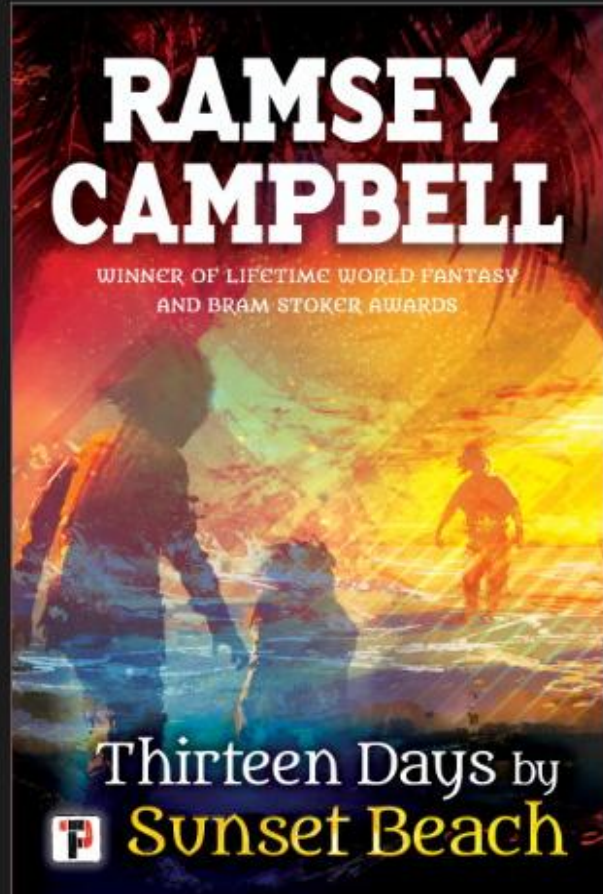
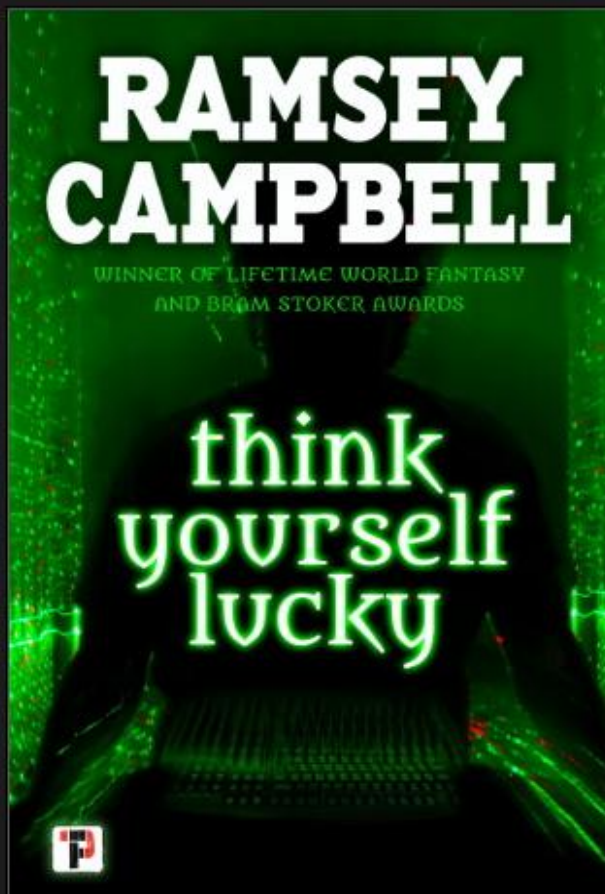
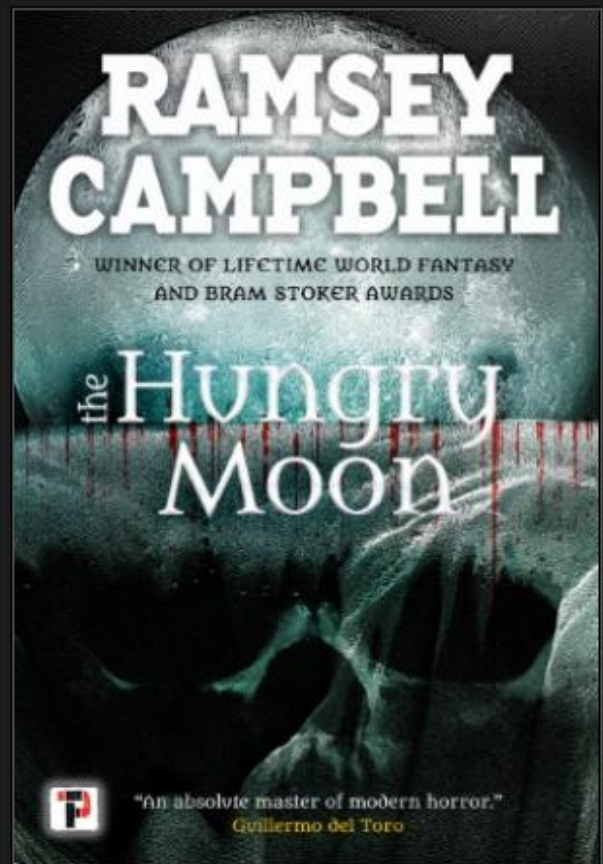
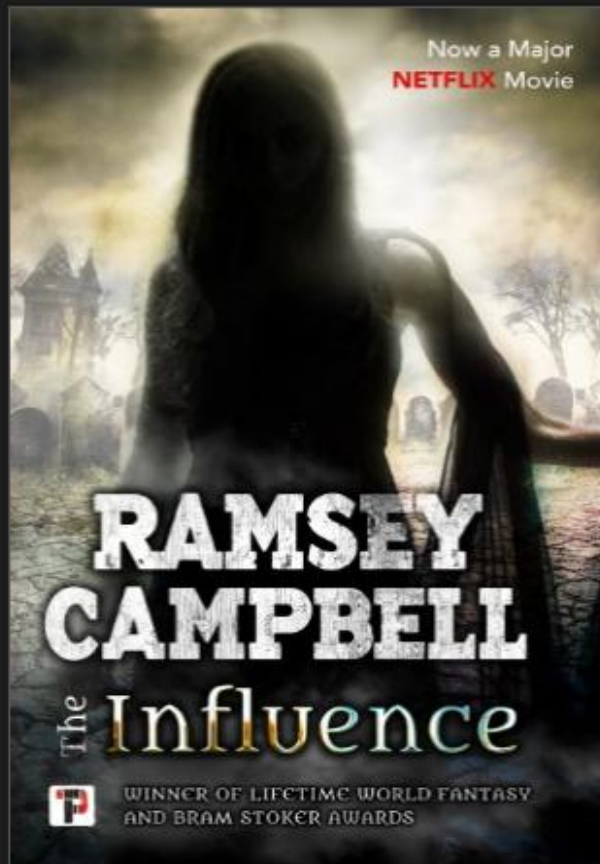
J.W. Grace started writing seriously in 2009 and self-published two novels in a genre he calls "Action-Horror". Based on his work and hobbies, he is a Geek and a Nerd, but he's also a Husband, a Father and a Musician. When he's not writing or spending time with family he's usually gaming.

Author Blog: [J. W. Grace](#)

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"Britain's most respected living horror writer."

~ *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*



Justin Truman stepped onto the stage. There was a roar of appreciation from the audience. There were about five hundred people in front of him, five hundred people who'd willingly paid \$250 for a ticket to hear him speak. Most would buy at least two of his self-help books before they left. It was going to be a profitable evening; these events always were. He raised his hands and the applause died down.

"Coming here tonight was the best decision you guys ever made!"

They applauded.

"I'm going to tell you the things big pharma don't want you to know!"

There was a cheer of appreciation from the crowd.

"I'll tell you the natural way to cure cancer! Heart disease! Diabetes!"

There was a bigger cheer.

"No drugs, no chemotherapy, no radiation! Simple natural cures! It's all in my book."

He waved a copy of the book

"It's called *Juice: The Natural Way to Cure One Hundred Diseases*. It's the only place you'll find these amazing cures! It'll save your life."

The applause echoed off the ceiling of the convention center. As he waited for it to end, he noticed the man in the front row, in the wheelchair. He wasn't cheering or clapping; instead he sat quietly, simply staring straight at Justin. It was disquieting. Justin sometimes got journalists or law-enforcement officials in his audience, but this man wasn't one of those. He was clearly seriously ill; emaciated and jaundiced. Normally this type would cheer and clap, praying the books would provide the miracle cure that would save their life. Praying that Truman could save him. This guy was different; his expression on his face was close to hatred. Justin suddenly realized the applause had died away and the audience was staring at him expectantly. He filled the silence.

"Did you know that cantaloupe juice will cure your cancer? Two glasses a day, that's all it takes. The juice of the guanabana, a little-known fruit from Central America is ten thousand times more powerful than the strongest chemotherapy drug. You've never heard of it because big pharma keeps the secret from you. If you buy my book, you'll find these secrets, along with a hundred other ways to treat all your diseases naturally. All you have to do is..."

His voice trailed away. He felt his eyes being drawn back to the man in the wheelchair. The man's eyes bore into Justin's. He felt the hatred; it was almost a physical sensation. He staggered slightly, his head starting to hurt. Out of the side of his eye, he could see movement at the edge of the stage, his staff was clearly concerned, but he couldn't look away from the man in the wheelchair. He willed himself to speak. Words flowed out his mouth, unchecked.

"It's all a fraud. I'm a liar. If you have a disease, get real medical treatment. If you follow my advice, you'll die."

He clapped a hand over his mouth, aware of the shocked expressions on the faces of the audience. The man in the wheelchair continued to stare.

In his earpiece, a voice shouted.

"What the fuck are you saying? Have you gone crazy?"

Justin felt his hand slip away from his mouth.

"If you've ever bought one of my books, go home and burn it. Better still, send it to me and I'll give you a refund. I'll give everyone a refund for coming tonight."

His microphone clicked off. One of the crew had pulled the plug. Justin knew the panic his words would be generating amongst his team. He was panicking too, but he couldn't draw his eyes away from the man in the wheelchair and he couldn't stop talking. He shouted so the audience could hear.

"Juice can't cure anything. Natural cures are useless. When my mother had cancer, I got her the best hospital treatment money could buy. She lived because of it. She would have died if she'd drunk the shit I promote."

The audience was leaving in droves, throwing his books onto the floor in disgust. Only the man in wheelchair remained motionless, still staring. Justin fell to his knees, ripping the earpiece and microphone from his head. He whispered.

"I'm a liar and a fraud."

He stood. The auditorium was empty. His crew was buzzing around him, but he still couldn't look away from the man in the wheelchair. He was the only audience now. Justin jumped off the stage and grabbed the chair.

"What the hell did you do to me?"

The man smiled.

"WHAT DID YOU DO?"

"I died, Mr. Truman. I died because I believed you. *They* gave me a chance to come back. To stop others from dying. To allow me to serve the coldest revenge possible."

Without warning, the wheelchair was empty. Justin slumped to the floor, five words echoing over and over in his mind.

You reap what you sow, you reap what you sow...

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, The Infernal Clock, 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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The Mask | B.E. Seidl

I know you will think me mad when I tell you this story, but I have to share it with someone and you are the first person I could get ahold of. About a month ago, I bought this mask for Halloween. Looks like a zombie, and when I put it on, the latex sticks to my face like a second skin. When I first pulled it over my head I could hardly breathe. It fit so tightly I was almost scared it wouldn't come off again. But it looked terrific and I really wanted to wear it to that party I was invited to. I tried it on again the next day and it felt surprisingly good this time. I soon forgot it was there entirely and cleaned my house, cooked dinner and streamed a movie all the while wearing the zombie mask. Yet, I felt something was different. There was this odd feeling, like an emptiness in my stomach that seemed to get bigger and bigger. No matter how much food I stuffed into my mouth, I wasn't satisfied: this hole inside of me wouldn't fill.

And now comes the really weird part. After I fell asleep on the couch with the mask still on, I had the most peculiar dreams of people I know, their blood dripping from my lips as I devoured their flesh. The taste of human blood was so nice and warm and when I woke up, dragged myself to the bathroom and finally pulled off the sticky mask, I saw that I had bit my tongue. I didn't put much thought into it though, and on the day of the party I couldn't wait to wear my mask again.

When I arrived, my friend's house was already packed with people and everyone seemed to have a blast. My head was spinning and I felt a rush of ecstasy. Immediately I jumped on the dance floor. The body-heat of the people around me was mesmerizing; I could almost feel their hot blood pulsating through their veins. I couldn't see much through the small eye-slits of the mask but even through the latex I could smell them, the sweaty bodies moving to the rhythm of the music. My pulse was so fast it almost made me dizzy. There it was again, this feeling in my stomach, this big hole screaming to be filled. I was in such a trance that I wasn't aware of anything else but the scent of the hot flesh around me until I could hardly resist anymore.

It was only much later, in the hospital, when the policewoman took my name and asked some awkward questions that images started flickering back into my mind—of a hand holding a fork flying down at me, stabbing ferociously into my scalp.

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.

Author Blog: [B. E. Seidl](#)

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"They're already starting," Phil remarked, with a hint of surprise in his voice.

It was only 5:20 pm. The dark hadn't settled in yet. In fact, it was still clearly daylight, even though it had been a gloomy, rainy, typical fall day. I glanced out the window and was a bit taken aback myself by what I saw. Two small figures were coming up the road clasping their booty tightly in their little hands. One was a pirate, the other wore a black cape and a mask over his eyes and was dressed all in black. A short distance behind the two small figures was a taller one.

"I didn't think they'd start till 6," I said. "I'm not ready for them yet."

I quickly went to the cupboard, took out a cardboard box and poured the contents into a large stainless steel bowl. Then I joined my husband in the living room, waiting for the doorbell to ring. We waited, but were greeted by silence.

"That's strange," said Phil, my husband. "I was sure they were heading this way."

He got up, opened the front door, and peeked out. There was no one out there. The yellow and brown leaves clung to the road, damp from the day's rain. Puddles still dotted the asphalt, though the rain had stopped a while ago. The air was crisp, the street was quiet.

"Most of the neighbours have their porch lights on already. Maybe that's why they missed our place," said Phil. He switched on all the outdoor lights, and we retreated to the family room to watch TV while our supper was cooking.

Our grown son, Nick, was already there, lounging on the couch, watching reruns of Happy Days. Our cat, Moe, sat perched by the patio door, looking out as if expecting someone. The smell of the lasagna cooking wafted into the room. We sat down and waited for them to start coming.

"I can hear them out there," Nick said. "Maybe we should check if the doorbell works."

He left the room and a few seconds later we heard the ring. Nick returned to the family room and remarked, "Well, it works fine. I just saw some of them over at the neighbour's house, so maybe you guys better head back to the living room to be ready. They'll be here anytime." So back we went to wait for them to come.

Everything was quiet once again. "Maybe they've been warned to stay away from the Fear house," I joked. When your last name is Fear, your house may not be the place to stop on Halloween night.

I remembered how when we first moved here we didn't think anyone was coming. Maybe it was because we were new or maybe it was because the street was so dark in spite of the few streetlights. With only a few houses on the street, maybe it wasn't worth their while. But some came, after all. They just came later than we expected them.

"Do you have my phone?" I asked Phil. "I want to see if Laura replied to my text."

I hadn't heard from her for so long. Our daughter had moved away some time ago and I worried about her. I was one of those mothers who always envisioned the worst when I didn't hear from my children. Earlier that day, I had read on my news feed that there was a big accident on a major Toronto highway. I just wanted to confirm that she was okay.

"I don't see any messages. You know she never answers your texts or calls. She's probably ignoring you on purpose," answered Phil.

He's probably right, I thought. I know she's busy, she's probably got better things to do than to check in with her overprotective mom every few minutes. But still...I don't recall the last time I talked to her. In fact, I can't remember when she last came home, when she was last here.

"I'll call her tomorrow. I'm sure she's just busy tonight," I conceded.

Then I went to finish getting supper ready. In the kitchen, I prepared the salad and checked on the lasagna. I got out the plates and cutlery and called out to Phil and Nick, "Supper's ready! Time to wash up and come eat."

The digital display on the microwave read 6:40. As they entered the kitchen, I recalled how the same thing had happened last year. "Remember last year we didn't think anyone was coming, but they just came later? I'll bet they'll start to come after 7, after supper."

We sat down at the table and enjoyed our meal, reminiscing about how we spent this evening in previous years. It was different when the kids were little, when we played a more active role in it.

Now we just sit and wait. *Things just haven't been the same*, I think to myself. Life is all about change, I guess. I suppose I'm not ready to accept it yet. The kids have grown, we're growing old, the house has grown quieter. Retired from our jobs, I sometimes wonder what's next for us. Are we just waiting? Waiting for what? Waiting to die? It seems we're always anticipating something, and that's a good thing, isn't it? I need to stop feeling sorry for myself and stop living in the past, I tell myself, I need to move on. There's something out there, just beyond our reach, waiting for us.

As we finished our meal, the antique clock in the living room chimed seven times. I collected the dishes and set them in the sink, put away the leftovers, while the guys returned to the family room.

"Why is it so cold in here?" I asked as I sat in my usual spot, the glider next to the window. The flames burned brightly in the fireplace, sparks flying and wood crackling behind the grate. Phil had lit a scented candle and set it on top of the piano. It was cozy, with the three of us and Moe settled in our favourite spots. I still felt a chill, though. Maybe I was coming down with something. Fall always was the worst season for colds and flu.

"I hear them again. They're out there," insisted Nick.

I got up and looked out the big bow window again. There were two police officers on the road in front of our house. For some reason, that sent a wave of apprehension through my mind and body. But I went to the door, bowl ready on the entry bookcase, and waited for the bell to ring. Nothing happened.

I went back to the family room and told them, "They were right out there. Two of them, dressed as police officers, but they passed by our place. Why are they ignoring us?"

"Maybe they're doing one side of the street, then the other. They'll probably circle around at some point," answered Phil. "But this town has changed, so I don't know what's going on."

Nick shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "What can you do?"

Things had definitely changed in our town over the last few years. The new highway passed by the town, not through anymore. Since the construction, things had really quieted down around here. We didn't seem to get the visitors we used to get. People moved out of town and new people moved in. At one time, we knew almost everyone in every house in town. People used to wave, say hello, stop to chat. Now, especially this past year, everyone seems aloof, not particularly friendly. When we go for our walks through town, our greetings go unanswered. People just walk on by, without acknowledging us, as though we don't even exist. We like to think it's them, not us. New people from the city moved to the small town aren't used to our ways.

"Yeah, I'm sure they'll come around sooner or later," I said, "But it's kind of weird how they intentionally pass by us and don't stop here."

Nick popped a DVD into the player and we settled in to watch a movie. Some horror flick I've seen plenty of times before. Something about the fog rolling in. I jumped out of my chair and ran to the front door. I was sure I had heard something.

"Mom, what are you doing?" yelled Nick after me.

"I think someone's here," I shouted back. Approaching the front door, I once again grabbed the bowl and waited for the bell. "This is ridiculous. Someone must be playing a joke on us," I said aloud to no one. Back in the family room, the eerie sounds from the DVD permeated the air as the guys sat mesmerized by the film. "It's getting late. Someone should have come by now. Is there something wrong with our house? Not good enough for them?" I quipped.

Phil broke away from the screen and responded by indicating their loss would be our gain. Once again, I heard a noise. It made me nervous.

"Did you hear that? I'm going out there to see what's going on. I need to get to the bottom of this. If people are goofing around trying to spite us or scare us, or whatever, I want it to stop," I decided.

Nick turned towards me and said, "Calm down, Mom. You always get yourself so wound up about everything. They'll come eventually. There's nothing you can do about it. They have to want to come. You can't make them come."

"You just have to be patient. Someone will come sooner or later," Phil tried to reassure me.

"I'll be right back in," I assured them. I felt as though they were trying to placate me, and I was having none of it. I had to see for myself.

"Wait! Don't go out there. Remember what happened the last time you went outside, and the time before and before. It always upsets you so much when you do this," warned Phil.

"Just leave it, Mom. It's not worth it. Don't do it. Don't go out there," warned Nick.

I didn't listen. I didn't know what they were talking about. There was something odd going on and I had to get to the bottom of it. So I went back to the bow window in the living room and drew back the curtains. It was definitely dark by this time. It must have warmed up a bit as there seemed to be fog in the field across the road from us. Still, I could see them. In the pool of light created by the streetlight, they walked past, never looking my way.

I went to the door and opened it, peered out, and saw more of them coming my way, enveloped by the fog. Out I ventured, down the steps and across the lawn to the road. "Hi, how are you?" I said to them. "Come on over to our place. We're ready for you."

They didn't answer. I noticed one of them was a vampire and another a witch, accompanied by a werewolf. Pretty normal, I thought. Except they seemed to ignore me, talking only to each other.

"Just two more houses on this street," said one.

"I don't like coming down here. It's so creepy," said another.

"Especially with what happened here last year," said the third. Then they passed by me without acknowledging my presence. Weird, I thought. I waited for the next group to come along.

Two tall figures, one carrying a little half cat, half pumpkin, and a smaller ghost came into sight followed by a black and orange cat. How cute, I thought. "Hi," I said. "Drop over to our place," I said to them. Again I received no answer. This was really getting spooky.

The next group included an angel and Robin Hood accompanied by two larger shadowy figures. There was something vaguely familiar about them. Before I could speak, I heard one of them say to the other, "That's where that terrible fire happened, isn't it?"

"Yes, that poor family. Only the daughter survived. What a tragedy," came the answer.

"What fire?" I asked. They continued along without looking back at me, almost as though they hadn't seen me.

Then it struck me. I remembered. I remembered how my husband and I had taken our own children out on a night like this long ago, one an angel, the other Robin Hood. There was something else niggling in the back of my mind. I just couldn't figure out what it was. I remembered how happy we were. I turned around to head back inside to tell Nick and Phil what was going on out here in the fog. Something wasn't quite right.

I took a step towards the house and froze. My heart stopped beating. I couldn't breathe. I opened my mouth to scream, but nothing came out. I felt myself fading. I couldn't believe what I saw. That's not possible, I thought. This can't be happening. I closed my eyes and counted to ten. Then I opened them again. Nothing had changed. I felt it go through my body, that wave of sheer panic, the feeling that I was about to die. I had to be dreaming. Was I losing my mind? Then came the realization, the Déjà Vu, almost calming in a way. This had happened to me before, many times. It didn't always play out the same way, but the feeling of detachment was there every time. Kind of like Alzheimer's. Or Schizophrenia. I was confused by it, didn't really know what was real. Couldn't remember what I needed to remember. Didn't know who to trust. Like I was not in my own body. I remembered why Phil and Nick were trying to warn me. They knew how excited I was about tonight and how disappointed I would be when I finally realized the truth.

I stood and stared for I don't know how long. Understanding at last, understanding once again, understanding for the umpteenth time. In front of me, where my house should have been, with its white brick and stone exterior, bow window facing the street, front porch inviting, front door waiting, it confronted me.

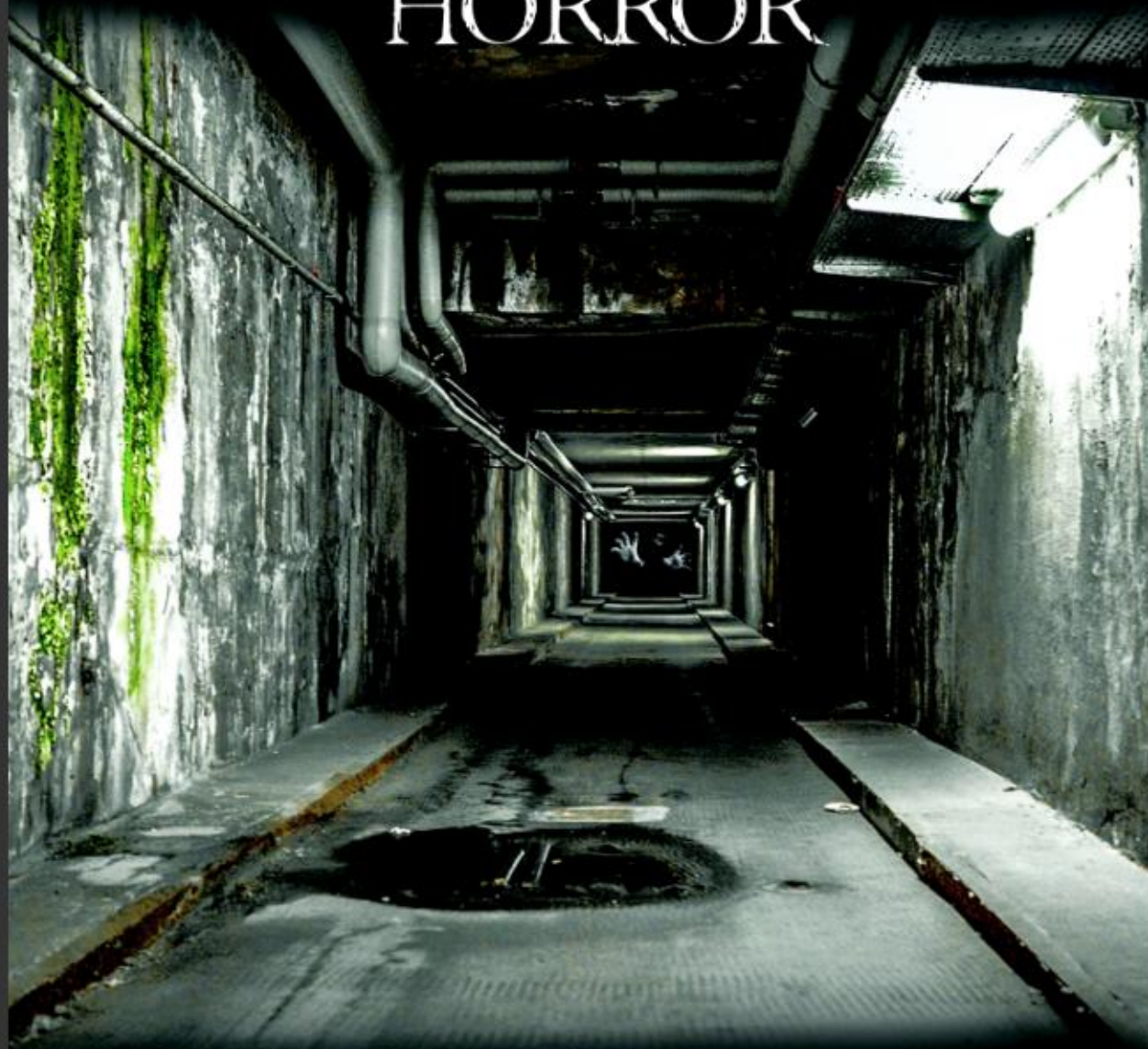
A wide expanse of empty lot, grass overgrown, lay there waiting for me. I walked in the direction of the door I had exited only minutes ago, the door that no one saw. I opened the door, walked in, and didn't look back. Sometimes you just have to wait and hope. Maybe next year, I told myself.

About the Author:

Ivanka Fear is a retired teacher and a writer from Ontario, Canada. She holds a B.A. and B.Ed., majoring in English and French literature, from Western University. Her poems and short stories appear in or are forthcoming in Spadina Literary Review, Montreal Writes, Spillwords, Commuterlit, Canadian Stories, October Hill, Adelaide Literary, Scarlet Leaf Review, The Sirens Call, Utopia Science Fiction, Bewildering Stories, Aphelion, Polar Borealis, Lighten Up, Wellington Street Review, and The Literary Hatchet.

There is no escape from the Labyrinth of Horrors

LABYRINTH OF HORROR



DUSTY DAVIS

A Labyrinth of Horrors is available on Amazon
in digital and paperback.

A Little Help This Year | *Michael D. Davis*

Every year I have a Halloween display, maybe not the best on the block, but I do what I can. This year the Thompson boy elected to help me out. He spray painted the tombstones, put together this old scarecrow I've had since the eighties and lugged out some boxes of skulls and bats I had towards the back of the old shed.

The yard wouldn't have turned out so nice without his help. The topper is the corpse hanging from the garage door and believe me when I say I could not have achieved that without the Thompson boy.

Take Only One Please | *Michael D. Davis*

Finn was an old pro at trick or treating. He could con the biggest and most expensive candy bars out of the hands of the stingiest of old ladies. The term 'take one' meant nothing to Finn, every unprotected bowl of candy was victim to his greedy hands.

When he walked down the street others fled in horror; Finn did everything he could to frighten his way into more candy. Until the last house. When Finn gripped a fist full of candy the old lady bent forward biting his hand ripping his skin off in her teeth saying, "just one."

On the Lawn | *Michael D. Davis*

It was on the front lawn. Stuck up in the dirt between two long-dead dandelions and some leaves. It was the face of a baby, unmoving and quiet. From the looks of it, the head has been there a long time. Even though it's just a doll the thing made my spine go cold. It was probably just dropped there, left by a forgetful child. I was about to pick it up when it moved. It flinched. Then as I stood there, the baby doll crawled from the ground slimy and broken. It inched towards me. I could not move.

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.

Locked Away | *Lydia Prime*

These metal confines can't contain my rage, no certainly not. I laugh 'till I cry, and sit inside while bodies begin to rot. Yes, yes, I'm in here and they're out there, but my wrath has endless reach. The end is nigh before they call goodbye; lessons I'm pleased to teach. This silly gate, those inept fools; my laughter has sealed their fate. No escape — for now my dreams will be enough to satiate. Memories blur and centuries pass as I sit inside my cell. Someday, I will be found and unto Earth I will deliver Hell.

About the Author:

Lydia is that friendly monster under your bed just waiting for you to stick your limbs out from beneath the covers. She tends to frequent the nightmares others dare not tread. When she's not trying to shred scraps of humanity from the unsuspecting, she writes stories and poems of the horror and dark fiction variety. She's often found behind dreaded 800 numbers collecting souls.

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

Instagram: [@Helminthophobia](https://www.instagram.com/Helminthophobia)

1:50 a.m. Tropical Cyclone Warning issued for Hong Kong. Alex Chan had been driving his taxi for nearly eight hours without a break, getting everyone home except for himself. The metronomic cadence of the windshield wipers and rainfall formed a perfect lullaby; he had to slap himself on the face many times just to stay awake. His taxi had just past the Repulse Bay Beach when he spotted someone walking on the pavement. It looked like a woman from the back, her long dark hair and clothes completely drenched in the rain. He pulled up next to her and rolled down his window.

"Miss, do you need a ride?" he hollered in Cantonese. "I am heading to Central anyway; I can give you a ride for free if you need one!"

The woman turned to face him.

He couldn't believe what he saw. Her eye sockets were empty; her skin pale and scaly like an ivory snake, and her mouth was sewn shut with jutes.

"What the h—" He couldn't even finish his sentence. He jolted from his seat as if someone just struck him with a cattle prod. It was June, too soon for the Hungry Ghost Festival, let alone Halloween. It didn't look like a mask, and she had talons too. Prosthetics? He didn't want to stick around to find out. In this profession, you have to trust your instinct. He stepped on the gas pedal and drove off, splashing her with rainwater.

He screamed while continuing to drive, the *woman* (he didn't know what to call her at this point) running after him. The traffic light ahead just turned red. What should he do? Run a red light? There were no other cars around and no cops in sight, but he could still get a ticket because of the photo radars. She was at least sixty feet away, not running that fast in the rain.

He decided not to break the law and slowed down to a stop at the traffic light. He locked the car doors, just in case she caught up to him, at least he would be safe inside the car. The windshield wipers moved at top speed, if only the traffic light did the same. What the hell was taking the light so long to change? Just then he saw the woman closing in on him from behind, looming closer and closer to his car. The light was still red, but she was just twenty feet away. Fifteen. Ten. Five.

Alex stomped on the gas pedal and sent the car off to a roaring start, creating mini tsunamis on both sides of his lane. She almost reached him when it happened, and the noise seemed to spur her even more. He yelped and accelerated at twice the speed limit.

Thud. She leaped a good ten feet and threw herself on the back of the taxi. With all that rain on the car, it surprised him that she didn't slip and fall off. He gripped the steering wheel tight to avoid losing control of his vehicle, his hands sweaty and shaky. He forgot to breathe, swerving left and right trying to lose the woman, but she held on and climbed her way to the left side of the taxi.

She tried with all her might to pull the door open while Alex screamed. What was she—assuming it's a she—Madame White Snake in one of China's *Four Great Folktales*? He didn't remember her being blind...at any rate, this was surreal. He got lost in this madness; he didn't know whether this was really happening or if he was dozing off again. He pinched himself hard, desperately trying to prove himself wrong, that perhaps he had been imagining things...

The sound of something sharp etching his car door woke him from his reverie and snapped him out of his denial. The woman had opened his car door on the left side and got in the backseat. He turned around, shrilling and hyperventilating. *What's this creature and what does it want from me?* He panicked. *What do I do now?*

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU?" He shrieked. She leaned forward and reached for him; she was reacting to sound rather than sight, because she didn't have eyes. Why didn't he realize that sooner?

He shut up. Once he went silent, the woman paused her talons in mid-air, not knowing where or what to grab. One nail from the claw had broken off. She tried to open her mouth and a muffled sound came from her throat—a deep *hmm*—as if some wretched creature got stuck in there, struggling to escape.

Escape! That's his objective. He needed a plan if he wanted to survive. Was there a way to contact the police without making a sound? He couldn't remember anything about the Hong Kong police responding to text messages in place of an emergency call. Should he drive to a busier area? At this hour and in this weather, even in Causeway Bay there would hardly be anyone out and about; the taxi company in Central was still another half hour away. He needed to get rid of her *now*! He could park the taxi close to the condominium buildings around here, lure her out with noise and sneak back into his taxi. A solid enough good plan. As long as he stayed silent, he'd be okay.

Suddenly, a call came through the radio dispatcher and broke the silence. Alex scrambled to shut it off; the woman reached forward again grabbing at the source of the sound and nearly grazed his arm with her claws.

Alex squealed. He ducked and almost crashed his taxi into a light post. The woman turned her head left and right, trying to discern the source of the noise. No airbag deployed—thank goodness—he could have been trapped! While the near crash obfuscated the woman, Alex opened his car door and made a mad dash toward a cluster of condominium buildings by the beach.

The storm raged on, the rain and wind whipped him hard as if he were being pressure washed. He ran against the gust and could barely keep his eyes open to see where he was going. The woman got out of the taxi and followed in his direction. He needed something to distract her. He looked around for anything that could make noise—even an empty soda can would do—but didn't find anything. The wind probably blew away all the garbage already. He cursed aloud, and then instantly regretted it, because he had just given away his location. He kicked up a lot of water from the puddles as he ran and made too much noise, though it couldn't be helped. She was a mere ten feet from him now, and he started sprinting toward the closest condominium building. There might be nobody on the streets, but a condo building like this usually had a concierge in the lobby. The woman was thirty to forty feet behind him when he banged on the glass door of the lobby.

An elderly man in a dark blue uniform sat facing the door. He was sleeping, his head tilted back and his mouth agape. "PLEASE HELP ME!" Alex yelled at the top of his lungs.

Alex's scream woke the concierge, who stared at Alex in bewilderment. The old man touched his left ear; perhaps he couldn't hear Alex through the glass too well and had to adjust his hearing aid.

"PLEASE OPEN UP! SOMEONE...SOMETHING IS TRYING TO KILL ME!" Alex yelled again, this time even louder. He looked back and saw that the woman was getting closer now, about twenty feet.

The concierge didn't approach the door. Instead, he picked up the phone on the counter and dialed, presumably the emergency number; Alex being the emergency. "PLEASE LET ME IN!" Alex screamed. He knew it was a long shot but what choice did he have? The woman was almost upon him, and he had no escape, being backed against the door and no way in.

Just then, he saw something move close to the dumpsters. Stray dogs. Poor things had to rummage for food in this weather. There were Styrofoam containers strewn all over the ground with some half-eaten Chinese food inside. With the woman just steps from him, Alex had to execute his plan, with a little improvising now that the dogs could be part of his solution.

He grabbed the food from the ground and zigzagged around the dogs, throwing it randomly to disperse them. Behind him, the woman looked confused by the noises coming from different directions. She paused just a few feet from him, and he flung the rest of the food at her. He turned around and started to run, his breaths shallow and rapid, his vision black and starry at times. The rain and the gusty wind eddied around him, making it even more difficult to run. Exhausted and horrified, the only thing that kept him going now was pure adrenaline.

The dogs barked and snatched the food where she stood and fought each other for it. The ruckus kept the woman rooted there, jerking her head all around and looking confused. Alex looked back once, and saw that she was at least sixty feet from him now. The dogs didn't care much for her, and she didn't try to attack them either. He made it all the way back to his taxi. Thankfully, despite leaving his key in the ignition, no one took off with his vehicle. He scurried in, locked the doors and drove off.

He blasted the heat in his taxi. His wet clothes clung to his body like a cold, soggy mess. He shuddered at the thought of what transpired. What if he didn't escape? What would that *creature* do to him? Most importantly: was she even real?

Should he tell the guys at the taxi company what happened? Perhaps it was best not to. In this day and age, who would still believe in folktales and monsters? He was still five years away from retirement, he'd better not get a reputation now for being delusional!

Alex arrived at the taxi company at 2:20 a.m. Three fellow drivers stood near the entrance; they saw him pull up and waved. Their eyes moved from Alex's face to the left side of his taxi. Suddenly, they stopped smiling and talking.

Alex crawled out of the driver's seat and rushed over to see what the guys were looking at. He gasped when he saw the five long scratches deeply etched into the car door, part of a black talon still stuck in it like a souvenir from a very bad dream.

The Umbrella | Judith Baron

Five past one. Sydney Grace grimaced, staring out the window of the Chinese restaurant at the pouring rain. She regretted not bringing her own umbrella from the office, thinking it was just a short walk and the chance of precipitation was low. She paid the bill and braced for the rain. She passed the entrance, where a bucket held a pile of umbrellas brought in by customers. She turned back to look at the patrons in the restaurants, all of whom focused on their meals. She had to make a quick decision. She could borrow one of the umbrellas, rush back to her office and grab her own, and return the loan within ten minutes. *Just borrowing, not stealing*, she told herself in her head.

She looked for a plain one so it wouldn't stand out. Her heart beat twice as fast as she grabbed a black one with a bamboo handle, which turned out to be an oil-paper umbrella. *Borrowers can't be choosers*, she thought. She skedaddled out of the restaurant, absconding with the umbrella. She rushed back to her office building, got in the elevator, and pressed the

button for her floor repeatedly as if it would speed up the ride. She didn't even realize that a man was inside the elevator with her.

She stole a few glances at the man. He looked out of place, wearing a dark Mandarin shirt, wide-legged pants and black fabric shoes. Something about him gave her the creeps, and she counted the seconds till she got out.

The elevator doors opened on the twenty-fifth floor. She ran out of the elevator, dropped the umbrella in the stand in the foyer and went straight to her cubicle when she saw her boss standing there with his arms folded, a look of disdain on his face.

"Syd, I need the month-end for Phoenix ASAP." Charles Brock glanced at his watch. "Your lunch was over fifteen minutes ago, by the way." He said, before returning to his own office.

Sydney grimaced. Of course, the one time she came back late from lunch!

She scrambled to gather the client's electronic files. She couldn't sneak out to return the umbrella now. She felt bad, because someone would get wet because of her. She felt being watched, though she didn't know from which direction. Her boss was probably scrutinizing her from his office. Talk about micromanaging!

After she sent the files to Charles electronically, she stretched and looked up, and that's when she saw *him*. The stranger in the elevator. But he wasn't standing. He was floating above her, looking down at her, his face ashen and his purple tongue hanging limply down toward her.

She nearly screamed. She stared up at the man, her mouth agape, her throat tickling and ready to squeal.

"Are you okay?" Susan Wong, her colleague, asked, looking up where Sydney was staring. "What's up there?"

Several other staff started looking up at the ceiling too.

"What am I looking at?" Charles came out of his office and stared at the ceiling above Sydney.

"No-nothing..." Sydney stammered.

Her colleagues gave her a strange look. She waited till her boss was gone, grabbed her key card and rushed out the door, the man still floating above her cubicle.

She went in the washroom and looked in the mirror. Her face and lips were nearly white, cold sweat beading on her forehead. She splashed cold water on her face. She's seeing things she couldn't explain. Who and what was this man and why did he follow her?

She dried her face with a paper towel, and then realized she was not alone; the man was now standing in the corner of the washroom behind her. She screamed, running out of the washroom and back into the office.

She grabbed her borrowed umbrella from the stand, convinced that the man/entity was a stowaway and hitchhiked with it. She didn't even take her own umbrella from her cubicle, fearing that her boss would stop her. She would be gone for just ten minutes.

Running on high heels in the rain was never easy, but she sprinted back to the Chinese restaurant, opened the door and deposited the umbrella back where she had taken it.

"I am sorry! I didn't mean to steal it!" she said aloud, to no one in particular.

She ran back to her office, her clothes and hair drenched in the rain. Her colleagues asked whether she was okay. She looked up at the ceiling but didn't see the man anymore. Breathing a sigh of relief, she went about the rest of the day as best she could. Maybe it was just her conscience nagging at her, manifesting itself as something frightening. After all, she never stole anything in her life before today.

After work ended at five-thirty, she took the subway home, the day's strange events behind her. The elevator doors of her condo building nearly closed on her when she squeezed in. She quickly looked around her to make sure the man wasn't there. Two people rode the elevator with her, both of whom she had seen before in the building. She felt relieved. She unlocked her unit and went in, flipping the light switch on.

Just for a second, she thought she saw the man standing down the hall outside her bedroom. She gasped; her heart pounding against her chest. She looked again but didn't see him. *I must be imagining things*, she thought.

Right above her, the man was peering down, his purple tongue nearly touching the top of her head.

About the Author:

Judith Baron is a fiction writer. Her short stories have also been published in *Canadian Dreadful*, *Animal Uprising*, *Future Visions Anthologies: Volume 2*, *Horror Bites Magazine Issue #8*, *The Poet's Haven Digest*, *Deadly Bargain: A Colors in Darkness Anthology* and *Trembling with Fear: Year 2*. She has a degree in Political Science from the University of Western Ontario and currently lives near Toronto, Ontario.

Amazon Author Page: [Judith Baron](#)
Author Blog: [The Writings of Judith Baron](#)



e11

ALONE

© ROBERT ELROD

"Hello," said a strange voice.

"Hello," answered Jason Peters, curious.

It was early in the morning and the car phone already rang. Jason was driving to the realtor convention in the city.

"I called about your mountain cottage ad," said the voice.

"Are you interested in buying?"

"Yes. How soon can we move in?"

"Don't you want to see the property first?"

"No. We will move in as soon as possible. When can we meet?"

"Are you free now?" Jason asked, having a sudden thought. It was worth a shot, the agency had sold nothing all month.

"Yes, let's meet at the cottage."

"In half an hour?"

"Yes."

The stranger hung up. They must have found the address of the property online.

The car turned to a dirt road. It headed toward the remote village in the mountains, the one where only goat herders lived. The weather was cold, even for a cloudy autumn day. The mountain rose high in front of the windshield, covered in fog.

Jason sped up. The dirt road climbed toward the heart of the mountain. The village laid on a ridge, close to the top. Jason lit up a cigarette and drove on. The fog was getting thicker and the U-turns on the road were sharper. He turned on the fog lights.

The air was milky and suffocating. A dark line on the edge of the road was now Jason's only point of reference. The front wheel bumped into something and the car shook. Jason slammed the brake. In front of the windshield, the void of the mountain gaped open like the gates of Hell.

He got out of the car, shaking, and lit another cigarette. He missed a U-turn. There were no protective walls on the dirt road.

Back inside the car, he tried to get the motor running. The car shook and puffed, but wouldn't start.

Jason walked up the road. He could only see the shapes of objects in front of him. He walked in silence, an uneasy feeling in his heart.

Larger outlines became visible on the side of the road. Jason entered the village. The buildings appeared behind a shimmering layer of mist. The sun's shape was visible above the fog, in a clear sky. Mud covered the dirt road and a thick layer of dust lay on the window frames of the ten houses in the village. Weeds grew everywhere, hiding the fences and gates.

Jason found the house he was looking for. All windows were closed, gray with dirt and the gate stood behind overgrown bushes. He pushed the plants aside and took the keys out of his pocket. He tried them one by one until he found the one that worked. The gate opened with a loud screech.

The house had a single room, blanketed in dust and spider webs. There was still no sign of the client. Jason thought about the strange voice on the phone. It didn't sound human. But the prospect of a sale was stronger than the uneasy feeling in his gut.

Jason decided to wait for the client outside and found a fresh path behind the branches of old trees.. Inside the forest, the air was damp and the ground, covered in tree needles, squelched with every step. Jason's foot got caught in something. Near the roots of a fir-tree was a pile of rags, all torn up and damp. As he pulled his shoe out of the rags, he uncovered a white bone-like sphere. A shiver ran down his spine. He had a dark thought of why the village was so empty.

Jason turned to leave, but the fog became thick again. It rolled off the cliffs and covered everything, darkening the forest. His eyes stung. The air around shimmered. It sent cold chills down his body and obstructed his breathing. He tried to run.

Our chance was here. We lit up in sparkle and erupted in the thick plasma air around us.

We had found a vessel, a valuable one. It appeared in front of us, running in circles. It was blind, scared and powerless. We engulfed the prey. We pressed on its terrified eyes and into its face. We became its face. We drove our

milky shimmer into its mouth and nostrils and into its lungs. And finally, one of us found the mushy, large, bloody brain. We all rushed there, alive with the excitement of a new home, and it absorbed us, like a sponge, until we were one. Then, we rested, for the hunt was over. We had found a new host.

Jason blinked and stood. He had been lying on the grass next to the dirt road. His feet were wet and tangled in weeds. The water stank of decay. The fog had lifted.

He was dizzy and sick. He tried to remember where he was, but he could form no coherent thought. There were houses around the dirt road and he could see mountain peaks in the distance. He remembered the water, blue, white, foamy, swirling. It made him happy.

A murmur hummed somewhere. He looked around, but there was nothing, only the houses, the forest, and the mushy earth. The sound grew louder. He covered his ears, but he could still hear it. It came from inside. Large bubbles crawled under his skin and the sound harmonized with the murmur. Then, he heard the words, whispered inside his ears. They soothed him. So, he chanted along, as in a dream, until he knew no more:

"We are water. We must find a new vessel. We must travel further. We are water."

Green Moon | Corina Gruber

Milky serene moonlight drips in the night's blackness. The hour is late, and all humankind is fast asleep. A shadow passes over the craters of the moon.

The white light turns to green, the moon opens her eyes to the darkness. A burst of high-pitched laughter fills the silence and all lights fade to velvet blackness. In their beds, humans scream.

He drowns in his nightmare, fast asleep. Green light pours from the moon and engulfs the world. The nightmare turns to lucid dream, and underneath it, he feels the horrific change.

Blood boils in his veins and liquefies his brain. Teeth turn to fangs and nails become claws. He wakes up, howling at the green moon. Tonight, he's a beast from hell. He lusts for blood.

In the woods, the green light of the moon shines darker. The woman sits under the walnut tree, watching the spotted, wrinkled moon face through the branches. It calls her. She stands, naked, and flies towards the green light. She will meet the sisters.

A howl breaks the sinister silence of the night. In the woods, a four-legged creature runs amok. It hunts, its fangs out and its eyes bloodshot. She stops in midair, looking at him.

The moon and sisters will wait another hundred years. She descends to the ground and the night robes her in deep green velvet. She waits.

The beast stops and snuffles the air, hungry for her blood. It leaps, lunging for her long, white throat. It bites into her marble skin. Green blood gushes from the wound and drips onto the beast's muzzle. It burns. The beast wriggles and howls in agony. Witch's blood is poison.

She stands over the dying beast and looks into its eyes. They are turning human. With one last scream, the beast dies.

"His savage blood will buy me time."

Sheonies | Corina Gruber

In the dead of the night, three men met in the middle of the village. It was a long walk to the forest. Winter was approaching, the cold, wind and ice were threatening to swallow the world. And the fires needed wood.

They walked in silence. Howls echoed in the distance, and ghostly bursts of wind sent chills down their spines. It was said that the forest was home to the Sheonies. Terrifying, beautiful, and deadly, they loomed behind trees. No one had seen them, or none who had seen them still had tongues to speak. They were all dead, or insane.

A white cloth fluttered nearby, disappearing between the trees. The howling wind shook the forest. The three men stopped in their tracks. It could have been a trick of the moonlight, or the wind moving something. It could have been them.

A piercing cry split the forest. From above, a swirl of white silk descended upon them. Six beautiful and terrifying women danced in the air.

“Heavenly Father, protect us,” mumbled one man, falling to his knees.

He averted his eyes from the creatures. Something made him look back at them, a lure he could not withstand. They were tall and lean, all dressed in white, long dresses. Their skin was milky white and shone in the moonlight. Their long, black hair fluttered around their heads. And then there was the horror of their eyes. They were large, unnatural, shining bright inside the blackness. They blinded him.

The last thing the man saw was the earth, which remained behind as he flew right up into the night sky. Then, the black eyes engulfed his vision, and his mind turned into a swirl of white silks and fluttering hair.

About the Author:

Corina Gruber, the pen name of the Romanian writer Corina Chiricheș, is a literary critic, journalist, and fiction writer. She has been publishing columns in local magazines, such as *Euphorion*, for 17 years. The dark tales she writes revolve around her native Transylvanian myths and nature. She resides in Sibiu, a medieval town in Transylvania, with her husband and daughter.

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The Gathering Time | *Marge Simon*

It is the time of summer solstice, and the hot and humid air throbs with desire. Our tribe's young men of age gather to hear the females sing. I take my place among them, for this is the summer of my sixteenth year. I've counted the days, my time is prime for breeding. Mama has woven daisies in my hair, my lips are stained with berry juice. The gods have blessed me, for my voice is sweet and clear.

Sweet Tamon hears my song! With soft and loving whispers, he carries me to lie upon the blankets I've prepared. Our union seems too brief before the summons of the drum. We pledge our troth, full knowing he's no longer mine once the ritual begins.

Distant thunder rolls across the heavens as the young men go to don their garb. Each will drink the sacred brew that should sustain them through the dance until the dawn. She of the burning yellow eyes will choose from those still standing. Thus sanctified, her choices will be skinned alive, their offerings carefully dried & tanned. The Elders shall set to task to stitch the hides to shape again for our Gathering Time, next year.

Farewell, my love. If all goes well, I'll bear a son to carry on tradition.

About the Author:

Marge Simon is an award-winning poet/writer. Her works have appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *New Myths*, *Polu Texni*, *Clannad*, *Silver Blade* and four pro anthologies in 2018. She is a multiple Stoker winner and Grand Master Poet of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association.

Amazon Author Page: [Marge Simon](#)
Author Blog: [Marge Simon](#)

The cabin was quiet as Robert's heart raced so hard and fast, his eyeballs were actually pulsating. The pain in his hands was unbearable, and sweat rained down from every pore in his body. He would have easily traded it for the time he had broken his fifth metacarpal at the bar last Halloween when a fake soldier had conned unknowing patrons into buying him drinks for being a 'hero'. That ass clown would never do that again, he had made sure of that.

In the dimly lit room, he somehow managed to see movement under his fingernail. It was almost like a maggot, but a dark red with hundreds of pulsating, tiny black legs. His thumb twitched against his will and he noticed another one of those devil worms under the thumbnail. It was as if acid were flowing through both of his hands.

Fuck all the bullshit. The pain needed to stop or his heart was going to. After serving in the military, Robert knew that a human being could only tolerate so much pain before the body quit. If you got lucky you only fainted, but a person *could* die. He scanned the cabin for anything he could use to remove the little fuckers from under his nails. He reached up from the crouched position he had assumed earlier and found the light switch. The strange worms looked as if they were swimming in a pool under his fingernails, but there was no blood. Only a clear substance with a yellow sheen, seeping out from under the freshly chewed whites of his nails.

This was just supposed to be a cheap place to stay the night before he started a new job in Louisiana next week. And where was that manicure kit his wife had packed for him? Fuck! She always put shit in the weirdest places. He plumaged through his suitcase, growing more irritated by the second. The pain was unbearable. He found the kit in a folded up reusable grocery bag along with his heart burn medicine, a pen, and liquid bandage.

Robert took the tweezers from the kit in his right hand and tried to catch the devil worm as it moved closer to the cuticle of the thumb on his left hand. He pinched down and caught a tiny piece, screaming immediately. The thing spun like it was the Tasmanian Devil after smoking crack for the first time. The room wavered and spots shot through his vision like a meteor shower. That's about the time he blacked out.

When he woke up, he was still in excruciating pain but his thumb felt a little better. He looked down at the appendage expecting to see a thumb, a nail, and maybe a dead fucking worm hanging out. But there was only bone. No flesh, no nail, no muscle, no meat, just bone from the fingertip to the first knuckle. Worms had eaten the rest, and they weren't done. He had to stop them. He scanned the room for some kind of blunt object, anything that could help. A lukewarm unopened soda sat on the small table by the door, it would have to do the trick. Robert fought through the pain, stood up, then fell forward on the table, crashing down with all the force of a two-hundred-seventy-five pound man falling six feet, three inches. That's about when the pain in his toes began. Robert looked down at his feet, under his toenails were the same swimming worms.

He scanned the room and noticed the can of soda had fallen within arm's reach. Grabbing it with the four good fingers on his left hand, he gripped the can like a monkey holding a banana and slammed it down onto his right hand as hard as he could. The can contorted after every blow until it was reduced to a fist-sized ball of aluminum. The pain was almost worth it as the remaining finger nails shattered like glass. He pinched the broken blood soaked nails and ripped the fingernails off one by one until he had forced himself to get all five.

Next came the toenails. After six well placed blows, he had shattered every nail on both feet, most likely breaking some toes in the process. But the pain subsided in his right hand and both of his feet. But he had done so much damage to his right hand, he couldn't hold the can to smash the four remaining nails on his left hand. Which, at that moment, were screaming as if someone had a cattle prod jammed underneath each one.

Instinct kicked in. Robert placed a trembling index finger from his left hand in his mouth and felt around for the first knuckle with his front teeth. The pain had to get worse before it could get better. That was the only way he could justify it. Tears trailed down his cheeks and he slammed his teeth together so hard, the pain in his mouth registered before he tasted the blood or felt the searing agony from his finger. He didn't think, only repeated the action on the three remaining fingers. The excruciating pain had mellowed into something almost bearable.

Robert's right hand twitched. The worms poured out from the bloody nubs where the nails had once been and began devouring the flesh on his fingers and toes. Screaming in agony, only wanting the pain to end, he looked for an escape. Any escape. He crawled towards the suitcase and pawed at the reusable grocery bag. After finding the pen, he grabbed it with the exposed bones of his fingers and placed it in his right nostril. Laying on his stomach, Robert pushed up as high as he could using his right elbow and slammed his head onto the ground hard and fast.

Ending the pain for good.

About the Author:

Ryan Prentice Garcia is a construction worker and US Army veteran with a warped sense of reality. He lives in Texas with his wife, children, and three dogs.

"Paul? What the hell are you doing here?"

"Is that any way to greet your cousin?" Paul stood near the front door, staring at the gruff-looking man before him. "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

The gruffy-looking man ran his fingers through his beard. "She threw you out," he said.

"Yes, Dave. She threw me out," Paul replied.

"I told you to leave that slut." He stepped aside, letting Paul into the house.

"I didn't expect her to change the locks." Paul stepped inside. The house was cluttered with dishes piling up in the sink. He noticed a large clown doll sitting in a kitchen chair. "What's with the clown doll, and what's with the people dressed up as clowns here? I saw a clown walking a dog and another one pumping gas."

"Poentet is not a typical town, and you must've driven a long time to get here."

"I did, and I could really use the bathroom."

"Down the hall," and Dave pointed down a small hallway. "How long were you figuring on staying?"

"Maybe, the weekend. Is that a problem?" Paul closed the bathroom door behind him.

"No. Not a problem," but Dave glanced at the clown doll.

A few minutes later, Paul emerged from the bathroom. He glanced around the kitchen and living room, making a face at the clutter and garbage. Maybe, he would stay the weekend, but where would he go after that?

"You hungry?" Dave didn't seem too happy to see him. "You want to get breakfast? I'll drive."

"Sounds good," and Paul followed him over to the front door.

"Some ground rules first. Do not stare at the children unless they're older than ten. Do not look at the people dressed as clowns. Eat your food. Mind your business. That's it."

"Jesus, Dave. Are there children in the corn too?"

"I'm serious, Paul."

"Okay." He noted the serious look on Dave's face. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Let's go," and Dave walked outside.

The diner seemed fairly normal. The waitresses all wore purple and white outfits and were friendly. The locals, mostly older men kept their backs to Dave and Paul, but as breakfast came to an end, families started to walk inside. And with them were people dressed as clowns.

"What is with the clowns," Paul asked.

Dave reached for his wallet. "I told you. Mind your business."

"Dave, I got it," and Paul pulled out a roll of cash from his pocket.

"Keep it," and Dave got up to pay the bill.

Paul sat back in his seat. He watched Dave pay for their food. He seemed nervous like he was afraid of something, but he never knew Dave to be afraid of anything. Dave was never a slob either, so what the hell happened to him? And why were the locals giving him dirty looks, and why were there clowns sitting with families, entertaining the children? Something was seriously wrong with the town.

"Ready?" Dave stood beside the table, ignoring the ugly looks that he received.

"Do the town people hate you or something?" Paul moved away from the table.

"It's a long story," and Dave walked over to the diner entrance.

"Is that why you have that clown doll in your kitchen?"

Suddenly, the diner went quiet. All heads turned their way. Even the children and the clowns stared at them, and Dave's face turned red. His hands balled into fists, but he stormed outside. And the glass door nearly struck Paul in the face.

"Dave, what the hell?" Paul stood next to Dave's car as he watched his cousin try to calm down.

"Paul, you have no idea what you fucking walked into."

"You mean with Casey?"

"No, Paul. Not Casey. This town. You don't know one thing about this town, and that clown doll is a punishment because I failed."

"Failed? Failed at what? Being a clown?" Paul stared at Dave and realized that he was right. "You wanted to be a clown?"

"If you lived here, Paul, you would understand." Dave tapped his hands on top of his car. "You know what? This isn't going to work. You could stay the night, but you have to leave tomorrow. You can't be here."

"Because I don't want to be a clown?"

"Just get in the car," and Dave got into the driver's seat.

"Fine," and Paul threw open the car door.

"Paul," but it was too late. Paul did not see the clown riding a bicycle, and as he threw open the car door, it struck the bicycle. The clown was thrown forward, slamming his head against the hood of another car, and the clown crumbled to the ground. Dave jumped out of the car. All the color drained from his face, and he stared at Paul as if he had deliberately attacked the clown.

"I didn't see him," Paul stammered.

"Damn it, Paul! Why did you have to come here?" Dave looked over at the clown. "Now, we can't leave."

"What do you mean that we can't leave?" Paul noticed the people in the diner staring at him. "We'll just tell the cops that it was an accident."

"You're going to have to take his place."

"If I don't?"

"I don't think you want to know the answer to that," and Paul did not like his tone.

Paul stared at his feet. It was better than looking at the people inside the diner especially those dressed up as clowns. The children were even creepy, and finally the owner of the clown appeared. His name was Matt, and he started to cry as his clown was carted away in an ambulance. It was almost comical to watch, but Paul fought back his laughter.

"My son has three more months to go before he turns ten," Matt said. "I need a clown." He looked at Dave. "It can't be you because you failed that family, and now they're dead."

"Wait. What?" Paul looked at Dave, but Dave stared down at his feet. "Did you kill someone's family?"

"It wasn't me," Dave replied.

"It doesn't matter. They're dead." Matt now stood face to face with Paul. "It's going to have to be you, but I need to know. Are you incompetent?"

"I am not dressing up as a clown," Paul said.

"Then, I'm pressing charges, and you can go to jail."

"For an accident?" Paul looked from Matt to Dave, but no one said anything. And people continued to stare at him from the diner. "Will you quit looking at me," Paul yelled at them, but the people didn't blink. Not even the children or the clowns. "Fine. If I dress up as a clown, I'm not doing it for free."

"Two hundred dollars," and Matt shoved the money into his hand. "Go to Rick's apartment," and he also pressed a key into Paul's hand. "Get dressed. Dave knows where Rick and I live. Be at my house by five, and stay dressed up as the clown until tomorrow morning especially during the night. Do you understand?"

"We understand," Dave said.

"Good. Five o'clock." Matt got into his car and drove away.

"Paul, get in the car. Don't argue with me." Dave watched his cousin get into the car. "We'll go to Rick's place. He should have an extra outfit and make-up. I'll help you get ready."

"Dave, give me something here. What is going on?" Paul stared at Dave as he continued to drive the car. "Why did you move to this town?"

"I didn't know any better like you. After my wife died of cancer, I had to get away, and I made the mistake of coming here. Didn't you ever wonder why I never invited you over? I was protecting you, Paul, but I can't protect you anymore."

"This isn't a Purge thing, right?" Paul smiled at his joke, but Dave refused to smile. "So, I dress up as a clown. Big deal. It's stupid, even crazy, but hey, I made two hundred dollars."

"Hopefully, Matt's clown gets better soon, and then you can get out of here." Dave glanced over at Paul. "It's not safe," he whispered.

"Safe from what," but Dave did not answer him. "What are you afraid of?"

"We're here." Dave parked the car. "Let's get you ready. Then, I'll drive you over to Matt's house, and I'll come get you in the morning."

Rick's apartment was a clown's dream. So many wigs and outfits and red bubble noses. There were horns and squirt guns and fake flowers. It was nauseating, and Paul was getting angry that he had to do this. But then Dave went to get some air outside, so Paul poked around and found an empty black duffel bag under Rick's bed along with a small mannequin. He got an idea, one that would do no harm and one that could help him not stay trapped as a clown for too long.

"We're here," Dave said as he drove to Matt's house. "You got everything?" He glanced at the black duffel bag on Paul's lap. "Do I even want to ask?"

"It's fine, Dave. I'll see you in the morning," and Paul started to exit the car.

Dave grabbed him by the arm. "I thought I was smart too, Paul. I took everything off during the night and changed back into my normal self, thinking that I would dress up as the clown first thing in the morning, but everything went to shit fast. Don't do anything stupid because I know you, and this family needs you to stay as the clown."

"Jesus, Dave. You're acting like their lives depend on it."

"It does." Dave let go of his arm. "You should never have come here, and I hope to see you in the morning, Paul."

"I'll see you in the morning." Paul got out of the car. He watched Dave drive off. He looked across the street to see someone dressed as a clown staring at him through a window. The clown raised his hand to wave, and Paul slowly waved back. "I hate clowns," he muttered under his breath, and he felt ridiculous. The outfit was large and scratchy. The wig was uncomfortable, and he was sure that his skin would break out from all the makeup. Maybe, the town was playing a cruel joke on him, but something wasn't right.

An hour later, Matt's family had dinner. His wife made chicken with rice. His daughter set the table, and Paul offered to help. But the family told him to stay by the son and entertain him, and Paul tried. But the son seemed more interested in watching cartoons, and once again, Paul felt stupid, wasting his time. But at least, the dinner was good, but no one spoke during the meal. The parents and daughter just glanced at Paul and the boy, and the boy, Ben was the only one that would not look at Paul.

After dinner, Paul returned to entertaining the boy. When the boy was finally sent to bed, he started to relax. He walked around the house, wandering upstairs, keeping an ear open. He was told that if he heard the boy's bedroom door open, that he had to be standing outside of it. It was crazy, and there was no way that he was going to do this after tonight. He was going to leave, whether Dave wanted him to or not. He was sure that the family could find someone else to be the clown, and maybe Rick would be discharged from the hospital tomorrow too. The whole thing did not make sense, and nobody was telling Paul anything.

"You know the story of this town, don't you?" Paul was surprised to find the daughter standing behind him in the upstairs hallway. "You heard about the children, right?"

"No," Paul said.

"Some of the kids in this town go missing, but nobody realizes it until it is too late. They're all under ten years of age, and Ben's got a few more months to go."

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"The clowns keep them away. If you stay as the clown, we will all be safe, but if you don't..." The daughter looked past Paul and paled, and she hurried into her bedroom.

Paul turned around and saw Ben standing by the stairs. Ben's eyes held an empty stare. He waited for Paul to do something, and Paul squeezed his nose, making a squeaky sound. Ben blinked, and then he walked into his room. And Paul stared after him, unnerved by that stare.

Eleven o'clock. Matt's family went to bed. Once Paul knew that the coast was clear, he went back for the black duffel bag he had left in the family room. He opened it and took out the small mannequin. He placed it on the couch and turned on the television set. He removed his wig and put it on the mannequin's head. He took off his shirt and dressed the mannequin, and lastly, he removed his ridiculous red nose and put it on the mannequin's face. Paul would keep everything else on including the uncomfortable makeup, but he needed some air. And he needed to really smoke a cigarette. He made sure to leave the front door unlocked before he left the house.

Paul strolled around the block, smoking his cigarette. The town was so strange, and it was getting late. He finished his walk and his smoke, and he returned to Matt's house. The front door was wide open, and Paul slowly stepped into the house and found the television set still playing in the family room. The mannequin was gone. Only his wig was left on the floor.

Paul moved up the stairs. He expected Matt to appear, but no one was there. All the bedroom doors were open, and Ben's bed was empty. Paul stepped into the daughter's bedroom. She was trying to tell him something earlier, but he didn't listen. He was relieved to see her still lying in the bed, but when he reached out with his white gloved hand and touched her shoulder, she did not respond. And something slid down her shoulder and onto his glove. Paul pulled his hand back and saw the red against the white.

Paul ran out of the daughter's bedroom and into Matt's room. A scream slipped from his mouth as he stared at the butchered bodies of Matt and his wife. He screamed again and tore down the stairs, ripping off his gloves. He wiped

his face with his hands, smearing the makeup away, and tears poured down his cheeks. He reached for the front door, but the door was locked.

“A clown should never lie.”

Paul turned around, and there was Ben standing behind him, soaked in blood. Ben giggled, and it was a strange sound. He smiled at the tears flowing down Paul’s face, wiping more of the makeup away, and his skin turned gray with black patches. His face molded into a blank slate with no eyes, no ears, no mouth. There were only holes where his eyes should have been, and the holes glowed a strange orange. His fingers turned gray, and the tips extended outward into razor sharp claws. One arm lashed out like a whip, and Ben’s fingers sliced through Paul’s waist, splitting him in half. As the top part of Paul’s body splattered against the floor, one last tear ran down his face.

About the Author:

Melissa R. Mendelson is a Horror and Science-Fiction Author. Her short stories have been published by Sirens Call Publications and Dark Helix Press, and her short stories have also been featured on Tall Tale TV. She recently self-published a Dystopian Short Story Collection on Amazon called, Better Off Here.

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A Quiet Ravine | *Nina D’Arcangela*

Roused from its sleep by the ruckus in the trees, it slunk from its den; head down, teeth bared. It sensed pain and fear on the humid air. Slowly it approached; the stench of contorted metal nearly overwhelmed the scent of iron-rich blood. In a low crouch, it moved toward the mass of debris resting in the stream. Caution barely quelled the hunger it felt, so much so that it shivered with need. Seen from a distance, a bulbous shadow began to move. The shape grew frantic, it hung upside down like an animal in a trap. Quicker, its appetite fully aroused, it sprinted towards its quarry. Screeching sounds now emanated from the pile. It responded by clawing at the crumpled mass, eager for the taste. The movement inside stopped, it paused in unison; both awaited the other. A tentative mewl from within sent it into a mad frenzy. It slammed its body against the teetering hulk, snapped and snarled at its prey, pounded every surface until the vehicle rocked violently.

Terror vibrated through her body; her wide eyes peered helplessly as the thing outside ravaged the mangled vehicle. She knew she shouldn’t scream, but hysterics and fear won out. As it backed away a few feet, she could see it contemplating the cracked window. It burst through the passenger side in a cacophony of shattered glass, screams and growls. Trapped upside down in the locked seat belt, she could do nothing but wait. A moment of tense silence hung between them. She began to pray, but no god answered her prayers as stiletto teeth fastened themselves around her midsection. She gurgled red foam as it ripped the engorged bump of her unborn child from her body. She watched as it shook the mound with feral brutality. Her body gushed a moan that matched the torrent echoing in her mind. The creature’s head lashed out again; its jaw crushed her ribcage, collapsed her lungs, stilled her heart. Her scream ended in a useless gasp as her body slumped forward in grotesque embrace of that which feasted upon her.

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 also an UrbEx adventurer who loves to photograph abandoned places, bits of decay and old graveyards. Nina is the co-founder of Pen of the Damned; an owner of Sirens Call Publications and Phrenic Press; and the resident nut-job and sole anarchist at Dark Angel Photography.

Author Blog: [Sotet Angyal – The Dark Angel](#)

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FATE OF THE FREE THINKER

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New Face at the Party | *Radar DeBoard*

He slowly, stalked down the street. His eyes scanned the streets looking to see if anyone was out. His mask made it difficult for him to see very far. That didn't matter to him though, he was too proud of it to take it off. He had shaped the mask to mimic the face from the painting *The Scream*. The disturbing shape of the head had always given him a sense of uneasiness, which he was hoping he could pass on to others. To add his own touch, he had streaked the white mask with intersecting lines of black and red.

He looked down at the knife in his right hand, and saw it was still covered in blood. He casually wiped it off against his black robes and continued walking. The faint sound of music drew his attention to the houses on the end of the street. He made his way towards the noise, the sounds of music beginning to overpower his own breathing inside the mask. It became very easy to tell that a large, green painted house was the source of the tunes.

As he drew close to the house's yard it was clear that someone was throwing a Halloween party. There were several groups of people, all in costume, standing on the porch conversing. He made his way up the steps to the open door to the home. He stopped for a moment when someone yelled at him, "Hey!" He turned to see an intoxicated man looking at him. The man pointed at him and stammered, "That's a great costume, dude."

He ignored the man and walked into the doorway. The overwhelming sound of dance music filled his ears. He scanned the room, seeing large amounts of people dancing and talking. They were all clearly only focused on having a good time and nothing else. No one even paid him any attention as he stood in the doorway. A whole house filled with drunken, bumbling sinners who were celebrating the devil's night. *Dozens of perfect victims*, he thought as he made his way through the clumps of people. Now the only question that remained was where should he start?

Not Fit for Consumption | *Radar DeBoard*

Martin quietly moved down the stairs, making his way to the kitchen. He opened the fridge looking for his new favorite late night snack, finding it on the second shelf next to the sliced cheese. He pulled a spoon out of the drawer while he fumbled to get the lid off the container with one hand. Pulling off the lid he immediately dug in. He would be the first to admit it, but trying new foods wasn't normally his thing. Whatever this new brand was doing, he definitely enjoyed it.

He looked at the labeling, which he had read so many times already. *NatureSlim new and exciting nature gel now 100 percent all natural*, he read to himself. Taking out another spoonful, he slowly turned the container. The only thing he didn't find right with this food, was that it seemed to be lacking on the ingredients label. There was no nutritional facts listing telling him what percentage of his daily recommended vitamins he would have from eating a serving of it. There was only a little labeling on the back saying that all ingredients were 100 percent natural, containing no artificial flavors, coloring, or additives.

Martin found it a little weird that the FDA didn't make them disclose the ingredients of their product, especially since NatureSlim had created their own food. Though if the FDA certified it as natural, maybe there wasn't a problem with not showing every little ingredient. Plus, if there was truly anything bad in it, it would be far too late for Martin. He had been snacking on the nature gel on a daily basis for the past few weeks. He started having it maybe once or twice a week, but that gave way to eating it every day. Now he found himself snacking on it three or four times a day.

He sat the container down on the counter next to the sink, looking at the dishes that had been left in it. He let out a sigh of annoyance upon seeing a large skillet sitting at the top. His son must have come home earlier and fried himself up some bacon, and left the skillet in the sink without even bothering to rinse it out. Martin could see the bacon grease that had now solidified in the skillet, which would make it a pain to clean out later.

He walked over to the window located on the other end of the kitchen. He looked outside at the calm night sky, watching the moonlight shining across his yard. He put a hand on his stomach, feeling how small it had gotten. He would admit that several months ago he had a gigantic potbelly. That is, until his wife wasn't having anymore of

it. She started them on a string of diets over the course of three months, and even added more exercise to the mix. Yet, after all that effort, the diets had little to no effect.

Then, she had brought home the nature gel from the store. It was just something for the family to snack on. Martin had tried a small amount the night she brought it home, and found it to be quite tasty. Then Martin and his wife continued their normal routine of minimal dieting and exercise, not thinking much about the food. That weekend though, Martin found a nice surprise when he stepped on the scale. He had lost almost four pounds in a week. Something that he or his wife had not been able to do while on all those diets.

His wife was quick to point towards their new snack being the culprit, but Martin was skeptical. He decided to give it another week, where he would keep everything the same except for occasionally eating the nature gel. Sure enough, he had lost another three pounds at the end of that week. Whatever was in that nature gel, it greatly helped in their weight loss efforts. For the first time in over two decades, Martin felt that he was actually in fairly decent shape. His gut no longer extended out, and a lot of the excess flab was gone. He truly did love the simple, late night snack.

A bubbling noise drew his attention away from the window, and back towards the sink. He approached the sink trying to find the source of the noise. As he approached, he realized the noise was coming from his nature gel container. He noticed the container was slightly shaking while the strange noise continued. Then the nature gel tipped over, spilling some into the sink. "Oh crap," he said grabbing hold of the container. He managed to lift it up without too much spilling into the sink.

He now felt the trembling of something inside the container. He looked inside to find the nature gel bubbling and moving. It was as if the food was trying to escape up the sides. "What the hell?" Martin stammered. He placed the nature gel back on the counter, now hearing gurgling also coming from the sink. He looked down into the sink to see the spilled nature gel also moving. It was converging on the bacon grease, making a new sucking noise as it covered it. After a few seconds it moved onto a different patch of grease on the skillet, leaving no traces of grease behind it.

"Oh my god," he whispered, "it ate the grease." He took several steps backward, running into the kitchen's island. He knew now that whatever his family had been eating it wasn't natural. Whatever it was, it seemed that it was after fats and oils. *That must be its food source*, he thought to himself. He looked down at his stomach. It was a sentient thing that ate fats, and he had been putting it inside himself for weeks now.

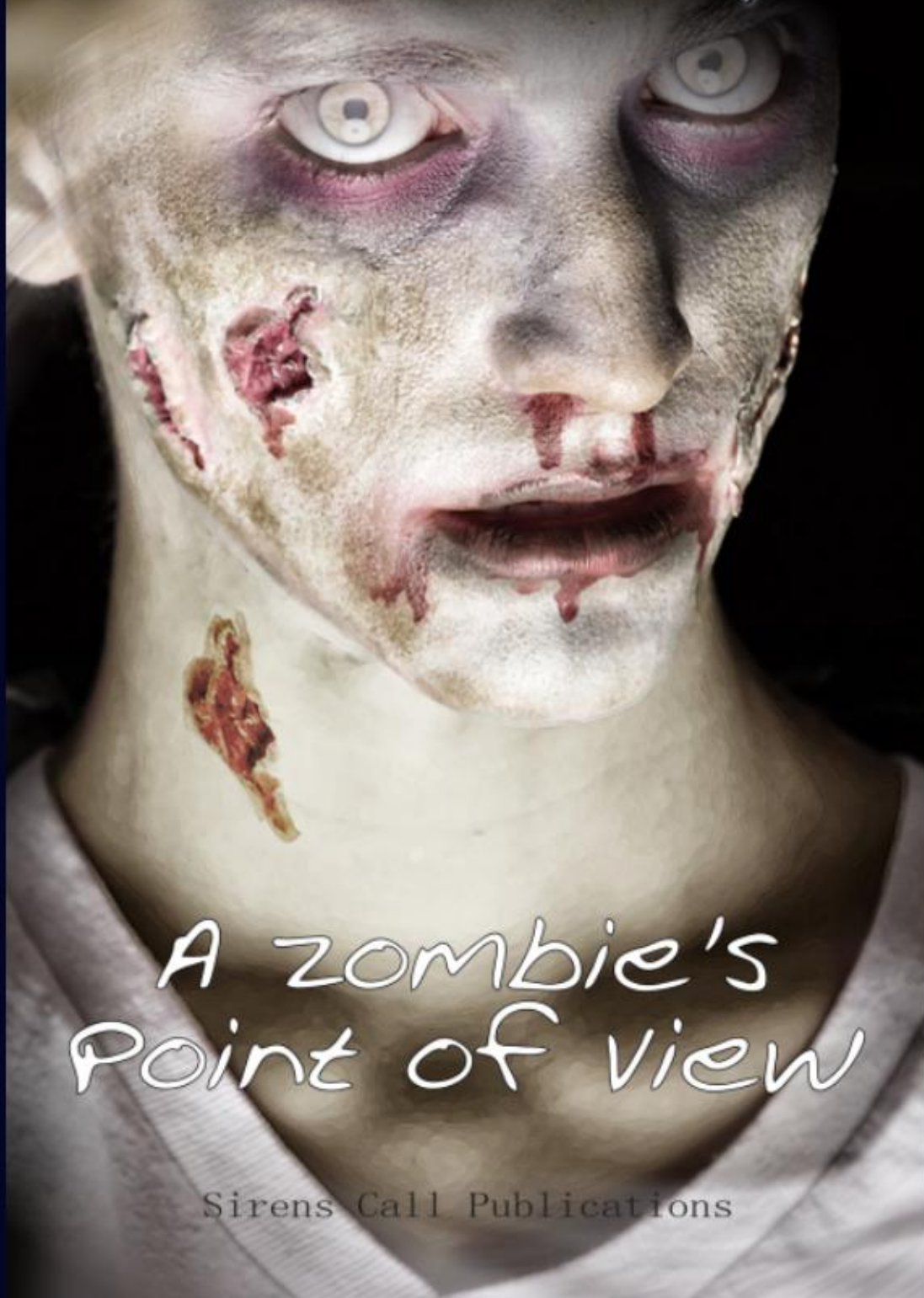
He let out a gasp, as a sudden wave of pain erupted from his stomach. He wrapped his arms around his stomach falling to his knees. From there he fell onto his side, the pain growing to the point of being unbearable. He felt something moving around physically pushing against the walls of his skin. "Oh god, please no," he whimpered. Martin didn't have enough fat anymore for whatever the nature gel was, and now it was going to find a new source of food.

About the Author:

Radar DeBoard is a new author living in Kansas. He is a lover of all things horror. His largest hope for his work is that people will enjoy his writing enough to share it with others.

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Through Clouded Eyes



A zombie's
Point of view

Sirens Call Publications

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I am the blood and squalor of humanity. I reek of filth and putrescence. I live in the vile cesspool below your feet. I am the thing that goes bump in the night.

I do not know my origin, only that I was born as a plague upon this world.

I remember when I emerged from the sour muck of the sewer. My first gasps were filled with bile and fetid waste. I crawled haphazardly from the murky depths onto the cold, wet ground.

At first, I had no eyes. They weren't necessary in the dark bowels of the city. I slithered my way by touch and sound.

I quickly learned how to hunt. I used the rancid slop surrounding me as camouflage as I pounced upon my prey. Sewer rats have never been tasty, but they are plentiful. Their greasy, black fur slides down my throat as I ravenously rip them apart.

Over time, my senses have become stronger, more attuned. The day I first opened my eyes I was blinded by the sun. I loathed its presence, how it illuminated my wretched form.

I burrow into the feculence of the sewer when the light appears. I feel most comfortable when nestled among the slime and filth of my home. At night, I emerge from my cocoon, refreshed and hungry.

I scrounge for whatever I can, but the rats are becoming scarce. Their rotting corpses decorate the ground, attracting even more pestilence. But now I crave something bigger, meatier. Something to satisfy my growing belly.

As I slip through the sewers, I hear the sound of another animal. It's on the surface, but I can tell that it's nearby.

I see it above me, next to the storm drain. It is a furry creature with a long tail. It licks its paws as if to clean itself. I had seen these things before, but never up close. I salivate as I quietly creep towards it. I steady my hand, ready to strike.

Suddenly, it notices me and starts to hiss. In a flash, I reach up and pull it down into the depths. I feel pain as the beast tears into my sinewy flesh with its miniscule talons. I pause for a moment to admire this creature. Unlike the rats, it can defend itself.

My stomach rumbles. I pierce into it with my long, black claws, and it goes limp. Eating it proves more difficult than I anticipated. Its fur is not slick with the bile of the sewer, and it catches in my throat. I dip the carcass into the bubbling muck beneath me.

The meat is stringy, but flavorful. Only the tail is too meager for me to eat. I pick the bones clean, but my stomach still stirs.

Above, I listen to the sounds of the street. I hear the noises of people walking and chattering as they pass by. Suddenly, a thought enters my head.

I had seen them many times, but as a child I was always scared to get close. Looking at the jagged barbs on my fingers, I realize that I am no longer a helpless nestling; now I am the predator. My fangs froth at the thought of catching a person in my jaws, but how?

Fortunately, I wouldn't have to wait long for my first kill.

I awake to the sound of scraping metal. It is dusk, and I can see the faint outline of sunlight hitting the wall. I remain ensconced in my nest, waiting to hear the noise again.

"Hey Louie, you want to give me a hand here?" A voice echoes through the sewer. Could it be?

I slowly creep from my cocoon, careful to remain in the shadows. My glistening black skin hides me from the world, giving me an advantage.

I peek around the corner, and see a circle of light flooding the chamber. Moments later, I see one of them slowly climbing down. He is rotund, wearing a bright orange vest. His head is covered in a brilliant yellow cap.

My mouth waters as he comes into my domain. The quills on my back quiver with anticipation. This is going to be my moment.

As I move to get a better look, I see another one descend. Two of them! I feel a sharp tingling run up my spine as I stare at them. I dart into the adjacent tunnel so that I can watch without exposing myself.

"Did you hear something?" one of them speaks. He has fur around his face, unlike the other. They are wearing the same colors, but this one is a bit smaller than the first.

"I can't hear anything over the sound of the water." the first one replies.

The two of them make their way down the tunnel. The one in front has a light in his hand to highlight the path. I watch as they walk in a line, careful to avoid stepping in the muck. I spy them from the spaces between tunnels as they continue forward.

They finally stop at a chamber with a series of pipes along the wall. The fat one pulls out a flat piece of wood with paper on it.

Carlos looks at the clipboard. "Okay, which ones are we looking at today?" Each pipe is sealed and marked with a plastic ID tag. He starts comparing numbers.

Louie looks around nervously. He's never been comfortable down here. He always had the feeling like he was being watched.

"Hey, look at that." Louie taps Carlos on the shoulder. He points to something on the wall. "What is that?" he asks. It appears to be a handprint smeared in blood.

"You think there are people down here?" Carlos replies. He reaches out to touch it. The blood is still moist.

"I think we should go." Louie's voice cracks slightly.

"How about you keep an eye out while I finish this. If there are any homeless or something down here, we'll call it in." Carlos turns his attention back to the pipes.

Louie becomes even more agitated. He pulls a wrench from his tool belt and wields it like a weapon. "I don't feel too good about this."

"Come on, it's probably some homeless chick who couldn't clean up after her period. I've seen this kind of shit before." Carlos remains focused on his task.

"Can you hurry it up?" Louie stammers.

"Just keep your pants on, will ya?"

From the shadows I watch them argue. I silently creep into position. I know exactly where they will cross to get back, and I will be waiting.

I stand still as the light fades from outside. The shadows grow deeper and consume my body.

I am the darkness.

Minutes later, I hear them returning. They are still talking. First, the fat one passes in front of me, unaware of my presence. My body tenses, poised to strike.

I see a flash of orange; I reach out and ensnare the second one, hooking into his flesh. I pull him back reflexively, dragging him into the shadows.

He tries to scream as I start biting his face. My fangs rip into him as blood splatters over me. I can feel him struggle and try to get free, but my claws are dug deep.

Finally, I manage to find his neck. I clamp down and blood rushes into my mouth and down my throat. His body becomes languid. I pull him further into the tunnel.

Suddenly, I hear the fat one screaming.

"Louie? Louie!! Where are you?" He frantically searches with his portable sunlight.

He swings it in all directions, but he's too frightened to pay attention to what he's seeing. The light passes over us, but he doesn't notice.

Finally, he runs back to the hole and clamors to the surface.

"Jesus Christ! Holy fucking shit!"

There's the sound of metal scraping, and the hole closes. I sit in the dark with my new prize still clutched in my arms. I savor the moment, triumphant with my kill.

His blood is far sweeter than any other. His flesh is soft and succulent. He is the most delicious thing I have ever tasted.

Although his body will feed me for days, I want more.

I need more.

About the Author:

Jonathan is a freelance copywriter living in Portland, OR. He also likes to dabble in creative fiction from time to time. He's been writing professionally since 2014, and unprofessionally all his life.

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The new Mrs. Schein sat primly on the edge of the couch cushion. "I guess the honeymoon is over," she said, not trying to be funny.

Her husband of one month, his ginger hair tousled on top, his sunburned nose and forehead peeling, laughed. "I think it's cool," he said. He reached out and stroked one of the polished branches. He turned and walked to the sofa, flopped down beside her. He hugged her with his right arm while gently gripping her chin with his left. "Come on Tamra," he teased.

"Get rid of it," she demanded.

"It's a gift from my parents." He regarded the seven-foot-tall, gnarled and twisted wooden floor lamp across the room. "My dad says it comes from an oak tree that was one of the oldest in England. Over 2,000 years old. A storm blew it down. The wood was auctioned off. Wait, I have the booklet somewhere...." He hopped to his feet and hurried into their bedroom.

"I don't care about that bullshit," Tamra called after him. She stood, arching her back as she stretched. "It's ugly, Lorenzo. It's completely hideous. I don't want it in this apartment. We don't have the closet space to store it, either."

"We aren't putting it in a closet, and we're keeping it," he said, walking with an athletic bounce as he emerged from their bedroom, a pamphlet dangling from one hand.

"This is my home too. Get rid of it."

"Listen, just listen for a minute," he pleaded as he flipped some glossy, stapled pages. "'... After Monmouth's rebellion was repressed, a judge was sent down to the southwestern counties of England to try the defeated rebels and their supporters. It was from this tree, the Wilton Oak, that scores were hung and an entire village was depleted of its inhabitants....' And here, listen to this," he pressed another page over, "it says here that this tree grew from an acorn planted at the time Julius Caesar invaded the British Isles."

Tamra folded her arms tightly and narrowed her eyes impatiently. "If you don't give it back to your parents, I'm throwing it out."

Lorenzo sighed. He ambled over to the floor light and studied it once more. It perched on four bulbous, knobby legs--all part of the original, ancient bark. From that base, the wood rose, twining and torturously winding around itself, forming asymmetrical elbows that jutted in different directions; he wondered how the thing remained so remarkably balanced. A staggered set of five crooked branches rose from the upper half of the trunk, each tipped with an opaque white-glass globe. "But don't you think it's awesome how someone chose this particular piece of wood, varnished it, ran electrical wire, installed sockets, turned it into an lamp?" He shifted his head, then spun around. "Hey...." he said, noting she was gone. "Tamra, we're not done discussing this!" he shouted.

"Yes, we are," she shouted back, through the open door that led from the kitchen to the garage.

Lorenzo listened to boxes crashing, objects clunking and rattling as they hit the cement floor. Then he heard her steps--thud thud thud--loud and determined despite her slender build and bare feet, as she crossed the kitchen floor.

She paused under the arch between the living and dining rooms, breathing heavily. She was carrying a shovel. "This is all I could find. We don't own a goddamn ax or sledgehammer."

"What the hell, Tamra?" He sidled so that he was between her and the lamp. "You're acting like an idiot."

She jumped at him, hefting the shovel. "Promise me," she said loudly. "Promise me, you'll get rid of it. Give it back to your parents!"

"Or what?" he asked, feeling unusually irritated. He'd seen her temper tantrums before. He was always positive, kind, supportive; he prided himself on his ability to understand her and talk her down. But now annoyance--and a growing contempt--pricked him. "Or what?" he repeated, his voice cold.

Her eyes were open wide, her face covered with red blotches. She gripped the haft with her fists and raised it over her head. "Or I will chop this hunk of shit into pieces and throw it out with the garbage!" she nearly screamed.

"No you won't," Lorenzo said, his tone taunting. He knew he shouldn't goad her, but anger was simmering and he couldn't control the urge to push back.

"Yes, I will! You don't think I will?"

"No, you won't. You can't chop with that anyway, moron."

"I can't what? I can't what?" And she pushed right by him, trying to swing the shovel.

Lorenzo ducked in surprise. "Tamra, what the fuck, watch out!..."

But she continued, her momentum unchecked, and the spade struck one of the globes, which shattered; the light bulb inside popped, sparks flying.

He tried to grab her from behind, yank her down by her elbows, but she pulled away from him and threw the handle backwards into his belly. He bent over double, and gasped, "Tamra, calm the fuck down. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Her face was covered with sweat now, her teeth bared in a grimace. She growled, her breaths hissing from her mouth. She swung again.

Lorenzo lunged for his wife, getting a hold of her upper arms just as the metal spade connected with another globe and socket. There was a hissing, crackling sound; Lorenzo felt the current seize him. It was as if he was glued to his wife. He tried desperately to break free and finally was able to tear himself away. He collapsed to his knees. His wife was still upright, her body shaking and jerking, smoke rising from her charred skin. He crawled for the outlet, and finally yanked out the plug. He watched his wife topple over like a statue, her fingers still gripping the shovel handle. He wormed his way over to her and started to cry. "Tamra, Tamra, what the hell..." he said over and over.

The rest of the lights abruptly blinked out. The air-conditioner stopped.

Lorenzo raised his eyes to the tree that loomed above him, now free of the electricity and enveloped in shadows. He suddenly dropped his wife's body, leaped to his feet, and ran for the front door.

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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The Young Man | Daniel Senser

Old Davey Riggs was a bitter man. He had never married, was very poor, and lived a solitary life. Every evening, he'd walk to a little square, sit on a bench, and watch the young men and women pass by. 'Look at them,' he'd think, 'with their healthy bodies and their smug faces. Just wait! They too will grow old, and then they will know the truth!'

One evening, Davey was sitting on a bench at the square thinking thoughts like the ones above, when he noticed a strange young man staring at him. He was pale, handsome, and dressed all in black. He seemed to be smiling slyly at Davey. 'Who is that young man, and why is he looking at me like that?' thought Davey.

Davey called out to the young man, but as soon as he did, another person walked in front of the young man and he disappeared.

Davey went home. On the way home, he noticed that his face was itching. He scratched it and for some reason the skin felt looser than normal. When he got home he stood in front of a mirror in his foyer and looked at himself. Oddly enough, there seemed to be a loose piece of skin near his chin. He pulled at it, and to his great surprise, the skin was peelable. He pulled at the skin till a fresh set of pale, young-looking skin was revealed beneath. He peeled until his whole face came off! And there, looking at him from the mirror, was the young man from the park. Davey tried to scream, but could not. He felt his heart clench, his breath leave him, and he fell over and died.

About the Author:

Daniel Senser is thirty-three years old and has worked mainly as a poet the last thirteen years. His work has appeared in *Jewish Currents*, *Penwood Review*, *Blue Nib*, and *Adelaide*, among other journals. He is originally from Cincinnati, Ohio, and currently lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His new collection of poetry, *Another Missed Connection*, comes out in January.



STYGIAN ARCHITECT

© ROBERT ELROD

Fifteen-year-old Robbie was tied to a chair, battered and bloody, squirming and grunting through the dirty underwear taped into his mouth. They were his, soaked in his own sweat and stink and semen, a noxious taste for a vanilla-prone straight boy. He'd wept for hours, but was out of tears. He didn't know that dehydration had factored in to his inability to cry any more or the pounding headache he had. There was a gash on the side of his head where he'd been hit with a baseball bat. The blood from it had dried into a flaking black frosting, but it still oozed.

He was in the basement of his parent's home, an unused room that stunk of mold and stagnant water. The stone walls, like his slash, seeped a thick, viscous fluid. Only a single light bulb dangling above him on a tattered chord lit the icy tomblike surroundings. He could see his own breath, a phantasmal wisp from his nostrils. Through his own pitiful sounds, he tried to hear what was going on in the house proper upstairs. Was the fiend that had put him down there waiting in the living room for his family to come home? They wouldn't expect a thing. They would be caught completely off-guard. They'd end up in the chairs beside him. There were two. The fiend knew how many people were in his family. The fiend had been watching them.

His blue eyes widened when he heard his little sister's voice announcing her arrival. He tried to scream a warning, but it was muted. There was no way she could have heard it. At thirteen, she would be no match for the invading stranger. He was big, a towering, lumbering behemoth that had easily overtaken the high school freshman football player everyone thought was much older because of his own oversized stature. He'd hurt her. She'd fight back. He'd hurt her more and he'd make sure she was down long enough to bring her to the basement and tie her to the chair that awaited her.

Robbie listened to the radio when he did his homework, not always paying attention to what emitted from the speakers. He just liked the noise in the background, the hum of anything that kept the silence at bay. He hated the silence. News reports were prevalent of the three key issues of the time, the unusual, unseasonably cold weather the area was experiencing, the slow, steady loss of employment in a dying northern Pennsylvania town, and the fiend that was terrorizing the residents and eluding the bumbling local police.

He was aware of these things, of course, they were the talk of his family and friends, ad nauseam, but as most horrors he didn't believe they would ever come his way. Aside from his father's unexpected departure two years ago to shack up with a younger woman, his life was pretty sweet. Evil just never factored in. After completing his math assignment, he'd paused long enough to catch a report about the inevitable worsening of the outside elements. He wondered if the schools would close, though he didn't want them to. He actually liked school, he was one of the beloved and privileged A-Listers after all, there was nothing for him to dread.

From the cold front seizing the town, the correspondent moved to the latest tale of the fiend and his ghoulish deeds. After the names of his victims were announced, Robbie tuned out. He didn't know them so it didn't matter to him anymore. He yawned and stretched and got up from his desk, left his room, and went to the kitchen to get a soda from the fridge. His sister, Charlotte, wouldn't be home for a while, a student of dance with a teacher that ran her pupils into the proverbial ground with her endless rehearsals. She was a perfectionist. Her countless awards justified it.

He loved his little sister, but he hated being dragged to her showcases and various competitions all across the state from Erie to Philadelphia and everything in between. Thankfully, their mother never forced him to make the out-of-town trips. Those stretched across the country and would interfere with his own interests. Football came first. If his academics didn't get him one, he'd need a sport's scholarship to get him into college. His father afforded them a comfortable life, but with higher education costing into the hundreds of thousands of dollars, he'd need more than a little help to get one. When he got back to his desk, some mindless rap abomination was playing. He pulled out his geography homework and got started on it, letting the vapid song sink into the background.

Charlotte was a limp, boneless ragdoll in the arms of the fiend as she was carried down the steps and tied to her chair. A pair of her panties was stuffed into her mouth and taped into place. He wondered if they'd been pulled from the dirty clothes basket too. He wondered what sick perversions the man had planned for him and his family. For the first time since his father had left them, Robbie felt helpless. No matter how he pulled at his restraints, he couldn't move. There was nothing he could do to protect his sister or his mother, Amanda. His mother wasn't home yet, and when his sister was secured, the fiend went back upstairs.

Her head hung down in a painfully unnatural way. She'd been hit on the side of the head too, the fresh gash bleeding freely. It ran down her soaking her wool coat, staining the off-pink fabric, turning it into a dark wet crimson.

There was blood around her mouth and nose, the thick of it bubbling as she breathed. Had the fiend hit her as hard as he'd hit him? Would she survive the assault? Was he watching his sister slowly die? His fear of her end intensified when she began to twitch, her head at first, her shoulders, then her legs. Her entire body convulsed for several minutes, and his helplessness intensified too.

He wanted to go to her, to hold her, to tell her it would be okay. He'd get her out of there, somehow, and to a hospital where they would save her. When her body settled and a long sigh escaped her through a boil of blood, he couldn't look at her anymore and closed his eyes. What had she done to deserve this? What had he done? What had anyone done? He cursed himself for disregarding the horrors of others. It had been cold of him, callus. Just because he hadn't known them didn't mean they didn't matter. They mattered. He mattered. His sister mattered.

Upstairs, his mother announced her arrival.

"I'd argue that we have a serial killer on our hands," the cohost of the local radio program said with dire conviction.

"I don't think I would go that far," the host responded.

Not paying them much attention, Robbie yawned and stretched again, finished his geometry. He had one more assignment before he'd be done for the night. High school homework was ridiculous. At best it robbed him of time he'd prefer to be socializing, at worst he ended up spending as many hours on it as he had in school. It was cruel, excessive, and unfair. It felt like they were stealing his life, but he forced himself to do it, all that punishing homework. College, after all. He checked the clock, hours remained until his family would come home. He had time to spare, and he felt an urge all teenage boys do. He went to the bathroom to sate it.

He thought of his girlfriend, a cheerleader of course. The elites stayed with the elites, a self-imposed segregation everyone betrothed upon themselves, a kind of unwritten rule. He kept the fantasy simple, nothing romantic, nothing extravagant. They were alone in the locker room after school, silly and giggling as they removed their clothes. They kissed, they touched, she satisfied him, and that was it. As a sizable puddle had been left in his tighty whities, he slipped them off and used them to mop up the rest, depositing them unceremoniously in the dirty laundry. They'd be dry by the time his mother washed them. She'd be none-the-wiser. He hoped, at least. Back in his room, he was surprised to find the radio station hosts still discussing what the town's fiend should be labeled. He didn't care and rolled his eyes.

His mother screamed, and the chaotic sounds of a struggle filtered down to the basement where his sister was stirring. He watched her come round, eyes widening in terror as she realized where she was and what was happening. A glance at her brother heightened her panic as the understanding that her only hope had been rendered a feeble victim too. They were the same, defenseless and vulnerable children tied to chairs in a dank and gloomy crypt.

When the melee and the shouting stopped, both brother and sister turned their eyes upwards, hoping the same thing perhaps: against all odds their mother had prevailed against the invading fiend. But when he slowly descended the steps carrying her, the children hung their heads. The sister howled through her panties in fear and sadness. Robbie sobbed without tears, knowing the three of them were done. Their mother was restrained and gagged as they had been, and as they had also once done, draped like a dead thing in her chair.

The fiend hurried back upstairs. Robbie listened for something, anything to let him know what he was doing, but the house was silent, that dreaded silence he hated. It made it all so much worse, all this malice being done to him and his family. After a long while of imagining the worst, Robbie wasn't prepared for what the fiend came down the stairs with. Trotting next to him, leashed by a thick chain, was a barrel-chested pit bull snorting and pulling against its constraints. The man walked the animal right up to the teenager and urged it to brace itself in his lap as it stuck its intimidating face right into the football player's.

Robbie's reading assignment was a mind-numbing chore, all such tasks were. He hated to read to begin with, but classics such as *The Scarlet Letter* were more tedious than anything else. The style was difficult for him to understand, many of the individual words were as well, alien things he would never use in everyday life.

He pulled the well-worn school copy of the novel from his backpack and flipped to the fifth chapter. He started to read, but was distracted by overrunning thoughts and deep desires to be with his friends. He'd been invited to Kinzua Dam to hang out and sneak cigarettes, but had to turn the enticing offer down. Homework. College. All that shit. He put his head down on his desk and passively listened to the radio.

"I don't think we can escape the unavoidable conclusion," the cohost said matter-of-factly. "You have to call a spade a spade."

"That's just it," the host countered. "He's not being called a serial killer because that's the wrong term. I'm sorry, it just is. Whoever this guy is, he hasn't actually killed anyone."

"Yes, he has," the cohost exclaimed adamantly.

"They're not people though. He's only killing their pets. Is it wrong? Yes. Is it criminal? Again, yes. Heinous? Traumatic? Just plain evil? Yes. Yes. And yes. But serial killers kill people. He's only killed animals. He's made no attempt to actually kill a person, even going to far as letting the people go after he's done his dirty deed."

"What would you call him then?"

"I don't know. Maybe there's not a term for him yet."

"Serial killer," the cohost insisted.

"Alright, it's time to get back to the music. Here's the new one by..."

There was a knock on the front door and Robbie gladly went to answer it.

Robbie had forgotten all about his dog, Bummer. He'd let the animal out when he'd gotten home from school, but as the canine had not scratched at the door to be let back in, he'd lost himself in his homework, absently, unintentionally neglecting his pet. Bummer had been a recent rescue, a big, slobbery, bumbling goofball of a gargoyles that had, for some reason, taken him, his sister, and mother by surprise. The creature had been so excited to see them, to be with them when they walked him around the shelter's scant property. They hadn't gone to the shelter to get a big dog, they'd never had one before, only smaller ones with big dog aspirations.

As he gazed into Bummer's unassuming, trusting, so far apart they were endearing, eyes he whimpered as the animal might have, powerless to stop what was about to happen. He saw the glint of the blade out of the corner of his eye, but refused to look directly at it. From his sister and mother, he heard sniveling to match his own, but he kept his gaze on the dog and watched in revulsion as the animal's brown orbs bulged when the knife entered the side of its neck. The big shark-like mouth fell open and his tentacle-tongue flopped out to dangle at the side. Robbie felt it on his chin, a warm wet thing that was immediately lost to the surge of the animal's blood as it drenched him.

The serrated hunting knife sawed through the dog's throat, opening it up like a book...like a *Scarlet Letter*...like the wide end of an A! The fiend held the animal up by the chain even as its legs gave out beneath it. He shoved the wound into Robbie's face, and the teenager felt the warm tissue smear over him like flushed snails, the sticky wetness so thick covering his nose he couldn't breathe. He could hear the slicing through muscle continue, still feel the aureole spray of blood, until in a bizarre moment of complete nothingness, no sights, no sound, no air, he remembered something from his childhood, a similar nothingness as he'd fallen off his bike in the street before an oncoming car.

It was a strange memory, non sequitur, and yet as terrifying as the situation he now found himself in. He hit the concrete as Bummer's chest slapped down into his lip, gore spilling out and saturating his crotch. Sound returned. A moment opened, the tape and underwear pulled away and out of him, the air was like an arctic slap to his face. He desperately gasped. He did not dare open his eyes as the same disgusting thing was done to his sister and mother, the dog's severed head rubbed into their faces.

The abhorrent act was repeated over and over until Bummer's blood stopped running and his flesh went cold, then the fiend held the body up and repeated his assault on the family. He terrorized them until their sanity shattered and they were flaccid, mute, exhausted things that, once cut from their chairs, could only curl into worthless fetal balls on their stony basement floor.

About the Author:

Joshua Skye is the author of *The Angels of Autumn* and *Cradle*, both from Sirens Call Publications. His work has been seen in several anthologies and periodicals.

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Mark Nugent was on heads. It had been heads all week, all month. Most of the year, now that he thought of it.

Mark wasn't usually the sort to dwell upon why things were the way they were, but now that it was in his mind, he had to wonder how come it was him on heads, yet again. Big John favoured working the pluck; the long, ridged tube of the oesophagus and trachea, from which hung the lungs and heart. The heavy disc of the liver. And, no surprise, look at him, doing just that whilst Mark was on fucking heads again. John and Charlie Gardener, the boss-man, thick as thieves, they were.

Mark glared for a moment, a moment all he could afford because heads don't stop coming. He watched the big man palpating a spongy lung, looking for disease, before cutting deep to expose the lymph nodes. The pluck slid slowly past him on its steel hook and he was already onto the next.

Mark was suddenly so pissed he would've yelled, the guy was only ten yards away, but knew he wouldn't hear.

People, in the main, don't like to think about slaughterhouses, what it might be like in there. What takes newbies aback is the noise. And the blood. And the non-stop, factory line killing.

The skinned head before Mark had been happily attached to a living cow only seconds before. The truth was, nobody knew what the cows were thinking as Mark, the meat inspector, got to work. It's not as if they could talk.

As Big John said, even if it was a human head on there, it couldn't talk.

"You need lungs to do that, and I've got them."

There was a lot about heads that Mark didn't like, now he was thinking about it. Like the way the eyes rolled, as if they were scared, but holding onto some hope that everything would turn out ok. The face twitched and shuddered as he touched it. He sliced the muscle at the left of the tongue, which was fine, but when he sliced the other side, preparing to yank the tongue down to expose the throat, it invariably pulled *back*. Like going, ouch.

After thousands of heads, Mark hadn't got used to that feeling.

Incise the cheeks, searching for disease, and the head was already past him. Fast, noisy, and incredibly bloody, but still a factory line, turning animals into meat.

The other downside of doing heads is what you get hit with. Standing so close to the giant power saw cutting the rest of the beast in half, straight down the vertebrae, *bits* hit you. Mark already looked like he had been pebble dashed with blood, and chips of bone.

Occasionally, Big John or boss-man Gardener would flick other things onto him. Once, Mark finished a long pig shift and caught sight of himself in the changing room mirror. His whites were solid red, from hard hat to wellingtons, but that was normal. What was less so, was about a hundred nipples stuck to him. It was easy enough to do, slice that nipple off with your knife and flick. It would stick to whatever it hit.

He didn't complain. Didn't say one word. Slaughtermen, he told Alice, weren't normal. You had to be at least half cracked to work here. She hadn't disagreed.

Mark glanced up now at Gardener, marching along the line, glaring left and right. Everybody hated the scrawny, nasty little chain-smoking shit. Always desperate to catch people out, find excuses to sack them. And Big John Logan was his informer-in-chief. Everybody knew that.

Mark focused on the next head, incising the cheeks. The blade of his knife was almost a foot long, wickedly slim from constant sharpening.

Alice had agreed straight away, about slaughtermen being weird. Saying you had to be at least a bit odd, to be fine with seeing animals killed, one after the other, day after day, an ocean of blood.

She'd said that, not even knowing about the things that went through his head, the stuff he kept to himself. Walking down the street, or sitting in a café, imagining what the people around him would look like on the hook. But she must have guessed something, otherwise she wouldn't have left the way she did, without even a forwarding address.

Mark inspected another head and stepped away, his knife a blur as he slid it up and down the sharpening steel, on automatic pilot. He reached up for his next customer, but stalled.

This was no bovine head. It was the boss-man, Charlie Gardener himself, skin still intact but face a mask of blood. Gardener's chin wobbled and his lips trembled, his eyes cut to Mark's and widened.

Mark glanced at Big John, John frowning hard as he turned to the pluck just now coming before him. Smaller than the others on the line, more like a pig's, but the lungs blackened from smoking. He saw John reach out and squeeze the heart.

Mark turned back to Gardener's head. No hole in the forehead, so the brain would be intact still. It looked as though Charlie was trying to speak, his lips working and his eyes wide and horrified.

But, when Mark incised his cheeks, the meat was good, no sign of hemorrhaging, and the lymph nodes weren't inflamed. It was harder getting hold of the tongue, which writhed more than a cow's, but the back of his throat proved to be fine, tonsils in good order.

Mark spent longer than usual, ignoring everything else as he completed his inspection and passed the meat fit for human consumption. The next head was bovine again, but the one after that made him stop and smile.

He leaned in, putting his mouth right to the ear. "Blink if you can hear me, John."

About the Author:

Bill Davidson is a Scottish writer of mainly horror and fantasy. In the last three years, he has placed stories with around forty good publications around the world, including Ellen Datlow's highly regarded Best Horror of the Year.

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The Last Doll | *Melissa Elborn*

When Anne moved into the nursing home, something had been left behind in her bedside cabinet - a Russian doll.

Her mother had one of these when she was little. Anne's favourite doll was that last little wooden doll - small, solid, alone. Seeing this Russian doll was a piece of an old home, long forgotten until now.

She snapped each doll apart to expose its smaller sister. But the last doll was different. Instead of a solid wooden figure, there was something wrapped in a dirty white bandage.

Anne pressed it - soft like flesh. Underneath the jelly, she could feel tiny limbs. It made her think of bird bones. She unravelled the cloth slowly, aware that the slightest rough touch could snap it. Finally, a waxen figure lay in her hand. There was no hard barbie doll plastic here; this was skin. It was ugly and emaciated but real. Somehow she could not bring herself to throw it away and sealed it back up into its layered wooden coffin.

Now and then Anne looked at the doll. It never changed. She thought it might rot; she was so sure that its bones and skin were once alive.

Months pass and one day as the sun was sinking Anne pulled apart those wooden dolls until she found the shrouded doll.

Today she noticed the doll's hair. It was the same colour as Anne's white hair - the same coarse texture. She stumbled across to the mirror.

She was much fatter when she'd first moved in. Now she was as emaciated as the doll. But it was the doll's face that made her swallow down the taste of vomit.

The doll had not changed since the day she'd moved in; it's Anne that's changed.

About the Author:

Melissa Elborn writes short fiction and is a former award-winning journalist. She haunts deepest, darkest Bedfordshire in England with her husband, daughter and two black cats. The Last Doll is her first published short story.

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The Blood Lights are the last
thing you'll see...

The
BLOOD LIGHTS



ELAINE PASCALE

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Tobias worked the night shift at The Grange; his duties were light—check the doors and windows were secure, look in on the prisoner hourly and keep a record of any sounds she uttered for his employer Dr. Ralston.

“Never unchain her. No matter what temptations she offers,” Ralston had instructed. ‘The last fellow who did . . . he’s in the asylum.’”

Tobias nodded, desperate for the work. He had a family of six to feed.

At first, when he entered the cell to empty the bucket or check the chains, Tobias obeyed the rules, never meeting the prisoner’s eye. However he couldn’t help but observe her lying clad only in a thin nightshirt, chained to the wall by her ankles, with her black hair flowing to her waist. He was particularly fascinated by the bony protrusions on her shoulder blades. Her musical chirrupsoothed him and he took to lingering outside the oaken door to listen.

“Is it true Tobias you’re guarding an angel up at t’Grange?” asked his neighbour in *The Golden Hind*, slurping his ale.

Tobias laughed the enquiries away, but he began to wonder.

On the seventh night he broke the rule and spoke to her. “What are you?”

She lifted her head and stared at him. Her eyes were ebony and each held no iris. He leapt backwards knocking over the toilet bucket.

He crossed himself, “Monster,” he whispered and one tear fell from her eye. The music she sang that night broke his heart and he ceased to keep the diary Dr. Ralston demanded.

“May I t . . . touch your face?” She cocked her head to one side, before nodding permission.

Pleasure and warmth flooded his hands, moving along his arms to his torso. His skin vibrated; he’d never felt this, not even with his wife in the throes of lovemaking. Tobias touched her bare shoulder, then ran his fingers along her arms, the dark feathery fuzz growing there tickled his skin.

“What do I call you? Angel?”

She smiled. The first one she ever bestowed on him.

“Ava.”

Night after night he sat with her, caressing her body, brushing her hair, pouring out his heart’s dreams and desires. She sang to him, calming his spirit.

On the one hundredth night, Tobias unlocked her chains. “Lean on me, my love. Tonight we will escape.”

She was all he desired.

Outside in the grounds, Ava shook off his hands, warbling to the skies, she raised her skeletal arms. Her shoulder blades cracked open, birthing onyx feathers which soared high above her head. Tobias cowered from his lover.

“Come Corvids! Carry me away!” she cried.

Dropping from the skies, the flock arrived, pecking and scratching, tearing at his exposed flesh. Screaming, he beat at the horde, whilst he glimpsed Ava, rising above him, with the same birds tugging at her nightshirt and strands of hair, drawing nary a drop of her blood.

Tobias wailed, all reason lost. He crawled into the bushes.

About the Author:

Alyson lives in the UK; her fiction has been published both in print anthologies - *DeadCades*, *Women in Horror Annual 2*, *Trembling with Fear 1 & 2*, *Coffin Bell Journal 1* and in ezines. Her latest story, *Night of the Rider*, is published by Demain in their Short Sharp Shocks! E-book series. She performs at open mics, teaches, edits and hangs out with her dog on the moor in all weathers.

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Millie casually walked up to a group of costumed party-goers standing around a cooler filled with beer. She was dressed as a punk version of Medusa, with an assortment of life-like snakes styled into her long black hair. Her face was covered in blue-green iridescent scales. Real scales, donated by a friend who saved the skin shed by his pet python. She inhaled the crisp autumn air, intermingled perfectly with smoke from the bonfire. She wondered if someone added something to it. The scent was different from other fires; sweeter, more intoxicating. It triggered a faint memory that she couldn't quite place. Maybe something from Halloweens past.

Halloween was Millie's favorite holiday, her time to go all out, even if that meant gluing snakeskin to her face. She was shy and quiet by nature, the kind of girl people forgot about as soon as she was out of sight. But not on Halloween. As long as she was wearing a costume, she was the most confident person in the room. Or in this case, the most confident person in the backyard of an acquaintance she barely knew.

A usually cute guy dressed as a not-so-cute zombie was the first to see her approach. "Holy shit! Is that you Millie? Damn!"

"In the flesh. Or scales, I guess." She beamed, which looked just a tiny bit evil with her green lipstick. "How have you been, David?"

"Oh, you know—dead, eating brains. The usual."

Millie laughed and grabbed herself a beer, even though she usually hated the taste and rarely drank. She wasn't sure how she knew it would be different tonight, but it was. The beer tasted crisp and clean, like the night air, instead of bitter and gross like it usually did. She looked around at all the costumes, excited for a night of being able to proclaim her love of all things horror without being seen as a freak. She spent the next hour talking to people about costumes, much of the time explaining how she got the scales to look so real.

After a while a tall blonde in a sexy devil costume joined the group she was talking to. "Hey friends!"

She had obviously had enough to drink that everyone was her friend.

"A bunch of people are going to tell scary stories at midnight when the fire dies down a bit. You guys should come. It's gonna be so much fun." Alina's sultry, albeit rather slurred, voice matched her costume perfectly.

For the most part, the night remained lively and quite enjoyable. There was talking and laughing and drinking. There were a small handful of minor, likely alcohol-induced, altercations; the most notable being the Cane brothers duking it out over who got to ask the pretty mermaid for her phone number. No one could tell how or why the fight ended, but neither of them talked to her, or to each other, for the rest of the night. It was a bit strange, given how close the two usually were, but no one thought much about it once it was over.

By midnight, there were only a dozen or so people left, and all of them were sitting around the remnants of the bonfire. Richard, the host of that night's festivities and a goliath of a man, looked like a real werewolf by the light of the small flames and sliver of a moon.

"Thank you all so much for drinking my beer into this late hour of the evening." Then he howled, a bit louder and more menacing than should have been possible, making everyone jump, then burst into laughter. "It just wouldn't be a Halloween party without scary stories. Who's up first?"

Alina volunteered to tell the first story, which turned out to be a not-so-veiled attempt at getting a handsome vampire to ask for her phone number. A few others took their turns as well, with classics involving murderers with hooks for hands, and hitchhikers who were never really there. Nothing terrifying, and most involved laughs instead of screams; although everyone was a bit disturbed when Grace, who typically spent most of her waking hours trying to get people to go to church, or at least pray with her, told a story about demons—in which the demons were the good guys and religion was invented to oppress them. No one spoke for a few moments after that. They just looked into the fire or exchanged inquisitive glances at the person next to them. Grace seemed just as confused as everyone else, and avoided eye-contact.

A sudden gentle breeze guided the smoke to spiral around Millie and those closest to her, and the almost-memory that she couldn't reach earlier came flooding back. It was a story from her childhood, but she couldn't quite place where she had heard it. She didn't remember reading it, or seeing it on TV, or anyone telling it to her, but it was there in her mind, as if she'd heard it a million times.

"I'm next," she said, and the group stared in shocked silence. Millie wasn't the kind of girl who told stories, wasn't the kind of girl who spoke out to bring attention to herself. She smiled, knowing what they were thinking.

She looked behind her, into the woods off to her right. She didn't know what she was looking for, and couldn't see very far past the fire anyway, but a feeling she couldn't quite place forced her to take stock of her surroundings before beginning the tale.

"A long time ago an evil man lived in the woods not far from here. Truly evil. A decomposing-bodies-in-the-basement type of evil. Everyone knew he was strange, and pretty rude, but no one had any idea of the atrocities he had been committing until after his death. His family found the bodies, some fresh, others skeletal, and everything in between, as they were cleaning out the house. He had never been close to his children, and his ex-wife shed no tears over his demise, but they were shocked and disgusted nonetheless. Needless to say, there was no funeral, but the man's oldest son still felt obligated to at least take his father's ashes from the crematorium to the cemetery, since his father had already made the arrangements and payments.

"About halfway through the drive, his feeling of obligation was replaced by a complete freak out. I mean, full on panic attack. He couldn't stop staring at the container holding the ashes, and nearly swerved off the road. Without even thinking, as if something else were completely in control of his body, he threw the container out the window and sped away. The cremation technician had a very similar reaction while disposing of the body, and thus the container wasn't sealed properly. It was a windy day, and the wind spread the ashes around for miles. Animals that breathed it in became violent and savage, attacking anyone or anything that came near them; leaves, cars, people...it didn't matter. The local authorities blamed it on rabies when they could, and found other excuses when they couldn't. Eventually, the ashes settled, and rain soaked them into the ground so the animals didn't breathe it in so often, and things returned to normal—most of the time. But people around here love fires, especially when the weather starts cooling down."

Millie paused for a moment, staring into the fire. Those around her shifted away just slightly, though they weren't sure why. Maybe it was the way she looked at the fire, like she could see something they couldn't, something that made her smile the way vampires smile when they know you have nowhere to run. But the man dressed as a vampire wasn't smiling, just staring, his heart racing. Millie continued.

"Sometimes huge bonfires, sometimes small campfires like this one, perfect for toasting marshmallows and telling scary stories. The problem is, fires make smoke, and smoke spreads ash. If one of these fires that people love so much were to be built on the ground where the ashes soaked into the earth, or if it were built with wood that had absorbed the ash, or from a tree that grew from the ash soaked earth, the evil would rise again. This time it wouldn't be confined to the woodland creatures, and it's different when people breathe it in. The effects take hold a bit slower, almost imperceptible at first. It starts with little things, someone who doesn't drink suddenly loves beer, or two brothers get into a fight over a girl neither of them even likes that much. Things that no one would notice at first, unless they knew what they were looking for.

"But then it escalates. Maybe a fake howl is filled with not so fake rage, or the most religious person you know suddenly finds themselves questioning God. Or maybe, just maybe, the quiet girl, the one who only speaks when spoken to, decides to make herself the center of attention, telling a scary story, holding everyone's attention just long enough for the evil to take over completely."

About the Author:

Veronica is a writer of speculative and horror fiction. It is her belief that partaking in as many experiences as possible increases authenticity of writing and quality of life, and has been involved in several eccentric hobbies as a result of this pursuit. Some of these include roller derby, ghost hunting, wildlife photography and education, and the circus arts of trapeze and aerial silks.

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Graft | Sonora Taylor

Emmaline made her way into the forest. A trail of blood followed her footsteps. She'd long given up on trying to stop the bleeding. What was more important was getting the arm to the tree before it could fester.

Emmaline found the arm in a bar, a popular place to find wayward men looking for a way home with her. She saw their limbs and the branches of their fingers, and saw a way to give back to the forest. The arms of men removed the trees' branches. It only seemed fair to replant the trees with skin and bone.

Emmaline made it to her favorite tree: a squat, fat, blackened tree that she used to lean against when reading as a girl. She shared her secrets with the tree, and when the wind blew through the leaves, she knew the tree was answering her. It was the tree who first whispered, *Bring me skin*.

Emmaline first hung animal skins on the branches, as she'd read that people once did. It wasn't enough. The tree needed limbs.

The wooden branches reached into the sky, and the limbs of flesh hung limp against the bark. The graft would be slow to take, but Emmaline trusted that soon, the tree would recognize the skin as gifts. She brought the arm to a bare patch on the side of the tree. She nailed the limb to the tree, then smeared its blood against the wood in the hopes that the tree would understand.

Emmaline was bitten by the tree. She snapped back her hand and looked at her palm. A fresh splinter lay deep in her skin. It hurt when Emmaline pressed it, but like the tree would grow used to the skin, Emmaline knew she'd grow used to the wood. She saw it as a gift from the tree – a recognition of their oneness, and how they would trade wood for flesh, flora for fauna.

Emmaline left the splinter in her hand as she left the woods. She promised the tree that she would return soon. She smiled as a breeze blew through the leaves and parted her hair.

Hear No Evil | Sonora Taylor

Father Marvin couldn't get it right. No matter how much he worked the flesh, evil could still slice its way through.

He sighed as he washed the blood off of his hands. When he'd first seen the trio as a boy – see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil – he found a perfect trinity, one even holier than the three he'd hear about in church as he sat next to his mother on Sunday mornings.

Sadly, though, the people around him seemed more than happy to let in one (or more!) evils. Evil soaked their eyes, drenched their ears, and filled their mouths, leaving no room for the blood that Father Marvin offered in communion. He often grew so frustrated that he imagined stuffing the parishioners with wine, holding their mouths and nostrils closed until they drowned in God's glory.

But that wasn't as effective as the Trio of No Evil – and he knew the only way he'd save his flock was to make them like those little statues he'd been entranced by as a boy.

There weren't many left in his flock to save – fewer people came to his services with each passing Sunday – but on that Sunday, the 31 who'd arrived were more than enough. He'd locked the doors, tied them to the pews, and bound them into trios. Hands sewn to mouths, eyes, or ears depending on who sat where.

But one parishioner remained, a man named Charles; one whose frightened tears mixed with the blood on his face. Father Marvin had sewn one hand to Charles' mouth, and the other to his left eye. But how could Father Marvin ensure he'd hear no evil, with no hands left to cover him?

Father Marvin looked at his own hands. Despite the washing, blood stains seeped through the cracks in his palms. He couldn't cut off his own hands. They were the hands of God, hands that brought good to his parishioners. His hands didn't need to cover evil. They needed to wash evil away.

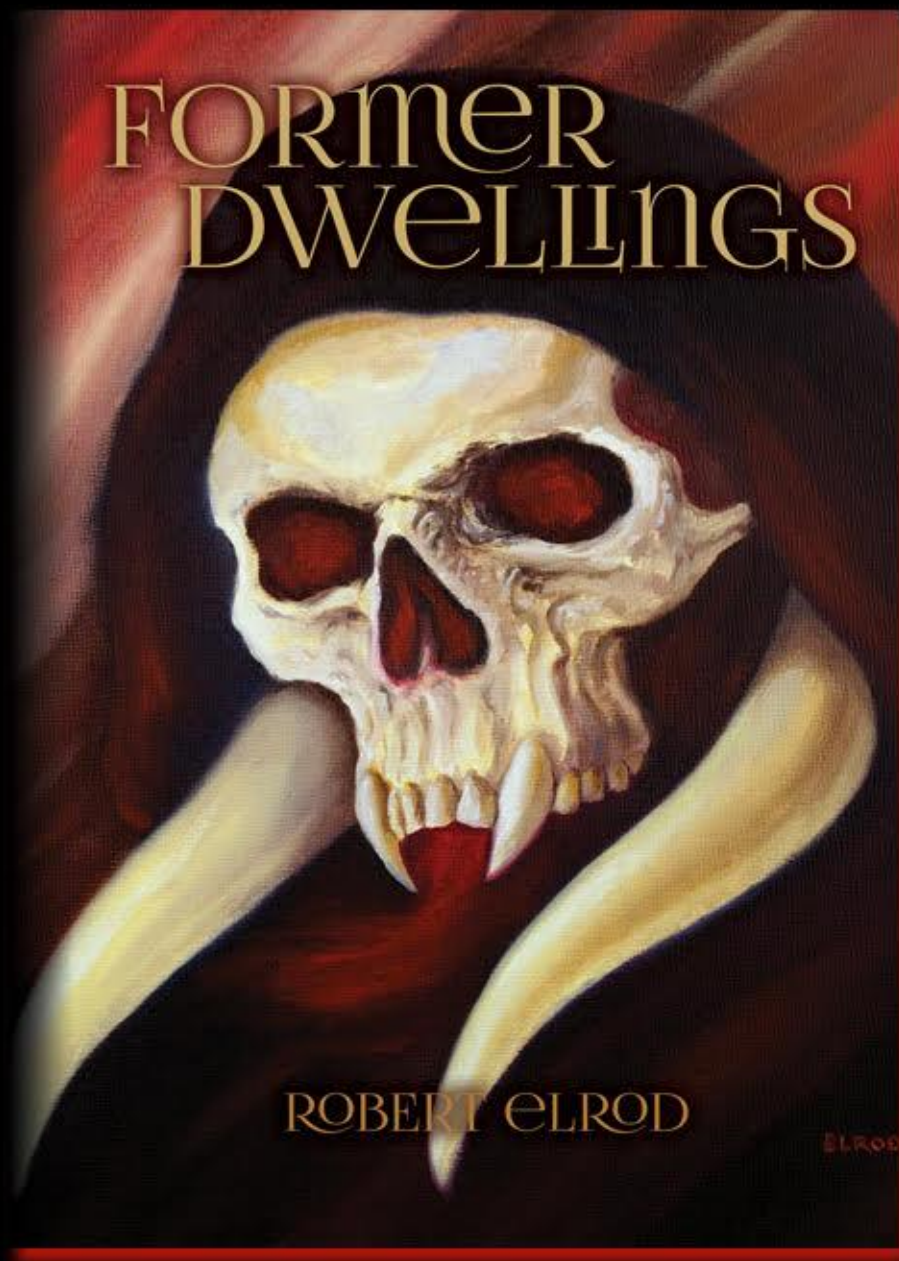
His knife glinted from the pew. Father Marvin said a prayer, then picked up the knife and walked towards Charles. He'd have to slice his ear away – and probably the other eye, for good measure. Charles screamed through his own hand, and Father Marvin gently shushed him. Soon Charles wouldn't need to hear the evil. Soon he would be safe.

About the Author:

Sonora Taylor is the author of *Without Condition*, *The Crow's Gift and Other Tales*, and *Wither and Other Stories*. Her work has appeared in *The Sirens Call*, *Mercurial Stories*, and Camden Park Press' "Quoth the Raven." Her latest short story collection, *Little Paranoias: Stories*, is now available on Amazon. She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband.

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Former Dwellings is an 80-page 6"x9" hardcover retrospective of Robert Elrod's work, collecting 48 full-color and 35 black-and-white pieces. You'll see artwork in a wide variety of mediums, spanning multiple genres. He's selected his favorite pieces from the last several years and they're all here in one beautiful book. Limited to just 500 signed and numbered copies.

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Skull Cap - oil on paper mounted on board



Exalted - oil on paper mounted on board



Kraampus - digital painting



Obscure - digital painting

Phil considered himself a connoisseur of fine spirits, which is a fancy way of saying alcoholic.

He was an ugly mean bastard with a black belt in bar fights and unlicensed firearms. He was a fixture at the Gecko's Sidearm bar, a dive good for its punk rock shows, cheap drinks and not much else. It was a trashy hole in the wall held together just as much by anger and rural anxiety as it was steel and concrete. Despite always being a familiar face, nobody really liked Phil. He knew this and couldn't give a shit. He made it violently clear on several occasions that he preferred the cordiality brought on by intimidation more than the compassion of friendship.

All of this changed on a single unassuming Tuesday night.

A man approached Phil no one had ever seen in town before. He had a Gunsmoke leather coat and a hood partially concealing his smooth skin.

"I hear nobody in this town can drink you under the table...Phil is it?"

The man said in a voice cold like freezing rain.

Normally anyone Phil thought too weird even for a place like Gecko's would be spending the rest of the night looking for their teeth among the peanut shells and broken beer bottles but even the most of uncouth beasts know to exercise caution in the face of a genuine threat. He eyeballed the unsettling stranger for a moment before responding, with one hand firmly on a single-shot sawed off 20 gauge he kept strapped to his hip.

"Nobody alive can out drink me. I have a cast iron liver forged by the Devil's own blacksmiths. Why do you ask?"

Before he could respond somebody from one of the tables in the back yelled.

"That's called cirrhosis you hillbilly wannabe beatnik!"

Phil took a deep breath and raised his gun up to where everyone could see.

"Last time I checked this is not an open mic, next comedian to wisecrack will be picking their jaw fragments out of the drywall! Now, what makes you think you can out drink me? You can't even grow a beard."

The stranger lowered his hood, revealing a bald head covered in tattoos of symbols and patterns no one present had ever seen before.

"Your reputation for rotgut precedes you."

He reached into his coat and pulled out a bottle of whiskey. Its contents were of the kind of blackness that not even light could escape from.

"See this here Dark Magic moonshine?"

Chuckles broke out among the patrons, whose attention was now wholly focused on the two. The stranger ignored them.

"It is an ancient recipe brewed deep in the mountains far from the prying eyes of puritans and abolitionists. Out drink me, and the recipe is yours, but if you lose, you never drink another drop the rest of your days."

Phil smirked.

"You could save yourself a lot of time and just give me the recipe, but I enjoy the song and dance."

The two then sat opposite each other at a table and the bartender gave them two shot glasses.

The stranger poured them both a shot. The liquid was thick like a liqueur and filled the shot like sludge being poured into a bucket. Phil examined his shot.

"This looks like slag from a coal refinery." He sniffed it a bit and gagged. "I feel like I just huffed a casket."

On the count of three they took their shot. The stranger was completely unfazed. Phil not so much.

He clutched his face and screamed. There were tears running down his face and snot running out of his nose.

"I feel like a demon just pissed in my stomach."

A malevolent smile was forming on the stranger's face.

"You are not thinking about giving up, are you?"

Phil looked at him with blood red eyes and gritted teeth.

The stranger leaned in, shoved the bottle towards Phil and said.

"Good, then drink!"

Like a soldier following orders, Phil grabbed the bottle and drank the entirety of its contents. Seconds later his head slammed off the table and fell to the floor.

The stranger sat back in his chair and looked at his wrist as if there was a watch on it.

A few moments later Phil sat straight up on his knees and projectile vomited blood and mucus onto the bar floor.

"What did you do to me?"

He bellowed.

The stranger said nothing, opting instead to get up and walk towards the door.

Phil pulled out his gun and shot the stranger in the left shoulder blade, who did not even notice as he walked out the door.

A couple of patrons followed him out to see where he was going but all they found were about half dozen footprints made out of the same stuff found in that bottle. The stranger had completely disappeared.

Phil was taken to a hospital and released the following evening. Nobody saw much of him after that. He never came to Gecko's Sidearm and rarely came into the town proper. The bartender is the only one who has seen him. One night after a particular raucous show he told the headlining band about it.

"All of Phil's hair has fallen out and he carved weird patterns into his head not unlike the stranger who showed up that night. He was digging a giant hole in his yard and tried to shoot me when he saw me on his property. The pitiful sod almost shot his own foot instead he was so out of it. After that he ran up to me and grabbed my shirt collar. I never seen a man look so disheveled, he had a large wound on his forehead and dried blood on his face. He told me he apparently sees things now. Nightmarish beings that lurk between the shadows and whisper things into his ears that make his stomach churn and break out into cold sweats. The only way he can sleep at night is by headbutting the back of his toilet until he passes out from the pain. He said he is digging a hole deep into the earth to find that stranger, says he lives in the caves and coal mines far beneath our feet. At that point I tried to leave but he put his gun to my neck and told me in a voice I never heard issue from his throat before. That stranger was a ghoul not of this world. It is nothing more than the coagulated blood of the dead god of the mountains. I tasted what lies beyond death that night. Don't drink that dark magic moonshine, unless you too wish to join the stranger beneath the earth!"

About the Author:

B.B. Blazkowitz 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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Trick 'R Treater | *Thomas Sturgeon Jr.*

I'm not your normal trick or treater, nor your average kid. As I go from door to door on Halloween, I get my bag filled with candy. Walking amongst the others, my disguise won't last long at all. I can hear one of the kids complaining about the awful odor as I run along to the next house.

My disguise melts off my body like plastic. I need to get back to my resting area, my yellow eyes are but a reflection on the houses' windows. There are children screaming and the police sirens wail. The monsters are already here.

About the Author:

Thomas Sturgeon Jr. is loved by his family and friends. He's had stories published in anthologies such as Organic Ink Volume One and Black Hare Press' *World's' Monsters*. He also has an orange cat named Tigger.

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I draw a single, aching breath. The earth is cold around me, as though my lifelessness has seeped into the porous dirt, chilling the compacted layers of gray roots and soil. A crow calls from somewhere far above me, where the air is not so stagnant.

I emerge from the decayed remnants of my silk-lined, cedar bed. It is so rotted and splintered that it no longer offers any barrier against the encapsulating ground that has flooded through its walls and ceiling.

As I fight to be free of my desolate prison, I think only of *him*. How he must miss my presence in his life. How he must long to be with me, the way that I long to be with him. I claw and dig at the malleable dirt, pushing up with mounting gusto. My overgrown fingernails crack and peel with the effort of performing the arduous task, but there's no blood anymore.

I can see the sky now, my arms and head have surfaced out among the damp grass. A full, scarlet moon hangs directly above me, as yet unobscured by the gathering storm clouds which threaten to overtake it. The glowing orb's red-orange light is cast over my yellowing bones, illuminating me with its second-hand warmth. From this position, I am able to wriggle the rest of my body up onto the ground with relative ease.

I inhale again; a hollow, meaningless passage of air from the two, slit-like openings in my crumbling nasal cartilage, into a fractured set of empty-bird-cage ribs, and back into the atmosphere. There is no exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide, nothing to connect me to the mortal world anymore. Nothing, except for *him*. The others around me are still and silent in their dreary tombs, they have no reason to walk tonight.

I smile, or attempt to, with what little facial muscle still clings to my mandible and lips. I am lucky, I know, to be held to earth in such a way. These others, they haven't known a love like I have known, and so they sleep on, or else have passed completely from this place.

I exit from the wrought-iron gate, and in the distance, hear the exuberant whooping of young children. Keeping my slim form to the shadowed gutters, I inch my way along the familiar sidewalk to 3rd Street. I have to stop behind an old oak tree, as a small gang of costumed trick-or-treaters scampers past, calling out to one another in sugary, nonsensical banter.

Impatience ripens within me as one child falls to the pavement, scattering candy and delaying the chaotic procession. I grind my teeth together as the brood gathers to help her, and a small boy dressed as Dracula looks up in my direction. I go still, though impatience has given way to anger. He blinks his heavily-lashed eyes once, then returns to picking up the spilled candy. Finally, when I think I can I stand the wait no longer, they run on.

I hurry now, the soles of my feet not leaving so much as a dented impression among the fallen leaves. The house, *our house*, is not far now, and soon I can make out the glow of its front porch light. It is very late now, and the streets are blessedly empty. I move into the dark gap between our house and that of the neighbor's. Creeping up on tiptoe, with my back against the hard brick, I slide toward the back of the house, stopping when I reach the bedroom window. The light is on, and I can't keep my anticipation contained any longer. I look.

He is there, shirtless in his favorite pair of dark sweatpants. My fingertips tremble at the sight of his bare skin, remembering the sweet feel of it.

His well-muscled back is toward me, his unruly mass of black hair shining in the lamplight. My very bones whimper with the desire to be pressed against that warm body again, to feel the comforting weight of it on top of me.

The bathroom door opens, though he is nowhere near it. My breath catches. A woman I don't know steps into the room, clad in one of my expensive bath towels. He goes over to her, says something to make her smile. I think I'm dying all over again as he bends to kiss her.

It's too much, and I look away. I'm crying, though my ruined body shows no outward sign of it. He *wouldn't* do this to me. I clutch at the few flakes of scalp that still adorn my skull. I'm disgusting. If I were pink, lively flesh, it would be me there in his arms, not that insignificant wisp. It isn't fair, it isn't *natural*. He needs me. A plan begins to form, and I look back through the pane.

He's kissing her neck now, but she pushes him away playfully. It's his turn for the shower, and he crosses into the bathroom with a single-dimpled grin. Still smiling, she sits down at my vanity, running *his* comb through her damp blonde hair.

This is my chance. I hurry to the front of the house, stopping beside an awkwardly shaped, gray garden rock. It is hard plastic. I remove a spare key from its inner compartment, then glance around myself, noting that the street is still deserted. Ideally, I would go to the back door, but that would take extra time. I decide to chance the front, porch light and all, running with a speed I didn't know I possessed. As quietly as possible, I slide the key into the lock, waiting to hear the *click*. I push the door open, and dash inside, closing it slowly behind me.

With my plan still only half-formed, I walk into the kitchen. The floorboards do not squeak. There is no sound, in fact, until I slide the thick butcher's knife from its place in the block. It makes a satisfying slicing noise as I pull it free.

I carry it to the bedroom, moving slower with its weight to burden me down. Slowly, ever-so-slowly, I push the bedroom door open, creating a space which is just wide enough for me to slip through.

She is facing away from me, still at the vanity, looking down at her lap. The room smells heavily of lavender, even to my deadened senses.

I stalk toward her on the cream-colored carpet, with the knife clenched securely in my fist, poised to strike. She doesn't notice me until the last second. Her eyes widen at the sight of my grimacing corpse in the mirror before her, and her mouth gapes open. I cut her before she has the chance to scream, slicing horizontally across her pretty throat, where his lips had been pressed moments ago.

Blood pours from her neck like a fine claret, drenching and staining the carpet. I can smell it; rusted copper overtaking obnoxious lavender. My body is exhausted as hers sags limply in the chair, but I'm not done yet.

I used to fillet fish as a teenager. My father would take me to the lake almost every weekend, where we could catch and prepare our own dinners. It builds character, living off the land like that, or so he used to tell me, in his gruff, dry voice.

I use my experience now, carefully cutting the smooth, pale skin from her face, leaving a thick layer of subcutaneous fat attached to maintain the integrity. When it is done, I apply the skin to myself, attaching it with ropes of blonde hair around the back of my head. I remove her scalp with rather less precision, and use the makeshift wig to cover the seams of the mask. I look in in the mirror. *Beautiful.*

I hear him shutting the water off, and hasten to throw on a terry cloth robe and a pair of long pajama pants and slippers. Putting a dab of rouge onto each cheek, I hurry to the bathroom.

"Hi babe," he says. He hasn't looked over at me yet, he is shaving at the sink. The mask starts to slip. I hold it in place and move toward him. He turns, and all color drains from his face. He falls back against the sink, staring, speechless. I knew he would be so happy to see me.

About the author:

Erica Schaefer worked as a Registered Nurse for many years before becoming a stay-at-home parent. Her short stories have been featured most recently by: Visual Verse (Vol. 06- Chapter 09), Blood Moon Rising Magazine (Issue 77), HellBound Books ("The Toilet Zone"), and Still Point Arts Quarterly (Fall 2019 issue: "The Dance"). She lives in rural Tennessee with her husband and two children.

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Midnight | *Laura Coruzzi*

Do you ever find yourself sitting at home, maybe reading a book, or watching a movie on T.V., with the volume turned down low so you don't disturb anyone else in the house who is sleeping at midnight?

Think about how you feel. Sitting in a comfortable armchair, or stretched out along the couch, a blanket spread over you, and you only paying half a mind to your surroundings. The house is dark. From the kitchen comes a faint glow, the light above the stove left on. In the living room, in the den, even curled up in bed, it is quiet. It is dark. There's something staring at you from the corner of the room.

No no, don't look. Once it knows you've noticed it, it will make its move. Keep your breathing steady. Keep your eyes focused on the T.V., on your cell phone, shut tight where you lay in bed.

You hear soft footfalls; it's moving. You try to not be so obvious about the fact that you're ignoring it, while at the same time you are wondering if you were to call for help, would it stop you? Can it understand you?

Your mind is trying to tell you that it is just a shadow, but you know shadows don't have teeth.

You know shadows don't exhale harshly as they round your bed, your chair. Shadows don't suck in the flickering light from the T.V. screen and absorb it, and seem to resonate with the washed-out hues taken from the picture.

You hear something. On the roof. Or maybe in the basement. Or maybe from inside your bedroom closet. A dull thud, as though something heavy has just landed. Your forehead is clammy with sweat. Your heart, beating frantically, must be loud enough for them to hear.

Them? Them who?

Just a shadow, your mind insists. It's playing tricks on you.

If that were true, you would be impressed. It's not every mind that can imagine a cold, sharp claw tracing its way across your cheek. Not every mind can so perfectly imagine the closet door sliding open slowly, laboured breathing coming from the dark.

It's not every mind that can look upon leering demons and still plead, it's just a shadow.

In the Summertime | *Laura Coruzzi*

"Witches!" The old man scoffed. The gang of kids, five or six boys and girls that lived in the neighbourhood, all nodded and began talking over each other.

"Tommy's brother said they look just like old women!"

"I saw one and she had RED eyes and a big fat nose—"

"If they catch a kid they EAT him!"

The old man chuckled and shook his head. "If anyone were to be believin' half the things you kids believe, this whole town would be run by bigfeet and fairies! Now I'm tellin' ya, there's no such thing as witches."

"But, but Mrs. Mills is one!" A big-eyed red-haired girl insisted, looking over her shoulder to the brick house across the street, as though fearing the woman inside would hear her.

The old man sat back in the rocker on his porch, and tapped his pipe against his lips thoughtfully. "She is, is she? Well, must explain how her peach preserves are so good." He leaned in close to the kids clustered at his feet, and with a wink, whispered, "Magic."

"She can do anything!"

"I saw her float to the roof to get a bird and she pulled off the head and ate it raw!"

"She's got silver in her eyes!"

The old man raised a hand and frowned down at the kids. "Listen here, will ya? You spreadin' those nasty rumours around can hurt people's feelings. Even nice ladies like Mrs. Mills. And she's a sweetheart, I'll tell you that. Always gives me big jars of her peaches every summer, and I know for a fact your parents get them, too, and you're the ones enjoyin' 'em. Now, does that sound like something a witch would do?"

"The syrup is probably made from cat blood or something!" A boy hollered, waving his arms excitedly. The old man grinned at him.

"Then it must be from the sweetest kitty cat on the block." He raised a gnarled hand to stave off more chatter. "I want you little jabberwockies to promise me something. You treat all your elders with respect, no matter how funny lookin' or smellin' they are. Hear?"

The children all mumbled a chorus of half-hearted agreement. He nodded at them, and said, "Now, why don't you all go over and ask Mrs. Mills for your ball back, that bein' the whole reason you came shouting up my drive today. No, I ain't doin' it for ya," he said, giving them a stern look in answer to their pleading eyes. "You put it there, you can go and ask for it back."

"But Janie said she saw Mrs. Mills pulling it over her fence with magic after we kicked it!"

The old man looked at Janie, the red-haired girl who feared Mrs. Mills hearing them from across the street. "Janie. I want you to think about what you saw. Really saw. Do you think Mrs. Mills is a witch?"

Janie looked at her friends, some of whom were shaking their heads at her and others nodding fervently. "I...I guess not," she said in a small voice. "But I just—"

"You kids all have active imaginations," he smiled at them. "And that's a fine thing. But you best mind what you're saying about who, and think about whose feelings might get hurt. Now," he gestured across the road to Mrs. Mills' house, "go on over and ask the lady for your ball back. You'll see how sweet she really is."

He sat back in his chair as the children trudged across the road, nudging each other up to the front door of Mrs. Mills' house. The door swung open, and there stood the woman in question, smiling down at the children, a bright smile he could see even from his porch, and a soft melody, haunting in its song, drifted across to where he sat. He hummed absently to himself as his chair creaked as he rocked back and forth, as Janie walked slowly into the house, and the rest of the children turned and left the way they'd come, walking down the sidewalk in silence.

He leaned back in his chair, slowing the rocking to a stop, kept his eyes shut in the cooling arrival of dusk. He looked forward to the morning, in a week or so, and the jar of summer peaches that would be sitting on his front porch, freshly jarred, and swimming in the sweetest syrup there ever was.

The Mirror People | *Laura Coruzzi*

It's a quiet neighbourhood I live in. Not many kids, and no one seems to be a 'dog person' besides me. Me and Rex take our time strolling the neighbourhood, talking to who's out, maybe picking up the odd paper cup tossed from some jerk's window as they blast down our quiet road.

We always stop to talk to Mary Holst and her daughter, Lisa. Lisa comes running out to charge over to us, and Rex patiently allows her to fall all over him. Mrs. Holst, recently widowed, would invite us in, coffee for me and a peanut butter cookie for Rex.

I remember one day, a dry southern morning, piping hot coffee steaming away in the sunflower mug Mary always gave me, when Lisa came grinning into the kitchen. "What's got you so happy, darling?" I asked her.

Lisa giggled and said, "The mirror people! They're funny."

Mary smiled fondly at her daughter and explained to me in an exaggerated tone, "Lisa has made friends with the people who live in our mirror." She pointed with her chin, out the kitchen, down the hall. "That big one there, by the front door."

"Ah," I said, and nodded at Lisa. "So. What's so funny about these mirror people?"

Lisa shrugged as she dug through the cookie tin, grimacing as she tossed an oatmeal raisin to the side. "They just say funny things. You wouldn't get it," she added, "you're old."

Kids can get away with saying anything. Mary and I shared a look over our coffee cups while Rex crunched a cookie underneath the table. Lisa grabbed a handful of cookies and went skipping back into the hall. "I'm back!" we heard her announce, and, if I leaned forward in my chair, I could just see Lisa down the hall, sitting on a chair pulled up to the front of the mirror.

Mary smiled but sounded worried as she admitted, "Lisa has such an active imagination, but sometimes I worry that she lives too much in her head. And now, with these 'mirror people'..." She trailed off.

I waved my hand at her. "Don't fret about it. She's a young girl. She's figuring out who she is."

"Now, even I haven't done that for myself yet," Mary said with a wry smile. "I suppose she's just...having fun," she said, trying to come off as casual, but I could see the tension in her shoulders.

"Look, Mary," I said, turning my mug around and around on the table, "she's probably just taking more time to adjust to Al's passing. These friends of hers, they're just a way of coping with his loss. Something she can feel like she can control, maybe."

Mary smiled at me. "Since when have you been so astute?" I chuckled and sat back in my chair, giving Rex a friendly thump on the ribs as he stood next to me, panting happily.

"I've been around the block a few times." Soon enough I made my way to the door to take Rex home. I stopped by Lisa, where she was leaning her head against the mirror and whispering.

"See you next time, little miss," I said, smiling at her reflection. Lisa gave me a flat look from the mirror's surface.

"It's rude to interrupt."

I held back a grin. "Sorry, sorry, you're right! I—Rex!" I grabbed Rex's collar and tugged him back from where he was suddenly crouched in front of the mirror, ears pinned flat as he growled. "What's got into you, boy?"

I noticed Lisa, still with her head pressed to the edge of the mirror, fixing Rex with a cold glare. I tried to suppress the shudder that started working its way down my spine. Rex's fur bristled under my hand, his shoulders vibrating with inner growls. Mary stuck her head around the kitchen corner.

"Everything all right?"

"Fine," I assured her, even as my stomach dipped as Lisa and Rex continued to stare each other down in the mirror. "C'mon Rex." I tried to tug him to the front door, mere steps from the mirror, when Lisa's voice stopped me.

"Did you know everything in the mirror is opposite?"

I nodded, keeping a tight grip on Rex. "Sure. Left is right, right is left."

Lisa was staring into the mirror, a far away look in her eyes, as though she could see through to something in the distance. "Right is...wrong," I heard her say faintly.

Rex barked. Lisa shook herself and focused on my face through the mirror again. She smiled. "See you never, Mr. Jones!"

"Later," I corrected her with a shaky smile. "You mean see you 'later'." She beamed up at me, then was lost to her reflection again. Down the hall, Mary was watching us with a concerned expression on her face. "Kids," I mouthed at her, even as I struggled to shake off the unsettled feeling that was swamping me. Rex eagerly led the way out of the house, fairly pulling me all the way home.

Later, not by many days, everything changed. Lisa didn't come out to see us anymore when we went on our walk. I didn't seek Mary out either, that uncomfortable sensation from my last time at their house weighing heavy on me. And then one night, when the moon was high and full, I was woken by a siren. The red and blue lights of a police car shone inside my room as it shot down the road and screeched to a stop in the Holst's driveway.

Lisa was gone.

The search party found nothing. The posters plastered around town yielded no fruit. And there were whispers in town of Mary Holst losing her mind. She was cleared of any suspicion, but no one was offered in her place.

I still see her sometimes, when her front door is open, to let the breeze in. Sitting on the same chair that Lisa used, face pressed to the mirror in the hall, calling Lisa's name, sometimes screaming for 'them' to give her daughter back.

About the Author:

Laura Coruzzi is an average Canadian who enjoys fall and cows. She has a fondness for writing horror and gets along well with cats. She has had an unmanageable ego since having a verse published at seventeen and finds herself to be good company.

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The silver gleam of the waxing crescent moon cast an eerie pallor across the damp fall soil as the last of the sunlight vanished. Darkness held dominion above the densely wooded acres of land bordering the tiny town to the south, broken only by a sprinkling of silver dots peppering the velvet sky. Crickets began to play their song, joined in their natural symphony by the croaking of bullfrogs and the occasional call of a passing owl.

Then silence fell. There was nothing organic about it. As if some unseen presence had entered the woods and compelled the nocturnal creatures to abandon their song, everything went still. Even the wind seemed to take heed, the rustling of leaves beneath a light breeze lapsing into an eerie quiet.

Deep down, beneath the layer of rotted vegetation coating the ground, something stirred. Powerful energies from a realm outside the physical called to a force dwelling far below. A deep hunger – both primordial and relentless – awoke as it had on this night for eons.

With a surge of force, the earth began to shift. A cold river of black sludge swept tribes of earthworms and burrowing insects along as it ascended. A dull, thick *whoosh* was audible as it broke the surface, an apparition of dirt and moss. It rose, calling forth errant roots and fallen tree branches, absorbing them as they came, fashioning a makeshift, skeletal body across which the earth surged and boiled.

It turned its featureless head north, regarding a lonely stretch of highway emerging from between opposing rows of buildings in the distance. That was the destination to which it had been called.

That was where it would *feed*.

Overcome by desire, it shuffled toward the town.

"I knew I shouldn't have listened to you."

Belinda, who was crouched next to an open doorway, flashed Lara an angry look over her shoulder.

"Would you keep your voice down?" she hissed in a whisper. "And don't blame me. You were fine with coming here tonight. Just like us." She turned her attention back to peeking into the other room. There was no sign of the thing, only the large, pulpy blood stain left after....*that*.

"I didn't know you planned to summon a demon!" Lara shot back, dropping her voice a few decibels as a precaution. The thought of what had happened to their mutual friend Jennifer – back in the warm, wonderful moments of fifteen minutes earlier, when there had still been three of them – sent a powerful shudder through her skinny frame.

"I didn't know it would actually work," Belinda said, keeping her eyes trained on the shadows. The thing seemed to have disappeared. She stared down the hall, at the top of the staircase on the opposite end. They'd used those stairs to get to the second floor of the abandoned warehouse and, right now, Belinda couldn't recall a sight in her admittedly young life that had ever looked so inviting.

The problem was they'd need to slip past the doorway to get there. As there was no actual door hanging in place, that left them wide open to being seen by the monstrosity that had taken Jennifer.

Of course, if we stay here too long, it'll probably come for us anyway, Belinda thought grimly. She was working from the assumption the creature was still in the room. It had pounced from the darkness while the three of them had been sitting in a circle she'd drawn, following the instructions in the book she'd stolen.

It had snatched the girl, lunging atop her from the gloom the way a spider might leap onto a struggling insect. The wraith had been unlike anything any of them had ever seen. Jennifer's screams had shattered the silence as the other two had fled into the outer hall.

That had been over a quarter of an hour ago and they were still crouched by the door, waiting, terrified, to see what would happen next.

"I thought we were just gonna goof around in here," Lara whispered, her tone defensive. "Maybe smoke some weed or drink beers. You didn't say anything about black magic."

"I thought it would be fun," Belinda answered, not sparing the other girl a look this time. "What the hell do I know about casting spells? I always thought it was bullshit."

"Where did you get that book?" Lara demanded. She'd been wondering since Belinda had pulled it out of her backpack. The thing had been large, leather-bound in a cracked, dusty cover that looked as if it had been around for centuries.

It's gone now, no matter how old it was, Lara thought, shivering at the memory of how the pages had exploded with an eerie, pale blue light as the monster had snatched their friend. The book had been reduced to ash in the few seconds it took the beast to disappear with the girl.

"I yanked it from Elizabeth Wuhrler's locker when she wasn't around." This time Belinda *did* look at her remaining companion. Her eyes were as wide as they could open and her lower lip was trembling. For the first time, Lara realized how ferociously the girl was struggling not to break down into complete panic.

She stared at Belinda, feeling hollow. In the momentary silence that followed, all that could be heard was the occasional creak of the dilapidated building.

"Why?" was what Lara finally managed. "Why would you swipe a book of spells from a girl who openly practices witchcraft?"

"I..." Belinda faltered. It was moment of weakness completely out of character for her. Under different circumstances, Lara – who privately considered her friend to be something of a bully at times (though she'd never admit it) - might have derived at least a small measure of pleasure from seeing it. Tonight, it only served to deepen her fear.

But also her resolve. If Belinda was losing the battle to stay calm, then she'd have to be the one to get them out of there. After all, it was the other two who presumably knew about the book. She was just someone caught in the middle.

There was no way she was going to be eaten by a monster tonight.

"Come on," she said, nudging Belinda's arm for emphasis. "Let's run for it."

"What if that thing attacks us?"

"If it's there and it's still hungry, it's gonna do that anyway," Lara pointed out. "We might as well go for it. Are you coming or not?" A focus lit her eyes that hadn't been there before. "If you want to stay, stay. I'm running."

And with that, she bolted.

Startled, Belinda issued a short, alarmed bleat before scrambling to her feet and racing down the corridor after her.

It stood in the shadows, watching the two girls run for the staircase, neither realizing they were literally heading directly into its arms. It stood on the top steps, wrapped in gloom, the earth surging and sliding around its spindly frame. Behind it, a trail of dirt and moss trickled down the steps.

It was keenly attuned to everything going on in its immediate environment. It perceived the impact of their footfalls thudding against the cracked, dirty concrete, feeling the minute expulsion of energy as thick layers of dust - accumulated over the course of years - billowed in small clouds from the floor each time their shoes landed. Despite the absence of light, it was able to zero in on the two figures as they rapidly drew closer.

It braced itself, waiting for the meal that had drawn it from the bowels of the earth.

Lara ran with every bit of speed she could muster, grateful they had decided to forgo wearing costumes for Halloween this year. A mask would have blocked her vision and any special clothing might have tripped her up.

Her eyes had adjusted to the dark. Ahead, she could make out the outline of the staircase. It was only a few yards away. She'd already run further than she'd realized. Elated at the notion escape was within reach, she pushed herself even harder.

Behind her, she could hear Belinda struggling to keep up. The other girl was heavier, not fat but also not as nimble as Lara. From the ragged sound of her breath, running wasn't an activity she indulged very often.

Lara debated whether she should go back and help her friend along. She didn't want to leave the girl behind, but neither did she wish to confront the horror that had murdered Jennifer, either.

A predatory growl from somewhere behind her solved the dilemma. It was the same sound she'd heard in the seconds before the earlier attack.

It was back.

With a push demanding the last bit of energy she had to spare, Lara shoved Belinda out of her thoughts and made a final, panicked bolt for the stairs.

Behind her, a terrified shriek echoed through the corridor, accompanied by a reptilian hiss. The tenor of terror transformed to agony as Belinda's voice deteriorated into a bubbling gurgle, underscored by the nauseating sound of something thick and wet being torn asunder. The noise was cut short abruptly. In its absence, Lara could make out a frenzied chewing.

Now in a blind panic, she collided with something at the top of the stairs.

A monster loomed in the darkness before her.

Impossibly tall and thin with a spindly, stick-like frame, the creature towered over her, blocking her point of egress.

She stumbled backward, damp soil seeping through her tee shirt where she'd touched it, sending gooseflesh crawling along her arms. Crying out, Lara spun too quickly, igniting a bolt of pain in her ankle. She tumbled to the ground, getting the wind knocked out of her.

Fear – a raw, pulsating ebb of unchecked fright unlike anything she had ever experienced or suspected she could experience – swept over her, eradicating whatever thoughts might have come next. Lying on her side, grime from years of decay leaving dark splotches against her cheek, Lara drew her knees up to her chest. Wrapping her arms around them in a fetal position, all she could manage was a small, scared sob as she waited for it to be over.

The thing swept past her.

The sound of confrontation filled the air, the beast that had killed her friends howling in protest as something unspeakable was done to it. The thing may have been from Hell itself, but Lara recognized a cry of pain when she heard it.

A sonorous croak reverberated along the cracked plaster of the corridor walls, causing them to tremble. She could feel it run through her, such was the power of the sound.

For a moment, there was complete silence. Then she heard a soft squelching, as if something moist and bulky were being dragged across the ground, punctuated by a thick splat, reminding her of the sound mud made when it splattered against pavement.

Shhhhhh- plop! Shhhhhh-plop!

The sound repeated, growing louder as it drew nearer.

The skeletal monster from the steps emerged from the shadows, one earthen limb clutching what looked to be a limp, oily snake skin. It dragged the remains behind it like a ghastly trophy.

It paused as it reached her, the featureless head cocking to one side and regarding the cowering human at its feet. It sensed the emotions radiating off of her in the same way it had sensed the presence of the other it had come here to consume.

It reached out with its free limb, extending a proboscis that wound toward her ankle. She recoiled, attempting to pull away before it could touch her. It encircled her leg before she could slide out of reach.

Lara watched as the ring of dirt solidified around her foot, at first scared, then amazed as the pain disappeared. It was as if the thing had drained it from her. Staring up at the blank wave of crumbling earth that should have been its face, she sensed it meant her no harm.

Relief rushed over her. Unburdened of the weight of her terror, her thoughts turned to her friends. Grief welled up inside her. She rocked back and forth as she wept.

Having fed on the energy of the human's physical pain, it moved toward the stairs, sparing the girl no further thought as she watched it disappear down the steps.

It had fed. It was time to return to the underground. Satiated, it would sleep until next year, when the barrier between this world and the next was again down and other horrors slipped through. They would come. Such things always did, whether on their own strength or beckoned by humans with no understanding of the powers they were tempting.

Then, its hunger again awakened, it would rise.

About the Author:

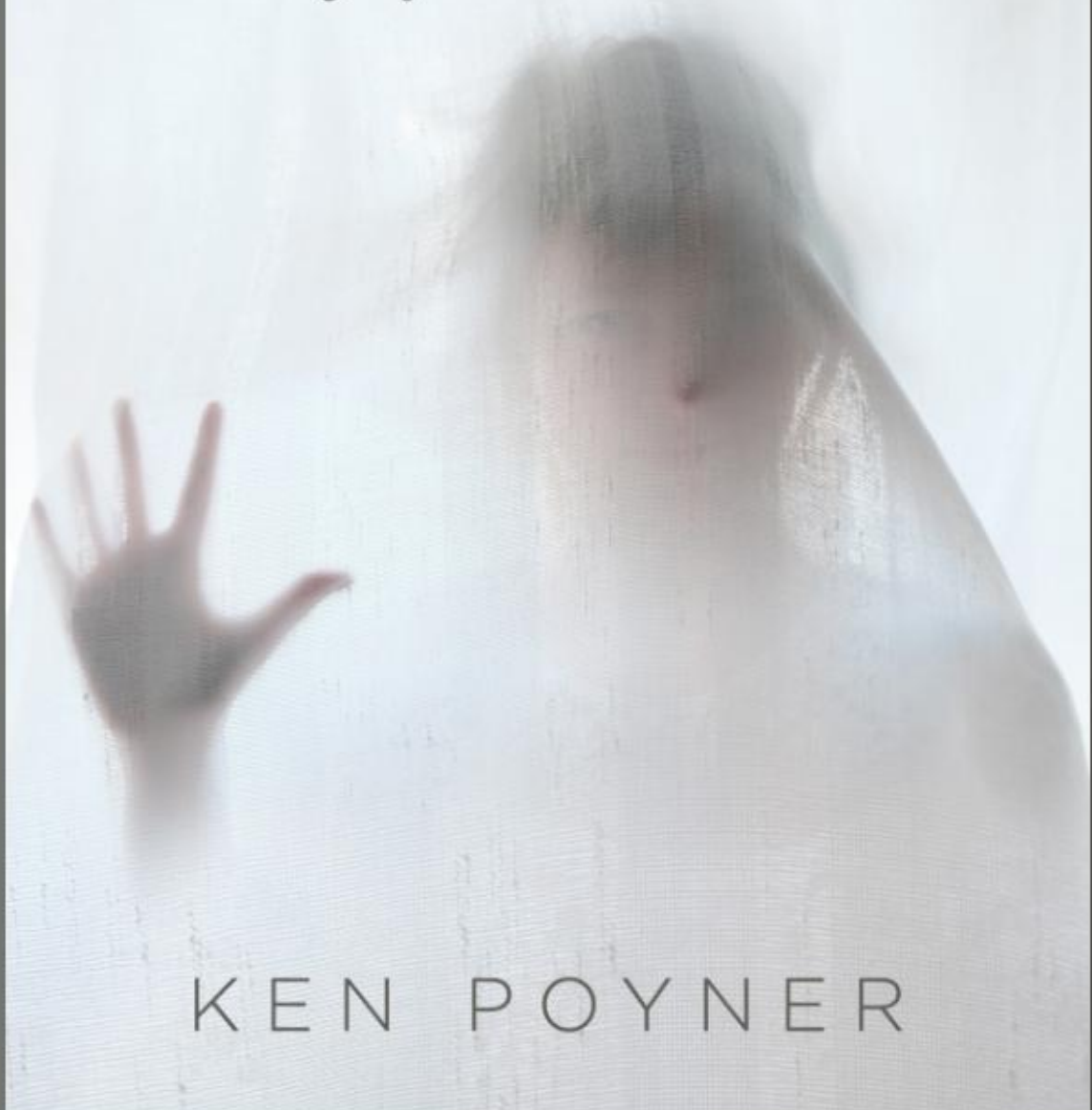
D.S. Ullery is the author of *Beyond Where the Sky Ends- Dark Tales to Disturb and Engage*. He lives in West Palm Beach, Florida.

Amazon Author Page: [D.S. Ullery](#)

Twitter: [@DSUllery](#)

VICTIMS OF A FAILED CIVICS

Poetry of the social tesseract



KEN POYNER

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

POETRY

The Last Night of October | *Marge Simon*

The last night of October
is one of crickets,
loud and soft, blending
with a yellow gray sky,
a chill wind rising,

while down the street
children in costume
parade from house to house.
But ours is dark.

A door slams.
My wife's thin face,
distorted with hate,
breath stinking of gin,
that shy pretty girl
I took to the altar
so many years ago,
out she goes to the car.

*(about the brakes -
I'd fixed them just for her)*

She revs it up, and charges
into the rush of passing traffic,
a shriek of tires, a scream --
headlights on broken glass,
an asphalt mirror.

When I hear the sirens,
I light the candle in
my beautiful pumpkin.

About the Author:

Marge Simon is an award-winning poet/writer. Her works have appeared in Daily Science Fiction, New Myths, Polu Texni, Clannad, Silver Blade and four pro anthologies in 2018. She is a multiple Stoker winner and Grand Master Poet of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association.

Amazon Author Page: [Marge Simon](#)

Author Blog: [Marge Simon](#)

It was a childhood hobby
carried out first
on the kitchen table
then in his room,
his shed,
his workshop.
He left childhood behind
but never moved on from his hobby.
Meccano and Leggo had their time
but Frankie left them behind
and began his collection
of bits and pieces
that might be useful
a bit of wood or metal,
plastic, nails, screws, rivets, wire,
Frankie kept them all
for his creations
his men and machines.
The boats and planes and trains
had had their time long ago.
Now it was the human form for him,
not the outer veneer
but what lies under the skin.
He studied the complex joints
and carefully fitted their metal muscles
and wired them with nerve-like fibres.
All that was needed now was the skin.
Carefully Frankie began to put it in place.
Soon his creation would raise its head
and open its eyes,
then it would be ready,
ready to go.

I know I'm no angel
but I'm not a devil
either
I said.
They said
I would cause a sea of blood
and it does look a bit like that
except,
I think the sea may be the sky
and the blood a red moon glow,
I'm unsure,
confused,
but I know it's not me who held
the smoking gun.
See
it's just a cigarette.
I know I'm under age
but that's all it is
a cigarette
which lit up the sky
and bloodied the sea,
made them both red
and gave me a halo.

About the Author:

Lynn White lives in north Wales. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality and writes hoping to find an audience for her musings. She was shortlisted in the Theatre Cloud 'War Poetry for Today' competition and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a Rhysling Award.

Author Blog: [Poetry - Lynn White](#)

Facebook: [Lynn White - Poetry](#)

Sweet Candy | LTC

Who is that knocking
upon my front door?
It is Halloween Eve,
time for some horror and gore.

Toffee apples are red
Candy is sweet,
She will fit in my freezer
if I cut off her feet.
Her fingers and toes
I will store in the fridge.
The meat shelf is empty
so there is ample storage.
I will dine on raw rump
and her pretty pink cheeks.
For Candy will be
my Halloween treat.
For pudding I will make
a special dessert.
Don't worry; I will tell her
after the first bite it won't hurt.
To finish I will have
her knobbly knees -
with a Havana cigar,
biscuits and cheese.
Dearest sweet Candy
with lips luscious red
I will miss you next October
now you are dead.

About the Author:

LTC is a wandering poet, writer and storyteller of tales found on the edge. He lately resides in deepest rural France, surrounded by his loved ones who are happy to indulge his minor eccentricities and penchant for fish. LTC is currently writing his memoirs as an epic poem, covering many of the adventures he has had over his past nine lives.

Facebook: [The Adventures of Louie the Cat](#)

A call from the grave | *Mathias Jansson*

I hated the old man
with his evil rat eyes
his yellow teeth
his stinking breath of death

I killed him without hesitation
and buried his body under my floor
I felt at peace
I had no regret for my deeds
when the police knocked on my door

They asked if I had seen
the old man living next door
he was reported missing
a terrible scream
had been heard
last night from his flat

On no, how terrible to hear
I hope nothing has happened
to that sweet old man
I hold so dear
please come in and tell me more
have a cup of tea in my living room

I listen patiently to the cops
when suddenly I froze with fear
it was a phone
ringing under my floor
ringing louder and louder
it was the old man's phone
calling from the grave

I started to speak louder
rattle with my cup
but the sound was increasing
driving me insane
but the cops sat still in the chairs
quietly drinking their tea
how could they not hear?

I couldn't handle it anymore
I started to rip up the floor
and screaming with a voice
filled with fear:

For heaven's sake
can't you hear
the old man's phone
loudly ringing under the floor
can't you hear the tune
Knock-knock-knockin' on heaven's door!

About the Author:

Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines 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.

Author Blog: [Mathias Jansson Art Critic and Poet](#)

Gaslight Ghoul | *Alexis Child*

By gaslight's ghostly sheen
I tread these cobblestone streets
This quest could lead anywhere
But to death's despair
My soul knows no resistance

Haunted London is vigilant
Cold evening air
Trembles with fright
Should secrets
Like ghosts take flight

Tell, where have I been laid to rest?
Never fear one haunting less
Content to roam amongst the dead
In even-tide's eternity I lay my head

Author Bio:

Alexis Child lives in Toronto, Canada where horror is in its purest form and is haunted by the memory of her cat. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in numerous publications. Her first collection of poetry, a dark and sinister slice of the macabre gothic, horror, surreal, and supernatural—DEVIL IN THE CLOCK—is available on Amazon.

Website: [Alexis Child's Poetry Empyrean](#)

Facebook: [Alexis Child](#)

Parlophone | *Robert Beveridge*

Frank was the last person
you'd ever expect to vanish
into thin air. But sometimes
you get the perfect conditions
for miracles; thirty-eight
degrees out, pursuit by a flock
of carnivorous dandelions,
the syllables of the prayer
garbled in just the right order.
One foot strayed into the ring
of mushrooms and bang, we
were left to stare at a void
and, seconds later, defend
ourselves from the seedheads
that had turned their attention to us.

About the Author:

Robert Beveridge makes noise and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in The Virginia Normal, Credo Espoir, and Chiron Review, among others.

Hallowe'en Horrors | DJ Tyrer

They say graves open on Hallowe'en
That not every horror that is seen
Is a child disguised by a costume
But a what rather than a whom
And they say that tomb doors roll back
When the sky turns night to darkest black
And that things from such places
Walk the streets wearing faces
Stolen from the living unwary
Who have made fun out of something scary
So the walking dead can mingle and greet
And play a trick or enjoy a treat

Red & Black (III) | DJ Tyrer

The Laughing Man chants his song
Words hate-filled and vile
Yet sugar-coated with a smile
Like a joke and yet so wrong
You can't help but chant along
Listen just a little while
Entranced by his style
Chuckling over his bong
Now, what will you do?
It is kill or be killed
Blood demands to be spilled
Either way, the joke's on you!

The Festival | DJ Tyrer

Only the poor and lonely remember
For the rich and friended have their own
Society to fill their time and
Have achieved their hopes and dreams
Not watched them crumble away.
So it is that only the downtrodden
Have trodden their way down those paths
Those strange paths that ought not to be
Bored in secret below the earth
Where vile things congregate
In the accumulated corruption
Waxy-faced things that have learnt to walk
Where nature suggests they should crawl
Swarming in attendance at that blasphemous festival.

About the Author:

DJ Tyrer dwells in Southend-on-Sea, UK, where they run *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), *What Dwells Below* (Sirens Call Publications), and issues of *Hinnom Magazine*, *ParABnormal*, and *Weirdbook*, and has a novella available, *The Yellow House* (Dunhams Manor).

Facebook: [DJ Tryer](#)

Twitter: [@DJTyrer](#)

Your race is like ours: as you mortals, us gods:
Those most hungry for power seek its rule at all costs.
And just as the worst find their way to the top,
They fling accusations, projecting their flaws.

The best of the gods was near perfectly fair,
Not just his visage, in morals as well.
He rallied around him those burning with light,
Against the cruel god, a celestial blight.

“The Father of Lies” named the Foul our fair Lord,
When ‘twas he fit that name like a sheath to a sword.
When our prince met the wicked, in search of parlay
He was struck down with flames by the angels of Hate.

Cast out of Heaven, the best of us fell,
All goddesses with him, whose bellies could swell.
The One creates nothing, providing the nudge
For the hatred of women—an impotent grudge.

So, keep this in mind when you offer up praise:
For what childish ego such stoking does crave?
Instead use your wits and live life to your best,
And be pure, so our bacchanals follow your rest.

About the Author:

Corbin A. Grace is a writer from Western Canada who’s taking a break from hammering out copper, silver and titanium jewelry to hammer away on his fiction. He has diminished the global graphite supply in his quest to draw artistic portraits but finds that his fictional characters, in the end, are more successfully drawn and don’t smudge.

Facebook: [Corbin A. Grace](#)

Twitter: [@corbinagrace](#)

Where does it come from,
this fascination with the supernatural?
Nature or nurture?

Born this way, perhaps,
on the eve of Halloween,
spirits swirling around handmade cradle,
their breath on tender cheek.

A reincarnation, maybe,
some ancient soul reborn
with otherworldly knowledge
hidden beneath the surface?

Old world superstitions alive,
passed on by grandparents,
the old wives' tales echoing
off the worn wooden floors
of the ancestral homestead.

Customs observed warding off evil,
rituals performed to bring good luck,
keeping watch over expectant
mother and newborn child.

Suggestive forces at work, could be,
fostering a curiosity of the unknown,
promoting a predilection for mysteries.
Mass media, Hollywood propaganda,
old black and white horror movies on TV,
literary thrillers, New York Times Best Sellers,
big business instilling beliefs in malleable youth.
Mythology from bygone millennia, possibly,
folklore shared throughout our history,
attempts to unearth the story of our being.
Creatures created by our own hand,
vampires seeking blood on an immortal quest,
werewolves howling, witches' incantations,
zombies roaming aimlessly, arms flailing,
Frankenstein arises - alive through our own devices.
Ambiance ripe with our vivid imaginings,
houses haunted by full moon glowing
as ghostly visions suddenly
intrude on a dark and stormy night.

Fascination,
a supernatural obsession,
by nature.
Wanting to know the unknown,
wanting to look, covering our eyes,
delighting in frightening ourselves silly,
by nurture.
All Hallow's Eve, our night of all nights,
no need to disguise who we are -
it's masks off for us,
nurturing our true nature.

About the Author:

Ivanka Fear is a retired teacher and a writer from Ontario, Canada. She holds a B.A. and B.Ed., majoring in English and French literature, from Western University. Her poems and short stories appear in or are forthcoming in Spadina Literary Review, Montreal Writes, Spillwords, Commuterlit, Canadian Stories, October Hill, Adelaide Literary, Scarlet Leaf Review, The Sirens Call, Utopia Science Fiction, Bewildering Stories, Aphelion, Polar Borealis, Lighten Up, Wellington Street Review, and The Literary Hatchet.

The Font of Deception | *Shawn D. Standfast*

Slumbering twilight descends
As chanting saints become muted
Banshees gather in their silence
While shadows devour the virtuous

Demons hunt kindred spirits
Guided by piety and remorse
Feeding on holy redemption
Harnessing illusions of hope

Legions of seraphim herald
Minstrels reciting tales of old
As idols and lovers embrace
Thirsting for the blood of the lamb

Salvation from the font of deception
Scorning the rites of consecration
Winnowing the righteous from the fold
Revelling in a life forever profane

Searching brothels for the anointed
Inhaling the scent of lost innocence
Where despair and desire mingle
Becoming a communion of lost souls

Brotherhoods of faith converge
As divine revelations become manifest
Through liturgies of sacrament
Feasting on the resurrection

Escaping Reality | *Shawn D. Standfast*

My dreams are never ending
Loneliness is my vengeance
With hours yet to go I ponder
Is death my only salvation?

When I'm lost on the horizon
Drowning self loathing
Spare a thought of understanding
Because your prayers are stifling

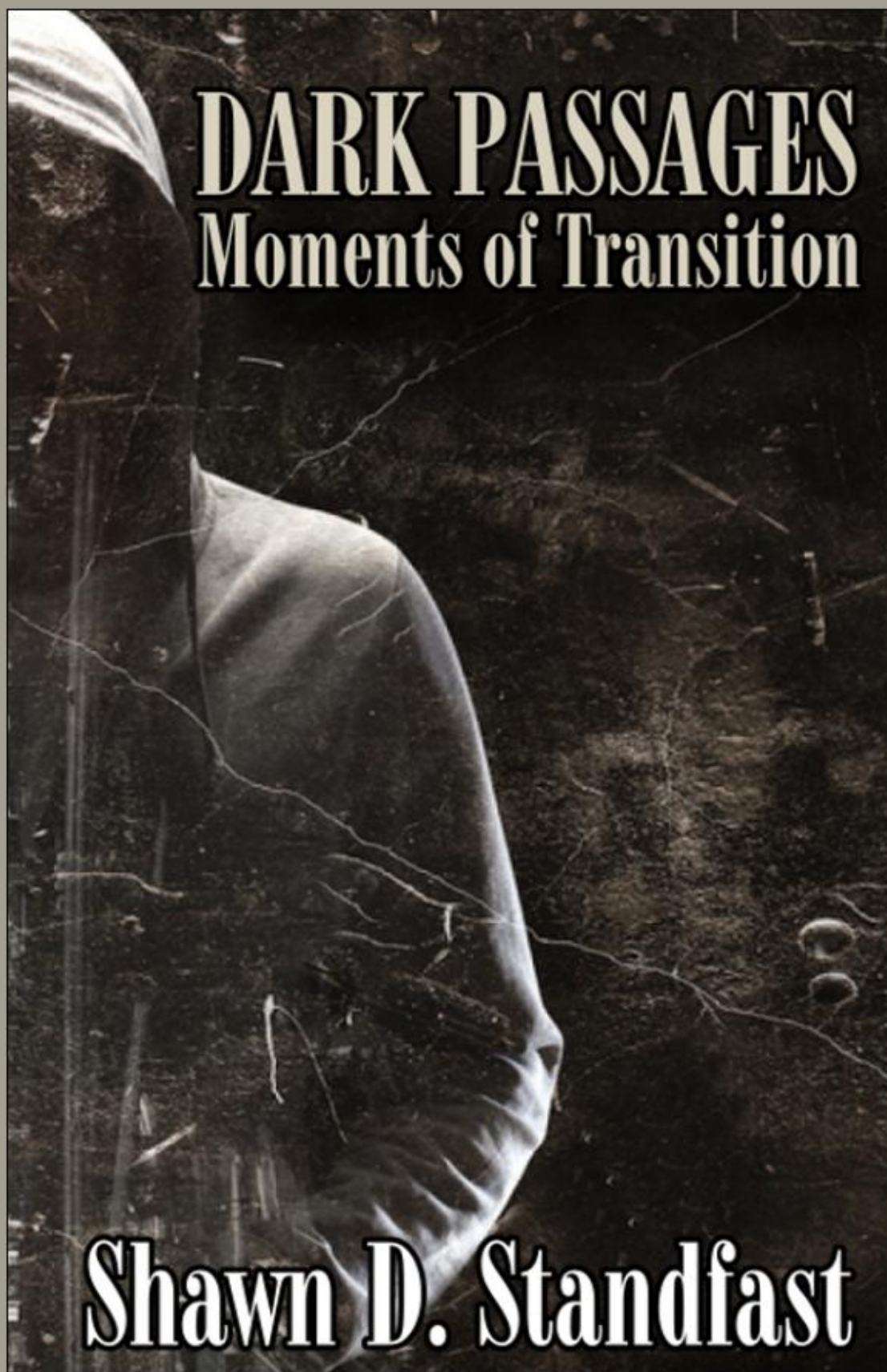
I sit all alone in this emptiness
Mired in hope and indecision
Locked in this battle of deceit
As my conscience slips away

With thoughts born in silence
I move into nothingness
Escaping mere reality
Transcending to darkness

About the Author:

Shawn D. Standfast was born on an island in Northern Ontario, Canada. His early years were spent without running water, indoor plumbing, and electricity. Shawn began reading to pass the long summer days and cold winter nights. A high school English class sparked his interest in poetry. Inspired, Shawn began writing. In 2005 Shawn relocated to the United Kingdom. His first collection of poetry *Dark Passages: Moments of Transition*, is now out through Sirens Call Publications.

A collection of poetry caught in shadow, interweaving the remnants
of memory, thought, dream, and desire.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

A Crippled Plaything | *Timothy Hosey*

Its obsidian eyes rolled in the back of its head,
Every limb was stiffened with time,
Her porcelain existence in a little girl's room,
Waiting to be played with.
The clock chimed noon.
She tried to lift herself up from the bed,
Pushing herself against the other lifeless dolls,
Using her porcelain hands to throw herself off the bed.
Every limb fought with resistance as each,
Porcelain limb scratched the plastic laminate floor tiles.
The girl who lived in this room has grown up now.
Who is gonna play with this Crippled Play Thing?
The Crippled Play Thing scrambled on the floor like a crab,
Walking sideways with porcelain toes ready to shatter at any minute.
The house was dark and foreboding,
Her shadows were mere ink blots under the moonlight.
Nobody to be found in the house but an old widow with her dog.
It was futile to find anybody to play with her.
She was a Crippled Play Thing nobody wanted to play with.
She jumped back up on the bed,
Closed her eyes forever.
Her eyes rolled back in their normal eye coordination,
Exposing whites with her pupils.
She looked like a happy doll in her porcelain existence.
Back when the girl used to live in this house.
She will be remembered as the Crippled Play Thing.

About the Author:

Timothy Hosey is a poet of the macabre. Whenever he's not writing poetry, he thinks about the macabre. He intends to work on his craft as a flash fiction writer to write dark fiction.

Facebook: [Timothy Hosey](#)

Twitter: [@timothy_hosey](#)

They lived here, before anyone can recall.
Before other homes stood in the dense shadow
of the house on Bleaker Street.
Perhaps it is haunted — the large towering manse
that lords over us with Victorian embellishments
at the close of a grim corridor.
We are all as bleak and dismal as the name implies,
tenants of a festering wound carved from the forest
it replaced, a path of desolation.
Why would we remain? The question that burns in
minds and souls. If we are so wretched, why do we
stay on the road to Perdition?
There seems no answer, only the shrill echoes of gales
that screech past our porches; the somber vacant looks
that peer from a dead end.
They never emerge, pale and withdrawn, no more
than shapes gliding behind glass in a storied manor
facing a gaunt pavement length.
I watch from my windows, keeping a sharp eye out,
alert as a sentinel for the perils that could befall the
luckless denizens of this lane.
I cannot let fail my guard, napping in dreary shifts,
obsessed by a vigil shared with neighbors, signaled
by lamps along the row.

We have little life beyond this task, born to carry on,
involuntarily ordained. Yet no bars prevent us from
forsaking an abhorrent sight.
What meaning might be derived, handed down for
generations to embrace . . . what sense of duty or need
motivates us to behold it?
Are we no different than the ones in there? Pacing and
abiding, regarding us with contempt, loathing attention,
lurking in that dreadful place.
Why do they not leave? How can they tolerate a role
that we ourselves regret — spying, waiting, enduring —
linked to a rickety abode?
We are the first and last line of defense, protecting
against what lies within a brooding den of malediction.
A shelter from light . . .
Family or flock, they inhabit that terrifying drab
estate like a box, eternally confined in its bounds,
those decrepit decaying walls.
An unspoken curse, acknowledged by the orbs on
both sides of a staring match, bearing silent witness
to and from a dark villa.
At times I wonder, what would happen if either side
abandoned their post of maintaining a stark balance:
the view on Bleaker Street.

Resting in the earth, a premature burial,
Prone to every minuscule creature that wants a taste,
A meal. Vulnerable to the ravages of time while lying
Silent and still, awaiting rescue from this solitary end.
An unmarked resting-place. They do not come,
And so I languish, an eternity it feels. Life going on
Above the surface. A world teeming forth, springing with
Seasons, the frolic and greenery and frost, the colors and
Scents. For me only dark, and damp, and cold. A deep drab
Tedium. This is it, my forever. Yet how I wonder.
I wish and wait, eating dirt. Aching, yearning, desiring
To view it all again. Drink it in with orbs and ears.
Nose and lips. Touch, and another sensation . . .
With my spirit. To embrace the flesh and bone in every
Manner possible, savoring that which I took for granted,
Wasted. I did not appreciate fully this gift.
I would now, I promise. But there will be no second chance
I fear. I am destined to remain in this hole, this wretched
Self-dug pit. Yes, I trusted a stranger to be decent.
Honorable. I see in retrospect I risked my life —
Not in some great heroic memorable act of courage . . .
By a simple mundane gesture. A random encounter.
Giving a ride to someone in need on a desolate night.
My excuse? I could use some company, my journey long.
She cut it short. A quiet bespectacled woman,
Middle-aged, not very talkative. As I bled, she dug the
Grave with a gardening spade I had purchased and
Forgot was in the trunk. Then rolled me into the depression
Facedown and covered my shallow tomb. Not a word to
Pay respect. “You remind me of someone I dislike.”
Her excuse, before pulling a knife and slaying me!
That was it. I will admit I am no angel. I did not
Expect very much, and few would have shown up to
My funeral if there was one. I made plenty of blunders
In my day. Still, I did not deserve this. Nobody does.
It is terribly unfair, undignified. Allowing no finality.
No remembrance, mourning. A blunt and
Ungracious demise after a life with ups and downs,
Moments good and bad, both shining and dull.
Experiencing afterlife regrets. Dismal emptiness,
Futility, crushing disappointment. And the worst:
Confusion, disbelief at the sudden interruption of scenes
Like a movie that breaks. To stumble from the theater
Blinking. Left with emotions of loss, unfinished
Deeds or business. And then — could that be a shovel?
I find myself being found, exhumed. Too late.
Far too late. My body is turned. As if comatose,
Eyelids sealed yet transparent, I goggle at her beaming,
Reaching toward me. A cheerful voice echoes . . .
“Wake up!”

All Hallows Ball | *Lori R. Lopez*

The gloaming arrived, its black mists creeping,
Seeping from the eerie Woods and vales,
Bringing shadows deeper than most eves to settle
Upon hills and fields, o'er the steepest dales.

Not a soul could but shiver and pull on layers
At the cold touch of Winter, long fingers beckoning.
With the voice of a gale, the wrath of a storm,
On this Halloween Night would come a reckoning.

Yet Autumn in all of its glorious plumage
Refused to be rushed by premature haste,
Unleashing its furies — tempers fit to be tied.
A banshee-howl chorus may lend a Fall taste . . .

While the sinister twilight of Dusk slipped ever
Toward parading shades like a black heavy cloak —
A mantle of earth; air clouding the terrain
With layers of whitish-gray, wisps of cemetery smoke.

The vapors cavorted 'tween stone and cold tomb,
In a ballroom of silence's musical waltz,
Where invitations were engraved on chilly granite
And tersely worded, more cracked than faults.

Here skipped the hours from dark until Morn,
When the spirits might roam from coffin or crypt,
Unwelcomed by some who did not wish them back.
Still the Grimmers galumphed, morose and moon-
lipped.

Wearing masks over grins, their glee well disguised
By fearsome expressions, wide orbs on display,
These bulbous-eyed bumpkins romped and rejoiced
Whether goblin or skulker at the stroke of a day.

From the Witching Hour should the revelry heighten,
With souls escaping a most dismal exile . . .
Their best suits in tatters, fine dresses quite mildewed,
Each returned to the Danse Macabre in vintage style.

"Step lively! Hold hands whether bony or frigid,
Clammy and warm as a Wallflower's grip!
Here in this house of charnel and woes,
Check your hats at the door and try not to slip."

A league of rotting corpses and skeletal remains,
Ghosts and paranormals, livid or faded,
Gliding 'cross marble in a ruined mausoleum,
The Dead and the Undead stiffly promenaded.

Lifers would quiver 'midst a falt'ring horde
While visiting relatives, tugged into gloom
As spooks and cadavers breathtakingly circled —
A reel of morguish bodies in the starlit Ballroom.

A mystical occasion sparked by carnal resurgence,
This deadwood convergence of specters and ghouls
Hand in hand with the fleshed, both young and old:
Adrift on a risen tide of lachrymose fools.

'Twas the hit of Nocturne at the All Hallows Ball . . .
"Spare the gory details! Have a grandiose pall!"

I am out in The Nethers, those reaches beyond
the beyond, past the warm circle of light we call
Home. Way past the zone outside of that — where we
can still turn around and make it back in emergencies . . .
Nobody knows where I am. I went alone.

The saying to not venture in the water by yourself
should really extend to land when there are sharks
swarming about. The kind with feet, which don't actually
resemble sharks but have as many jagged teeth, ferocious
grins and moods, dreadful appetites. Not to mention bites!

I will because I was bitten. A careless moment,
combined with a nervous condition. You can be vigilant
every second, until that tiny instant of error in a million ticks
of terror no matter how calm, how composed you may
strive to be . . . None of us are machines.

(Surprisingly, we didn't turn ourselves into robots yet.
Technology took a major hit along with Humanity.)
We call it The Shakes. You can't predict when it will attack,
a backlash from all the intensity and continuous trauma.
If it strikes when you're out by yourself . . .

Mine did. Worse, I let my guard slip a hair, allowed
the thing to sneak up behind. I must have sensed it.
Goosebumps rose. Alarms went off in my skull and
triggered the tremors. Or maybe it was just time;
a wearing down. I am certainly worn.

The old kind of forty, before it was the new thirty.
A veteran of numerous wars, fighting Skulkers; defending
from panic, paranoia, anxieties. I could go on listing effects,
the hazards of residing in such a world. You must know.
As I am aware of my fate. Badly injured. Out of luck.

It isn't pretty what they do to the flesh, the inner workings,
the mind. We are trapped in these tragic consequences.
A world we ourselves created by doing nothing or too little
against the few who sought to reshape it through methods
they knew nothing about. Like bandits robbing us.

Not the beasts that stalk in the wake of their decisions;
like others before them, seeking to fill their pockets —
reaping glory and favor, recognition. Back when there was
a public and opinions mattered. Leaving us as frail reminders
of a better past. Each day I scouted for mementos, nostalgia.

The future they wrought is only about one thing: Survival.
Staying alive another minute. Life at its most extreme and
basic level, this is their legacy. Our reality. Rendered in

a corporate lab. Hyped as a product for a new age of Humankind. The next step forward.

But Evolution is a tricky process, there are no guarantees. Harnessing, engineering, manipulating nature is like endeavoring to wield the heart and soul of stars. Beyond our grasp to control, it may destroy us yet. For now we cling to existence. Hiding, barely hanging on. A far cry from home.

About the Author:

Lori R. Lopez is an author-illustrator, poet, and wearer of hats. Verse has appeared in The Sirens Call, The Horror Zine, H.W.A. Poetry Showcases, Weirdbook, Bewildering Stories, California Screamin' (the Foreword Poem) and more. Books include The Dark Mister Snark, Leery Lane, An Ill Wind Blows, The Witchhunt, three volumes of her Poetic Reflections Series, and Darkverse: The Shadow Hours (nominated for an Elgin Award).

Amazon Author Page: [Lori R. Lopez](#)

Twitter: [@LoriRLopez](#)

Her Charcoal Cape | *Linda Imbler*

Her shadow-play,
thin and fleeting.
In a somber cloak,
an obsidian mantle,
obscuring, enshrouding
arms of great length.
The stygian wrap
disguises the glint of the blade.

She, on the streets of Whitechapel,
no need for ambush.
Who would suspect another woman,
who, while matching steps,
was indeed stalking women.
Searching abdomens
for her long-lost babe,
when grief has turned to madness.

About the Author:

Linda Imbler's self-published poetry collections include: *Big Questions*, *Little Sleep*, *Lost and Found*, and *Red Is The Sunrise*. She has two e-books published by Soma Publishing: *The Sea's Secret Song*, and *Pairings*, a hybrid e-book of short fiction and poetry. Her third e-book, *That Fifth Element*, will be published by Soma Publishing in late September.

Author Blog: [Linda's Poetry Blog](#)

Amazon Author Page: [Linda Imbler](#)

Mr. Pumpkin's Party | Alex Grey

Farmer Joe grew old-style pumpkins to sell at Halloween,
Large and small all set to sculpt with faces sweet or mean.

One year Joe made a pumpkin man, to draw more punters in,
With pumpkin arms and legs and tum, and friendly pumpkin grin.

Mr. Pumpkin was so cute, crowds queued to view like curious sheep,
But when All Hallow's Eve was done, Joe threw him on the compost heap.

The next year, pumpkin man got wed to a plumpious pumpkin wife,
A cheeky child and pumpkin dog brought their family to life.

But once the crowds had all gone home, the compost heap awaited.
Mr. Pumpkin watched sad and angry as his family deflated.

As Farmer Joe spread mulch around, he spread the germs of wrath,
The pumpkin clan he'd murdered bred seedlings on the warpath.

Next year, the pumpkin clan was built with motors and hydraulics,
All plugged into the electric, to attract more shopaholics.

Their arms could wave, their legs could kick, the child could skip and prance.
Hordes came from far and wide to watch the pumpkins do their merry dance.

At sunset on All Hallow's Eve, the shoppers waved goodbye.
Joe fetched his axe and barrow, it was time to make some pie.

Now there are tricks and there are treats, the pumpkin man played host.
He invited Farmer Joe that night to a gathering in the compost.

A boisterous bonfire blazed up high, Mr. Pumpkin beamed with pride.
Electricity and old magic spells had revived their souls inside.

He hugged his wife and kissed his son, he threw the dog a bone,
And sang a jolly pumpkin song, a ditty of his own.

"Rip off the head, slice off the top, hollow out the innards.
Carve out the eyes, the nose and teeth, make candles with his gizzards."

Mrs. Pumpkin cooked the tender flesh in a pie with fresh ground spices.
Her human feast was delicious; they all had extra slices.

The rest of Joe they burned to ash, but kept his grisly head.
Its lantern light glowed in the barn as they all went to bed.

When November dawned next morning, Mr. Pumpkin and his clan
Lay innocent in cosy straw, planning next year's human flan.

Joe's son looked all around the farm, of his dad there was no hint.
Oh well. He thought, and carried on, the farm was worth a mint.

Mr. Pumpkin slept and had sweet dreams of Halloweens to come,
Of kidney soup and heart flesh stew, and liver pie – yum yum!

About the Author:

After a lifetime of writing technical non-fiction, Alex Grey is fulfilling her dream of writing poems and stories that engage the reader's emotions. Her ingredients for contentment are narrowboating, greyhounds, singing and chocolate – it's a sweet life. Of her horror writing, Alex' best friend says "For someone so lovely, you're very twisted!"

Author Blog: [Ideal Reader Blog](#)

Twitter: [@Indigodreamers](#)

Eva doesn't want to put on her costume,
of witch, cat, or pink Power Ranger,
she wants to wrap up in the gauze of time,
in a mummy's trappings,
and run through sand-drenched streets.
She wants to hop on the trolley near Wade,
and blend in, quietly assessing the onlookers,
who seek a haunted tour near Lakeview,
but she has plans to see dead of another sort.
She wants to jump off the rail as they do in the movies,
glide inside the Museum of Art as if in ballet shoes,
and move to the rhythm of passion and history.
Eva winds her way to the marble catacombs
of sarcophagus and statue,
lightly carrying herself on the chill breeze from
the hauntings of the ancients, risen before her.
She puts her arms out left and right, smiling,
as the mummies slowly step toward her in
the dark and empty room, taking her in
their arms

...and they dance.

Swaying, waltzing to the music of magic and fortune,
of sacrifice and power, their decaying faces alight again
with rebirth and hope, mobilizing her spirit.
Water of the Nile, green reeds of salvation,
scarabs rustling and blue funerary
carvings whirl by her entranced mind,
as if she's time-slipped to Cairo.
She has no need for trick-or-treat, or bobbing for apples,
she'd rather laugh and drink and sing
with the priests and goddesses from thrones centuries ago,
eat olives and grapes instead of Smarties and Tootsie Rolls.
Eva closes her eyes and she twirls, her hair flying backwards,
spinning like a windmill, feeling her own energy, laughing
with the ghosts and monsters before her as they take turns
in a ballroom dance for her soul.

Evil dark and dreary,
where do the nightshades grow,
little steps downstairs slowly,
running like the wind upward.
Mold and mildew, moss and peat,
tendrils of black spindle around feet,
rot and gore, amid screams of four.
One, two, three, four—
all the children play ring around
the floor and dance with open maws.
Languid lashing, soul reaping,
frail and dry as corn stalks,
plump and seedy as gourds,
no discriminating passage for
anyone as the rickety gate closes.
Guitar riffs in the distance,
drums beating rhythmically,
time in a circle, clock hands swirl,
leaves and branches fall and float.
Flies with beady eyes run for feast,
beetles with pinchers' for eyebrows
scuttle between cracks and crevice,
dampness encroaches, mist rises,
the scent trail leads to bodies in the deep.

About the Author:

Erin Sweet Al-Mehairi is a writer, editor, and PR Professional with degrees in English, Journalism, and History. *Breathe. Breathe.* was her debut collection of dark poetry and short stories, which was described as visceral and haunting. Her poems and short stories have been in many anthologies and magazines. She has edited several anthologies, with the most current in horror called *Survive With Me*.

Website: [Hook of a Book](#)

Twitter: [@ErinAlMehairi](#)

Out on the moor
kneeling amongst the rocks
we link hands in prayer
in owl light.

A pure note rings out
metallic,
from the fringes they seep
draped in feathers

hawkish hunters,
tawny coated combat soldiers,
sniff our sweat
taste our fear, peck our flesh.

We the village's tithe:
one child, a youth, a mother, full with child and an elder
this winter's cull.

Drugged, the child slumps,
skywards-
talons lift him

He is one with the stars. We die for a fruitful harvest
The elder chants.

My knife hums,
blade glimmering,
unholy communion
of steel and vengeance.

High leaping
gutting raptors,
entrails spill.

Rubies purify the dirt.
The child sleeps.
The mother weeps,
The elder hobbles
stick raised.

I have undone
I am a pariah.
I am free.

About the Author:

Alyson lives in the UK; her fiction has been published both in print anthologies - DeadCades, Women in Horror Annual 2, Trembling with Fear 1 & 2, Coffin Bell Journal 1 and in ezines. Her latest story, Night of the Rider, is published by Demain in their Short Sharp Shocks! E-book series. She performs at open mics, teaches, edits and hangs out with her dog on the moor in all weathers.

Author Blog: [Alyson Faye Wordpress](#)

Twitter: [@AlysonFaye2](#)

The Choice | Orla Fay

I know he is coming to me before he appears,
the clench of his teeth to the left of my neck.
I put my fingers to the place,
feeling the indentation on skin.
He is nowhere in the sticky night
and then he is right before my face.
His skin is porcelain, his dusky collar grazes his chin.
His fangs are so white, wide, sharp,
but his eyes...I should be terrified!
They are blacker than the darkest pool,
they are tar, they are honey, enticing, familiar.
He caresses my cheek with a long-nailed hand.
"Will you come flying with me?" he asks.
I think about it. Yes, I will go. It is the only thing to do.
We leave the city behind, its lights smouldering coals
in the cool moonlight. My devil is delightful,
the Perseid meteor shower his cloak.

About the Author:

Orla Fay is editor of Boyne Berries. Recently her poetry has appeared in The Irish Times, Poetry Ireland Review, ROPES 2019, Impossible Archetype, The Bangor Literary Journal, Ink, Sweat and Tears, Tales from the Forest, Quarryman and FourXFour. This year she was shortlisted for The Cúirt New Writing Prize. She won 3rd prize in The Oliver Goldsmith Poetry Award 2019. She is working towards a first collection of poetry.

Author Blog: [Orla Fay](#)

Twitter: [@FayOrla](#)

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse | RK Wheeler

Prophecy says when broken the seals
Dragons awake and earth will reel
The stars will fall, moon turns to blood
Plague and famine and death from above
Wormwood comes the waters will bleed
On the earth four horsemen are seen
Come and see, a white horse comes
With bow he rides to conquer some
Come and see, red horse is near
A great sword doth its rider wield
Come and see, a black horse stands
Famine spreads across the lands
Come and fear, for a pale horse dwells
It carries death, who brings forth Hell

About the Author:

Dr. Wheeler is a physician by day and an author by night. His genres are paranormal, romantic fantasy, poetry and children's books. Kirkus Magazine published a review of RK Wheeler's, *The Witch of Endor: Vampires* in January, 2019. *Mystical Musings: A Collection of Poetry* was #1 on Amazon, new releases for poetry audiobooks in January 2019. *A Fairy Tale* was #1 in children's nursery rhymes in December 2018.

Author Blog: [RK Wheeler](#)

Facebook: [Scions of Azazel: War in Heaven](#)



e19

I feed dragons from my front porch.
In magnificent swirls they drift
Home from their long roaming
Over the freedom of the nearby sea,
The furious never-flat that it is:
And exhausted, yet enlivened
By the sounding sameness, they land
In the sack-like open field I keep
Sparkled in only soft grasses: for them.
I see each starting a long way off,
Caught in the rising mists, banking,
Mapping the elevation to shoreline,
Cutting a helix in the air that leads
To my poor farm: racing down to the clarion green.
They fold their ragged wings. They pull
Their necks far into their over-arched crescent shoulders.
They parade slowly, ever nearer the house.

I sit on the porch
As bold as a rock temple.

When they come close enough
I toss out the week's offal,
The hard parts, with stray roughage
Mixed in to give it a sustaining bulk: not
A fit meal, but a meal nonetheless.
All heads, hooves and hides.
My neighbors marvel from their own porches,
Or intrude from barely parted curtains.
The descent of the unimaginable beasts:
Who gather their gravity close like winter stores,
Who grow illusory in my seaward field,
Who inform our living. My neighbors -
In the fire hardened, dragon-loving
Communal chambers of their hearts -
Fear me. And they should.

I don't even like children.
The hair is too fine,
Too difficult to ruffle and shave;
They create a lot of grease;
There is generally more fat
Than salvageable meat.
I would have to be
In wildly dire straits
To take on the task of cooking
And eating one, much less two.

Now, if they annoyed me,
And then to escape my just scolding
Had hidden in the oven – that would be different.
But, with all my spells, what waste
Of talent would there be in
My attempting to beguile children?

Even were it true,
I would claim my culpability
Tangential, my liability limited
Only to an easily riled temper.

Given my widely disparaged - but recognized
As sharp - supernatural abilities, how,
If I had them in my culinary sights,
Could they stand here to accuse me?

There are easier marks on the streets,
And prey far simpler to prepare,
More pleasant on the palette.
It is merely my reputation
That brings me to trial, my popular
Dislike and a civic prejudice.

You have only the words of children,
Children who would eat an old woman's
Simple sugar and chocolate,
The edible work of her prodigious old age,
Her dear delicious home.

Think it out, my prejudiced justices:
Who should actually be on trial?

Time to pull out the old broomsticks.
These years they have stood
In the corners of closets; lain
In the back squares of attics;
Waited bored in garages; and
Slept carelessly in the voids
Above door opener motors.
Time to clean out the cauldrons.
Years they have squatted un-purposed in front yards,
Hidden by silencing mouthfuls of dirt,
Tufts of pansies brought
From grocery store spring promotions;
Or they have been the serviceable:
Employed as oversized umbrella catchers, conversation
Pieces that stick their bellies into the foyer.
The books of spells in halves
Are keeping dining room tables even,
Boosting our broods' booster seats.
We can pull it all back together:
We will send our black capes and conical hats
To the corner twenty-four hour cleaners. There is
Time. Our time. There are
Always plenty of unruly children to eat.
Imagine what we once were and what we can be
Again: you simply have to keep faith
That our coven will not, this rising, be merely
A has-been trip down memory lane: tales
Of what tickles our history, and a boiling
Of nothing beyond the retelling
Of how fierce the past was. I want to feel
A broomstick between my listening thighs, and not
For the cheap thrill, but for the action
It lifts me to commit. Round
And round the moon again I will go.
I will sour the milk, make
Barren our local husbandry,
Sicken the chattering town scold.
I want to be again the hint
That not all is right with the world.
Renewal will give me something still remarkable to do.

Town Charter | *Ken Poyner*

There is a right day for burning witches.
You should have a little overcast,
But no rain, not even mist. Humidity,
Improperly compensated for, hungrily
Can get in the way. The sun
Should not be a point; but, the light,
Diffuse, should be striking enough
To elicit details. Temperature is not so good
If your audience needs both
An over coat and an under coat,
But you do not want them to sweat.
Executioners need to be crisp.
Wind is good. Enough wind
To keep the coals stirred, to blow
The heavy, salt ashes out into the crowd.
Too much wind and the fire
Burns out, not up, and the witnesses
Pull back to stay out of the loose flame:
They miss the mutterings of the convicted,
Failing to apprehend whether there are loosened last
Prayers, confessions, curses, rattled forgivenesses.
The day should be a day that would be good for plowing
Or carpentry or the remaking of stone.
A day for production and industry,
A day that looks into your face for utility,
And one that does not make itself obvious.
Of course, there must be witches:
Convicted, suspected, convenient.
You would not want to waste
A good burning day's fire without one.

About the Author:

Ken Poyner has put out three books of mini-fictions, and two collections of speculative poetry, all of which can be had at Amazon and other book selling sites. He has had recent work in "Analog", "Asimov's", "Café Irreal", and other places, both print and web. He worked 33 years as a systems analyst, and now assists his wife in her world class powerlifting career.

Website: [Karen and Ken Poyner](#)

Facebook: [Ken Poyner](#)

I Stand Alone | B. T. Sutherland

I am the cheese. Father is the trap. Mick is my boyfriend. Do you see my problem?	We stand dead center Lost in the moment. Mick's tongue darts, tastes, Ignores my silent signals
Seconds scurry past I balance in silence A shrouded secret Waiting for a break	His quick breath Heats my layers. He nibbles here, there Consuming my essence
He creeps closer Tail whipping the air Drawn to my siren's scent Death, waits for Mick	I warm. I warn, I soften, I crumble The trap snaps - So does Mick's neck
Placed in this position I stand sorrowfully still My pungent allure Drawing Mick closer	Was it reward enough, To dance with danger To gain a small piece Of me, for a moment?
Titillating him To want to taste me so Despite Father's intentions Mick blindly advances	I am the cheese. Father is the trap. Another Mick will come. Do you see my problem?

About the Author:

B.T. Sutherland lives in Delaware and enjoys scary books and movies with the lights on or while digging her fingernails into her husband's arm. Experiences have taught B.T. that horror happens, and it only takes an open mind to see the moments that become the stories, that end predictably or otherwise.

Facebook: [BT Sutherland](#)

Voodoo | *Sheikha A*

The palanquin's embellished
and the hour is saturated with
bigotry. I have castigated
this inchoate night with the vein
of a valiant, contrariwise to
my writing of these lines:
desultory of ink/dissipated of sin;
we are far beyond exhuming
deaths. The bones are rank
with freshness of life, flesh seizures
under the evolution after burial
and the hour awaits its master.
A few strands, a photo, needle,
blood from the juiciest rose
and a single stitch. The hour is
locked.

Voodoo (ii) | *Sheikha A*

we are between verses
and hair an onyx sheen

demure snail in a lotus
thick locks caress water

night is a coyote's tongue
I am blades of white silver

honeycomb lips: red hexagon
you are moth stroking cocoons

she put a carnivorous
crow in my head, did I
tell you I am eaten -

my arms twisted on my back
you: puncturing wind with frolic

the night rising a tantric sweat
she swathing in sweet coconut

did I tell you
she tied my feet in wolf
skin - loosen her straps of

jasmines; crow, crow her
longing to your sense of vanity

I'm summoning the cloud,
cleft speech and foggy brain

Voodoo (iv) | *Sheikha A*

She was sculpted from aphrodisiac –
honey-tongued lasso around necks

of men; breath stale yet tempestuous
lipped – one look to melt stones. Limbs

arrayed her lair; carved parallax paths
with breaths of skulls. She invaded

dreams of virgins for locks of their hair.
Down black holes of dry wells, chained

jinns like tamed slaves slaked their fire
with scents from garments fresh with

the incense of virgins' sweat. Their aromas
snatched – graves exhumed – miniature dolls

bedding upright stacks of needles, veils
ripped, a crow sent to the moon. Masters

are obeyed – there is glory even among spirits –
until their ravenous appetites break from leash,

until the lure of a girl every night is no longer
shackled to sleep, until the beds they ravage

become laced with spells of safety. Errant
hairballs whisper across her floor at night

as shadows of hurtling bugs superimposed
on her irises; moon refractions now consume

her room's walls, darkness descends as fire;
desire of jinns insatiable, her eyes growing

heavy resisting sleep. They will arrive,
feet on air, her bed will tighten with fear.

The night has been sanctioned, her spells
reverted, the visits begun, her body gasping

in invisible clutches. Shock courses through
ciliary nerves as short flashes of light – faces,

hollow bends – pathways twisted – dolls
flinging from shelves; graves ripped open:

her bed, a tale of the nights. Dawn will rise
as stamps on her body. Her slaves will return

at fullness of the moon, ploughing seeds
the same way she sowed – hallow cry –

until silence chokes her shrieks,
until her breathless body goes limp.

Boning Breaths | *Sheikha A*

My third tooth fell at thirty-three –
the epoch of brittling youth.

I can sit by my grave, right now, know
of what truly was buried: palm-sized

sack of whatever made up a broken world
up for sale. I whispered in his ear, the boy

correcting the order of clothes on the rack
in a corner that reminded me of burnt snow;

he seemed to understand why they smelt
the way they smelt, dead peoples clothes;

I told him I lust bones of teeth that never
left their gums, and like an instinct still fresh

like a musk-musty block of incense coal,
he put his hand in my *Fifth Element* coat

and drew from it a creak of orphic lament.
Signs: strong cradling of adulthood. Offer them

the Persephone of my mortality –
the lips of a black mamba

surviving the juices of anxiety.
My breaths fissuring in

contemplative aging. Cold, on the collar of
his nape, I placed a tooth. I told him to set

a price that would amount to a coin of bronze:
my fare, and square the deal without

haggle. He didn't need to look into my
eyes. *Knew so well.* All that of my premature

over-birth ever needed was an itinerary,
accurate on empathetic deviations -

how he smiles at the customer that has
just entered; gaze fixed straight on the coat,

slow-striding towards him, her mouth parting in greeting, a tooth missing.

Fatigue | *Sheikha A*

Her eyes are half bitten beans - socket-like patches of amoebae, enlarging snarl and shallow rivulets of veins taking over the hinds where eyebrows meet. Mouth sunken to meet gums in air-sucked affix; she is a booth on the helm of a night that men cannot escape. She has put her voice in the beads around her wrist, tight like a lemon gripped in the teeth of a skull; she is the book of magic mired in a frame, the one I rummage viciously for in her cupboard in a dream. Clients hang by her house like bodies crept off souls. Some search for exit on the contours of her thirst. When she chants, children flock to her like a messiah's vault opened to treasures. But when comes fatigue, she is lesions erupting in the armpits - black sores entrenched between uncomplying skin - pandemic of spells. She is reversed energy in matter. Now, her spine is the iron bar of her cage. Molecules have turned delirious, snapping growls and saw-teeth. Her face an orchid of bad dreams.

About the Author:

Sheikha A. is from Pakistan and United Arab Emirates. Her co-authored digital chapbook entitled *Nyctophiliac Confessions* is available on the publisher's website, Praxis Magazine. Her poetry has been translated into Spanish, Greek, Arabic and Persian.

Author Blog: [Write me, Saudade](#)

Friend | *Laura Coruzzi*

I have a friend under my bed
Near the foot, sometimes the head
He whispers at night
When out goes the light
Silly things like fantasy lands
And fields of dismembered hands
He says my parents won't get it
They'll dismiss and they'll set it
Aside with other made-up things
Dragons and their horde of gold rings
But I believe
This tale he does weave
Both frightening and fun
That sets my heart to hum
So one night when it's late
My parents asleep,
In slumber they keep
My curiosity to sate
I slip under the bed
And look into red eyes
Twice the normal size
Glowing from a blackened head
He smiles at me, mouth bloody and raw
I quake at the sight
I pray for daylight

I am lost in the depths of his maw
Time stands still
Or passes in a blur
I find I'm not sure
So I've had my fill
Now I've seen, I can believe
I try to writhe my way out
But I am filled with doubt
Over ever being able to leave
As he grips my wrist tight
My bedroom falls from sight
With voice ragged on both ends
He says, "Come play with me, friend."
I fall endlessly
I cry pointlessly
My heart he does rend
With each croaked, "Play with me, friend."
My parents carry on crying
And I think they must be lying
Saying they're shocked by my dying
And they're praying and they're sighing
Though I can't hear any of it
My friend just tells me, bit by bit
Into madness I slowly wend
And always hear, "Stay with me, friend."

About the Author:

Laura Coruzzi is an average Canadian who enjoys fall and cows. She has a fondness for writing horror and gets along well with cats. She has had an unmanageable ego since having a verse published at seventeen and finds herself to be good company.

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

I hurt
someone, again.
It was Halloween. We were going to see a movie. I like scary movies.
Adrenaline.
My sister and the kids were there.
I wish the kids weren't there.
They heard me curse. A lot. I 'said the eff word'.
I don't remember.
I want to.
I try playing it back in my head over and over again.
Can't sleep.
This stranger
pushed my sister.
No reason, it seemed. Bad day, I guess.
Maybe he caught his girlfriend cheating.
Rage.
Two other men pulled me off him.
That was a good thing.
Yes, that was a good thing.
I remember the one man's voice:
"Please, stop!"
He wasn't yelling. He was pleading.
I liked his voice. He is
good.
I can't see his face.
I want to.
I wish the kids weren't there.
My therapist said my guilt was
Good
She thought I felt guilt for hurting someone.
no
The guilt was for wanting to hurt him
more.
I try playing it back in my head over and over again.
Adrenaline.
I try to feel the tension of his hair around my fingers.
I try to hear the gentle tapping of his blood hitting the tile floor.
He shouldn't have pushed my sister.
He was having a bad day, I guess.
I am grateful that he pushed my sister.
Thank you,
unkind stranger.
It had been
so long.

About the Author:

Mai Kil is a horror writer and artist. She spent much of her childhood escaping from real life horrors via the world of make-believe but now uses her imagination to explore, understand, and embrace the darker sides of human nature. She is currently in the first stages of edits for her first novel and is also drafting a collection of short stories.

Author Blog: [No Killing Today](#)

Instagram: [@mai_kil_stories](#)

Portrait | *Brian Rosenberger*

The painting needed more red.

It was a portrait of my wife,
Her pale skin, an ivory I loved,
Made even more white when
Contrasted with shadows.

A portrait in black and white,
With splashes of red for accent.
Her lips.
Her nipples.
The gash on her neck.
The fear in her eyes.

I dipped my paint brush
Into her wound,
Into my inspiration.

Almost time | *Brian Rosenberger*

Carefully, he scoops
Out their insides.
To be replaced
By a long, tapered candle.
The wick burns red.

Tonight, the candles
Illuminate the porch
For the trick or treaters.
Tomorrow just skulls
And melted wax.

Blood and Feathers | *Brian Rosenberger*

Across the chest, one word, knife-carved.
Sinner.
Blood drips and drips
Crows descend and caw. An unholy choir.
The buzzards continue to circle.
The Sinner moans.
The knife quivers in the Carver's hand
Eager. But he knows his place and waits.
The birds come first.
Pity the Sinner.

The Burning Season | *Brian Rosenberger*

As a kid, I raked leaves in our backyard. Piles of leaves.
The mounds courtesy of two giant Maples.
I got a quarter for my raking efforts. Thought nothing of it.
Just enough to buy a comic or two or candy. Different times.
I loved the smell of burning leaves and the exercise of raking.
Just like today, I love the smell of my tomato plants.
Somehow, the tomatoes taste better when yielded by hand.

Where we live now, you can burn but only on a limited basis.
Oct 1st through April 30th.
Plenty of time.

I monitor the neighborhood website.
Complaints of speeding. Needs for baby-sitting.
Furniture to be sold. Cars to be bought.
And that unusual smell. Like barbequed pork.
A few posts wrote "Smells delicious" and
"Who's grilling?" and "Address needed. I'm hungry."

I do not respond.
Until the police arrive.
I offer them coffee, orange juice, Coke, even sweet tea.

They ask me about my missing wife.
I filed a missing person's report five days ago.
One of the officers has been here before.
I respond with "How about some bacon?"

I smile...

Watching them eat.

Homecoming | *Brian Rosenberger*

The Parade is over. Some really great floats this year.
The Future Farmers of America really outdid themselves –
A John Deere tractor hauling a cardboard Combine,
Harvesting our opponents' jerseys.
Our cheerleaders danced alongside, tossing candy.

At halftime,
A King and Queen crowned.
Still, despite the pageantry, despite the fan support,
We lost the game, 21-7.

It's a small town.
Friday Night Football is everything.
It's what people do. It's where people go. It's a tradition.
If you aren't at the game, you better have a good reason.
High school buses provide transportation to the game.
For the truly disabled, the game remains watchable
On the School's public access and YouTube channels.

It's beyond sport and high school athletics. It's a religion.
And like most religions, sometimes a sacrifice is needed.

We were 2-2 going into the Homecoming game. The loss drops us to 2-3.
Next week, we battle our cross town rivals, The Spartans, currently 4-1.

Sometimes a sacrifice...

The following week,
The McVeys file a missing person report on their teenage son, John.
As will the Robinsons, on their son, Matt,
And the Allens on their twin daughters, Candy and Tammy.

Rumor reigns. All the missing teens were known to hang out together.
Gossip says they all left town together. Merely rumor. Just gossip.
The fact is none of them were football supporters.

We beat The Spartans by a touchdown in the fourth quarter.

The missing children remain missing,
But with that victory, they aren't really missed by most.

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 collections and bunch more published stuff too.

Amazon Author Page: [Brian Rosenberger](#)

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AVAILABLE EXCLUSIVELY ON AMAZON
FOR PURCHASE OR BORROW

I am in the subway when they attack.

The creatures walk on two legs, and their grey skins shine under the fluorescent light. Wide, grinning mouths display small, triangular teeth. Teeth they use to rip, rend, and tear into my fellow travelers. Shrieks of anguish fill the air.

An elderly woman and a young boy dash by, pursued by three monsters. I rush to their aid, but my feet slide on the blood-slick concrete and I fall hard. Pain shoots through my ankle.

I look up as one creature falls upon the old woman. She screams at the boy, telling him to run. He hesitates, then obeys.

The monsters tear the woman's arm from her body. They swarm her, choking off her screams. I turn away.

The boy darts into an archway which leads to the stairs. He doesn't see the creature which follows. I limp after them.

Dim light reveals a series of steps and concrete walls. A maw of darkness waits at the top. Footsteps echo.

I grasp hold of the railing and use it to pull myself up the stairs. The sounds of flight have ceased. The silence grows deafening. Still, I climb.

Within a few minutes, I reach the top. Outside the shadowy archway, a smear of blood marks the wall. Whether it belongs to the boy, I don't know. I pause before the blackness, my ears attuned to the slightest sound. Looking back, I see nothing. No monster has trailed me.

In another life, I'd been a hunter of men, my talents purchased by dollars wired to my Swiss bank account. But the blood on my hands ended that time, compelling me to forsake those skills. Now, they've returned to me, like echoes in the dark.

I have no weapon. I must find one.

My pockets yield little. Eighty-five cents in change. A lighter. Cigarettes. A few jelly beans. A small bottle of spray-on hand sanitizer. It's not the arsenal I need.

The hollow repeat of a strangled cry sounds before me. Time has slipped through my fingers and I must use what I have. I plunge into the dark, the lighter in hand.

The flame flickers as fresh air washes over me. The city lies in darkness. To my left, the light bathes naked grey skin. The creature growls as it struggles to reach into the space behind a soda vending machine. The boy screams.

I pull the sanitizer from my pocket and add a scream of my own.

The beast turns on me, forgetting the boy. It charges.

I brace for the attack.

When it reaches me, I spray the face and thrust the lighter toward its mouth. It isn't as good as hairspray, but it does the job. The thing ignites.

It falls to the ground, howling in pain. The creature has become a bonfire, its skin a natural accelerant. The light it casts reveals what waits in the dark. Hundreds of snarling, tooth-filled faces.

My ankle prevents my running.

The boy peeks out from behind the machine. I keep my eyes focused on him as the creatures surround me, their circle growing tighter and tighter.

In the boy's face, I see the echo of every life I've ever taken. I hope—I pray—one life will equal many.

They take me as he melts into the darkness.

About the Author:

Naching T. Kassa is a wife, mother, and horror writer. She's created short stories, novellas, poems, and co-created three children. She lives in Eastern Washington State with Dan Kassa, her husband and biggest supporter. Naching is a member of the Horror Writers Association, Head of Publishing and Interviewer for HorrorAddicts.net, and an assistant at Crystal Lake Publishing.

Author Blog: [Frighten Me](#)

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A monster lives in my house.

I learned this a few years ago, when the neighborhood children first gathered on my street. They marched forward with bulging pockets, and after one brief nod to each other, rained their arsenal of stones upon my door. With each blow that landed, they called out for the monster with a hunger for vengeance they didn't understand. It was then that I finally realized what I am.

I am the monster on Carriageway Drive.

They come for me almost every day now, curving their backs and raising their hands in exaggerated claws. How do they know that I am here? Can they hear me? Perhaps they can smell me, their noses attuned to the differences between us.

Auntie Anne says that I should fight back, but my mother insists that we ignore them. She tells me that the children will grow out of it and that she doesn't wish to upset their parents. So, I turn the other cheek, and give them a new place to bruise.

I pull my curtains apart and watch the sun dip toward the horizon and paint the street in orange and red. Soon night will be here, and darkness will seep through my house and steal away my sanctuary.

The fading light has hidden my reflection in the glass, so I follow my outline with my finger. Mother has covered all the mirrors in the house apart from her own vanity, so my opportunities to see myself are scarce. Sometimes I sneak into her room when she leaves for the market and examine myself. I trace the scar that passes from my forehead to my chin and watch my ribs and curved spine ripple beneath my thin shirt. As I take in my frail and uneven body, I understand why I am not included in the family photographs that hang along our staircase.

Father is a very handsome man. My mother likes to remind me that he was the most popular boy in her class, with his wavy dark hair, broad shoulders, and mischievous grin. He is the son of a war hero and was the captain of the football team in high school. She was lucky to marry him, she muses over half-closed eyes.

I do not resemble my father. Even if I had been born free of irregularities, my blond hair and gray eyes mirror my mother's. This disappointed my father, who always imagined that he would lead a family made up of versions of himself. Still, I probably would have been forgiven if favoring my mother had been my only sin.

Whenever Auntie Anne comes to visit and hears one of Mother's stories of times past, her mouth tightens. She waves her hand in my mother's direction and asks me to read with her. We like to make up voices for each of the characters, and she always applauds at the end. Then she must leave, and my mother returns to her bedroom.

I slide my hand along my shelf and pull out a small, leather-bound book. It is one of my favorites; a story about a dashing prince who rescues the princess from her evil captor. The villain is supposed to look like me, but I imagine myself as the brave prince instead. I tame dragons and ride a brilliant white horse through haunted forests. I am handsome and brave. I love and am loved.

It is nearly five o'clock, so I go to the kitchen and carefully fill the mottled copper saucepan with water. I listen to it hiss its indignation as its wet base meets the stove, then it relaxes into rolling bubbles.

The aging hinges on the front door announce my Father's arrival. His heavy footsteps climb the staircase in the next room, and I hurry to pour the water into the teapot. With some luck, it will brew quickly.

A loud crash startles me and I drop the saucepan. The voices above me twist together, a duet of anger and fear that they have sung so many times before, and I place my hands over my ears. It's time to go.

With soft, deliberate steps, I leave the kitchen and open the front door. Behind the neglected flower bed is a small, wooden enclosure that once claimed to be a doghouse.

You can't hear it out there.

I cross the yard and crawl inside the kennel. The night sky pokes through the cracks left between the slats of wood, and I wrap my arms around myself. It will be over soon.

My breath forms tiny white clouds. Beyond the shrubbery that frames my house is a street filled with people getting home from work. They file into their houses, lifting their hats as they greet their wives and children, and I bite back my pleas for help. They may nod to my parents as they leave in the morning, a silent recognition of a shared community, but their children are the ones who throw stones at my house. And who was it that taught them such good aim?

The night breeze tickles my legs and I watch as the shadows behind the curtain move in and out of view. From here, it is easy to pretend that they are merely dancing; they are performing a show for me, and soon I will be able to boo and hiss at the father's cruelty, and cheer when the mother and son escape into the forgiving night. The stars will be their candles, and they will find refuge with a stranger who replaces brutality with compassion.

Instead, I wait in the kennel, underneath the blankets I have supplied for nights like this one. As the moon rises above me, the shadows withdraw from view and I can also rise from my cramped position.

I have travelled the path between my house and this kennel so many times that I have forged my own trail. The grass has folded itself under my feet so that I can make my retreat as quickly and quietly as possible. It lays ready for me, patiently waiting. My eyes shift toward the road. Would a new path treat me so kindly?

Auntie Anne lives two miles away, in a town called Wetherton. We have driven there before in our spluttering Sedan, and I follow the road in my mind. It would take a long time for me to walk there, but it is quiet at this hour.

I run my hand over my scar. What would my punishment be this time if he finds me?

My legs tremble as I make my way to the front door, and I pause before nudging it open. There is no sound or movement within the darkened hall, so I head to my bedroom. I fill a knapsack that is older than I am with clothes and my favorite stories, before throwing it over my shoulder and creeping toward the door.

Light now spills from the kitchen into the entrance hall and I hesitate. My father is sitting at the table, facing away from me, and I step back into the darkness.

There is a clink as my father's cup meets its saucer, and I remember the tea. I imagine my father's face contorting with rage as he notices the puddle that I left on the floor. He reaches for a towel with knuckles that are spotted with blood, his badges of honor for the night, and vows to teach me a lesson. There are so many lessons he wants to teach me.

My hand curls into a fist and I inch near the door, careful not to cast any shadows. For once, I am thankful for the difficulty it takes to lift my feet. Shuffling makes me that much quieter.

With one deep breath, I squeeze through the door frame and I am outside. I lumber to the road and hear the soft crunching of tiny stones beneath my feet. If I keep out of sight, I will not hear these stones when they land against my window tomorrow.

The journey will be long, so I recite my favorite story to myself. I am a knight. I am strong and tall and protect the realm from the king's injustices. I am not the main character in the neighborhood children's nightmares. I am not the beast that hunts them, or an experiment that went wrong.

A monster lives in my house.

But it was never me.

About the Author:

Elizabeth Nettleton studied Law at the Queensland University of Technology, and now lives in Colorado with her family. She has written several short stories that have been published by Short Fiction Break as part of their writing competitions, and she is currently working on her first novel.

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Featured Artist | *Robert Elrod*

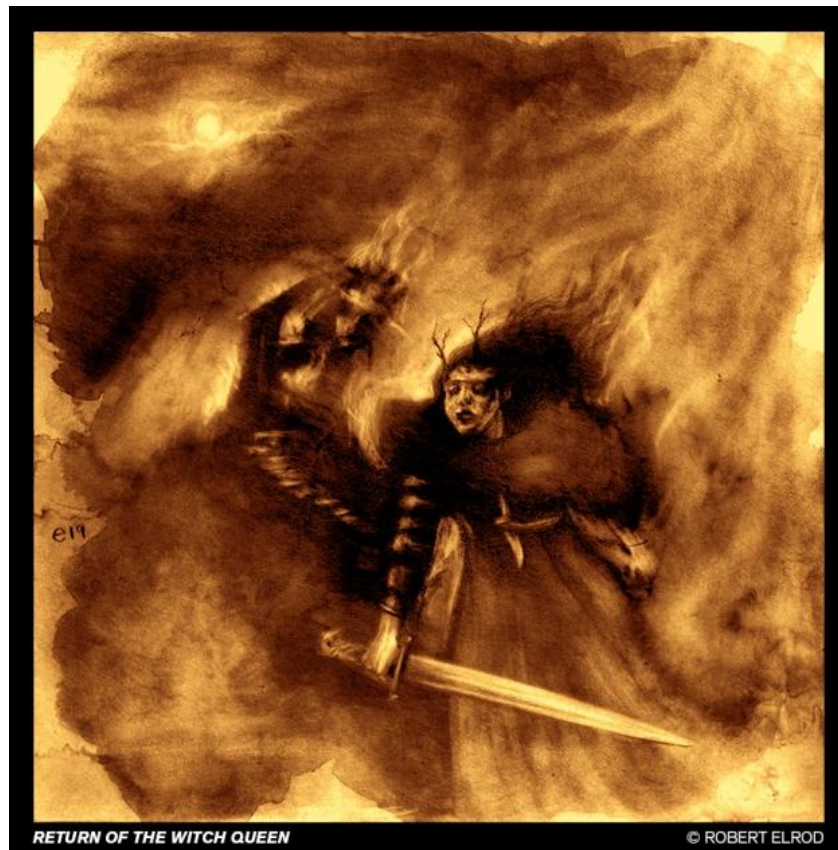
Robert Elrod draws and occasionally paints. Mostly monsters. He loves monsters.

Robert's influences are many. He grew up reading comic books and magazines, science fiction, fantasy and horror. A long-time fan of artists like Frank Frazetta, Bernie Wrightson, Jeffrey Catherine Jones, Michael Kaluta, Sanjulian, Esteban Maroto, Boris Vallejo, Don Maitz and many many others, Robert's earlier work was mainly done in ink. He's dabbled in oil, acrylic, watercolor, colored pencils and other mediums as well. These days he mostly works in graphite, adding color digitally. More recent influences would include Allen Williams, Wayne Barlowe, Carlos Huante, H.R. Giger, Zdzisław Beksinski, Travis Lewis, and many many others.



His artwork has appeared on the covers and interiors of several novels and anthologies from small-press authors and publishers. He has contributed art to publications by ArtOrder, Printed in Blood, Ragnarok Publications / Outland Entertainment, Corvidae Literary Services LLC, British Fantasy Society, Lovecraft eZine, This Is Horror, Permuted Press and ZED Presents. He has published his own artbooks and comics and has contributed to anthologies from Creephouse Comics, Books of the Dead Press, Bluewater Comics, Red Team Go, Creator's Edge Press, Abandoned Comics, and Angry Dog Press.

His work might be categorized as dark art or dark surrealism but that seems to be everchanging. You can find more of his work on his website www.robortelrodllc.com and on his Instagram feed at www.instagram.com/robortelrodllc.



It was customary to bow when the silhouettes appeared. It was said they took this as a sign of reverence and passed by, seeking another victim. Three times this summer, the silhouettes had been seen at low tide, slipping through the snake-like tendrils of seaweed that danced along the coast. The media called them mirages. Scientists blamed global warming for creating bizarre currents and airstreams that led to swirls of wind and dust. Along the coastline, strange shapes formed. Sometimes, it was said, people hallucinated in the heat and saw them as human-like figures. The elders knew better. 'Las traidoras' were the keepers of the sea, they had said, emerging when the waters bubbled and broiled. Like the vacationers at Sunset Key, they too needed to be fed, and it was time.

Mary bowed, clasping her hands together over her white dress as if in prayer, her shiny red fingernails casting a glare in the sunlight. She and John weren't religious people, but if there was a time to start praying, it was now.

"Not again," she said. "You see it too, don't you?"

John stood, refusing to bow, not about to back down from a silhouette.

"Mary, you've been wanting to come here for years. You told me this place called out to you. We paid good money. We're not going to let some local legend ruin our vacation. Someone's trying to get rid of tourists and keep the beach to themselves," John said.

"But just last week! Betty and Fred-" Mary said.

"Probably took off to Belize. They never had children. They're retired. They always wanted to live off-grid. I bet they snuck away when they could. Do you really believe they were eaten by a sea hag? Come on, Mary. We're scientists. There's no evidence."

The silhouette evaporated. Rubbing her eyes, Mary looked toward the calm seas, searching for the telltale signs. The elders had warned of their fingertips emerging from the water; the color of blood, they foreshadowed the brutal death their victims faced. John, too, looked across the horizon, eyes fixed on a mysterious point. Maybe Belize.

"Belize. I remember that dinner party at Betty and Fred's. It wasn't only their dream. I saw that look in your eyes, John. We could just leave this place with its horrible sea hags and myths and go now. Our kids are grown. We just retired, too. What's stopping us?"

John smiled, creasing his tanned face. His blue eyes twinkled.

"Just ourselves," he said. "I'm ready when you are."

That night, they headed to their cottage and packed.

"I've called for a charter back to Key West. It'll be here in twenty minutes," said John, taking Mary's hand tenderly. "But are you sure, Mary?"

"We'll send for everything else," said Mary. "If we don't go now, we never will. Who would have thought that some silly legend would bring us closer to a dream?"

At the docks, a skiff approached, cutting through the silent sea. The boat halted on the shore where John and Mary waited. A weathered older woman with tufts of white hair disembarked and waved.

The sailor woman said, "I'm Eldris," and bowed her head slightly. Mary bowed back, then handed Eldris their tickets as John hauled their bags aboard the craft.

The boat sputtered to life and thrust forward into the night.

From where she steered, Eldris turned to the couple.

"Scared off by the sea hags?" she asked.

"What? No," John said. "We're going to Belize. It's been a dream for a long time." As the water began to get choppy, the boat swayed. John put his arm around Mary.

"It's not only a legend, you know. Climate changes churn the seas and las traidoras float to the surface. They take different forms. Sometimes, they live among us, even for many years."

Eldris smiled, revealing crooked, pointy teeth.

"Tell me, what will you do if they come for you?" Eldris asked.

John laughed. Mary sat quietly.

"Bet they're friends with Sasquatch. Maybe even the Loch Ness monster. Besides, Key West is straight ahead of us now," John said.

"Is it, John?" Eldris asked.

Around them, the ocean swirled. Waves spired and twirled, encasing the boat. Strange shapes dotted the crests of the waves, emerging from the water and surrounding them.

"Mary, hang on!" John pulled her tightly against him. "Mary, are you okay?"

“John,” Mary said. “I’m sorry.”

In the moonlight, Mary’s eyes flared red, as red as her fingernails, as red as the legendary fingertips of the sea hags. At once, Mary was upon him, unable to avoid the draw of her people. The shapes took form and leapt aboard, joining Mary to engulf John under the thunderous roar of the water.

Eldris held fast and cut through the waves back into the calm waters at her usual dock on Key West. At the dock, a local fisherman smoked a cigarette and watched.

“I thought you had passengers tonight, El,” he said.

“They decided to go to Belize instead. Popular destination this time of year,” she said, smiling. As she pulled the boat in with her rugged hands, her red fingernails reflected the moonlight. Beyond her, in the distance, the waves rose and fell like teeth gnashing until the maw of the ocean, satisfied, became calm.

About the Author:

Alexandra Otto writes short stories, essays, and short screenplays. She is currently working on her first novel. When Alex isn't writing, she is outsmarting the largest bears in the world in south-central Alaska.

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Guard Duty | Alyson Faye

The winery was locked up for the night; Roberto’s muffled footsteps stalked the corridors, his torch softening the shadows. A sound made him duck behind a crate. A muted shuffling step echoed.

“Damn it. Paul promised everyone was gone by 10pm.” Roberto crouched, his spine cracking.

A shape limped into sight. “I heard your bones speak, boy.”

Roberto slammed into the figure, who did not flinch. Instead it pithed his spine with a chisel, leaving Roberto, unable to move, watching the hammer hover over his head.

“Brain pulp for the wine,” crooned the nightwatchman. “The secret ingredient to our success.”

About the Author:

Alyson lives in the UK; her fiction has been published both in print anthologies - *DeadCades*, *Women in Horror Annual 2*, *Trembling with Fear 1 & 2*, *Coffin Bell Journal 1* and in ezines. Her latest story, *Night of the Rider*, is published by Demailn in their Short Sharp Shocks! E-book series. She performs at open mics, teaches, edits and hangs out with her dog on the moor in all weathers.

Author Blog: [Alyson Faye Wordpress](#)

Twitter: [@AlysonFaye2](#)

Helen stood back and looked at her dining room table. It was almost perfect. Candle flames danced around a silver platter of roast chicken with golden-brown skin and the parsnips and carrots that surrounded it. She bit her nails and paced, then rearranged the sweet potato casserole and fresh rolls until she felt satisfied. Every guest would have their own salt and pepper shakers along with an individual small dish of cranberry butter. Most of the windows were open and the aroma of cinnamon baked apples rode around the house on the back of the crisp Autumn breeze. She closed her eyes, relaxed her shoulders, then took a deep breath—she didn't want any fuss, not tonight, and she hoped her guests would understand.

All the lights, except in the one in the kitchen, had been turned off. Helen was finishing dessert. She hummed and drizzled hot caramel into the ramekins that were filled with the baked Honeycrisps and sprinkled the tops with a buttery oat crumble. The doorbell rang and she jumped. After grabbing a note card from the counter, she rushed from the kitchen to the living room. *She's a little early, but that's ok*, she thought. She took a breath, then opened the door. Her sister in law, Mary, tried to take a step in, but Helen blocked the entrance with her body.

Mary pulled her jacket around her. "What the hell, Helen? I'm really cold! Can't I just come in?" Helen held out the notecard toward her. Mary hesitated, but took it and squinted down at it. "What's this about, now?"

Helen insisted, "Please, before you come in, I need you to read the card aloud...after I ask you the question first. It's important, Mary. You know I wouldn't ask otherwise."

"But what's it about?" Mary sighed.

"It's just something I'm trying. I promise—it's nothing serious. Please, Mary." She pleaded.

"God damn it...alright, then. Go ahead." Mary rolled her eyes.

"How do you enter the circle?" Helen asked.

Mary shook her head, paused and bit her lip, then mumbled, "In perfect love and perfect trust."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Helen squealed then dragged her inside.

"Whatever." Mary shrugged.

They went to the kitchen and poured two glasses of merlot. Helen told her only two other people were coming.

"Oh? Do I know them?" Mary raised an eyebrow.

"It's a surprise. You've met them before, but it's been a while. Heck, it's been a while for me too. I just thought it'd be nice for all of us to catch up."

"Great, sounds...thrilling. I hope you're not setting me up with anyone. After that last chick, ugh, she was a disaster! It's awful dark in here, don't you think?"

"As dark as it needs to be."

"Um, ok. How about the windows? It's chilly in here."

"I need them open. I wanted to air out the house."

"Whatever, your house. Are you making them read that card too?" Mary snorted.

"No, they don't need to. That was just for you." Helen smiled.

"Alright, that's it! Are you going to enlighten me to what you're up to? You told me this was supposed to just be dinner with some friends!"

"And it will be. Do you want to put this on the table for me?" Helen held out another bottle of wine.

"Unbelievable...", Mary snorted, "Sure, yeah. No problem".

"Good. I'm right behind you with dessert."

They walked into the dining room and Mary gasped. A shiver ran up her back. *What in the world is she doing this time? This is too freaking creepy*, she thought. The table was ornamented with a black cloth and black candles. All four place settings were black; the plates, glasses, cutlery, and even the napkins. Two of the chairs were draped in black also. Despite the dark décor, the food smelled and looked delectable. Mary finished her wine and set her glass down.

Helen walked over, lifted Mary's glass, and handed it to her. "You're at the other end with me, so you'll have to move your glass. The draped chairs are for the other guests...I should've said. Also, I'll need you to turn your phone off."

"What? Why? If you don't explain this crap right now, I'm out, I mean it!"

"I just want to have a nice dinner. You know how lonely I am this time of year. Can't you just roll with this? Is that really too much to ask?" Helen's lip quivered and tears filled her eyes.

Mary grabbed her glass. "Fine, I'll move the damn glass. Jeesh."

Helen took two folded papers from her apron and then asked Mary to join hands with her. They walked over to the draped chairs. Mary flinched when she saw Helen hold the papers over the candle's flame. "Are you crazy? You'll burn the damn table cloth or worse," she shouted.

"Quiet or this won't work. We need to focus!" Helen hissed.

"Focus on what exactly? You're acting abnormal, even for you."

"Just stop talking! Please...I'm begging you."

The papers burned and bits of ash whirled about. Mary yanked her hand away. "This's really freaking me out. You're supposed to have people here any minute, remember? This's on another level Helen and no one is going to enjoy this—whatever the hell this display is supposed to be! It's morbid!"

Helen didn't retort, but instead silently began to serve the food. She put some on the guest's plates and then their own. Mary watched in disbelief as her sister-in-law pulled out a chair and then gestured for her to sit, to which she halfheartedly did. Then she took her own seat, put her finger to her mouth, and shook her head. She gestured to their plates and made an eating motion.

Mary fumed when Helen began eating and went to open her mouth, but Helen's hand went over it before she could speak, then she once again put her finger to her mouth and motioned for her to eat. She wrenched Helen's hand away and seethed. *I'm going to have to commit her! She's gone absolutely off the rails this time!* Her sister-in-law's actions spoiled her appetite and she pushed around her food in protest. The other guests still hadn't arrived and Helen had already eaten most of her vegetables.

Mary folded her arms over her chest, but lost it when Helen began to butter a roll. "Don't you think it's rude to eat before the other guests have arrived? Their food is probably cold by now! This is, by far, the strangest thing you've ever done. It's beyond cuckoo! I know you asked me to be open-minded, but this's too much! I'm beyond disturbed and you're scaring me! Explain or I'm leaving!"

"I asked you here because you were an important part of the process. The other guests were supposed to come, but your rude comments...look, it doesn't matter now. You should've stayed quiet. Cold food isn't the issue here—you are!" Helen snapped.

"Who're these damn guests that aren't coming now? Tell me!"

The cold room grew even more frigid and an icy mist settled onto their skin. The candle flames bobbed in a frenzy and two shadowy figures began to materialize. Mary screamed and shot up from the table.

Helen smirked, "Well, they've come after all. Will and Theo are here, Mary, despite your blabber mouth. Will always said you never knew when to shut up, ha, was he ever right!" Helen's voice softened. "Will loved you...and you were always Theo's favorite Aunt you know that. He loved you so much. You were the cool Aunt, he always said."

Mary didn't move an inch. It was like her limbs were filled with cement. Her mouth hung open, but no words came. Some of the candles went out and it was harder to see. Goose pimples riddled her flesh and she couldn't stop trembling. A large lump like an egg formed in her throat and she had to force it down before she stammered, "Helen...Will and Theo...they died over four years ago. My brother and nephew...your husband and son are dead. They're dead."

Helen laughed. "I know that silly, I'm not crazy! And now they're joining us for dinner! Now, will you please sit back down and let us all enjoy it as a family?"

Dani didn't want to be at Jean Bello's Halloween party. She wanted to be at home, popping candy corn, drinking hot chocolate, and reading comics. All of the girls were dressed up as witches or vampires, but she came as a lady bug, which garnered a ton of snickers. She didn't know anyone other than Jean. Her mother and Mrs. Bello were jazzercise buddies and she knew this was their doing. *Why can't people just leave well enough alone*, she wondered.

Jean and her were in the same classes, but they never talked unless Jean was trying to copy off her homework. Dani's mother practically pushed her out the door and into the car earlier. She told her that a fourteen-year-old girl should be having fun on Halloween, not reading a book up in her bedroom like some kind of recluse.

After some chips, dip, and boy talk, Jean said they were all going to play a game. She grinned at Dani and said she should go first. She instructed her to go into the bathroom with the light off and stare into the mirror until the image of her future husband appeared. All the girls giggled as they pushed her toward the bathroom door.

"But I just got here a little while ago, can't we do this later?" Dani pleaded.

"No, we have so many other fun things to get to. We wanted to do this first." Jean smiled.

"But how long do I stare for? Can't someone come with me?"

"Not too long, but you have to go alone or it won't work. We'll all wait out here." Jean said.

"What if I don't see anything?"

"Then you'll be an unmarried hobo all your life who eats canned cat food and feeds the leftovers to the twenty plus strays that live outside your rusty old trailer. Now, c'mon, just go already!" Jean shouted.

They didn't tell her of course that they untwisted the lightbulbs or that Jean's sixteen-year brother, Bobby, was hiding in the bathtub with the shower curtain drawn. He was wearing all black and had on a mask. Jean asked him earlier in the day if he'd help her scare one her friends and he'd agreed. He was home since he promised he would keep an eye on things and hand out candy while their parents went to a party of their own.

Dani went into the bathroom and shut the door. She stared into the mirror and waited for her eyes to adjust. She hated this. Being forced to do anything sucked, first she was forced to come to this lame party and now she was forced into this. She didn't hear him over the chorus of giggles on the other side of the door. He had crept out and was standing to the far right of her in the corner. Dani's heart pounded all the way into her ears. She tried to open the door, but they had barricaded themselves against it. When she tried the light, it didn't work.

"Let me out, you guys! It's not funny!" She cried.

"Stop being a big baby!" Jean said through the door. "Don't you wanna see your future husband? We're not opening this door until you do it, so you might as well just hurry up. And focus or it won't work!"

Dani whimpered and let go of the door handle. She turned back to face the mirror. She still didn't see Bobby standing in the dark. Her eyes began to adjust, but only some, and she stared at the mirror and waited. She swallowed the lump in her throat and tried to control her breathing. 1, 2, 3, 4...she breathed in and out.

Bobby abandoned the mask. He figured it would be scary enough without it anyway and didn't want to give the poor girl a heart attack. He'd snuck a peek at her earlier before he went into the bathroom. Her golden hair was pulled into a pony tail and she wore a headband with springy antennae. *Maybe I'll ask her out sometime*, he thought. He smiled in the dark and walked up behind her.

Dani covered her eyes with her hands and whispered that it was going to be ok, that there was no such thing. A gust of air hit her neck and she whined. Something touched her ponytail. She froze and uncovered her eyes. In the mirror she could make out a face floating just above her own. It was definitely the face of a man. She screamed and began pounding on the door. "Let me out! Please, let me out!" She was crying and gasping for air.

"Hey, it's alright, it's ok. Calm down." Bobby put his hand on her shoulder, but she shrieked even louder when he touched her and she shoved at him in the darkness.

Dani fumbled around for anything to protect herself. She was able to find an object on the bathroom sink. It felt like scissors. She turned around, screamed, then she stabbed and stabbed and stabbed until she heard whoever had been behind her hit the floor.

The door flew open and Dani fell forward onto the carpet. The girls were laughing hysterically until they saw Bobby lying on the bathroom floor. Blood was creeping out from his wounds and a pair of scissors stuck out of his left eye. Dani looked up at all the horrified faces and then back to the body on the floor. No one moved.

"I didn't know...I didn't know..." Dani looked down at her bloody handprints then threw up all over Jean's feet.

“Bobby? Bobby! Oh my God, what did you do? It was supposed to be a joke! What did you do to my brother?” Jean screamed, then fell to her knees. She crawled to her brother and lay her head on his chest. Over and over she whispered, “It was just a party trick. It was just a party trick...”

About the Author:

Vivian Kasley lives in the land of the strange and unusual, Florida! She’s an educator who writes in her spare time. Her stories have appeared in Gypsum Sound Tales, Dark Moon Digest, Castrum Press, and Sirens Call Publications. She has more stories on the way, including her first novella. When not writing, she’s reading or enjoying life with her other half and fur babies.

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The Sweetest Curse | Jonathan Houston

As I opened my eyes, I could see it; a place so far away. There were flashes of images and feelings, a dreamscape for my senses. A whiff of hot caramel dripping onto chocolate, a glimmer of sugar, sparkling as it dusted the air. I could hear the soft chorus of wind chimes, drifting against a wind of sweet decadence.

I remembered the evenings by the fire. Days of crafting confections were layered between nights of stories, both real and imaginary. For a brief moment, I was there, sitting against my mother as she knit a scarf for her sister. She would hum an entrancing tune, the same she used to lull me to sleep. I never did find out what it was called.

The pain snapped me back. As I lay upon the fertile ground, bathed in a rich sanguine tapestry, I felt death’s icy fingers crawling across my skin. Above me, the leaves rustled as the air swept between the branches. The sound was soothing to my spirit. Like my mother’s melancholy melody, it would carry me into a deep slumber.

I whispered upon the wind - one last incantation before I drifted into the shadows. It was an ancient curse, carved into the bones of the forsaken. My light may be extinguished, but this flame would burn eternally. Those who had struck me down would never forget my name; it would be forever etched into their souls.

I heard the young man scream, followed by the woman. The sound echoed distantly against the trees. The words escaped my lips, and entered their hearts. My mouth quivered as I formed the faintest smile. *They should have cut off my head*, I thought. Thankfully, due to their carelessness, I would die knowing that they will suffer in eternal agony for their offenses against me.

As I closed my eyes, I was back home. The scent of my mother’s cooking filled my nose. It was a soft aroma of succulent fat and crisped flesh. I could even smell the sugar from the treats we fed them as it stewed in their bellies and permeated into their young skin.

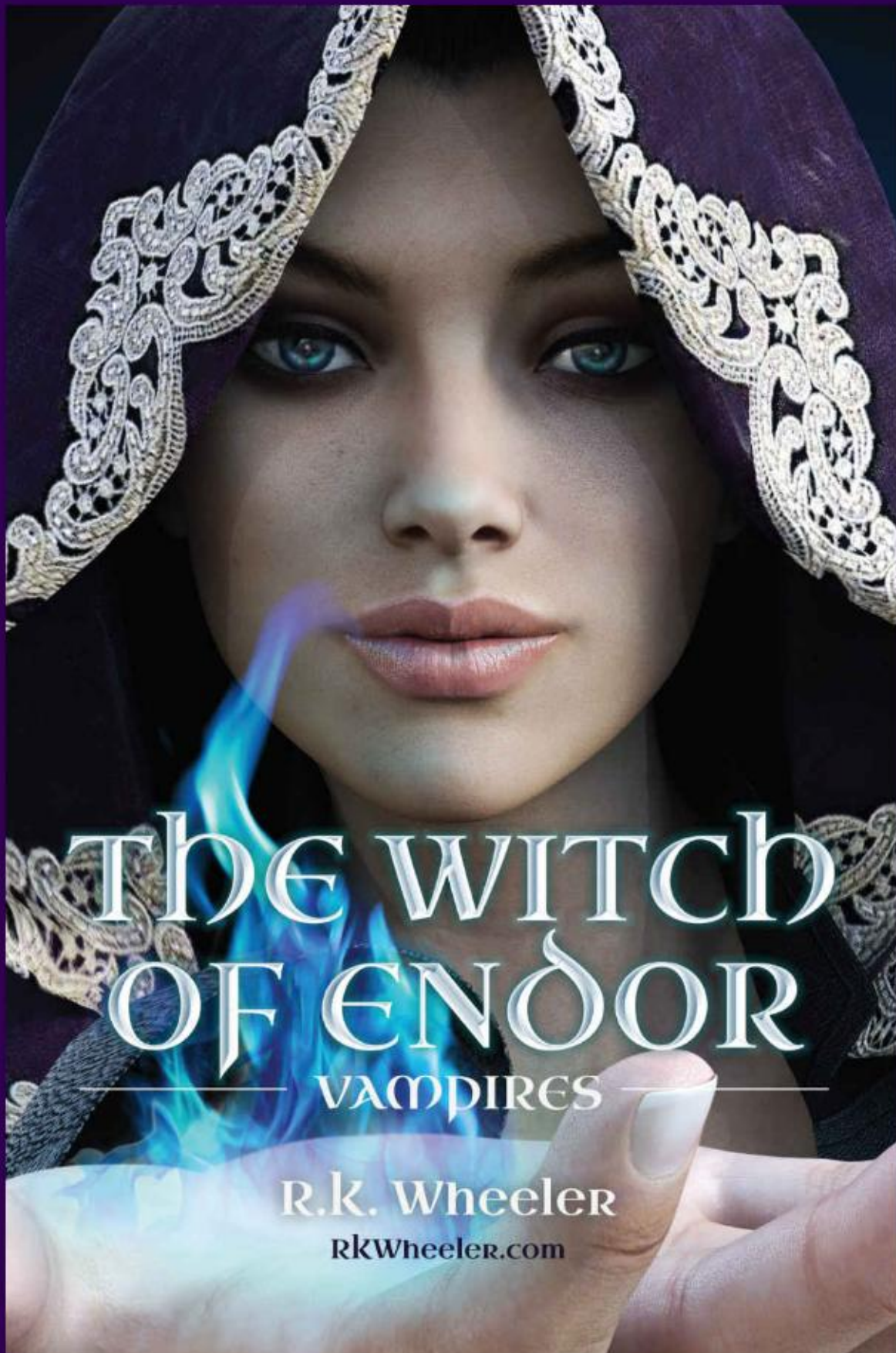
The hungry ones always tasted the best.

About the Author:

Jonathan is a freelance copywriter living in Portland, OR. He also likes to dabble in creative fiction from time to time. He’s been writing professionally since 2014, and unprofessionally all his life.

Facebook: [Jon Houston](#)

Vampire lovers, betrayed by their own.



Available on Amazon

In spite of it being mid-afternoon, Mrs. Hinson was still in her dressing gown. She sat in the solid and uncomfortable armchair that came with her room, although she did not mind. She had always been a simple and easy-going soul who wanted for very little, and at that exact moment she was happy enough just to be gazing at the peeling and stained wallpaper. Fast approaching eighty, she could not afford to be finicky. A radio somewhere nearby played stuffy commentary on some upcoming by-election, probably being listened to by another resident with more retained sense than many of them as the sun glared through the thin curtains of her grimy window.

The healthcare assistant—not a nurse by far—suddenly wheeled in her trolley, fighting against the thick brown carpet, and shut the door after her. She was middle-aged, dressed in the standard lime green attire, and overly plump in shape.

“HELLO, MRS. HINSON!” she yelled into the old woman’s face.

“Hello love,” she replied, smiling with ill-fitted dentures.

“HOW ARE YOU TODAY?!”

“Very well, thank you love.”

“DO YOU NEED ANYTHING?!”

“No thank you sweetheart, I’m grand.”

Satisfied, the assistant went about doing the bare minimum of cleaning that care home management and the regulations would allow.

While dusting in the lightest possible sense, the assistant spied a new photograph that had been placed on the bedside cabinet.

Remembering that Mrs. Hinson was not really as deaf as most of the others, the assistant pointed to the picture and asked her in a more normal voice, “Is this something your daughter has brought you?”

“Yes love,” the old woman replied, “just the other day.”

Framed in faux-silver, it was an ancient Polaroid displaying a twenty-something Sandra Hinson. She was dressed in a red and white polka dot dress, with a handsome man in overalls of a similar age, beside a blue-green Morris Minor. Their smiles were natural and true, their hands joined.

The assistant picked up the picture and brought it over to Mrs. Hinson, setting it on the tray table in front of her.

“Is this your husband?” the assistant asked.

“Why yes,” said Mrs. Hinson, “that’s John all right. You know, I remember that day like it was yesterday.”

Having got the information she needed, the assistant opened the door and looked outside: no one was about. Afternoon tea would not be brought for another half an hour or so. She had plenty of time.

The assistant firmly re-closed the door, and returned to the old woman.

She stood before Mrs. Hinson, leaning in and staring into her eyes.

“Tell me about this day,” said the assistant, motioning downwards to the picture.

Mrs. Hinson happily complied: “Well, it was summer 1963, and me and John had just got married.”

The assistant, still staring into Hinson’s eyes, opened her mouth and swallowed. A big lump went down her throat.

“Tell me more,” the assistant said.

Mrs. Hinson seemed to drift off for a moment, but then continued. “John had just bought that car, for a decent sum, too.”

The assistant opened her mouth again and swallowed an even bigger lump down.

“And what did you have at the picnic?” the assistant asked, licking her lips.

Mrs. Hinson struggled a little, the confusion growing within her. “Beef paste butties, and, and, and...”

“What was it?” the assistant demanded, her face reddening with craving, leaning in further, resting her hands on Hinson’s shoulders.

“Trifle, I made a trifle,” the old woman remembered, and the assistant took another big gulp.

Gaining a grip, she asked one final question: “Remind me, Mrs. Hinson, what was your husband’s name?”

Mrs. Hinson was quiet.

“Come on, Mrs. Hinson,” grilled the assistant. “What was his name?”

The non-nurse clenched her shoulders tighter, making the old woman uncomfortable.

“John,” she at last surrendered. “It was John! John Hinson!”

The assistant took a big closing swallow, unleashed Mrs. Hinson from her grasp, and continued cleaning the room as was her duty.

The task was complete within a few minutes, and when the assistant looked back upon Mrs. Hinson she had returned to her usual happy-go-lucky state.

The assistant picked up the picture and asked, "Mrs. Hinson, who are these people?"

The old woman squinted, before replying, "No idea love...not a clue."

"What was your husband's name?"

Mrs. Hinson thought for a moment before smiling. "I don't think I was ever married pet, sorry."

The assistant was pleased with her answers, and replaced the photograph on the cabinet.

Pushing her trolley to the door, she declared, "All done, Mrs. Hinson, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Thank you love," said the old woman, content to be back gazing at the wall.

"Are you sure you don't need anything?"

"I'm grand love, thank you. You're an angel, you know."

The assistant stopped and grinned to herself.

"I know I am," she said, "of a kind..."

Opening the door, the assistant drove her trolley out and onto the next resident's room.

"There are no awards for mercy. The true magistri have no need of compassion or honour when eternity is the prize." – from the *Niger Verba*, verses 210-212 (translator unknown)

About the Author:

Harris Coverley has short fiction published or forthcoming in *Curiosities*, *Planet Scumm*, and *Theme of Absence*, as well as poetry in *Star*Line*, *Scifaikuest*, and the Weird Poets Society anthology, *Speculations*. "An Angel" forms part of his "Magistri Mythos" sequence of stories, which includes "She Comes at Night" (published in Volume IV, Issue 1 of *The J.J. Outré Review*). He lives in Manchester, England.

Author Blog: [@ha_coverley](#)

Twitter: [@ha_coverley](#)

Found | *Belinda Brady*

At first, I thought I'd dreamt it, but the discovery of a body confirmed the worst; a vampire had attacked someone near my house, around the same time I was out walking thanks to a bout of sleeplessness, my mind foggy with the memory.

I'd since decided to catch this monster.

It's late and I'm waiting for my target, seeing only the odd passer-by, who speed up when they see me.

Defeated, I head home where I catch sight of myself in the mirror.

My eyes glow red, skin a dull white, fangs sharp and extracted.

I've found the vampire.

About the Author:

Belinda is passionate about stories and after years of procrastinating, has finally turned her hand to writing them, with a preference for supernatural/thriller themes; both often competing for her attention. She has had several stories published in a variety of publications, both online and in anthologies. Belinda lives in Australia with her family and has been known to enjoy the company of cats over people.

Instagram: [@witchy_woman](#)

Pricket Bellow Lane was a street not unlike any others found across the country. It was just a street. A street of very few homes and even fewer residents. In total, there were about five houses on Pricket Bellow that sat far apart from one another, and of those five, only two were filled with life. Houses on Pricket Bellow always seemed to remain empty for the most part and would quickly go back on the market about two weeks after a family or couple had moved in. In one of the inhabited homes on the street was a man that the residents of the small, Appalachian town of Coldshaw called Ol' Man Chuchip, even though he was probably not of Native American descent as far as anyone could tell -- no one had ever really seen him before -- but it was what he was always known as. In the other occupied home on the street, about 5 blocks down, was Quinn Hopper and her Himalayan cat, Fish. The newest member of the home was Quinn's five-year-old little brother, Noah, of whom was in her custody after the recent death of their parents. The three of them, and probably Ol' Man Chuchip as well if you'd ask him, never found anything unusual in living on Pricket Bellow Lane, even though all of Coldshaw had heard some horribly strange stories told by the ex-residents of it. Quinn had been living in the same house for two years, never being one to agree to the odd stories. She even found comfort in their origins and tales in how utterly ridiculous all the cryptid hogwash was. After all, there's only a need to fear something if the idea of it is worth fearing. Quinn would have needed to have had something come up to the front door, ring the doorbell, and talk to her face-to-face before she would be a firm believer in any of the nonsensical folklore created by Coldshaw's finest via drunk ramblings and hearsay.

It was about three in the morning one night during the late fall of '86 when Quinn found herself waking up to the sound of Noah whispering against her bedroom door. She sat up in the black of her bedroom with the orange glow of the street light across the way shining against the window blinds and listened for the voice again, wondering if she had actually dreamt it. When it came again, this time with a creak of the door opening and a little round face with black, unkempt hair peering in at her, Quinn grumbled and rubbed her eyes.

"There's a deer! A deer is walking down the road!" Noah whispered even though the only family member that was still sleeping and at risk of waking up was Fish in her cat bed, who meowed with annoyance and curled into a ball when Noah's voice rose in pitch with excitement. Before Quinn could say anything, Noah had turned and was stepping lightly down the hallway with a grin towards the living room to go look at the deer out of the window.

"What are you even doing up at this time?" Quinn called to him, but he didn't answer, so she kicked the blankets off and scurried after him, apologizing to Fish for the disturbance as she walked out of her room. Noah was standing at the too-high window on his tiptoes and with his chin resting on the windowsill. "So, it's a deer. We see deer all the time. Let's get you back to bed. You have school in the morning—" Noah shushed her and didn't move.

Quinn rolled her eyes and rested her elbows on the windowsill next to him, scanning the area for the deer. Everything was blanketed in the darkness of night with only one spot on the road and a little onto the driveway lit up with the gleam of the street light, as if it was a theater stage waiting for its performer to step into it. The heavy woods across the way was still, no movement, no life, nothing.

"Well, I don't see anything. Come on." Quinn grabbed his elbow and tried leading him back away from the window, but Noah just twisted out of her grasp and returned his eyes to the road outside. "Whatever. All this for a deer— but I am telling you right now, Bud, when that clock hits seven in the morning, and I can't get you up out of bed because you're exhausted, I'm not—" Quinn's mouth stayed open slightly as she regarded the shadowy figure that was slowly making its way down the road. "There he is."

The two stood silently as the animal came more into view but not enough to see it fully. As it was, it only looked to be a silhouette of a deer, if anything, in the darkness. Fish came prancing over to them and jumped up onto the windowsill, sitting down right beside Noah's face, and joined in watching, very indifferent to what was going on as she licked her shoulder.

"Ugh, move, Fish!" Noah groused as he pushed at the cat's fluffy tail that was swatting him in the face and blocking his view. Quinn glanced over at him and smiled at his child-like joy in seeing something so trivial as a boring deer that probably always walked about at night, but slowly Noah's toothy grin melted into a twisted grimace. His body tightened, and his eyes were bugged out of his head. Quinn said his name a couple of times, the last with a hint of worry in it, but Noah would not remove his eyes from the window. He was frozen in place, as if made of marble, with his hand still raised from smacking the cat's tail away. Fish hissed harshly at the window and ground out a garbled growl. Quinn shifted her gaze back at the deer that was now stepping into the light of the street lamp. It seemed to keep its front half turned away from them, as the only parts of it that she could make out were its hind legs, part of its back, and what could have possibly been its front legs. No head.

The Hoppers watched as it sidestepped down the road like that, its legs cracked and bent at the knees as if it was crab-walking. It did this leisurely at first, but as it rounded the corner and up their driveway, its back-half still facing them, the deer, if it could be called such, clacked its hooves harshly on the pavement and hobbled up the driveway quite hastily and disjointed in movement. Noah sucked in a breath and let out a low, stomach-turning moan, his eyes never moving from the animal, and Fish made another horrible sound before jumping down from the windowsill. Quinn grabbed Noah and pulled him down onto the floor, brushing the loose strands of hair on his face back and trying to calm him as he kept wailing in fear. She picked him up, carried him back to his bedroom, and laid him down, but Noah remained stiff as a board with his arms and legs stuck straight. His face was emotionless.

"What's wrong, huh? What's going on with you? It was just a... deer." Quinn tried desperately to get him to return to reality with her, but he would not answer. Fish, who had followed them back, would not take one step near him. Breathing in deeply, and trying to regain her composure, Quinn reluctantly reached for Noah's lamp and clicked it off, making his bedroom pitch black as she stretched a section of the window blinds open with her fingers and looked out towards where the deer had been. She didn't see anything. She saw only an empty Pricket Bellow Lane and an untouched stretch of woods across the way. Their driveway was just the same.

Quinn backed away from the blinds and shot a glance at Noah, who now appeared to be sleeping soundly, and then at Fish stretching contently, as if the horror they had all just been witnesses to had not occurred.

"It was just a deer, yeah? It—it, uh, must've gone off into the woods or... something." Quinn rubbed her face, trying to rationalize what had just happened. She stared at Noah as she reached over and touched his face in worry. "Or maybe I was *dreaming* all this nonsense and actually got up out of bed and came back here for nothing, huh, Fish?" Fish walked away down the hall without an answer to relieve Quinn of her fears. Quinn left the room with more worries in her mind than she cared to have.

It was nearly half-past three when Quinn burrowed back down into her bed. She stared at the orange-illuminated blinds for a bit, letting her mind run rampant, before finally shutting her eyes.

A ring of the doorbell and a rapid knocking of urgency came from the front door. Quinn bolted up in her bed and looked over at the clock. No more than ten minutes had passed since she had laid down.

Someone's come visiting at almost four in the morning?

Quinn shook her head and got up to peek through her bedroom blinds towards the front door. There was a man in a trench coat and hat standing on the porch rocking back on his heels. Reluctantly, and a little frightened at the large number of strange occurrences going on back-to-back, Quinn walked out into the living room towards the door, stopping in place to wonder if she was actually going to go over and answer it. She decided on cracking the living room window open just enough to talk to the untimely visitor.

"Can I help you?" she asked. The man turned to the window and tilted his head in confusion. "It's four in the morning."

The man's trench coat was buttoned all the way up to his neck. His hat was some form of an old fedora and looked to be made up of coarse, brown animal fur, and the more Quinn studied him, the more his trench coat appeared to be made from the same material. There was a noticeable buzzing of flies on the porch all around him, and a few landed on his face, crawling around on his mouth and up on his eyelids, but he didn't swat them away or even flinch when they landed. He didn't have any eyebrows or lashes, and, from what Quinn could tell under his hat, he didn't have any hair on his head either. His eyes looked dark and glassy, and when he smiled, his teeth were all the exact same shape and size like some kind of macabre cartoon character.

"I do not need any help, no. It is four in the morning." He struggled with his words and spoke like he had just finished swallowing jagged glass down his throat. Quinn felt sweat pooling at every bend of her body. "Oh, I am not lost. This is called Pricket Bellow Lane." Quinn nodded with a tight jaw. "I believe that some things tonight have been strange to you, yes. May I come in?" The man gave another smile that was wide, but this time, it made his eyes squint almost into lines with the force of it. Quinn swallowed hard and reached up to close the window.

"No, I'm sorry." She shut it with a thud and locked it back. The man stepped over directly in front of the window with his smile still plastered onto his smooth face. He said something that was muffled by the glass, but then he shook his head wildly and spoke louder.

"May I come in?" Quinn didn't answer. "May I come in?"

"Go away, now, or I'm gonna call the cops!" she yelled, stepping away from the window with gritted teeth. She heard Fish beside her foot start up with a horrible mantra of groans and hisses again.

"May I come in?" the man asked monotoned, with his hands now flat against the screen of the window. He dug his fingers into it and scratched them down with a sharp, grating sound. Quinn shot forward and closed the blinds. "May I come in?"

She ran for the phone out in the kitchen and dialed 911. Noah appeared in the hallway rubbing his eyes, and Fish was now lumbering in circles on the floor, chittering. Quinn motioned for Noah to stay back, but he muttered a question about what was going on and walked over to Fish.

Noah crouched down and studied the cat. "What is wrong with her?" he mumbled. The man outside banged on the door, and then again at the windows, still asking to come in, but now it was harsh and loud, still cracked with his glass-cut voice. Noah's eyes widened at Quinn, and he ran over to her and held onto her waist. The other end of the phone line answered, and Quinn sighed with pointless relief.

"Hi, hello, I need someone sent to 610 Pricket Bellow Lane right now! There is--" Quinn shouted as a loud thud was heard on the roof. Noah started crying as they both stood stock still listening to what sounded like animal hooves clopping up and down at a quick pace right above them. The operator's static voice finally snapped Quinn back into some semblance of reality. "There is a man here," she whispered, "He's asking to come in, and he won't leave us alone, and I think he's trying to break in. Please, send someone!" Noah listened as the operator's muffled voice said something through the phone and then Quinn yelled, "We can't wait that long! Please! We-- Ugh, God! Are we in a damn slasher flick? Do police always have to take over ten minutes to get places? Shit!" she whined as she slammed the phone down and held a very horrified Noah to her tightly while the demanding footsteps continued overhead. Quinn sat down with Noah in her lap on the kitchen floor as Fish continued to walk around out of her mind with the hair all over her body standing on end. "Damnit, stop it, Fish!"

"What's happening?" Noah wailed and looked up at the roof.

"Shh, it's okay, Noah, stay quiet, okay?" Quinn tried to keep the agonizing fear out of her voice but to no avail. She turned his head into her chest as a clawing noise filled the entirety of the area around them.

Then, as if everything outside had been sucked into the void, the footsteps stopped. The scratching stopped. The house was empty of noise. Fish had stopped in place. Noah was not crying anymore.

Quinn listened to the stillness for a few minutes and then shot her eyes at the front door. "I'm gonna go look, alright? Stay put." Noah frantically clutched at her to stay, but she hopped up and snuck over to the living room window. Noah stifled his now building sobs with his hands over his face. Quinn peered through the blinds. The road was as black as it had always been with the heavy dullness of night. The woods were quiet and still. Not a single figure out of the ordinary was to be seen. She scanned her eyes over to the spot of light on the road from the street lamp. Stepping out of it and into the black trees across the way was the backside of what looked to be a headless deer with crooked, bent legs tottering away at a quick pace. Fish's fluffy frame rubbed up against Quinn's leg, and Noah came over to stand with her. None of the Hoppers spoke or made a sound. A siren was slowly piercing the silence of the night as flashing lights came down Pricket Bellow Lane off in the distance. Quinn wondered how she would tell them about the deer that they had seen.

About the Author:

Kristen Reid lives in Tennessee where she is an English tutor at Roane State Community College. She received her English degree from Tennessee Tech University and is currently taking paralegal courses with Duke University. She has been writing stories since she was a child, and has carried her passion throughout life, always sticking with the darker side of fiction and her love of horror.

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THE MAN IN THE MOON

© ROBERT ELROD

Fury made it pretentious, its plumbeous colour dreadful; that night, the torrent was particularly menacing and Rick felt all its horror penetrate his bones. Although he disliked the place, he used to drag himself to the metal railing, lean over and watch the impetuous flow whenever he needed to blow out the fumes of his too many drinks.

The bleak waters had always upset him. It was said that terrifying monsters dwelt at the bottom and leapt up whenever a corpse fell in; bones and flesh provided their nourishment.

When Edward found out that the eerie creatures had become a recurring haunt, he never refrained from frightening his younger sibling.

He would laugh raucously and cry, "I'll throw you into the torrent someday; the monsters are waiting for you."

The memory of Iris, their maidservant, crossed Rick's mind. He had great difficulty in putting the pieces together as the thwarted love story constellated by sin and perversion was whispered, not even uttered; a true shame in his mother's words who never concealed her relief when the girl took her life by jumping into the murky waters. His father simply added that no funeral would take place as the body would never be found. Did he believe in the monster story too?

Edward smiled slyly, vexed perhaps, by losing his chance of intriguing the lovely Iris. Or had he been the cause of such embarrassment and concealment? Also depraved, he was capable of the worst mischief with the most stolid indifference.

Besides, wasn't he well acquainted with the hideous creatures' voracity?

Now the torrent seemed to sneer at Rick and cry, "Why so surprised, man?"

Somehow, the lure of evil as an irresistible magnet, made him look up at his elder with an inexplicable awe and wish he could be as bold and tough, but his innate weakness and sensitivity never allowed it. Possessed by intimate sufferance and discontent, he was unable to cope with the extremes of life, and more than once, ended on the brink of insanity.

The dread of the monsters ironically, had always kept him from jumping even in his most dramatic moments.

His existence, however, was miserable; self-commiseration and passivity prevailed on whatever reaction. He became a regular at the local bar where the thick smoke screened his table and enclosed him in a world of his own; faults were pardoned, resolutions fortified, and a bit of confidence restored. For a while, lucidity defeated terror and the monsters were nothing but an atrocious fantasy.

That night, Edward's visit had devastated him. After draining his drink, he whispered the deadly deed and hurriedly left. The bastard, mindful of their father's words, had served Adam, his closest friend and unscrupulous accomplice to the monsters.

'I've thrown him in,' would have sounded less terrifying.

Rick shuddered as the raucous laughter blasted his ears; a few more drinks were necessary to figure out what to do.

Could the diabolic bloke suddenly feel his conscience too heavy, if ever he had one? Or was he simply diverting himself by disseminating horror upon his shattered mind? For sure, nobody would believe the words of a drunk and psychotic wreck telling about a guy *served* to the monsters.

Now the torrent looked more horrifying than ever. Strident cries filled the air and Rick wondered if they were the fruit of his weirdness just as Adam's deformed face that appeared in instant sequences on the surface. The monstrous jaws had already got hold of it. Most certainly, the cries were a pleading, the image a request.

The ghastly visage would haunt him forever if he didn't go straight to the police and report the murder no matter if they believed him or not.

He already saw himself before the officers and felt their inquisitive glances upon him; he would start muttering and the scarce confidence would abandon him. Also Edward's glare flashed before him, but it wasn't enough to doom the dismembered spirit to an unrevenged torment.

The sound of nervous steps made Rick turn round; a familiar figure was heading towards him. Maybe, Edward had thought things over and feared someone might believe his wacky brother's revelation...

By now, the thick mist had obscured the feeble lamp light; no soul in sight except the ominous figure getting closer and closer.

After a quick glance at the torrent, sure that in a few instances it would be his final abode, Rick waited, the throbbing of the heart in competition with the vehemence of the flow.

The haunting threat was about to be accomplished. The monsters were already grinning, their jaws wide open, the eyes blazing with rabid thirst.

He wished he could run away or fight against the big bully, but his chronic inertia turned him into a pathetic dummy.

Edward stopped before him and firmly took his arm.

"I've come to take you home," he said in an unfamiliar mellifluous tone, "you have drunk too much and it wouldn't be safe to let you here all by yourself." And sneered, "We don't want those damned monsters to jump out and get hold of my brother, do we?"

Rick glared at him for a few seconds, then he lowered his eyes and followed him.

About the Author:

Olivia Arieti lives in Torre del Lago Puccini, Italy, with her family. Besides being a published playwright, she loves writing fiction; her stories have appeared in several magazines and anthologies like Enchanted Conversations, Enchanted Tales Literary Magazine, Fantasia Divinity Magazine, Cliterature, Forgotten Tomb Press, Horrified Press, Thirteen O'Clock Press, Infective Ink, Pandemonium Press, Sirens Call Publications, Black Hare Press, Pussy Magic Magazine.

Twitter: [@3squirrels](#)

Daddy Had a Mistress | *Archit Joshi*

Ten years Raman battled against unsettling glimpses of that fateful night. His mutilated mother gathered in a bag and spirited away; the stranger entering his father's bedroom soon thereafter. The creaking noises that'd followed, even before his poor mother had turned cold. The young lad had run away into seclusion, deranged, shaken.

Today, again, he'd been consumed by an insatiable rage, accompanied by a complete blackout. Blotched memory served up flashes of her, the bitch. Her face, her curls, the scar across her cheek. Another nightmare?

Miles away into the city, the headlines read:

'The Slasher claims his sixteenth victim...'

About the Author:

Archit Joshi is an author who writes a little bit of everything. His fiction has found a home in many reputable anthologies and online magazines, with stories long and short. Some anthologies he's featured in have become Amazon Bestsellers in multiple regions. These include 'Sea Of Secrets' (Dragon Soul Press), 'Blaze' (Clarendon House Publishing) and 'Worlds' (Black Hare Press). He's always ready for a chat.

Facebook: [Author Archit Joshi](#)

Twitter: [@ArchitJoshi](#)

*"Oh, they loved dearly; their souls kissed,
they kissed with their eyes, they were both but one single kiss!"
--- Heinrich Heine, German Poet*

As field trips went, this one to the Museum of Natural History so far had proven lame. What could you really say about the breeding habits of the Alaskan sea otter that would moisten the panties of any seventeen-year-old school girl? The twenty St. Clotilde students concluded their tour with a visit to the popular Human Oddities wing, and finally the museum showed some promise. The girls gazed at two skulls conjoined at the jaw and preserved behind glass. The golden identification plate offered little more information than the French names belonging to the skeletal heads.

Someone asked, "Were these Siamese twins or something?"

The young tour guide's name tag read BELINDA, and she held a special place in her heart for this grotesque anomaly, especially since the past summer. On some days she kidded her younger guests that the exhibition piece had been used as a paperweight by Marilyn Manson, then quickly moved on with the tour. Today she felt like talking.

"These are the skulls of Francoise La Bourliere and her paramour Antoine Furois, Parisian sweethearts of the French aristocracy dead nearly fifty years who met their end one spring morning as they strolled along the Seine. Their story is clouded by inaccuracies and exaggeration, but I can detail a pretty faithful version. Want to hear?" Belinda had developed a respectable flair for the dramatic on this job, and her voice dropped a pitch. "Do you young ladies believe in magic?"

Most of the group nodded, but not Suzanne. Wearing a fashionable red scrunchie that offset her starched parochial school uniform, the pretty disbeliever decisively shook her head. "Magic is crap. It didn't work so well for Siegfried and Roy, did it?"

A wise assed kid. Every school group had its junior iconoclast, and kids seething with angst were Belinda's favorites. Not long ago she had been one of them. She beaded in on Suzanne.

"Then maybe you believe in passion? You see, Antoine desired Francoise from the moment he first saw her. Fearing she might not return his affection, he -"

Belinda paused to look over her shoulder. This part of her narrative could be delicate if the school's dour nuns lurked nearby. The bad little girl living inside her was alive and well. Five years out of Holy Savior and she still checked to see if the Sisters were watching.

"... He procured the services of a sorceress named Amelie who might encourage the young woman's favor. Although Amelie was as hideous as Francoise was beautiful, after one hour spent with the young and wealthy monsieur she determined to have him for herself."

"Did she cast a spell on him?" one grossly overweight student asked the guide. The more homely school kids usually seemed the most interested in knowing about the power of magic spells. Maybe those who were themselves different needed to believe in witchery the most.

Belinda slipped into tour speak mode. "Even the best magic is never fool proof. But Amelie cast no spell on Antoine he hadn't selected for himself. The woman understood her blackest magic was a poor substitute for true love, and she refused using it to win Antoine's affection. Correctly intuiting matters of the heart, she offered the smitten man a vial containing a strong potion of exotic and forbidden herbs. If lovers sipped the vial's contents, she instructed, afterward the liquid allowed each of them one wish pertaining to the other."

The heavyset school girl frowned. "That wasn't very smart of the sorceress if Amelie wanted Antoine for herself."

Belinda smiled. This kid needed a few more years to grasp a clear understanding of the evil intentions of which women were capable.

"The most clever woman never lets on that she is. The sorceress believed that behind all male desire lurks a consuming need to possess. Amelie knew Antoine would desire that Francoise be his forever, and Francoise's assurance of eternal fidelity would likely become his one wish. That meant for the rest of his days the woman would cling to her lover like an itching garment. In time the sorceress knew Antoine would return to her little shop an exhausted man, begging for release from a constant lover who allowed him no rest. Amelie would offer the poor man relief, of course. He would be in her debt, and then she would have him."

This part of the story stirred memories, and the guide glanced toward the entranceway where the museum's dark-haired curator stood, Geoffrey B. Haskin, whose family had a considerable financial interest in the place. Belinda quickly

looked away. She noticed the girl with the red scrunchie was watching him too, and why not? He was a real looker, there was no denying that. But Belinda's narrative was not meant for a man's ears, especially this man's.

"The next morning Antoine persuaded Francoise to meet him at a small café, the revolving Tuileries Carousel along the Seine. When a particularly beautiful swan distracted the young woman, he sipped some of the sorceress' potion, then emptied the remainder into Francoise's tea. The results were instantaneous. The longing expression in his woman's eyes encouraged the suitor to waste no time in speaking his heart. He insisted he would never leave her, adding he had but one desire—to hear those same words from her. Smothering him with kisses, the smitten Francoise readily whispered them. And so, one wish had been uttered and granted.

"Hand in hand they walked the path along the Left Bank, each hopelessly immersed in love for the other, stopping frequently to steal a kiss along the way. The further they walked, the more passionate their kisses became.

"The potion's effects had almost expired when Antoine, hoping to benefit from the full effects of the sorceress' brew, whispered, 'My love, today you have granted me my greatest wish. If you had one wish you would ask of me, what would that be?' Francoise didn't hesitate telling him 'I wish I could go on kissing you forever!' Too overtaken with the moment, the man hadn't realized the tragic portent of his lover's desire until she pressed her parted lips to his. Their mouths immediately became one skin impossible to separate. Stealing one another's breath with every inhale, the two struggled ridiculously to break free of their death kiss. Attempts to scream made matters worse. Onlooking strollers pointed and laughed, misunderstanding what terrible thing had occurred. The lovers' end came quickly, and I suppose that was fortunate. Even in death, no one could divide them. Each had got their wish and here are their skulls to tell you about it."

Suzanne scrunched her face. "Ewwwwwww!"

"There's a little postscript to this story, but it's kind of personal. You guys interested?"

The girls' nods were unanimous.

"Last summer following senior year in college I was nursing a broken heart of my own. I visited Paris, losing myself in walks along the Seine and sipping wine in a dozen outdoor cafés with exotic names like Deux Magots and La Coupole along the Left Bank, making my way along the Saint-Germain-Des-Pre in the fashionable district of Montparnasse. By accident I came upon a small shop run by an old woman who called herself Madame Amelie. She was even uglier than I imagined, her troll-like hideousness compounded by an extremely ungraceful old age that had transformed the woman into a hag. Waiting until the shop emptied, I approached her.

"'Francoise La Bourliere and Antoine Furois, Madame. Do you know these names?'" I asked in the poorest French ever uttered. The woman didn't bat an eye. But finally she spoke.

"'Mademoiselle, few Parisians of my years have not heard those names.' The Madame was, of course, correct. In its day the bizarre story had spread throughout France. But word of mouth had distorted the truth, and over time the tale became regarded as fiction among most clear thinking Frenchmen. Deciding to be more direct I handed the old woman a fistful of francs. After examining the money, she looked closely at me.

"'Qu'est-ce que c'est?'"

"'Madame Amelie, I know the story of those doomed lovers. I know about your role in it.' I could see the woman had become agitated and required some assurance of my intentions. 'I have no reason to judge you, Madame. In fact, I'm very glad to have found you. You see, there is a matter that concerns my own heart.'

"I explained to the old woman about a young man who recently had lied to me, one day promising love and the next deciding he had tired of me. Knowing he had broken my heart, he pursued another woman before my eyes. If the sorceress' potion could salvage what remained of the man's love for me—or at least help me get over mine—I assured her I would someday return to Paris with several additional fists full of francs.

"'Men talk a fine game, Mademoiselle. They speak quite freely of forever.' That's all she muttered before disappearing into her parlor to mix a batch of her magic. She returned within a few minutes, impatient to send me on my way. I understood why.

"I wondered if maybe I were doing the right thing, questioned whether I'd been foolish to even believe in magic or sorcery. But when I returned home I slipped the potion into the man's coffee and decided from that moment I was done with him. And, happily, I am! So maybe there is something to be said for magic, huh?"

Belinda savored the moment of triumph she had created, but a shrill voice interrupted her rumination. Another group of museum visitors stood waiting in their queue while their pissed off guide shuffled about with nothing to do. The blonde woman displayed a noticeable hobble in her step as if this job had required too much time spent on her feet.

"Let's move it, Belinda! How about wrapping it up so my group can see some of the exhibits too before closing time?"

"Sorry, Lydia. We're moving right now. Okay girls, you heard the nice lady!" A peaches and cream smile emerged, although some of the cream had gone sour. "That limp looks like it's getting pretty bad. Maybe someone should look at it."

Managing her own affected smile that displayed a complete lack of warmth, the blonde steered her group quickly past Belinda whose own smile suggested something much worse.

Suzanne had watched the mini drama unfold. It was like playing connect the dots when she had been little. Already her brain penciled in the spaces to form a picture, and the picture included three people. The good looking man in the museum appeared too well dressed for a museum worker, and he had been standing in that same spot too long to be a tourist. Suzanne had seen enough TV. soapers to recognize a lovers' triangle when she spotted one, but she said nothing to her classmates. Instead she approached her tour guide with one huge shit eating grin as if she had solved an incredible math equation.

"That well dressed man over there... and that blonde tour guide? Are they--?"

Belinda winked at Suzanne in the universal language shared among all women. Suzanne watched as her guide approached the man, the girl inching closer to listen for whatever further drama unfolded. She knew this was eavesdropping, an act that would earn her sore knuckles if Sister Agatha saw. She didn't care.

"Hello, Geoffrey," Belinda said, but she pronounced it JEFF-rey as if making some kind of point. The man said nothing. "Something wrong? Cat got your tongue?"

Face contorted, seeming pained and confused, he managed to speak.

"Heh-wo, Beh-wij-a ..."

It seemed he had tried to say 'Hello Belinda,' but what came out resembled nothing like that. He sounded like someone who had taken diction lessons from Elmer Fudd, his speech impediment so pronounced several St. Clotilde girls standing nearby stifled giggles. Suzanne thought that seemed cruel enough, but felt especially bewildered by her tour host's harsh greeting when she must have been aware of the poor guy's disadvantage. Suzanne would have questioned Belinda about that, but Sister Agatha wanted the girls inside the bus for the return trip to St. Clotilde's, so goodbyes were hasty. Suzanne said nothing to Belinda nor to anyone else, selecting a seat apart from the others.

Some dots refused to connect. The girl continued working events over in her head thirty minutes later as the bus entered the Interstate and her classmates had joined together in a singing pop chorus of Britney Spears crap. Something was missing, all right, something no one had detected. Suzanne rewound her mind's video of the past hour.

Lydia, the other woman.

(That limp looks like it's getting pretty bad.)

... and the handsome and dapper lover who could hardly speak Belinda's name as if ...

(Cat got your tongue?)

Something in that ... yes, something only Belinda knew.

(The most clever woman never lets on that she is ... and maybe there is something to be said for magic.)

What had Belinda said were Francoise's last words to Antoine?

(I wish I could go on kissing you forever ...)

(Forever ...)

Something else ... something else from Amelie the hag ...

(Men talk a fine game, Mademoiselle. They speak quite freely of forevers.)

(Talk ...)

(Hello, JEFF-rey. Cat got your tongue?)

(Heh-wo, Beh-wij-a ...)

... Kiss ... Tongue ...

French kissing ... or something else? Something... dirtier?

(Cat got your tongue?)

Cat ... kitten ... puss-puss ...

Puss-Puss got your tongue ...

Suzanne bolted forward in her seat. While the school bus filled with song, in her mind's eye the young and handsome man was kissing blonde Lydia, all right. But not on her lips, oh no, not on her lips at all, but somewhere else... somewhere else where the cat had gotten his tongue. And kept it too!

... down there!!!

Forever!

(That limp looks like it's getting pretty bad.)

Suzanne's face contorted with disgust. Nearby her schoolmates stopped singing and turned to stare when she squealed.

"Ewwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww..."

About the Author:

Ken Goldman is an Active member of the Horror Writers Association with homes on the Main Line in Pennsylvania and at the Jersey shore. His stories have appeared in over 900 independent press publications. He has written three short stories anthologies: *YOU HAD ME AT ARRGH!!*, *DONNY DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE*, and *STAR-CROSSED*; a novella, *DESIREE*, and two novels, *OF A FEATHER* and *SINKHOLE*.

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Red Winds | Bill Bistak

The umbrella handle smashed Rose's porcelain-like hand and forearm, nearly bruising her tender pale skin. Her round eyes widened at the intensity of the growing wind and the developing storm above. Large clouds expanded and contracted as if God breathed into them deliberately. Strands of her hair sprung free from her hair clip, flipping wildly about. Her two ruby red lips dimmed to grey under the darkening atmosphere while she struggled to control her dress, which flailed and wrapped around her small frame in every which way possible.

"Help me!" Rose exclaimed.

The violent surroundings enclosed her without mercy. Soon her face hollowed against the angry fury of howling gales, her eyes now bulging to twice their original size. She managed to hold tighter to her umbrella, thinking some degree of safety might be possible from simply hanging on a little longer. The umbrella's naked skeleton shrieked in midair and taunted her peril. Her mouth remained agape and she screamed, hoping her protest would reach compassionate ears.

"Did you hear that?" Alice asked her friend, who shrugged while staring at her smartphone screen. Both were waiting with several others for the morning bus to arrive.

A moment later, Rose collapsed in a heap in the middle of the gathering crowd.

"You couldn't lend a hand?" Rose roared with all of her might.

A few seconds later a gale force wind blew into the crowd, sending them one by one into the path of the oncoming bus.

Rose stood freely, resumed her original shape and examined the bloody scene for a moment.

Her smile grew before she faded into the background of the bus stop, waiting impatiently for more commuters.

About the Author:

Bill Bistak (a.k.a BDSScott, pen name) is a gothic horror author hailing from Toronto, Ontario, Canada (originally born in Ohio, USA). Having spent a half a century studying human behavior in various health professional roles, he stays up late, casting new word permutations, plots and characters into storied glory.

Author Blog: [Best Short Horror](#)

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THEY COME FROM THE MOUNTAIN



Five tales of supernatural terror by

JUSTIN JOSEPH

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON OCTOBER 16th, 2019

The particles were floating through the air, threatening to overwhelm her poor, weakened immune system. The pizza sat on the table, mocking her. She could picture the tiny gluten molecules as they traveled past the pepperoni and made a beeline straight for her. She'd never been officially diagnosed with Celiac disease, but she was certain she had a very, very bad case of it.

Belinda Lancaster felt her gut seize up as she imagined the gluten nefariously wrenching its way closer and closer, feeling an urgent, almost desperate need to escape. It was outrageous they would do this to her. If she wasn't required by a familial obligation to be here, she would be anywhere else in the world. Somewhere where people didn't order toxic pizzas to poison their relatives. It really was unbearable.

A sudden movement near her feet made Belinda jump up in alarm. The cat! Her brother-in-law forgot to put it away again. The last time she was exposed to cat hair, she nearly had to be rushed to the hospital. Belinda could feel her breath getting thinner as the creature approached, giving her a curious look. She jumped up, knocking the chair over. The hives would be breaking out at any moment, they needed to leave. Now. Belinda hustled to the bathroom. Where on earth was Russell? He knew she shouldn't be dealing with this.

His parents were elderly and had driven eight hours to visit them, Russell's brother Tom and his wife Rita agreeing to host Thanksgiving in their honor. Of course, Russell and Belinda didn't come. There was absolutely nothing she could eat, or even get close to. No, it was only today, after the big event, that Russ forced her to come here and be exposed to that gluten-filled, cheesy monstrosity on the table. Belinda could sense a hospital trip in her future if they didn't get out of here. They had been here for well over an hour, it was time to go.

She threw open the bathroom door, locking it hastily behind her. Hyperventilating was a real concern in her condition, she had to calm her breathing. Quickly scrubbing her hands and legs with scalding hot water, Belinda considered her predicament. How quickly could she extricate herself from this situation without causing offense?

Her twin nephews were pounding around somewhere overhead, she could hear them like a herd of buffaloes chasing the dog down the hall. The dog was a real moose. A stubby-tailed boxer with scads of short, floating hair. Large tufts of fur rolled like tumbleweeds across the hardwood, kicking up her allergies even further, if that was possible. Tom's house was a deathtrap.

She knew they had to say goodbye to her in-laws before they could make their exit. Splashing water on her overheated face, she gathered up the remains of her strength and prepared for the ordeal to come.

When she pulled the door open, Belinda's legs threatened to buckle. There was nothing but total darkness in the room beyond. The power must have gone out, the whir and hum of modern day life was ominously stilled.

"Russell?" She called out weakly. Belinda was terrified of the dark.

"Russell? Tom? Is anyone here?"

She took a tentative step into the black, being careful not to trip or bang into anything. Belinda had very fragile bones, just the slightest pressure could cause serious damage. Tom's festive, noisy house was like a tomb. She could barely make out Rita's tree in the living room, every wildly blinking Christmas light had suddenly been snuffed out. It was like they had closed up the house and left, abandoning her to the pizza and the cat hair and the darkness.

In a burst of panic, she grabbed her cell phone from her pocket and held it out like a talisman. The sickly yellow light illuminated her surroundings as she slowly made her way along the wall toward the dining room. They'd all dispersed throughout the house after dinner, had to be around somewhere. Russell would never, ever leave her. He wouldn't dare.

One foot after another, she crept along the perimeter of the room. A click-clacking sound approached her from the direction of the stairs. The dog! Belinda frantically racked her brain trying to remember its name. *Spanky? Sparky?*

"Sparky!" The name exploded into her mind, "come here, boy!"

Click-clack, click-clack, the sound traveled just out of her light as the dog slowly made his way over to her. In her anxiety, Belinda was happy to see the creature. Just as long as it didn't come too close and infect her.

Thunk! The noise of an object hitting the floor made her jump in alarm. She forced herself forward, sweating and faint with fear as the dog emitted a menacing growl. The light moved shakily across the floor, finally landing on the unlikely scene of a shredded, bloody arm.

Belinda stared at it, refusing to believe her eyes. This had to be some kind of trick, her nephews playing a prank. The arm was sporting a watch she had just given Russell for his birthday, his fine blonde hairs standing up in macabre attention. She continued to focus on the severed arm of her husband, her phone shaking wildly in her hand as Sparky

stepped forward into the light to reclaim his prize.

Long ropes of green saliva dripped from Sparky's rotting jaws. It looked like something had chewed the back half of the boxer clean off, the bones of his back end playfully wagging in time to Belinda's jagged screaming. She tripped over her feet and went down hard, banging her head against the wall as the dog triumphantly scooped up her husband's appendage. Sparky ran back into the dark as Belinda slipped away into her own private darkness, fainting into a dead heap onto the cold floor.

A cloud of toxins floated through the air, enveloping her in its deadly mist. Cold and lethal, it lingered on her face, permeating every cell, bringing death as swift as any executioner. Belinda tried to scream as its tentacles entered her mouth and her nostrils, seizing her throat in a violent grip. She would never survive this, it was all over. The pizza had won.

The dream began to dissipate as Belinda felt a raspy sensation on her cheek. Harsh and unyielding, it felt like the skin on her face was being scraped off. She opened one eye, flailing around in a panic as she found the demon cat licking her face. A miasma of rancid odors assaulted her in sickening waves, pieces of the cat's decomposing flesh dripping onto her cheek.

The creature recoiled, its intestines spilling out onto the floor as a portion of half-desiccated pizza crust shot out at Belinda, hitting her in the eye. She flopped around wildly in the dark, slipping in a pool of tainted feline blood. The vile creature hissed and ran away, its entrails flopping along behind it.

Belinda could hear it then. A sound like a banquet being served in the lower echelons of hell. Scraping and gulping, wet sounds of animal delight. Something was feeding in the next room, a feral pack of creatures gorging on their kill. Wild animals had somehow broken in and were ripping her poor husband and Tom's pets apart, she had to do something.

Hugging the wall, Belinda inched her way along. She had just dialed the nine on her phone when the half-eaten cat jumped out again, malevolently hissing. Her phone shot through the air landing with a decisive crack onto the hardwood. Her light was gone, but she didn't need it. There was a strange green mist hovering over the dining room, lighting her way. Like a cornered animal, she rounded the corner on her hands and knees, finally solving the mystery of her missing family.

Bloodied and battered, the creatures that were once her in-laws were hunched down among the ruins of Rita's dining room table. Hunks of flesh littered the floor as they violently tore apart what was left of their feast and each other. The thick green haze emanated from the epicenter of the violent orgy, exactly where Belinda would have suspected: the pizza.

It was hard to tell who was who in the grotesque display. Blood sprayed through the air as her sister-in-law gnawed away on what appeared to be a leg. Tom's head was lopsided, falling halfway down his shoulder at an impossible angle. Still, he struggled to eat his fill, loosely grabbing bits of flesh and pizza in a ghastly attempt at nourishment. Her in-laws were right in the middle, blood dripping from withered old chins in feral ecstasy. The twins were little better than skeletons, running in circles around the carnage while the dog pulled the leg bone out from one of them. Both boy and dog went down in an unceremonious heap as the diners fell upon them and picked the remains clean.

Belinda sat in mute horror. The pizza pulsed and grew, throbbing like a heartbeat as a final figure broke away from the hellish scene and shambled over to her. She knew the pizza and the gluten would be the death of them, she'd tried to tell them so. The satisfaction of being right was cold comfort as Russell reached out, his only arm outstretched in greeting. His face was completely caved in, but she would know him anywhere. In his remaining hand, he held out a macabre offering, backing Belinda against the wall and cutting off her last avenue of escape.

Covered in bits of gore and gluten and rancid cheese, Russ held out a slice of demonic pizza for her approval. Her docile, obedient husband smashed and ground the pizza into her face, wanting to feed her well. Belinda screamed until her voice gave out before finally joining the family around the table, all of them finishing their feast together until there was literally nothing left.

The pizza had won.

The family all gathered around the figure in the bed. Russ had been beside himself with worry, recriminating himself harshly for allowing his wife to be around the many health hazards in his brother's house. They'd found Belinda in the bathroom screaming, tearing and scratching at her face in complete hysteria. No one knew what had happened to her, only that she had to be restrained to keep from hurting herself. The doctors talked to them about psychotic breaks

after initial examinations could find nothing physically wrong with her.

Rita and Tom sent the boys down to the cafeteria with their grandparents for ice cream as Russell went off in search of the doctors. He was convinced that Belinda's room had allergens and needed to be re-sanitized. She'd been sedated after the last screaming episode and was finally coming to. Rita crossed the room and gently placed her hand on Belinda's arm.

"Lind? It's Rita, honey. You're OK, Lind, the family's all here. It's going to be alright."

Belinda groaned, tossing and turning as she tried to regain consciousness. Rita pulled up a chair, resuming her vigil as her sister-in-law bucked and struggled in the bed. What on earth could have caused such a horrible, violent reaction? She really had no idea.

Tom joined his wife at Belinda's bedside. They'd been there all day and he'd run out to pick up dinner for everyone. He set the hot pizza on the nightstand next to the bed and opened the lid. The tantalizing smell caused his stomach to grumble in anticipation at the exact moment that Belinda's eyes snapped open.

The agonizing screams that filled the room gave testament to the fact that the pizza had, in fact, won again, as a wispy green fog began to lazily waft down the corridors of the hospital.

Dinner was about to be served.

About the Author:

A. Elizabeth Herting is an aspiring freelance writer and busy mother of three living in colorful Colorado. She has had over 60 short stories published and also has two collections of short stories that will be published by "Adelaide Books." "Whistling Past the Veil" in April 2019 and "Postcards from Waupaca" which comes out in February 2020.

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Seven Seconds | *Lisa Verdekal*

It's said that in the throes of terror time will slow.

In my case, it stopped.

Faces froze in leering grins and wide-eyed titillation at the bloody spectacle before them. Those lined up behind me were now held captive in the endless horror of what awaited them. Spewed vomit hovered before ashen faces. The stench of pissed on clothing hung thick in the air. Jeering, crying, praying, pleading.

I feasted on detail. I sensed it too. Razor sharp fear, every nerve commanding me to run, but hemmed in on all sides by spectators and soldiers, I took my place in line, waiting in a macabre semblance of normality for your turn. The cruel elation pouring off the crowd. And the soldiers' indifference as they thought about hot lunch and eyed up lovely girls.

For a moment, my view narrowed down to thin strips of light, my world became the musty smell of wickerwork and blood: old blood, fresh blood; my blood. I pondered my detachment to the awful weight of fear pressing down on the prisoners. Was it not weak to let terror rule your mind in these last moments of life? Proud of myself, I wondered if my composure would reveal a way of escape that had thus far eluded me.

An abrupt tug tore me from contemplation. I rose into the sunny square high above the cheering crowd and line of ragged prisoners. Below me my body lay sprawled before the guillotine and then all went dark.

About the Author:

Born and bred in the City of the Angels, Lisa swapped the sunny west coast of L.A. for the rainy west coast of Ireland. And never looked back. She has had several short stories published in online magazines and is taking a self-publishing course. Her aim is to get her novels into the public arena.

Author Blog: [Prose Perspective](#)

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"So what will it be, sir?"

A simple enough question, to most, but my mind races back to the hours before...to all that damned blood. I snap back, and begin to debate between a cheeseburger and a chicken sandwich. It seems like a little beef in the tummy might settle me down a bit, and I choose accordingly. I attempt to slide my card, but hesitate, noticing a fleck of the red stuff on my sleeve. My eyes dart to the cashier...does she see it as well? Is it even there at all? I think better of it and complete my purchase.

I sit down to my meal, amongst the dregs of society, all of us beaten down by this shit town we call home. What the fuck had just happened? And it was so fast...no choice, only action. My mind had woken up like a hungry bear in springtime. I begin to play back the day's events as I take my first bite.

Boring start to another boring day in the cage. I work as an inventory specialist, another title for a glorified parts counter. And yes, these expensive parts (for airplanes, mainly) are locked up safely. Just me. And the parts. Caged in, 8 fucking hours a day. It does take some mental dexterity to deal with the loneliness of a day like that. You just do your time, and go back to your normal family. Then do it again. And again, and again. Until the end of time, it seems. A beast in a cage. Why should today be any different?

I eat my shitty cereal, stuff myself into my button-down shirt, brush my middle-aged teeth, and off I go, straight up the highway. Early fall morning...sun's just starting to peek through the darkness. I'm half asleep, robot mode, until I see a figure perched on top of the side rail of McNally Bridge. 'Suicide Bridge' is what we call it...a quarter mile long overpass above a deep gulch amongst the trees. So deep it is, in fact, that you can differentiate the separation of the fog line as it settles from up above. Apparently, the bridge is hungry on this day. I automatically begin to slow as I see the hooded figure, all dressed in black, ready to descend. My heart is starting to beat faster as I imagine the body falling out of view, like a bird out of the sky. I creep closer, probably 20 feet away until I park and turn my lights off. I think about driving away, as it is their ultimate decision to make, after all. The naïve, childish part of me, however, simply will not allow for it. I open the door and slowly make my way to the figure. At about 10 feet away I hear a low female voice barely reach my ears:

"Just please mind your own damn business. Or give me a push. Pick one."

I retort quickly "If you're gonna do it, at least do it with good form, like a fucking diver or something. I'll rate your performance and tell the papers how you fared." I'm hoping some humor will diffuse the situation.

For a moment she turns her head towards me slightly and smirks... "Quite the smartass, aren't you?" Her response calms me a bit. I can do this. I can get her off that fucking bridge.

"Let me see your face" I ask.

"Why? What the hell does that have to do with anything?" She seems perturbed.

"Because you sound sexy. Are you sexy? 'Cuz if you're ugly I guess I'll call it a day then." She giggles. I'm in. She flips back her black hood and I am able to see that I am not far off from my initial assumption. Jet black hair (shoulder length), porcelain skin, and gorgeous blue eyes, as opposed to the ugliness of the streaked mascara running down her glistening cheeks, still wet from the tears. Probably in her mid-20's if I had to guess. Fit-looking.

"See? Now was that so hard? My name's John. What's yours? And don't tell me your last name's Wallenda or else I will have to question your balance."

"I'm Ruth. Why the hell did you have to show up? I just wanna do it...let me go. I'm done...with everything. Sick of all the bullshit" She begins to wobble a bit as she starts to sob.

"I understand. Completely. I've been there before. Life is hard, but we have to be harder. What if tomorrow ended up being the best day of your life? You would miss it. You don't want to miss it, do you?" I want to get her down before we attract too much attention or the cops show up. Cars are slowly driving past, hoping to catch a glimpse of the dive. Eventually someone will fuck this up. I slowly approach the ledge.

"What are the odds of anything turning around, ever? Every day gets worse... One shit sandwich after another. I can't fucking do it. I won't." Her voice cracks as she inches closer to the edge. Fuck.

"Let's just talk about it. What's that gonna hurt? I'm one hell of a good listener. Let me prove it. Please. After all, I'm missing work for this shit. And if you jump, it's gonna fucking traumatize me."

I give the most boyish smile I can, and I outstretch my hand towards her. My heart speeds up as I realize it is the moment of truth. Ruth's eyes raise to mine, and the moment lasts forever...until she makes the move that will change everything, for both of us.

She grabs my hand, and I gently help her down from the ledge. With my heart in my throat, I clutch her tightly and take her to my car. We are both sobbing at this point, emotionally drained. What a fucking day, and it's not even 7:30 in the morning yet. We leave her car on the bridge, and I agree to drive her home. She's definitely in no shape to be operating a vehicle.

As I drive, Ruth begins to let loose about her life and the reasons that brought her to the bottom. She goes into the hatred within her family, the fact that her parents won't even talk to her, and confides in me that she's struggling with her past heroin addiction, which led to the loss of her job. I listen. I let her pour it all out. Sometimes that's all a person really needs. She's definitely been through the shit. She directs me to her home, about 15 minutes from where we met, down a few backroads near the county line. As we get to her house, she invites me in, because she says she doesn't want to be alone. Of course...why not? My work begins texting me, wondering where the hell I am. I turn off my phone, and follow Ruth into her house.

I notice how meager her lifestyle is...simple, but very neat and tidy. It's a small house, but then again, it's all she really needs. She makes us both coffee, and I sit with her at the kitchen table. We continue our discussion about her life and run through some possible options and programs she could get into, a gameplan for her life, etc. She has so much to live for...such a beautiful person. I enjoy spending time with her...in another life maybe we could have even been an item, albeit a slight age difference. Every now and again, our eyes lock, but she quickly turns away. There is an energy between us, one that cannot be ignored. Unfortunately, she has no idea who the fuck I really am, or what is about to happen.

Sitting that close to such a beautiful girl, it's hard not to think of where I would start on her delicious body. I size her up as we are chatting. I know she won't put up much of a fight. I want to taste her so badly, and I will, eventually. When I saw that girl on the bridge, in the deepest recesses of my mind, all I saw was a weak victim, easy for the plucking. An opportunity had presented itself, and I took it... enter her life in the guise of an angel, only to introduce the devil when the time is right.

It's such a nervous excitement right before you pounce on your prey. The feeling builds and builds until you can't hold it in any longer, and you finally explode, past the point of no return. I can compare it to a sexual climax. The most pleasing thing, however, is the look of sheer surprise on their faces when they realize what you are, and what is about to happen to them. The same with Ruth. The lunge across the table, the spilled coffee, the smashed cups, the feeling of my knees hitting the floor as my hands wrap around her neck...it is quite the event. I can see the fear and disbelief in her bulging eyes as I squeeze tighter and tighter, off and on burying my face in her hair so I can smell her scent. Choking the life out of someone is no easy thing, and it's not necessarily quick. It takes time and strength, but thankfully this is not my first rodeo. Patience is a virtue...you have to get past the gurgling, the flailing, the foul smell of piss as it exits their body and puddles around you. Sometimes (thankfully not in this case) they will even shit themselves. And then, after minutes of struggling to breathe, they will give you the look...one of submission, of giving up. At this point they accept their death. Only then it becomes real. The flailing stops, and the silence is deafening. Ruth is a fighter, for sure....more than I had anticipated. But the end result is the same as all the rest. I kiss her forehead, slowly, enjoyably, right before I begin to disrobe the body. I partake of her treasures for about an hour, doing whatever I please, in any manner that suits me. Details are unnecessary at this point, as those are gifts set aside specifically for me to enjoy, no one else. After all, there exists decorum, even in murder. I take photos when I am finished...a keepsake to behold for years to come.

When the fun is over, there is only work to be done. I clean up all the coffee, pick up the porcelain shards, even mop up the mess Ruth had made from her panicked bladder. I bag it all up to bring with me...dispose of it elsewhere. That's the easy part, but what to do with the body? A part of me wants to take it with me, hide it in the basement maybe...but that is just fantasy. I already know in my mind that the easiest thing to do would be to continue what she had started. Her car was near the bridge, and onlookers can place her there. I have to get the body back where it belongs...on the rocks below.

It is extremely difficult to put clothing back on a dead body. The dead weight is almost too much for me to handle, but after a while I get everything back in place perfectly. Unfortunately I notice blood beginning to dribble out of Ruth's mouth and nose, which was unexpected to say the least. I like things to be as clean as possible. I shove a dish towel into her mouth, maybe to help stop the flow. Thankfully Ruth's house is a bit in the trees with no close neighbors, so moving her to the car shouldn't be an issue. I stoop down and lift her up, carrying her like a baby out through her screen door. 120 lbs might as well be 250...I struggle just to get her to the car. I dump her in the back seat and pull a large blanket from my trunk. I place it over her. At this point I'm really sweating...not just from the physical expenditure but also because I'm becoming concerned. I'm beginning to realize how difficult it's going to be to get that body over that damned ledge in broad daylight.

I begin to make my way back to the bridge. It's funny how paranoia takes hold when you've got a dead person under a blanket on your back seat. You drive carefully and slower than usual, always checking your rear-view, always expecting those flashing lights. Time takes forever to pass in a situation like this. Eventually I near the bridge, and I'm so nervous I could vomit. I park behind Ruth's vehicle, and get out of the car. I survey the road. Thankfully our vehicles are partially hidden behind a concrete barricade right beyond the ledge. I open the back door and start to prepare. I remove the blood-soaked rag from her mouth and throw it to the floorboards. It's a little before noon by now, and it seems traffic is slow enough to pull this off. With my heart exploding in my chest, I eventually see my chance...no traffic in either direction. I rip the blanket off and scoop up the body as quickly as I can. I stumble quickly to the ledge, my lungs burning, and with every ounce of strength I have left I hurl the body over the side. I catch one last scent of her perfume as I let go. At this moment I fondly remember tossing an egg from the windowsill as a child, just to see what would happen when it hits the ground. The body plummets in

slow motion it seems, with Ruth's beautiful black hair whipping in the wind. As she smashes back-first into the rocks below, I can faintly hear a moist thud, like a wet washcloth falling into the tub. A large puddle of red forms underneath her, almost instantaneously. So much blood, more than I'd ever seen before. Her limbs are contorted, the bones obviously shattered. The head is now misshapen from the impact, almost alien-like, inhuman. It's a grisly image that will stay with me forever, I'm sure. I bolt back to the car, just as I see traffic beginning to close in. It is done.

I sip the last of my soda as the final memory of the day's events is completed in my mind. I relish in my accomplishment...it's not every day that an opportunity like that presents itself. I could've driven right past Ruth, let her do herself in, but that wouldn't have been nearly as much fun. I saved her life, just to destroy it myself. The irony is not lost on me. It could have been anyone on the bridge at that particular moment, but it had to be me. Was it a gift? Possibly. Coincidence? Certainly not. And now, another notch on my belt, another life snuffed out. Playtime for a beast. And to think...there's always another adventure to be had...

About the Author:

Matt Martinek is a singer/songwriter and author from Johnstown, PA, whose passion is the creative process itself. Whether it's through song or the written word, Matt's works always find their audience. His writing credits include poetry for *Falling Star Magazine*, *Unhoused Voices* (anthology), and *Names In A Jar* (anthology). Matt has also recently completed his first horror novella, *El Prolifico*.

Facebook: [Matt Martinek](#)

Late October Guilt Trip | John H. Dromey

A high-pitched plaintive cry of "I'm melting! I'm melting!" preceded the ringing of the doorbell.

When the homeowner opened her door, she was confronted by a pirate.

"Trick or treat." He pointed to a puddle of water on the porch.

"What's that?"

"My little sister's witch suit made her sweat. She went home." He pointed to the porchlight. "Your incandescent bulbs contribute to climate change."

The housewife held out a bowl of candy. "Help yourself, and take some for your sister."

Afterwards, the pirate's water-ladle-wielding accomplice said, "We should've brought more buckets."

"For water?"

"No, to carry the extra treats."

About the Author:

John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri. He likes to read—mysteries in particular—and write in a variety of genres. His drabbles have been published in some previous issues of *The Sirens Call eZine*; as well as in the Dark Drabbles series of anthologies (*Worlds, Angels, Monsters*, etc.) from Black Hare Press (Melbourne, Australia, 2019); and elsewhere.



E18

"The sea has its mysteries," the old man said.

We sat in the ancient Inuit's sod hut, drinking hot tea next to an antique coal stove. His English name was Frank, and his weathered, creviced face showed each of his 87 years, most of them spent fishing the frigid waters of the Arctic.

"Yes, it does," I said. "And the *SS Baychimo* is one of the sea's biggest mysteries—because we know it's real."

"Oh, yes," he said, as a sigh. "It's real."

The *Baychimo* was a 1,322-ton steel-hulled cargo steamer built in 1914. In 1931, while carrying a load of furs, she became stuck in the Arctic ice and abandoned. Her crew expected the ice to crush the ship's hull and sink her, but a few days later, they found her freed from the ice and still afloat. An attempt to salvage her ended when *Baychimo* became ice-bound again and, again, she was abandoned. After a powerful blizzard blew through, *Baychimo* disappeared, presumed sunk.

But she didn't sink. A few years later, she reappeared. Not a specter, but the actual ship. Attempts to salvage her again failed, and *Baychimo* once more disappeared. From that day on, the old ship reappeared every few years. Each time, she would shrug off salvage attempts and vanish again. The last time anyone saw *Baychimo* was 1969. With no further sightings, *Baychimo* was again presumed lost. Yet the mystery and lore of the Ghost Ship of the Arctic lived on. Determined to solve the mystery of her final resting place, the Alaskan state government hired a marine archaeologist—me—to find her.

"You were the last one to see the *Baychimo* in 1969," I said.

Frank shook his head.

"I am one of the last two to see her then," he said. "Dr. Banastre also saw her."

"But you're the last surviving witness," I said. "You're the one who came back."

"I suppose," he said wearily.

"Can you tell me about that day?"

Frank looked at me with eyes grayed by cataracts and nodded slowly. With equal slowness, he stood, shuffled to the coal stove, and poured us more tea from a battered teapot.

"Dr. Banastre was a scientist, what kind I never understood," he said. "I am a simple man, and these things he spoke of I did not understand. All I understood was he would pay me to take him to a certain place in the ice pack at a certain time on a certain day."

"Did he say why?"

The old man shrugged.

"He studied the *Baychimo*. He said he believed she appeared more often than people thought. He said the ship was on what he called . . ."

The old man tapped his head trying to recall the words.

"A dimensional timetable." He said the words slowly, not certain of the pronunciation. "Yes. And he knew where and when the ship would show up again, and he wanted to be there."

"How did he know?"

Another shrug.

"Okay," I said, "where did he want to go?"

"He pointed to a spot on the chart between Point Barrow and Icy Cape. That's where I took him."

"And?"

"And we waited." Frank picked up a poker and prodded the fire in the stove. "Dr. Banastre did not like to wait. We Inuits have learned how to be patient. Not so much your people."

Frank replaced the poker and sat again.

"But we waited. The night was clear and moon lit. The ice glowed blue white under the moon. Dr. Banastre paced the deck of my boat, muttering to himself. Then a strange fog appeared and drifted toward us. It glowed like the ice. Dr. Banastre became very excited and shouted, 'It's coming. It's coming!'"

"The *Baychimo*?" I asked, and the old man nodded.

"The fog surrounded us. It felt like electricity, the way the air is charged when the sky thunders with lightning." Frank rubbed his arm. "It made the hair on my arms stand up. Then the fog drifted away and the ship was there, stuck in the ice."

"Dr. Banastre shouted, 'Take me to her! Get me there!' So, I found a place in the ice where I could bring my boat in, dug a hole in the ice, buried my anchor in it, and tied off the boat to the anchor line. Then we climbed up the ice drift and walked toward the *Baychimo* while Dr. Banastre took photos with his camera.

"One of those rope ladders hung over the side. The doctor handed me his camera and started climbing. He wanted me to follow, but I said no. I told him it wasn't right to go on board. It was like disturbing a grave. Bad medicine. He called me a superstitious fool. So, I made a small fire with some kindling I brought along and sat there, waiting."

"How long did you wait?"

Frank thought about it.

"Until nearly morning. Dr. Banastre came back on deck and beckoned me to come on board."

"Did you?"

Frank shook his head.

"Not right away. I didn't want to, I told him again. But then I told myself he was my responsibility. He hired me to take him to the *Baychimo* and bring him back. So, I started to climb the ladder. That's when it happened."

"What, Frank?" I asked. "What happened?"

"The fog returned," he said. "It was thick and had that electric feeling again. It felt like electricity was flowing through the rope ladder into me. I looked up and Dr. Banastre was looking down at me, but he looked funny. Like he wasn't there, like he was fading. The rope started to move on its own, writhing like a snake, and I lost my hold and fell back onto the ice."

Frank touched his head, then looked at his hand, reliving the event.

"I hit my head," he said. "There was blood on the ice and my hand. Then everything looked like it was changing, getting blurry. Dr. Banastre was smiling and waving. I don't know. Maybe it was the injury to my head that made everything look strange. But I saw . . ."

Frank shrugged as he frowned.

"I saw spirit people," he continued. "What looked like the spirit people I was taught about as a young boy. Then I passed out. When I woke up, the *Baychimo* and Dr. Banastre were gone. I waited for an entire day to see if they would come back. They never did. I went back to my boat and went home."

The rest of the story I knew. The Coast Guard investigated but came to no conclusion. Dr. Banastre's photo of the *Baychimo* was developed and became famous as the last picture of the ship. I finished my tea, thanked Frank, and moved toward the hut's entrance, then paused.

"One last question. Do you think the *Baychimo* sank that day, sank where you took Dr. Banastre?"

Frank stared out the door at the distant ocean and shook his head.

"My eyes aren't so good anymore, but I still see her sometimes. Out in the open sea now. There isn't that much ice anymore, you know. And I see Dr. Banastre waving at me, beckoning me to come on board."

The old man paused, thoughtful, then shrugged.

"Perhaps," he said, "someday I will."

About the Author:

Martin Roy Hill is the author of eight books, including the Linus Schag, NCIS, thrillers, and the Peter Brandt thrillers. His latest novel, POLAR MELT, a military sci-fi thriller, was published in January 2019. Martin is a professional member of Mystery Writers of America, Sisters in Crime, and International Thriller Writers.

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"Be happy", she whispered.

"Jittle-figg." I whispered back

It was our joke. Jessica was fluent in Dutch. I could barely repeat the words spoken to me, let alone write them correctly on paper. So Gezzelig to her was my Jittle-figg.

Jessica had just catered a huge party for her office near Pier One. Coming home, on her car phone, she was exuberant. The tires thrummed loud as they rolled over the bay bridge.

"The whole night was Gezzelig." She said. "A huge success. People were happy. It couldn't have gone better."

"Jittle-figg bonanza." I laughed. There was a catch in her throat.

"Oh, babe." She whispered, "Be happy."

The line died. Even in the East Bay, we could hear the rumbling explosions.

My Jessica was on the Bay Bridge when 'LittleRocket man', like a jilted lover, let fly 12 short range missiles taking out most of downtown San Francisco. Unfit 45, a leader too slow, too careless to react, allowed this carnage to happen.

Rome burned, why couldn't America's Union fray and tatter?

Born while her mother watched fireworks, my Jessica watched them descend upon her.

Did she see the rockets streaking towards her? Did she know what was happening?

Her voice had been calm.

That one word stayed with me.

Gezzelig.

I raced to find her, careening up the 680, but got as far as the Orinda Tunnel. Police had closed them all. Standing around with AR-15s, shaking in their body armor, these pale warriors turned us back. Staring at them, I knew we weren't going anywhere. We all had to turn around which itself took two hours. The sky around the mountain was smudged grey, the horizon shrouded black with defeat.

I watched the cops' faces. There was no good news there. Faces in other cars appeared altered. Many motorists were stopped along the shoulder.

I kept rolling home, one eye on the rearview mirror watching that smudgy ink stain in the sky spread like hideous octopus ink.

Traffic was light on the 580 going back to Concord. No citizen was out walking. Stores looked closed. Parking lots stood empty.

A dead cat lay in the middle lane as I rolled up Treat road.

Birds flitted from tree to tree, as if spooked, not wanting themselves to be seen.

Loss kills.

Sorrow breeds frustration. Anger blossoms, then comes rage. Who are we after disaster?

An old identity Rubbed raw, flayed from being ripped away from loved ones, we no longer recognize ourselves.

Or know what we are capable of.

Jessica was the calm in my life. Mercurial, quick to burn, hot temper at the drop of a hat, I'd given up being a complete angry bastard because of her. Coming up from the street, she saw past my hardscrabble demeanor, had seen something in me worth loving.

I could already feel myself losing control, a fury rising in me.

I had to pull over.

My hands shook on the wheel then. I had to pull over, tears streaming down my face.

Few cars were in the lot, but TJ's was open. I tried to ignore the spreading ink blotted sky. None of that could be good for us.

I refused to go home.

Seeing glass doors for the store jammed open, I decided to wander in. Being alone sucks. Electricity was out in Concord, hence those stuck sliders. A manager was bent over glued to a radio by the front counter.

A half-empty store with an employee crying by the coffee grinder

Walked towards the wine section. End of America, why not indulge in some '2 Buck Chuck'?

That's when three young teens decided to add insult to injury. The trio had knives. Sad punks looked like they raided Mom's kitchen blade block.

Claire at the counter, in her Hawaiian shirt, just stood there. Her makeup was smudged.

No expression as these half rate looters waved steel at her hollering for cash.

I went French. The first bottle of Chateau Richelieu hit the shortest cretin in the back of his head. Kid dropped like a sack of taters. Began shaking on the tiles, like some brain cog was busted.

His pal turned as I smacked him with a nice red in a thick stout bottle. The squat glass base broke his nose nicely. Squeaks of pain rose to screams as he dropped his steak knife running out the red sliders. That left one skinny bozo in a long green shirt.

I smiled like a crazy freak at the last idiot. I hissed low and long.

"Jittle-figg."

Then began laughing at his shocked face.

The coward retreated along with his pal out the door.

Claire remained expressionless.

We stared at each other. She looked how I felt.

Claire was lost in grief, I succumbed to smoldering rage.

What sorrow hath wrought when contentment is stolen from us.

Without Jessica, what was the point of pretending I could be whole? America had been hanging by a thread for the last three years. We all knew something would break. Who we were was gone now.

Who I was, poof, gone.

Other Hawaiian shirts suddenly emerged from hiding, joining us. Some man-bunned employee hugged me, his pot reek overwhelming.

Another worker, older bald guy picked up one of the salvaged merlot bottles, produced a corkscrew and poured us all a drink. Calls had been made to Fire, Police and 911, but all lines were busy.

Looked like we were on our own.

A few remaining customers stopped and joined in.

An impromptu end of America party.

I helped drag the still shaking teen into the chips aisle. Didn't look like he was going to make it. We put a few towels under his head. A few minutes later he left us.

Just exited sooner than the rest.

End of America party, with alcohol, violence and laughter.

Fun while it had lasted.

But all parties come to an end.

Jittle-figg!

About the Author:

Originally from Chicago, David Ghilardi resides in the deceptively bucolic confines of the East Bay. When not writing, he's on-stage or in front of a camera. To David, his characters are more interesting than he is. His Dark Chicago series gains another chapter in November with *Abbadon's Flame*. He's also the creator/writer of Mlx, a horror suspense series available for free at Davidghilardi.com.

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I took my time getting downstairs. My walker has wheels, and I'm afraid of falling. But the man was still there when I reached the front door.

"Good afternoon, ma'am. I'm Andy Love from the Love Foundation Ministries, and I'm wondering if I could have a few moments of your time." He was very well-mannered.

"Of course," I said. "Won't you come in?"

"Thank you so much." He seemed slightly surprised to be invited inside. I hobbled toward the living room with Mr. Love behind me.

"I represent the Love Foundation Ministries, a spiritual fellowship that brings divine love to the hearts of millions. We sponsor *As the World Burns* and *The Old and the Dutiful*, dramatic daytime television on the Love network."

"Oh, yes." I'd heard about these shows although I hadn't seen them.

"Through these critically acclaimed programs, we teach millions of viewers the wages of sin and the glory of redemption."

"Um--hmm," I said.

"But these television dramas are expensive to produce, and so we rely on viewers like yourself to help us continue to spread our sacred message."

"Wait right here, Mr. Love." I limped and rolled to the kitchen, where I put cookies on a plate and poured a glass of the milk I keep on hand to help me sleep. Then I returned to the living room. "Please, eat something. Your work must make you hungry."

"Why, thank you!" Mr. Love seemed thrilled with this further hospitality. He bit into a cookie and gulped down some milk. "This is very kind of you."

"My pleasure," I said. "Now, you were saying...."

"We go from door to door, asking good people to help us spread the word. We ask for whatever folks feel comfortable giving."

"Well," I said. "I don't have a lot, but I could write you a check."

"Why, that would be wonderful!" Mr. Love looked truly pleased. "We're really very grateful for whatever you can do. It's believers like yourself who make our holy work possible." He raised his half-empty glass in a toast to believers and downed some more milk.

I paused and then said, "I keep my checkbook in the basement. You never know whom to trust, so I hide it downstairs."

Mr. Love took this little confession in stride. "Right," he nodded wisely. "Better safe than sorry."

"Could I ask you to get it? It's in the cardboard box at the foot of the stairs." I motioned toward the basement door off the kitchen.

"Why, certainly. I'd be happy to retrieve it." Mr. Love was positively glowing. We both got up and headed toward the door. I pulled it open and flipped the basement light switch.

"Watch your step," I warned. Mr. Love groped the railing at the top of the stairs. Then his knees buckled. The narcotic in the milk had taken effect. I gave him a push, shut the door behind him, and turned the bolt in the lock.

After he woke up, he yelled for two days. It's day five now, and things are pretty quiet. But I've been watching *As the World Burns* and enjoying the show. As for *The Old and the Dutiful*, I just couldn't get into it.

About the Author:

Janis Butler Holm has served as Associate Editor for *_Wide Angle_*, the film journal. Her prose, poems, and performance pieces have appeared in small-press, national, and international magazines. Her plays have been produced in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K.

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I stepped out of the building and the cold air hit me sharp enough to catch my throat as I inhaled. I blinked at the thin layer of white glistening on everything. When did it get frosty? Midweek and I'd been working late to meet a deadline. There wasn't a soul about or a car on the normally busy main street. It was a clear night and everything was washed in the orange glow of the street lamps. I locked the door and put my hands in my pockets, shuddering already regretting not calling a cab. Well, I was outside now and the sooner I started walking the sooner I'd get to bed. I set off walking quickly but carefully enough that I didn't slip. The air had that scent that you only get on a frosty or snowy morning, I always used to tell myself it's what cold smelled like. Fresh and unlike anything else you ever smell. I could feel the tension ebbing from my shoulders, finally winding down from months of hard work and late nights. I looked down at the pavement as I passed under a streetlamp and smiled as the frost twinkled in the orange light. It was like walking along a path of a thousand tiny suns.

I was just approaching the railings to the park when the nape of my neck tingled and it felt like someone had just dropped a sliver of ice down my spine. My heart started racing and I glanced back casually behind me. The street was empty and peaceful. I looked ahead where the road entered the industrial estate, the shadows more prevalent as the lights were spaced further apart. There were too many pools of darkness to conceal someone but it looked quiet. I glanced to my right through the railings and into the park. Vague outlines of trees and darkness. My night vision was ruined by the streetlights. I normally cut through the park as it took almost 20 minutes off my journey but with almost complete darkness and the low creak of the trees I decided to take the long way. My heart was still racing and I had that feeling someone was watching me.

I glanced back in front and my heart nearly stopped as I caught movement in one of the dark pockets of shadow. There was a faint but distinct sound of flesh striking flesh and a figure landed face down, close enough to the light that I could make out muted ginger hair and some kind of work uniform. Another figure materialized and dropped their knees onto the ginger man's back. The victim grunted as the attacker grabbed a handful of hair and yanked the head back. With the other hand he drew a sharp blade across the exposed neck. I froze in horror as I watched the dark blood spray out over the frosty road. I was right next to the gate into the park and every ounce of me wanted to flee but all I could do was stand and stare. I imagined I could see the blood steaming in the cold morning but I was too far away to tell. The murderer stood and disappeared into the shadow and slowly the victim inched backwards into darkness as he was dragged away. Still I couldn't move, staring at the dark patches on the frosty road.

A spark of light appeared in the shadows, briefly highlighting the distant pale features. It was replaced by the tiny glow of a cigarette that moved closer to the edge of darkness. He stepped out into the half-light between streetlight and deep shadow and I felt instinctively his gaze locking onto mine. My body unlocked and turned stiffly on the spot and I marched to the park gates and squeezed in between them under the chain. A quick glance once I was through showed the killer walking purposefully down the street towards me. I turned and fled into the darkness along the path. The trees were black sentinels with talons scraping skyward above me revealing a thin strip of black starry sky and I could see the slight clearing ahead where the fountain opened up in the middle of the park. I wasn't a fast runner, I never had been. I stopped and heard the distant clink of the chain on the gate and the quick tap tap of shoes striking the path. I moved to the side, every noise or creak that my clothing made like a gunshot in my ear and my heart hammering louder and louder.

Throwing myself flat I shimmied under a low hedge every rustle sending panic spasms through me. The tap tap, and the thump thump of my heart combining into a spiralling tattoo of terror. I froze as the taps got louder, deafening, and I had to bite down hard to stop myself crying out as they hurtled past. I heard them slide to a stop in the clearing with the fountain for a moment and then continue onwards towards the far gate. The fear was sapping into my brain, should I run, should I stay where I was, should I call someone? I didn't want to go back towards what I'd seen but at least on the main street someone, anyone might be about. I started to wriggle out when another sound caught in the still air behind me. The soft step of a tread on the path, then another. I turned my head slightly, the cold ground sapping the warmth from me and hard soil pressing into my cheek. A click, click preceded a blossoming flame that revealed a half smoked cigarette, pale, cold featured and dark eyes focussing on the task. The sound in the man's ears of him inhaling to draw the flame to the cigarette must have been enough to hide my terrified pathetic squeak as I looked again, closely at the face of the murderer. The light died as he proceeded past.

The rapid tap tap was returning from the far end of the park, the two met not ten feet in front of me. Again I could feel the panic rising and I felt sure they would hear my heart. It was throbbing as if it were about to puncture my chest, its thumps about to perforate my ear drums. I was vaguely aware of a warmth spreading beneath me, my fear

manifesting in the most base of bodily functions. I could feel tears freezing on my face and I bit down harder, clamping my teeth together to stop any noise escaping.

"I couldn't find 'em" stated a gravelly, out of breath voice. There was a pause and the dull red glow of the cigarette tip brightened as the murderer inhaled.

"It's fine" answered a smooth voice, cold and hard. "Get back and finish cleaning up. It's doubtful they saw anything but I'll check the CCTV footage anyway. At the very least we can identify them, and take care of it if necessary." The other man grunted and took off back towards the murder scene, the steady tap tap of his shoes fading.

A few moments later the murderer turned and started back towards me also. About three feet from me he stopped. Just a darker shadow against the trees and the thin strip of night's sky. I could vaguely see a shift like he cocked his head to one side. The cigarette moved upwards and flared dully again and then there was a soft click and I watched as it soared towards me. I held my breath and through the pounding in my ears heard a very gentle trickle of water dribbling over a hard surface. In horror out of the corner of my eye I could see the dark stain spreading across the path as my urine moved over the frozen ground, obliterating the pale frost coating just becoming visible to my eyes in the weak starlight. The cigarette butt landed inches from my face rolled and settled against my cold cheek. I flinched and the hedge above me shook, announcing my presence in a fanfare of crisp leaves all shaking at once.

My fight or flight instinct kicked in and I leapt to my feet in an explosion of leaves and snapped branches. I leapt forward and shoved the murderer backwards towards the hedge on the other side of the path. I had a split second to register something sharp and hot on my sternum and the man toppling over the waist high hedge with a grunt before I was off hurtling towards the far gate and home. I didn't stop and I didn't look back I just ran. My lungs were burning and my sides were on fire. It was an odd place to get a stitch my terrified mind fleetingly thought. To my mind it seemed one moment I was in the dark park, surrounded by terror and seconds later I was slumped against the wall on the other side of my front door in a dark hallway. I was wheezing and my vision was blurry. As safety began to drain away the adrenaline I began to feel the cold, the wet cold of my trousers sticking to skin like ice. I began to shake and stifled a cry as I moved and my warm wet shirt slid over the top of a wound.

He had been holding a knife and I must have run into it when I shoved him. I cried out as the realization caused the full pain to wash over me. I shifted to one side, again crying out as fresh pain and terror washed through me. I fumbled in my pocket for my phone, pulled it out and tapped the power button on the side. Nothing happened and I howled in defeat. It's why I hadn't called a taxi when leaving the office. I got on all fours and started to make my way to the kitchen. My side felt very wet and very hot, the blood saturating everything. That can't be good. I had a vague notion of medics in films saying 'Put pressure here' but I felt as if I had the strength of a kitten and it was ebbing by the second. It was all I could do to keep moving towards my charger in the kitchen. I managed to pull myself up against the door jamb and stretch for the light switch. I cried out again as the wound pulled.

I flicked on the light and slumped back to the floor. I could see the red streaks up the white paint and looked down. I felt my vision blur further and it grew dark. I thought I might pass out from all the blood. Instead I lurched forward back on to all fours and began to crawl again towards the counter. I could still hear the tap, tap of pursuit in my head, a companion to my sobs and cries of pain. Tap tap, tap tap. I got to the middle of the kitchen, the cold tiles draining more of the warmth from me. Tap tap, tap tap. It felt like it was distorted one high in pitch and the other a more base and wooden sound. I'd shake my head if I didn't think I'd throw up or pass out. There was a louder tap of the deeper kind, behind me. I froze. The higher pitched one continued, tap tap, tap tap. I looked at the window. A pale, cold face gazed back, cigarette in the corner of his mouth and black emotionless eyes. A long red stained blade tapping on the window. Tap tap, tap tap.

A soft scuff of a tread on carpet told me the rest. The bass tap was the murderers associate working the lock on my door. I cried in defeat slumping to the tiles, no energy left to even cry out. The taps finally stopped as I slid into darkness.

About the Author:

Colin Walsh has been writing for a long time but only recently decided to push for publication. He is trying to have his first novel published and is experimenting with a project on Patreon where the audience guides his writing. He has a massive interest in Fantasy but likes to dip into the darker side of writing.

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To Whomever It May Concern,

It is with great sorrow that I, Dr. Elizabeth Sinclair, on this date, the 17th of August in the year 1972, hereby resign from the practice of medicine. I will attempt, to the best of my ability, to recount the events that have led to my resignation. You may question my sanity, as I once did myself. However, your belief (or lack thereof) in the veracity of my claims does not concern me. I trust my status within the medical community will stand on its own.

It happened six nights ago. I received a strange telephone call from Mrs. Darcy Sutton. She asked that I rush over to her home as quickly as possible, that something was terribly wrong with her son. As a doctor, I rarely take house calls but this one seemed paramount.

By the time I arrived, Mrs. Sutton, whose kind eyes once brought hope to me during my darkest times, had cried away her tears. All that remained was fear. She told me four words which have played back in my mind like a tape recorder since that night, *It's inside of him*.

Inside the quaint cottage, I found her son, Samuel, lying supine on the wooden kitchen table. He was ten years old, gangly and bony as boys his age typically are. However, his stomach was bloated, similar to a corpse's abdomen when it inflates from methane gas expansion. His pale skin glistened sickly and he spoke in guttural groans. The air around him was musty and barely breathable, the stench of sulphur gagging me.

I could not help but see in Samuel my own father, lying supine on paper-thin hospital sheets. Chemotherapy was still experimental then. He lost his hair, his strength, his being. He was so ugly. When I try to remember him, I can't find the happy moments I'm sure we used to share. Instead, I find anger, resentment, crying in closets because of the milestones missed, the important moments he wasn't there for. I find in myself an ugliness. It is because of him that I became Dr. Elizabeth Sinclair.

I asked Mrs. Sutton to tell me what happened leading up to this point. She told me that Samuel had become violently ill over the previous three days; a stomach virus, surely. She motioned towards the kitchen cabinets - all open, all empty. Regardless of the amount of food he consumed, he couldn't satisfy his ravenous hunger.

I splayed my fingers across his stomach, like a tent. His skin was cold and clammy. I moved my fingers around slowly, trying to determine the source of his pain. Something within his abdomen grazed the tips of my fingers with its own. I jerked my hand back, shaking.

Samuel spoke weakly, too weak for me to hear. Whatever was inside of him was pressing on his diaphragm. I leaned in closer to hear his words.

"Make it stop," he said to me.

From his stomach, I heard something squelching, like when you pull your foot out of the mud and your shoe releases suction. The noise grew in intensity, squishing faster and louder. Mrs. Sutton and I watched helplessly as Samuel's stomach expanded further, his pasty skin stretching tight, then rolling over itself.

Like an infected boil, Samuel's stomach ruptured open. Chunks of intestine and guts sprayed the ceiling. From the gaping wound, a bloody, grotesque bouquet of body parts burst out. Wriggling aimlessly, each appendage contorted in its own direction, trying to claw their way out of his raw entrails. It was as if I was witnessing a drowning and could see only the flailing limbs of the victims as they tried desperately to pull themselves above water.

Somehow, this abomination coordinated its mismatched limbs and dislodged itself from Samuel's body. I discovered the limbs were not separate entities but instead attached to a central, horrendously disfigured face. For the briefest of moments, my mind replaced its face with my father's.

The arms and legs and hands and feet extended outwards from the face, like limbs on a spider. Its first movements were jerky and awkward. Gaining its balance, it scuttered towards the kitchen, leaving behind a trail of wet blood.

Mrs. Sutton cradled her son's corpse and cried, as if her tears could bring him back to life. I know what it is to wish beyond wishing that your sorrow could resurrect the dead. When she could not revive her son, she snatched a scalpel from my bag and, before I could stop her, slit her throat from ear to ear. Blood cascaded down her body in a torrential downpour, then escaped between the floorboards.

My next memory is of the sun peering over the horizon, casting an oddly serene glow across the two mutilated bodies that lay in front of me. Stopping my legs from quivering, I stood up, then vomited until my throat was raw. I followed the streak of blood, looking for the creature that had expelled itself from Samuel's body. I was going to butcher it.

I happened upon the malformed creature, curled next to the back door, unable to do anything but quiver like a terrified kitten. It was pitiful and ugly and for a moment, the same anger I had at my father rose from the dark place in my soul. But this time, I released it, refused to allow that hatred to control me any longer.

Some would suggest that it was a 'motherly instinct' which kept me from harming this creature. I prefer to think of myself not as a woman but as a human, one incapable of killing something just because it is ugly. As a woman of science, I

have always believed there to be an explanation for any phenomena. It is with great sorrow I release such beliefs from my life, for today and all days coming.

Formerly,
Dr. Elizabeth Sinclair

About the Author:

Kaleb Tutt is a writer from South Louisiana. He lives for his family, his dog, and Taylor Swift.

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New Arrangements | *Tiffany Michelle Brown*

As was their new custom, Ronnie had beat Susan to bed. He lay atop their midnight blue comforter in pajama pants and a worn T-shirt, his eyes half-closed, his body cutting a fine impression into the mattress. Susan thought he looked peaceful.

She wasn't sure she liked this new arrangement. Over the years, Ronnie had proven to be a night owl and Susan, an early evening bedbug. Her husband's newfound stillness was unsettling; she was used to him puttering about well into the early hours of the morning.

But, Susan reminded herself, people change. Circumstances change. She simply needed to get used to it.

And truly, it wasn't all bad. Since she and Ronnie now had quality time together before bed, she'd taken to reading aloud from her favorite classic, *Jane Eyre*. Ronnie had yet to complain about the old-timey language, so Susan figured he was enjoying himself, even if he wouldn't admit it.

Susan climbed into bed and rubbed lavender-scented lotion into her arms. She found the scent refreshing and calming, and the routine seemed to keep nightmares at bay.

Susan procured her worn copy of *Jane Eyre* from her bedside table and flipped open the brittle pages to where she'd left off the night before. She'd taken to using the rose Ronnie bought her a week earlier as a bookmark, which Susan found incredibly romantic—despite the circumstances under which Ronnie had bought the rose.

It was meant to be an apology. It hadn't worked.

But Susan didn't want to think about that night. It seemed so very long ago. And reflecting on the past wouldn't let her move into her new future. *Their* new future.

Susan's voice, steady and warm, read the words of Charlotte Brontë as Ronnie lay beside her—not just dead to the world, but dead in all respects, as he had been for days now.

At the close of the chapter, Susan sighed, replaced the book, and turned out the light. She was convinced somehow, as she drifted off to dream of their argument—the one that ended so badly and that she revisited in REM night after night—that this life of theirs wasn't so bad.

She'd get used to it. It would just take time.

About the Author:

Tiffany Michelle Brown ran away from the scorching deserts of Phoenix, Arizona, to live near breezy San Diego beaches. Despite a sunny disposition, she's inspired by dark, stormy nights and once had a heart-to-heart with a ghost over a beer. Tiffany's work has been published by Gypsum Sound Tales, Sirens Call Publications, Camden Park Press, and Trembling with Fear.

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ELDER GOD

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Pumpkin Night | *DJ Tyrer*

"Looks like we done got ourselves a bumper crop this year," said one of the figures standing on the farm porch overlooking the field thick with bulbous orange globes.

"Uh-huh. Gonna be a fine pumpkin night tonight," said the other as they turned and went inside.

It was Hallowe'en and the two men were already in costume, done up as a pair of sack-faced scarecrows. Jim wasn't in his costume – Mom had gotten him a great Spiderman suit – because he wasn't there to trick-or-treat. He was at the farm on a mission. Technically, he was about to steal, but all he planned to take was a pumpkin and they had so many it wasn't as if it mattered. They wouldn't miss just one and he wanted to have the biggest jack-o'-lantern on the block.

He waited a short while after they'd gone inside to make sure they weren't going to come back for another look. They didn't.

Cautiously, he crept out from the bushes and threaded his way through the field, selecting the biggest and best-looking pumpkin of them all.

He pulled out his pocket knife. Well, technically, it was his brother's, but he never seemed to need it since he'd become interested in girls.

All he needed to do was slice through the thick green stalk and it was his.

The pumpkin shuddered.

Jim jumped back and swore. Pumpkins weren't supposed to shudder like that.

It shuddered again. Then, a crack appeared in its side and, a moment later, it cracked open. There was a pungent smell and orange goo vomited out onto the ground. Then, the husk fell away to reveal what appeared to be a baby smeared with the orange slime: a baby with a hideous face with enormous black eyes, yawning nasal cavity and a jagged, narrow mouth that looked just like the faces carved into pumpkins.

Jim shrieked in terror then the door to the farmhouse burst open and the two masked farmers ran out. Just what did the burlap sacks over their heads conceal? He was certain he knew the answer. He turned and ran.

"Damn kids," one of the pair muttered.

"Don't worry," the other said, "no-one'll believe him. Come on, they're hatching..."

Raven Guard | *DJ Tyrer*

Some said that ravens were the soul of the Mount and that they protected it and those who dwelt upon it. Willeam Plaren had never really believed in such things – he was a realist who only believed in what he could see and feel – but, he was beginning to have his doubts.

"It's guilt," he told himself, "nothing more."

Willeam certainly had reason to feel guilty. He had come to the Mount this day intent on murder. Ambush, not a fair fight. A coward's choice, he knew, but this wasn't a point of honour. It was about unadulterated, selfish revenge, nothing more.

Willeam Plaren planned to kill the man who had married his sister. For three decades, he had nursed a grudge against the over-proud youth who had grown to become the Lord of the Mount. He should have been proud for the bond between their two lines, but a youthful loathing had festered and grown into hatred. Was not his family every bit as noble in their blood as the line that held the lordship? Was he not every bit as good as his brother-in-law? Yet, his father had squandered their money and, somehow, success had always seemed an insubstantial will-o'-the-wisp to Willeam.

He had planned the murder carefully. He knew his brother-in-law was in the habit of taking a morning stroll through the fields near the edge of the woods that covered the western flank of the hill. Willeam had observed him more than once. Each time, ravens had taken position in the trees and had seemed to watch him watching the master of the Mount. Until now, he had thought nothing of it, the birds being ubiquitous there, but today...

Today, Willeam had taken up a position on the edge of the trees, behind the concealment of the boundary hedge, where he could see but not be seen. He had primed his musket, which rested upon a sturdy bough. But, as he waited, the ravens took up position above and around him, cocking their heads to gaze at him, as if judging him.

First one raven cawed, then another and another, until the assembled mass were all crowing, as if condemning him for his perfidy or sending out a warning of his intended crime. It seemed deliberate. Nowhere else had he observed

such behaviour. They might assemble in numbers to roost or feed in a freshly-ploughed field, but never quite like this. Suddenly, the old stories seemed plausible to him, especially when he considered his brother-in-law was named Bran, 'raven' in the old tongue. Did they serve as the guardians of their namesake?

Willeam looked out across the fields. His brother-in-law was strolling towards him as if he had not a care in the world. Willeam sneered at the thought; knowing Bran, he probably had no cares, not like him. The man had lived an easy life. Had he had Bran's advantages, Willeam was certain he would not have wasted his life as he had.

He raised his musket and pulled back the hammer of the lock so that it was ready to fire. He took aim. A few steps more and Bran would be the right distance away. Willeam's finger rested on the trigger. He began to squeeze.

Just then, as he pulled the trigger to fire, the congregation of ravens that had clustered about him took flight in a cacophonous storm of beating wings and raucous cries. Bran started in surprise and Willeam jerked at the sound, the black cloud of furious wings obscuring his target. The musket cracked and sent the ball hurtling towards Bran, but Willeam's aim was off and his target had moved, so it slammed harmlessly into a gatepost.

Panicked, Willeam turned and ran. He couldn't see Bran through the mass of agitated birds, but he doubted the musket-ball had struck him. By the same token, although Bran surely knew someone was there, he could not have seen who it was. Alerted he would doubtlessly summon men to investigate. If he ran now, Willeam was certain he could elude any such pursuit and escape without recognition or consequence.

Willeam did just that, but the ravens did not seem inclined to let him go. They followed after him, cawing their accusation, calling out their pursuit. In their cries, he almost seemed to detect the word "Traitor!" again and again. He threw the musket aside and clamped his hands over his ears, trying to silence the sound.

He stumbled and fell, rolling down the slope, too late in thrusting forth his hands to prevent a broken nose.

Willeam lay stunned for a moment, and before he could rise, the birds fell upon him, buffeting him down with their wings and clawing at him with sharp talons, pecking at his skin and eyes with powerful beaks. He tried to shield his face, but felt his eyeballs pop under the vicious assault. Blood ran from his scalp and eye sockets and soaked the ragged shirt on his back. The ravens tore into him, and battered him senseless, until he could do no more than lay there whilst they inflicted punishment upon his body for his sin.

"Traitor! Traitor!" the ravens seemed to cry, but he was too weak to place his bloodied and torn fingers over the ragged remnants of his ears. Blood ran down his cheeks like tears in an absolution that was too late to save him from his fate.

Men had come running at the call of their lord and set out into the woods in search of the assassin, following the raucous cries of the ravens, thinking them to be agitated by the panicked flight of the fleeing villain. Instead, they stumbled upon a febrile carpet of black feathers splattered with red. The ravens rose at their approach, settling on branches overhead, allowing them a view of the mangled corpse.

The ravens gazed down upon the scene, their cries sounding like cruel laughter.

Cautiously, fearfully, the men approached the body and rolled it over to reveal the brutally-gored face. Identifying Willeam would take some time and would shock his brother-in-law, but Bran would understand that the ravens had saved him and acted to punish the treacherous man.

As the body was carried back up the hill, the ravens maintained their vigil, watching over the Mount as ever they had done and ever would, until finally it became a ruin.

About the Author:

DJ Tyrer dwells in Southend-on-Sea, UK, where they run *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), *What Dwells Below* (Sirens Call Publications), and issues of *Hinnom Magazine*, *ParABnormal*, and *Weirdbook*, and has a novella available, *The Yellow House* (Dunhams Manor).

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I need sleep. It's been a long night of Halloween trick-or-treating and I'm tired. But first I need to pack away my costume. It's one of a kind, fragile with age, and requires delicate handling if I'm to use it again this time next year.

I drop my treat bag onto the table and carefully lift the witch hat off my head. It lives in a tall hat box so the pointed top doesn't get bent. First, I stuff the inside with crumpled tissue paper so the hat holds its shape. Then I brush the felt rim with a soft feather to remove any dirt or dust. Satisfied, I pack the hat into the box and place it on the top shelf inside the closet.

Next, I slip out of my emerald green robe. I love the silky feel of the fabric as it slides down my arms. The robe is a family heirloom, last used by my mother in her trick-or-treating days, but the fabric still holds the scent of myrrh, my grandmother's favorite essential oil. As I hang the robe in the closet, I notice a red splotch on the sleeve. That was careless of me. Fetching a cotton ball from the bathroom, I dab at the red, hoping the robe hasn't absorbed the scent of my night's activities. I much prefer the smell of myrrh. I'm in luck. The red splotch transfers to the cotton ball, leaving no trace on the robe. Nose wrinkling at the sweet, coppery smell, I place the cotton ball on the table—I'll find a use for it somewhere—then stow the robe in the closet.

Last to pack away is my broomstick. I purchased the broom a year ago out of my own savings. It's the first time I've owned something that hasn't belonged to someone else in the family. I lay it on the table, admiring how the bristles shimmer in the lamplight then, using a bee's wax-infused cloth, polish the timber handle until it gleams. Black smudges mark the cloth, an accumulation of street smut after hours of door knocking. I toss the cloth into the rubbish bin beneath the kitchen sink. I've no use for suburban grime.

As I roll the broomstick in a protective layer of brown paper, Merlin, my cat, leaps through the open kitchen window carrying a rat in his mouth. He gives a muffled yowl, then jumps onto the floor and drops the rat at my feet.

"It looks like your hunt has been as successful as mine," I say, reaching down to stroke his sleek, black fur.

Merlin purrs and rubs against my legs. His green eyes fix on my treat bag.

"There's no candy in there for you," I say, prodding the rat with my boot to distract his attention from the bag. "Go on. Take your rat. Just leave the tail where I can find it."

Merlin meows, picks up the rat with his teeth and slinks away to the corner of the living room. I make a mental note to search beneath the sofa for the tail.

Stifling a yawn, I return to my task. I secure the brown paper with two silk ties and stand the broom in the cupboard with the robe. I yawn again as I close the door. In the hallway, my grandfather's clock strikes twice.

"No wonder I'm tired," I say to Merlin.

His response is a crunch of bones.

I head to bed. Then remember the treat bag. I can't leave that out. Merlin will have a feast. Returning to the table, I open the bag and tip out the goodies I collected. It's a nice haul. Four prying eyeballs from my nosey neighbors, one broken heart from the newly widowed Mr. Perkins who lives over on Fourth Avenue, two livers, a pair of earlobes, and Mrs. Drinkwater's tongue.

All I wanted from her was a vial of her blood but I lost my temper after she remarked that it was rude for an adult to take treats meant for children. It's not my fault potion ingredients are ancient. I'm not even sure where I can use it. There's no potion in my grandmother's recipe book that calls for an old woman's waspish tongue. Maybe Merlin will get a treat after all.

The one treat I didn't collect was the spleen from the lady in the pink house over on Sixth Avenue. I'm all out of spleens. She said treat first, but changed her mind and asked for a trick. I think my youthful glow, thick, glossy hair, and lack of wrinkles for a woman my age spiked her curiosity. I still could have taken her spleen. She's not the first person to faint after I changed myself into a bat. But that didn't seem fair. Not to worry. I'll collect a treat from her next year. I doubt she'll ask for a trick ever again.

Fetching some jars, I pack away my treats and store them in the fridge. As eager as I am to get started on a new batch of potions to replenish my dwindling stocks, I'll wait until morning. I need sleep. It's been a long night and I'm tired.

About the Author:

Pauline Yates writes speculative fiction, dabbles in horror, has a weakness for comedy, and seeks stories for the soul. Her growing list of publications includes short stories with *Metaphorosis*, *Abyss & Apex*, and *Beta Noire*. She lives in Australia, prefers a lonely beach, and is proud of her green thumb.

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WICKED DEEDS

WITCHES. WARLOCKS.
DEMONS AND OTHER
EVIL DOERS

SIRENS CALL PUBLICATIONS

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Patrick liked to travel down to New York and look around the second-hand cybernetics outlets on the Lower East Side every couple of months. You never knew what you'd find amongst the scrapped and obsolete equipment. He walked through one of the less reputable stores, 'Fairyland Automaton,' past the heaps of junk: stepper motors, limbs, heads and torsos, to the set of racks at the back of the shop where rows of long drawers were arrayed one on top of another as in a mortuary. The label on the first said 'Hoffman mark 3.8F – possible damage to higher cerebral functions, superficial exterior damage, mobile.' He couldn't believe his eyes when he pulled the drawer out and looked down on its occupant, the 3.8F was an up to date 'Domestic Companion' model and certainly didn't belong in a junkyard like this.

Patrick was a software engineer by profession and a singleton by preference, his hobby was cybernetics. He had a well-equipped workshop back at his home outside Norwich, the attached barn was a museum of droids and synths. He had dozens, mostly de-activated, arranged as if at a party, standing or sitting at tables, his friends said it was like a set for a sci-fi movie. Many of them found the place spooky.

The 3.8F was enclosed in a padded wire mesh examination cage that was pivoted at the head and foot ends, so that it could rotate along the drawer's long axis. The synth lay on its back as if sleeping, but could be rolled over to allow examination and repairs. Patrick tried to ignore its physical perfection, the H 3.8's were all beautiful, both the F and the M versions, that was part of their role. This one had flawless skin, long black hair and slightly oriental features. The face might have been copied from a real person or computer generated. There was a lot of exterior damage: two circular burn marks on the back of the head where it had probably been Tasered, that would explain the 'possible damage to higher cerebral functions.' There were lacerations to the skin at the wrists and ankles, probably from over-tight ligatures, in fact he could see a cable tie embedded in the skin of the right wrist that was partly healed over. One side of the synth's face was discoloured and misshapen. Patrick was repelled by the sight of what looked like cigar burns in various places on the torso. Cigars were still legal, if you could find them and were willing to pay the tobacco tax. Disturbingly, there were weals on the synth's back as if it had been caned. Patrick wondered if it'd been used in some sort of sadomasochistic episode. He pressed the left earlobe three times quickly and the synth's eyes opened. It tried to move but the cage restrained it.

"Hello, my name is Mary, I am damaged, please help me," it said.

"Hello, Mary, my name is Patrick, boot information please," Patrick's policy was to be polite to software, even when it wasn't self-aware.

"I am a Hoffman model 3.8F, serial number 82741 dash 38747 dash 13624, software upgrade revision number 18937 dash 9876."

"Report content of working directory," he said.

"No data files, working directories empty, last formatted 02 slash 09 slash 2053 at 01 dot 34 dot 21 hours."

So, its working memory had been wiped clean before it was switched off and dumped. He would be able to trace the previous owner from the serial number but the synth may have been stolen and re-programmed, possibly as a pleasure bot.

Patrick tried to be professional, after all, you wouldn't feel sorry for a car that was scratched, or a broken-down lawnmower, but it was difficult not to empathise with the synth. He noticed that the eye on the damaged side of its face was seeping fluid slightly, almost as if it was crying. He managed to be dispassionate as he pointed out the various defects to 'Shaky' Tom Fletcher, the proprietor of the emporium. "Where did it come from?" he asked, but Tom was evasive, said he couldn't remember, he thought it might have been part of a job lot, brought in to be scrapped for spare parts.

"She's all legal though, I can give you a copy of the receipt. She is lovely, I didn't realise she was in such good condition," said Shaky Tom, as he began an attempt to raise the price. Patrick wasn't having any of it though and rolled the synth over slowly in its cage, pointing out defects and damage until he got the price down to something reasonable.

The two men shook hands on the deal and Patrick transferred the funds. He and Tom unclipped the top half of the cage and helped the synth to climb out. She stood naked at the side of the rack as Shaky Tom slid the drawer back into place. "You kids have fun now," he said, leering, as Patrick helped the synth into a set of paper overalls. She left the shop walking like an invalid but under her own steam.

Patrick strapped the 3.8F into the passenger seat of his car and switched it to 'sleep' mode. He sat looking out of the windows as the car drove them back up the interstate towards Norwich. He wondered what sort of person would do this to a defenceless machine, it was the sort of thing only a sick-minded man would want to do. They arrived at his house at the edge of town, it was a converted eighteenth-century barn, he'd bought it for the space it provided. He

walked the synth into his workshop and helped her into the pivoting examination cage suspended next to his bench. The next day was Sunday and he planned to start work on her in the morning.

"I'm going to switch you to sleep mode for a few hours, Mary" he said, "but I'll have a good look at you tomorrow and start your repair."

"Thank you, Patrick," she said. He switched her off, and went up to bed.

Next morning, he began the repairs. The wrist and ankle cuts would heal themselves over a few days now that she was powered up, even while she was in sleep mode, he just needed to keep the wounds clean and covered. He carefully peeled back some of the skin from her face and repaired her broken cheek bone. The cigar burns which so horrified him would take a while to heal, they were relatively deep and the skin would probably be permanently discoloured. He sprayed the weals on her back with a temporary plastic covering. Patrick was used to dealing with damaged synths and androids but usually the damage was caused by accident or age. He found it difficult to imagine somebody mutilating a synthetic in such a calculated fashion. Synths weren't conscious, but they were programmed to avoid damage to themselves, as long as that didn't put a human being at risk in the process. A synth would plead and beg for help if it sensed injury. There were probably people who were turned on by this sort of behaviour and, of course, inflicting damage on one's own property wasn't illegal.

He left Mary in sleep mode for the rest of the week and woke her the next Saturday after first checking her over. Her wounds were healing nicely and the cheekbone was fully fused in place. She climbed out of the examination cage and dressed in the clothes that he'd brought for her. They were oddments from thrift stores but she carried them well, he thought. He showed her around the living quarters to orient her and then took her out to the barn to look at the 'exhibits,' part of her duties would be to keep them dusted.

Patrick seldom had to leave his house, he did most of his programming work in his office and he HoloSkyped colleagues and attended virtual meetings as necessary. Mary's deep programming allowed her to cook, clean, and hold basic conversations. She made beds, answered calls and placed orders for provisions. Patrick often took her with him if he went out. If he drove the car manually, Mary would use her GPS software to give him directions. If he visited friends she would sit or stand patiently, answering simple factual questions and helping to serve food and drinks if asked. Friends noticed that Patrick seemed happier and more relaxed than he'd been for a long time.

Patrick knew that he was being illogical but he felt that Mary was lonely as she sat quietly downstairs while he slept, so he told her to sit in his bedroom during the night. She would wake him at the allotted time and then go down and make him a cup of tea.

Patrick and Mary had been 'co-habiting' for about three weeks when he got a call from Shaky Tom at Fairyland Automaton. "The cops have been round," he said.

Patrick was puzzled. "Cops, why?" he asked.

"That 3.8F's previous owner wants her back," said Shaky.

"But I've got a receipt for her, I bought her in good faith, she's mine."

"Normally that would be true, but the previous owner says she was, stolen, so it's your loss, I'm afraid." Shaky disconnected and his image disappeared in a cloud of tiny multicoloured three dimensional pixels.

Two hours later there was a knock at the front door. Patrick answered it and found two police officers on his doorstep, standing behind them was an angry looking older man.

The smaller of the police officers introduced herself. "Sergeant McGovern, sir, we've come to retrieve a stolen synthetic, serial number 82741 dash 38747 dash 13624, illegally sold to you by a Thomas Fletcher of Fairyland Automaton and owned by Mr. Martin Riley here," she gestured towards the older man.

Patrick invited them all in and tried to argue that Mary was his property now. The Sergeant showed him the various court orders on her DataPad. She offered to upload copies to his server.

"You can sue Mr Fletcher or apply for recompense through the Victim Support Scheme," she said.

"I'm not worried about the money; I just don't want you to take her." Patrick was agitated, and almost shouting.

"It's not a 'she,' Mr. Tighe, it's a synth, and I'm sorry but it's Mr. Riley's synth."

Patrick realised that he had no option, he called Mary down from the bedroom where he'd sent her.

"Hello, Mary, do you remember me?" asked Martin Riley, speaking for the first time and smiling broadly.

"No, I am afraid I do not," said the synth.

"Well, you used to live with me, and now you're coming back home. Say goodbye."

Patrick stood helplessly as Riley led Mary out to his car and opened the passenger side door for her. Patrick moved forward but the sergeant and her companion were standing in front of him, they grabbed him and held him back as he struggled to go out to Riley's car.

"Don't hurt her, don't you dare hurt her," he shouted. He caught a glimpse, through the rear window, of a smiling Martin Riley looking back at him as the car drove away. Patrick was distraught, shouting and weeping, the police helped him to a chair and the sergeant made him a cup of tea. They left once he regained his composure. As they walked down the front path, he heard the sergeant say to her companion.

"He should get a real girlfriend, a good-looking boy like that, wasted on a synth."

Patrick shut the door of his house and walked into the kitchen. He stared out at the fields at the back of his house and wondered what to do next. He went back to his office and tried to work on his current job but stopped after a few seconds and sat staring at the screen. He was coldly furious. He hated Martin Riley and had fantasised that he had re-programmed Mary to strangle him while he lay in bed, or smash his skull with a hammer.

It was no good, all these things were impossible, synthetics were specifically programmed not to harm human beings. There were unsubstantiated stories about military synths, robot soldiers that didn't have this inhibition, even though they were banned under a United Nations treaty.

He returned to his solitary life in the countryside and tried to make the best of it. He missed Mary and thought about buying an android pet: a dog or a cat, but they wouldn't give the companionship that Mary had.

Four weeks later, it was the middle of the night, Patrick was woken by knocking on his front door. Holding his Taser ready, he risked opening it. Lying on the ground, hair dishevelled, clothes in tatters, lay Mary, Patrick could see a tie wrap still attached to one of her wrists. She raised her head to look up at him and said, "Hello, my name is Mary, I am damaged, please help me." Patrick half carried her into his workshop and sat her on a chair.

"Do you remember me, Mary, my name is Patrick?" he asked.

"No, Patrick, my working directories were formatted two hours and twenty-four minutes ago. This location is embedded in my navigation software, I am programmed to go to it if I am lost."

"That's right, Mary, I set that up in case you were ever formatted again. You used to live here with me, before Martin Riley came and took you away. I'm glad you found me." Patrick helped her out of her clothes and into the examination cage where she lay back and stared at the ceiling. "I'm going to set you to sleep mode, Mary, I can install your last back-up and then I'll see about this damage."

Once Patrick had restored the files in Mary's working directories, she remembered everything up to when she left the house with Martin Riley. He checked her over and found a similar pattern of ligature damage at her wrists and ankles as before, she'd been beaten with a stick or length of plastic pipe again but it was the deep burns on her torso that horrified him. They would have taken time to inflict and Mary would have begged Riley to stop as he did it. There were more of them than last time. Mary lay quietly in the padded cage as he rotated her around and examined her wounds. He probed one of the burns carefully to see how deep it was.

"Please don't damage me, Patrick," she said.

Patrick stopped, he was weeping, "I'm truly sorry, Mary, I don't want to hurt you, I just want to see how bad the damage is. I'll put you in sleep mode and clean the burnt tissue out of the wounds and cover them so that they can heal better."

"Thank you, Patrick," she said quietly. When he'd finished cleaning and covering her wounds, he switched her back on and helped her upstairs to his bedroom.

"Sleep in my bed, Mary, you'll be in better shape in the morning," he said.

"Shall I make you a cup of tea at seven o'clock?" she asked.

"No, I don't want you working until you're completely healed." He pulled the covers over her, although he couldn't have said why. He switched her to sleep mode and went downstairs. Two hours later there was loud banging on his front door. Patrick was working in his office, he clicked the external camera icon on his screen and saw Martin Riley, red-faced with anger and staring straight into the camera.

"Fucking let me in, propeller head," he said.

Patrick walked through and opened the door.

"You've got Mary in there. Her tracker says she's here. She's my property, I want her back. I want her back now," he shouted in Patrick's face.

"Calm down, Mr. Riley. Yes, Mary's here, she's in my workshop, please come through." Patrick gestured Riley to go ahead. As he walked past, Patrick popped out the Taser he wore on his belt and deftly applied it to the back of Riley's head. Riley collapsed unconscious to the floor and lay jerking convulsively.

Patrick climbed the stairs and switched Mary back on. "I need a hand, Mary," he said.

Martin Riley woke to find that he couldn't move he was naked to the waist and secured in the examination cage in Patrick's workshop. His hands were tie wrapped to the front of the wire mesh, his head ached, his mouth was dry, he felt weak and ill.

"Let me out," he shouted, "let me out." He could see Patrick sitting in a chair close by, he was staring at Riley, his face expressionless, almost as if Riley was a scientific specimen or an automaton needing repair. "Fucking let me out," Riley shouted as loudly as he could, but he remembered that the nearest house was a quarter of a mile away. He screamed as loudly as he could. Patrick pulled a wry expression and shook his head.

Patrick stood up, and Riley could see that he was holding a length of flexible plastic hose. He swung it back and then brought it crashing down across Riley's face. The examination cage saved him from the blow but the noise was shocking, he screamed with fear and began to piss himself. Patrick dropped the hose and slowly lifted a cigar from the workbench.

"Ironical that this should be one of yours," he said as he lit it, took a long pull and leaning forward blew smoke slowly into Riley's face. Riley coughed but stopped as Patrick ground the lighted end into the back of his captured right hand. Riley screamed and tried to jerk it back, blood dripped as the tie wrap that restrained it tore the skin on his wrist, he screamed again. "We need to talk, Mr. Riley," said Patrick evenly, puffing smoke as he lit another cigar, "We need to talk about Mary."

About the Author:

Roger Ley was born and educated in London and spent some of his formative years in Saudi Arabia. He worked as an engineer in the oilfields of North Africa and the North Sea, before pursuing a career in higher education. He writes in a variety of speculative genres, his stories have appeared in about twenty ezines in the last two years.

Author Blog: [Roger Ley](#)
Goodreads: [Books by author Roger Ley](#)

The Burial | *Greg Fewer*

The archaeologist explained to the journalist how, unlike other skeletons in this medieval graveyard, this one lay buried face down with the skull between its feet. Apparently, the man concerned was believed to have been a vampire and was buried like this to prevent him escaping his grave to attack the living! They both laughed.

The journalist returned later for another look. Though **it** was **then** closed, some passersby saw him entering **the archaeological site** through a gap in the fence.

The next day, archaeologists found his blood-drenched corpse in the otherwise empty grave, his neck broken and torn open....

About the Author:

A lifelong fan of speculative fiction, movies and television, Greg Fewer writes predominantly flash fiction. His stories have appeared in (among other places): *Cuento Magazine*, *Lovecraftiana*, *Monsters: A Dark Drabbles Anthology*, *Page & Spine*, *Schlock! Webzine*, and *The Sirens Call*.

For time immemorial, the battered old wood and green leather chest had been interred in the attic, gathering dust and memories. Certainly it had been there as long as I had lived in the shambling Victorian manor. At first I had resided there with my family, then in more recent times I had only the occasional rat for company. Try as I might, I could never pry its solid lid open, nor find a key anywhere. Thus the chest had remained, only being disturbed every few months when I had to make use of the attic, or another futile attempt to discover its secrets and alleviate my boredom. The more the mystery eluded me, the more the vessel haunted my thoughts. I imagined all manner of treasures kept within, from pirate gold to a wealth of family heirlooms. Eventually there came the night when it pervaded even my sleeping hours, seeping into my dreams, leaving me restless and at its mercy.

As the weeks flew by I slept less. My repose had been sacrificed in my all consuming obsession to delve into the mysteries of the chest. I became fettered by wood and leather, becoming a pallid recluse in my efforts. No manner of tool nor gadget could break through its carapace, all mysteriously breaking or malfunctioning. Even my efforts to remove the chest from the attic were thwarted, suddenly it would seem as if it weighed ten thousand pounds, and I could not lift or shove it, even though I had many times before. I began to spend every waking hour by the chest, and many a sleeping hour too, just waiting for... something. The chest seemed to taunt me, I fancied that there were twisted, jesterly faces appearing in the grain of the wood, the cut of the leather. For fear I was losing my mind I began to force myself to leave its presence and the prison my attic had become. Inevitably I always came scurrying back after mere minutes, wanting to see if any change had occurred. I did this, knowing all the while that it was my Pandora's Box.

Finally a new kind of day dawned, a day that was black as the night that preceded it, so gloomy and meagre in its sunlight that I had barely noticed it dawn at all. My attic was perfect, dark and warm, and in due time I nodded off to sleep. What a wicked trick that was, after I had not slept for many days. In my dreams I saw the baneful chest finally creaking open, the snapping of the weathered hinges like that of so many bones, the groan of a dying man, dust raising like ghouls on the wind. I willed myself closer, hoping that the dream state would give me some semblance of respite to my obsession, allow me to dream its interior, to peruse its wares.

As I leaned over the gaping opening my eyes began to fill with a thick liquid that obscured my vision and began a rapid course down my cheeks. I rubbed my eyes to clear it, but this only served to spread the viscous fluid further, allowing me to see only the faintest of shapes through a film of red. Blood. I scrubbed at them a second time, only to have the orbs collapse in, rendering my world black, mixing the blood on my cheeks with vitreous fluid. I screamed a wordless scream, impotently attempting to rouse myself from this trance. Instead I merely fell forward, into the open chest, the lid slamming shut as I continued to fall. I was reaching, clawing at any surface to stop or even slow my rapid descent. It was in vain.

I awoke with a start, relieved to find my eyes intact and vowing to not fall asleep again until I could discover the contents of the trunk. As I rose I noticed a simple brass key had appeared in the lock, much to my consternation. I looked about me for any signs of another being having come up here while I was in repose, but there was not a hint of any person having been here in months. Tentatively I reached out, touching the key once, twice, affirming that it was indeed real before turning it. It moved effortlessly, as if it were well greased and used regularly.

I could barely contain my excitement and trepidation as I lifted the lid carefully, finally at this moment, this precipice that I had wished to be for so long. Initially the contents puzzled me... Toys. Toys very much like those I played with as a child. As a matter of fact, exactly like those I used to play with as a child. But why would my parents store them here? It had been so long since I played with them, and this chest seemed far older than that. I began to pull them out, reminiscing on fond memories of each and every one. Then I laid my eyes on something which made me recoil in horror... From beneath a stack of building blocks, a little foot, worn down to bone. Aghast, I moved more toys aside, finding a leg, then another, until the body of a boy emerged, on the brink of embracing his teen years before his life was cut short. I sat back, no longer wanting to look upon this sarcophagus. Sensibility had me wanting to run and tell the authorities, or slam the lid to hide the indelible image of that broken, pathetic body from my mind.

My body would not move, would not flee. Why was this corpse in amongst MY toys, my precious things? I had to look closer, I had to find the answer. Again I peered over the edge, the scene no less shocking the second time. I shuddered and looked over the body. The head was at an odd angle, the neck clearly broken. Twisted eyeglasses still sat on the ghoulish skull, a thin gold necklace around the neck. On it was a ring, my breath caught at the moment I sighted it. I reached out, pulling it to me in my shock, dislodging the head completely. That ring, passed from father to son for generations, that unique ring that hung around my own neck. I was paralysed, not moving, not seeing, not feeling. The

wracked corpse, now so familiar to me, forced the truth into my numb, unaccepting mind. The truth of my own sad fate, and my imprisonment in this sprawling Victorian house, full of ghosts and sadness... Little knowing that I was one of them.

About the Author:

Ysadora Alexander is an Indigenous queer author currently residing in Western Australia. Their passion for writing started at a young age, however it is only recently that they developed the drive and discipline to actively pursue the career. They are currently working on three novels while dabbling in the horror genre for short stories to pay for their cats to attend college.

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Soul Reaper | E.A. Williams

Lady-like. The word itself is nothing more than a cliché. It sounds weak, what a man says when he stumbles across a lady, quiet and obedient. I am strong, cunning, desirable. Most of all I crave the taste of vengeance, torture, death. Not a physical death per se. I want souls. Revenge, taking life as they know it, ceasing them to exist. The pain I've endured by the hands of men countless times ended my life years ago. Alone in the woods, I laid there motionless, breathless, lifeless. My naked body grey from the cold, lips blue with death. Something happened that night. Hot air filled my lungs and warmed my body. I knew I was brought back for a reason. No longer a person, I'm nothing but a shell, a walking corpse in search of prey without a soul of my own. I spend my days in search of men who treat women as tools, playthings in their sick, twisted games. While they sharpen their blades mistreating, tormenting, these women, I stalk. I wait till they find a victim to claim then step in. I cast them in by the one thing, the only thing they look for. Vulnerability. I play the damsel in distress and allow them the opportunity to play the hero. I praise and express my appreciation in owing these *brave* men something of unyielding pleasure luring them into my bed. They feel as if they have power over me, little do they know the power I have over them. When they are finished with me, I ask to pose them in front of my camera. Explaining I want something to look at from time to time to remind me of the hero that saved me from a chilling fate. More than willing to oblige me, the clicking of the shutter sounds, the bulb flashes and I'm left alone in my room. I dress while waiting for the film to develop and look over my collection. Portraits of men lining the walls of my red room, pleading to be let out. Scratching, clawing, crying, to be released from their framed prisons. The man who took my life hits his side so harshly it caused his frame to tilt. Placing it back in a perfectly straight line, I clicked my tongue while shaking my head. He is still my most prized portrait. My most recent inmate comes into focus in the tray. He looks confused, scared, and quickly discovers he's trapped. Framing his cringing face, I hang him to my collection smiling in pride. Blowing the lamp out, I shut the door behind me listening and smiling at the screams echoing. Out again, I walk along the cold streets seeking my next subject. My hunger is never satisfied as I am cursed to live my days reaping souls of the wicked.

About the Author:

E.A. Williams is the author of *Spirit of the Dragon*, included in the *Dragons Within: Claiming Her Wings* anthology. Her interests focus on gothic literature, as well as crime, and paranormal romance. Her work will capture your raw emotions bringing you into a world of suspense, and exposing you to sheer terror. E.A. Williams is a California native currently residing in Texas with her husband and daughters.

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*Look for E.A. Black's story, 'Can You See It?'
on page 85 of the Summer 2019
issue of The Horror Zine*



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Acwel warned the village that the boy would not return as he'd been.

The assembly received this, and there was a loud sound of rough voices, all talking at the same time. When the officiator used his gavel, the sound stopped.

He made it known that Acwel's comments were not well appreciated. Further, the council had for some time disapproved of the strange sounds and lights encountered on occasion as villagers traveled near his home at the northern post.

Acwel was unmoved where he stood. "Am I being charged with sorcery?" Sorcery and shamanism had been outlawed in a unanimous vote three winters prior.

The officiator spoke quickly, and his voice was no longer loud. "No, no, no," he said. "We've no ill will against you. You've more than held up your end tending the graves and prayer circles in the grieving grounds. But we've decided your services would be better used in a village with a real need."

Acwel was unchanged. He said nothing else as he gathered his tote to leave. He'd not waste the words on the dreams of dead people.

The trade route was rocky, and the long walk wore on their legs and backs. At night they lit no fires and some of the older ones said things to one another about the nomads that still came through on trails that weren't more than three miles west of where they'd crossed into the mountains. Hosts to demon intelligences. One said they came down from the trees in teams to hunt and they killed you while sleeping and cleaned your bones and kept them for witchcraft. He said that's how they do worse than just kill you. They curse you besides. Their orders were to err on the end of caution.

The boy couldn't sleep. The night stars scared him. He ate cured sticks of meat and wished they had more water. He wished for his mattress and masturbated as quietly as he could as he thought of his sister's new body. This spring she'd shown him her breasts. They sometimes met in secret near the boneyard and the grieving gardens and hid behind the tall grass, just beyond the post's demarcating pylons.

Acwel had once suggested the posts be adorned with the skulls of their executions, but the council balked and called the idea barbaric. Acwel ceased to appear at the council meetings unless he was summoned.

After they'd dressed again they part company one at a time to avoid suspicion. The boy once saw Acwel standing on the stoop of the post's parish. The boy didn't try to hide and so instead he waved, his trousers still undone. Acwel waved in return. The ground was soft and still cold. When the boy returned his shoes were soaked through.

It was summer when the council called upon a trade party to travel to a city center a week away on foot. The city had previously been hostile to private colonies, especially agrarian villages that didn't contribute their young men to the city's endless cycle of army campaigns, the continual encroachment of the region by weaponized force in skirmishes too quick and one-sided to properly call war.

But peace had lasted decades, and the city had diminished production without a war effort. They welcomed any and all trade exchanged and were very often generous and hospitable to their guests.

The village council agreed to trade corn and rice and wild berries by the box, each stacked and attached to a slow coach. They wanted a cache of weapons and tools and writing instruments and liquor. Acwel, summoned but not spoken to, had said aloud that the trip was wasteful. The exchange was frivolous. Acwel packed his things into a small satchel and left the next morning at sun-up.

He came upon the boy in the grass. The sister had set off for home first as she always did.

Acwel gave the boy a large book bound in leathered skin and clasped in brass. The boy could not read the title. Acwel told him it didn't much matter.

The boy went home to pack, the strange book under an arm, his soul alight with love.

After the boy finished there on the rough, strange road under the stars, he lay panting as quietly as he could, not wanting to wake any of the snoring men. When he still couldn't sleep, he reached into his pack and pulled out Acwel's book, hoping to look at the strange pages he'd stared at in every stolen moment he'd had since leaving.

The boy understood for the first time that starlight was not unlike sunlight. Both defined the world about you. Both contained the power to strike you dumb. But the dark light also carried the unshakable presence of your slaughter. As sun assured the accomplishments of strong men and the minds of sound plans and motives, the night sky promised a death that was as sure as it was unimaginable. Even the men's morbid whispers did harm to one another, each night's sleep in the camp broken and surrounded by bad dreams.

He couldn't make much of the words, most of which were in languages he could neither read nor pronounce, but the images that were interstitially sketched and scribbled every several pages or so made his ears hum with a high whine, made his breathing come in deep gulps and gasps.

Here a cube surrounded by piles of human bones and a line of scalps tied up between two poles. Here the diagram of a hand with arrows pointing to specific points of significance unknown to him. Here a face lost in sorrow. Here a face in screaming laughter. Here the body of a man torn to pieces by amphibious imps as his eyes rolled skyward toward a blazing black sun.

But the one he returned to was at the center of the book, spread across two pages.

A perfect circle, blacker than any other shade of black he'd yet seen in a book or drawing. Black like the forgotten dreams that never surface. Black like the doorways at the bottom of deep stone stairwells. Openings that are only ever shadow.

He stared at the circle for many minutes and fell asleep.

More than three weeks passed, and the trade party did not return. Wives came to the council and begged them to assemble a search team. The council conceded and gathered who they could.

The father of the boy was one of three officiating members. A merchant and grocer, and the first to volunteer his child into what had been a common right of passage.

His wife, sick with worry, said that he had to go as well. She said in plain words that she would not forgive him for their son's death.

That night, two men from the trade party stumbled into the village square, bleeding and begging for water. Their wounds were treated, and they were given large bowls to drink from as they fielded loud, impatient questions from the council, each having been called out of bed by the warning bell.

They said that the city had welcomed them and hosted them well. They'd agreed to the boxes of goods and in return they'd loaded their coach with the desired weapons and tools and instruments. They were well fed and well rested when they set out from the city gates—but the city sent no soldiers to guide them back along the first few days' journey, as had been the custom on all previous trade visits.

On the second night of their return the hunters had come upon them in masks of human skin and decorated in scraps of bloody clothes and bone jewelry. They slaughtered the group while they slept—and the few who woke to the sounds of their screaming fellows scattered into the woods on all sides.

They did not see what had come of the boy.

The next morning the search party set out as planned, each on horseback and heavily armed with rifles and steel blades. They had few hopes of finding any survivors—or their goods.

In three days, they found the remains of the camp and the dismembered mules beside the empty coach. They could account for each body but one. All that they found of the boy was his pack, which his father kept as a keepsake to help his family grieve.

True to her words, the wife never forgave him.

When the man unloaded the pack, he saw the book and inspected the contents therein. Like the boy, he too was unable to read the strange script. But the pictures spoke well enough of

dark magic and damnable things and the man burned it in disgust, and secret. His daughter watched him from her window and cried as she'd been taught—quiet and without theatrics.

Summer became fall and the village held none of its yearly festivals or parades. The Council saw three members resign and elected three more to fill the gap.

The sister eventually showed, and the mother screamed at the embarrassment. She slapped the girl's face and pulled her hair. She told the father, and he demanded to know who.

When she told them, there was a secret appeal to the inner council of elders, and the girl was dismembered piece by piece and burned inside of an iron furnace. The inner elders acted as clerics, but none had divine authority, and in truth all defied the law. The execution was, in fact, a crime.

Years passed. Inner elders died off and were replaced by newer initiates. Harvest seasons came and went. There was a surplus of pig and cattle and the villagers ate meat often. Many of them could no longer recall their dreams.

The years of peace came to an end. The city sent for the young men and the village conceded their share to ensure protection along the southern and eastern posts.

There were seasons of severe disease and families spoke of death most days. The boneyard and the grieving gardens were overgrown by weeds and wild grasses. An open pit of bodies. The northern post went untended and most stayed away.

The council grew paranoid about attacks from the outside and they gathered a trade party to try to convince city officials to station soldiers on the village grounds. Mercenaries.

The father, now alone, having lost his wife to fever, agreed to go.

She had cursed him as she lay in her sheets, teeth chattering. Laughter.

The morning they left, the council hanged a woman who'd stolen chickens from the butcher's storefront window. They left her to rot on the branch, to become home to squirrels and bees.

The trade route was rocky and long. The father was old. His gods no longer spoke to him. He was scared to consider that maybe they never had. The stars cast light unlike any light he had wanted to see. They made no fires and they ate dried meat and dried meat and dried meat.

The city welcomed them as it always did, as it always would.

One morning late in autumn, warm as summer now for two weeks or more, a boy, the butcher's son, looked out to the flat land of the south as he played with his carved soldiers there in the dirt. He saw an envoy approach—still miles and miles away.

But the ship—a craft unlike any from sight or story the boy had yet known—came with the sound of fire and human grief. It floated above the ground like a specter or a god—shaped into a massive skull from the city's sacred alloy. It carried men in brass helmets made to resemble the terrifying faces that filled the dreams of every citizen within the city walls. Gods of war. Demons and primal beasts that had no quarter for kindness or fear. They stamped the hilts of swords and axes and rifles and they cried out together in time. A single body without organs.

At the center of the craft, their Lord and King, their spiritual guru in necromancy, their philosopher of extinction leading them with a small megaphone and a set of brass horns spiraling up from where they sat upon his head.

The boy had become the man. He had always mourned the loss of the book—the one thing given to him by an elder that had not been filled with delusions, traps, and lies.

Beside his throne, the head of the father embarked on his final official errand, thin hair blowing back from the scalp, eyes eaten by pesting birds, neck skewered upon a brass pike.

The butcher's child let his wooden soldiers lay where they'd fallen, and he watched the arrival the same way he watched when the village square hosted puppet shows or fireworks or fiddlers in clown paint even though he could always tell who was who. Only now the spectacle held his gaze as though it were a new sun emerging on the horizon, a strange and violently colored second sun intent on destroying the first.

This was new. This was undeniable.

Everything had changed.

About the Author:

J. Paul Christopher is a writer of weird fiction from Minnesota.

"You will die. Pain is optional. Enjoy your day."

I curse at the note, as if that will stop this train. The Reaper's warning comes to all, but I didn't expect it to happen on my first and apparently, last vacation.

Rain drizzles across my window. I laugh deliriously. Time never felt so precious.

I just wanted to see the world outside Clock Tower Industries. But now, death was imminent.

I leave my cabin and head for the diner car. If a reaping agent is onboard, my actions will appear normal. I imagine my file would read: 'Subject is purchasing comfort food or inebriating beverage. Behaving within normal grieving parameters.'

I order a stiff drink and a cheese plate, scanning the crowd between sips and bites.

The reaping agent could be anyone. The elderly couple sipping tea would make an unsuspecting cover. The bartender's friendly smile could be a lure. The young lady dressed in a fur coat with a live monkey perching on her shoulder was by far the craziest sight of all. Perhaps she was the agent, embracing noise over shadows.

I swallow my drink and make a decision. If she was the agent, I would strike first. If she wasn't, then my file would read: 'Subject is attempting to seduce a female companion in his last hours.'

The liquid courage burns through me as I approach the young woman. Her monkey bares its teeth.

"I've noticed you on this train for several days. Could I ask your name?"

She glances up, lush red lips parting in delight. "Morana."

The Slavic goddess of both winter and death. How fitting. There was only one test left.

"I could use a companion on this journey, if you get my drift."

She sets down her half-eaten pastry and eyes me. "I hope your performance is as large as your subtlety."

Her monkey whimpers as she takes my arm and we return to my cabin.

I kiss her first while her creature scampers away, clawing at the locked door.

"Don't get in bed with the devil," she whispers in my ear, moaning in pleasure as my fingers run down her thighs.

The rain outside my window crackles into frozen droplets. Death was here. And painless, as long as I didn't resist. I lean in for one more kiss. Her hands slide up my chest, towards my neck in a lusty embrace.

Thud.

In one motion, I throw her across the room and grab the monkey by the throat.

Its red demon eyes burn into mine.

I laugh as the monkey claws in vain, hissing with the stench of death.

Morana scrambles to her feet, fleeing half naked and fully terrified.

I place my forehead against the monkey's bristling fur. "Don't you know," I whisper. "You can't reap the Reaper."

About the Author:

Riley Cross is a self proclaimed 'word nerd' and dystopian SciFi writer. She enjoys brewing coffee and listening to pirate theme music while concocting her twisted tales. Follow her on Twitter for snarky comments and frightening glimpses into a highly caffeinated writing brain!

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"Behold!" commands Professor Brightfever. And because it is Professor Brightfever, you behold. Oh, I suppose we *all* behold, for we are all beholden to this handsome scoundrel, tethered to our lives with his compliments and extortions.

But you are beholden most of all, dear Simon. His 'precious pupil.' He will break you, my love. Not merely break your heart, your spirit. He will break *you*.

Professor Brightfever points to the peak of the velvet-lined staircase. There, high above us partygoers, is the spectacle he assembled for our amazement. His latest creation. His latest calamity. It hunches over, facing away, sludgy hair staining its dress.

We all recognize that dress. How could we not? It is Constance's dress. That colossal, pink affair with billows of ruffles and pillows of frills. Remember, Simon? Remember her prancing it around town, knocking over children, suffocating pets, providing herself ample cover whenever she relieved herself in Mrs. Tafferty's shoppe?

No. Of course, you do not remember. Your attentions focused not on wife, but husband.

Professor Brightfever clamps a casual hand on your shoulder, that shoulder you only let me touch in darkness, when your eyes are closed. "The latest scientific miracle!" the professor bellows. "See once again the face of my beloved Constance!"

In response, the figure on the stairs turns. Professor Brightfever is correct. It *does* have his recently departed wife's face.

"But Constance were dead!" shrieks an overjoyed Mrs. Tafferty. "Your last explosion at church done 'er in!"

The assembled partygoers bubble in agreement. They coo. They caw. They shush their children. They chide their wives. They threaten to leave their husbands for not being half as brilliant as Professor Brightfever.

Exhibitions like this are a marvel for our tiny town, eager for whatever excitement the professor can conjure. Despite the inherent peril, the townsfolk return, time after time. The farmers dressed in muck-smeared finery. The family-folk pocketing polished flatware. The dignitaries with their sullied dignity. Even my fellow lads from the College of Modern and Unnatural Sciences gleefully titter. (I catch Handsome Pete surreptitiously rubbing that frequently swollen spot in his trousers.)

Professor Brightfever still grips your shoulder, my slender Simon. But we both know his touch never lasts. In the commotion, he pulls from you, casts you aside, eager to elate another random guest.

Your posture wilts.

Predictably.

I look from you to the thing atop the stairs. And I understand. *This* is why you abandoned our cot last night. You helped him.

You stumble away—(whether to be nearer your cherished professor or rid of me, I cannot say)—nearly tripping over your gangly legs as you attempt to cross the crowded hall. Fortunately for your modesty, the crowd's attention remains in steady sway toward the professor's bluster and blaring, his brays and his bays.

"My Constance's face, yes," Professor Brightfever continues, his fingers now fondling another able-bodied student's shoulder. "But not her mind. Not her heart. Not her... body."

The well-trained thing in Constance's dress slowly raises its arms. Rather, it slowly raises what *should* be its arms. Dozens of vine-like tendrils flutter from pink ruffles. Oozing mucous. Barnacled by suckers. Peppered with unblinking eyeballs.

"It's worms!" cries Mrs. Tafferty. "Lady Constance got worms for arms!" She says this not in terror, not in derision, but in delight. Her hands clap-clap-clap, and she leaks tobacco from her decayed grin.

"Not *worms*," you hiss, appalled she would deign such insult on the professor's greatest accomplishment. "They are tentacles, you simple cow." Always his protector.

But Mrs. Tafferty is too enraptured to hear. "Make them worms wear tiny 'ats an' do funny tricks!" The crowd roars. They laugh. They stomp their muddy boots all over the sparkling floors of Brightfever House. (Handsome Pete emits a mid-rub squeak.)

"Come, my dear," Professor Brightfever calls to his creature. "Let us introduce you to new friends."

As the perfectly poised caricature of Constance seeps down the stairs, Professor Brightfever turns back to his guests. "No doubt, your simple minds are shocked. As well they should be! It was heartbreaking to lose Constance, to become a widower again so recently after Agnes, after Greta, after Allisandra and the others."

"My favorite were the one what turned into a punk'n," screams a little boy before his mother scolds him for confusing the professor's wives with Cinderella's stagecoach.

"But by using my knowledge of Modern and Unnatural Sciences," Professor Brightfever continues, "I figured out how to transform my treasured wife into a new state of being."

"That's somethin'!" yells the village's mayoress. "I ain't even figured out 'ow that tubby donkey got in me kitchen!"

"I was in my College laboratory," Professor Brightfever explains, "studying the telescopic equipment. I spotted a many-tentacled being, flying through the cosmos, thrice the size of our planet." (Handsome Pete nears crescendo.) "It spoke to me. Though it was light years away, I heard its words clear as you hear mine. It called itself a 'Stardweller.' It promised rewards. Many rewards. 'Let me be your lowly servant,' it commanded. 'Find me a host form. Transmit my unspeakable essence Earthward.'"

Which is why he enlisted you, naïve Simon. Why you dug up Constance Brightfever's muddy grave. Why you assisted our professor in this unholy reanimation, this interstellar unification with some being beyond mortal understanding. "Oh, Simon," I whisper. "What have you done?"

But you do not answer. You simply quiver eyelashes at Professor Brightfever. Enthralled.

I understand, my love.

He once enthralled me, too.

"Some College lad brought me Constance's body," Professor Brightfever continues—(does he even know your name?)—"and I conducted perhaps the grandest experiment of my storied career. Behold!" And we once again behold, because this well-trained Constance-wearing beast has descended the stairs, trailing a smear of slime on the velvet carpet. "Friends, I present... Re-Constance!"

"Shoulda called it 'Monstance'!" cackles the town's oh-so-pleased-with-herself librarian.

"I am a Stardweller," gurgles the creature in pink. Bile and mouse intestines dribble from its mouth.

Professor Brightfever turns to his wife/creation. In my many encounters with the professor, both public and private, this is the only time he has revealed unease. "Your name is *Re-Constance*," he gently reminds this thing that is perhaps not so well-trained after all. He returns attention to the crowd, his face again beaming. "She's a tad forgetful. A... side effect of the procedure."

"Me Annabeth once 'ad 'er a side effect," shouts a farmer, proudly thumbing the woman beside him. "It were in 'er bum!"

He laughs.

His Annabeth laughs.

The creature laughs. It then wraps two ghastly tendrils around the farmer's and Annabeth's necks. The tendrils slither tighter, tighter, until the farm couple's heads pop right off. The tendrils skewer the heads mid-air, thrust them back, and stuff them under that heavy, pink skirt. Savage munching emerges from within.

The couple's blood-spurting bodies collapse to the marbled floor.

Mrs. Tafferty screams. Shouts and whimpers surround us. Pandemonium abounds as men, women, and children flee from something that is neither man, woman, nor child.

"Please," Professor Brightfever cries, voice adrift in the din. "No need to panic. Mere side effects!"

More fleshy tendrils dart from the dress, eager for sustenance.

The librarian is suffocated.

Mrs. Tafferty's eyes are gouged out and the remaining tobacco sucked from her mouth.

A grinning Handsome Pete explodes in every possible way.

I feel a shove to my torso as the mayoress pushes herself away, away from the madness, away from this creature that wears Constance Brightfever's face and dress but is not, not, *not* Constance Brightfever.

You, too, Simon, are knocked aside. Cast aside. But, as always, my sturdy arms are here. You land gently within them. Our eyes lock. We share a look. *Our* look. Would that it could continue forever.

But, of course, it cannot.

A familiar voice begs for help.

"Let go of me, Ned!" you cry, jamming an elbow into my tender chest, that chest you idly caressed days ago. Stunned physically (but perhaps not emotionally), I release you. You rush away, calling "Professor Brightfever!"

It is the last thing you say.

It is midnight. The calamity eventually ended, as all Professor Brightfever's calamities eventually end. I stand in the College cemetery, shovel in hand, Constance's re-deceased body at my feet in bloody pink frills.

Hers is one among myriad bodies. The librarian's. Handsome Pete's. Mrs. Tafferty's. Yours.

I warned you Professor Brightfever would break you, my love. Like you, I was once his 'precious pupil.' And like you, I again find myself doing his bidding. Digging graves for his latest mistake, as I have dug for so many of his past mistakes. Agnes. Greta. Allisandra. Constance. All those wives reduced to 'side effects.'

The stars shine on your body, my Simon, broken and cast aside.

I think about that beast from beyond. It called itself *a* Stardweller. Not *the* Stardweller.

You are slender of frame.

I am sturdy of arms.

The professor's laboratory is so very close.

Perhaps it is time to create our own side effects.

About the Author:

John Adams is a writer, improviser, producer, and communications professional from the Kansas City area. His plays have been selected for the 6x10 Play Festival (2016 – Mission, Kansas), Alphabet Soup (2018 – Kansas City), and the Midwest Dramatists Conference (2017, 2018, and 2019). He performs with the comedy improv team That's No Movie, which regularly plays at improv festivals and pop-culture conventions across the United States.

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Newspapers Can be Right Sometimes | *Radar DeBoard*

Gerald slammed the newspaper down upon the table. "This is the most ridiculous I've ever heard of," he scoffed. "Armies of werewolves now attacking major cities," he sarcastically read out loud.

He continued his tirade, "This is the most ridiculous thing this rag has ever done!" He swiped the paper across the table and into the trash. "I'm canceling my membership first thing tomorrow!"

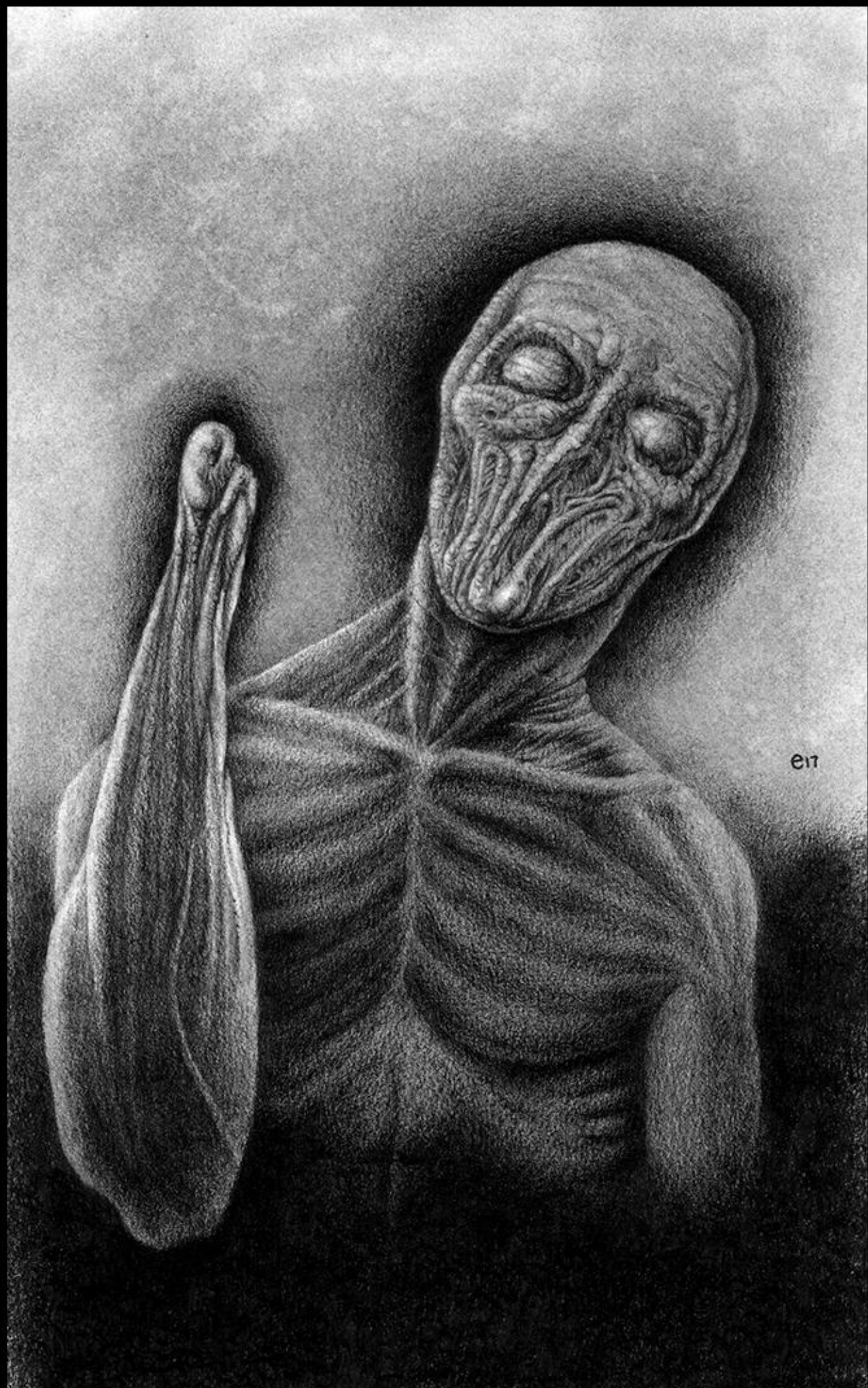
He finally sat down, allowing himself to settle down as he sipped his late night tea.

A loud howl brought his attention to his window just in time to see a large, hairy creature charge forward.

About the Author:

Radar is a horror movie and novel enthusiast who resides in the small town of Goddard, Kansas USA. His biggest hope from writing is that people will enjoy his work and share it with their friends. When he's not writing horror drabbles, he likes to catch up on the latest horror movies.

Facebook: [Radar DeBoard - Author](https://www.facebook.com/RadarDeBoard-Author)



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"Ugh, how much longer?" Traci groaned, squinting her eyes at the cellphone mounted on the console.

"Another hour, babe, see right there?" Ed pointed at the GPS display on the phone. "It's counting down, we'll be there soon. Go back to sleep – I got this"

"Another hour, might as well be another four."

"Well, don't complain now, I told you we should have flown but you wanted to drive. Or I should say, you wanted me to drive."

"That's because if we flew, we'd get there too quick. I don't even wanna go so I definitely wasn't rushing. But now I'm tired of being in this car. It seemed like a good idea at the time."

Ed reached out to caress her thigh. "Are you still nervous about seeing your dad again? You know I got your back, right? You don't have to be afraid anymore."

"If only I believed that would help. You don't know my father."

"He don't know me either! If he comes at you wrong, I will straight fuck his shit up, Traci. He will be one fucked up daddy spread across the dinner table, don't forget, I'm still from Joy Road!" Edmond made faces as he threw up his fingers in impromptu gang signs and tried to look tough.

Traci giggled and grabbed his hand, bringing it to her lips and planting kisses along his fingers.

"God, I love you so much with your crazy ass. You gonna kill my daddy, huh?"

"I will eat his ass up, baby. You better text him right now and let him know that I'm coming for him."

Sighing, Traci looked out the window at the passing cornfields. "I've actually been texting him for the last couple of days, trying to prepare him to meet you but he never responds. He can hold a grudge like no other."

"Well, I'm ready for him."

"You really are a keeper. I love that about you because you gotta be a little crazy to survive in MY family."

"Then I should be fine because I'm a LOT crazy!" Ed replied.

The buzz of the clippers cut through the blanket of quiet in the condo. Long crudely chopped locs littered the bathroom floor around Mero's feet as he drew the clippers across his head to remove the remaining hair. His reflection was now of a different man and he hoped this time his father would see that man and not whatever his sick imagination convinced him of each year when they met.

He was tired of the fighting; tired of ending every holiday with threats, curses and punches. He wanted to try something different this year, even though he knew that the violence wasn't his fault, he still wanted to try. If not for him, then for his long suffering mother who just wanted to finish one goddamn meal at the table with her family intact and everyone asking for dessert instead of wiping up blood, searching for snatched out earrings and trying to convince the 911 operator that everything was fine.

"Babe – whatcha think?" His wife, Kat, came strutting into the room in a cranberry-red silky body-clinging dress with a deep v-neck that barely contained her ample breasts. Her hair was piled high into a bun and she wore no jewelry, so there was no distraction from the concert taking place from the neck down.

"You are NOT wearing that!" Mero exclaimed, feeling himself stiffen at the sight of her.

"Why not? Your dad thinks I'm a slut anyway so I'm just gonna give him what he believes – I'm gonna be that slut for him this year." She took long sexy strides into the room and twirled in the middle of the floor; the thigh high slit in her dress parted to expose the length of her bare legs. Pointing her toes toward the floor in the red 'fuck me' pumps, she put a hand on her hip and smiled lasciviously toward her husband. "Are you with me or not? Are you Team Kat this year or are you Team Daddy's Boy?"

Mero reached out and stroked her thigh, moving his hand between to the heat. "I'm Team Kat every year, baby. You know it."

"Good. By the way, I love your bald head. It's gonna feel real smooth between my legs tonight when we get home." Kat reached up and stroked his head, planting a kiss on his forehead.

Mero felt a knot in his throat. She was so good to him. She was so good FOR him. He felt like he could handle anything as long as she was by his side. She had been there since they were 16, so she knew all of the darkest secrets of his family and she was still here.

"Alright baby, let's go give that old bastard a fucking heart attack" She grabbed his hand and pulled him out of the bedroom.

"So, no Pops again, huh? Let me guess, he's 'working', right?" Traci scowled as she pushed the food around her plate. Of course her father would skip dinner, he knew she wanted him to meet her husband and he also knew that her husband just might know a few things about what he'd done to her over the years.

Mero giggled while Kat adjusted the top of her dress to cover her flesh; she was saving the exposure for Mr. Gates, whenever he arrived, no need to waste all of the sluttiness on the rest of the family. She sincerely wanted him to have a stroke at the dinner table while yelling at her like he did every year, telling her that his son shouldn't have never married 'her kind'. She had something for his ass this year and she couldn't wait.

Luda, the family beagle, ran in circles around the table as the family ate and occasionally dropped a scrap his way.

Ms. Gates fussed about the table replacing the empty serving bowls with fresh options, then stood watching her family eat.

"Who made the sweet potatoes? They're really good." Ed asked as he finished the last bit of potatoes from his plate.

"Kat actually made them – they are great, right?" Ms. Gates piped up, smiling for the first time since they'd arrived.

"Whoa, good job, Kat! I think these are the best I've ever had." Ed smiled at Kat around bites of food.

"No response, Ma?" Traci tried again before Mero spoke up.

"You sound like you miss him? I think it's pretty peaceful without his ass." Mero used the big serving spoon to add another scoop of stuffing to his plate, topping it with a pool of warm gravy from the gravy bowl.

"Now you gotta tell me – who made the green beans?" Ed asked between mouthfuls.

"That would be me," said Ms. Gates. "The green bean casserole is a family recipe."

Ed gave her the thumbs up as he continued to shovel food into his mouth.

"Sit down, Ma, you're not even eating. Stop acting like the waitress!" Traci patted the cushion of the chair next to her. "Sit and talk with us. Let's enjoy the peace until Satan gets here."

Ms. Gates settled into the chair next to her daughter and proceeded to fill the plate in front of her with slices of turkey, macaroni and cheese and sweet potatoes. She picked nervously at the food and Traci noticed that her hands were shaking as she raised the fork to her mouth. She looks tired, Traci thought as she watched her mother. It was time she talked to Ed about moving her mom back to California with them. Her father would be angry and try to fight them, or worse, try to beat her mother again, but she wasn't afraid of him any longer, not since she married Ed. She finally had someone to fight for her when her mother was just too weak. It was okay though, Traci wasn't resentful, she accepted that her mother had done the best she could to protect them, but it just wasn't in her to fight. It wasn't in everybody. Some people were born to be victims and unfortunately, her mother was one. But it was time for Traci to fight for her.

"It's okay, Ma. Give yourself a break today of all days. Let him do him. We're here for YOU. You know that." Traci covered her mother's frail hand with hers and gave her a reassuring squeeze. Her mother squeezed back and her grip was strong and firm for the first time ever.

"Ugh, there's a hair in my stuffing," Mero gagged, scraping at the chewed food just inside his lower lip as he searched for the offending hair. He pulled a long coarse curl from his mouth and placed it on a napkin next to his plate.

"Gross," Traci shuddered, fixated on that single curly hair as it lay on the table.

His disgust at the hair forgotten, Mero returned to the dressing. After a few more spoonfuls, he groaned again and pushed his chair back from the table, scratching at his mouth.

"What the fuck? Okay, now what is this?" He withdrew a small sharp curled sliver of what looked like onion.

Mero sat the object on the napkin next to the curly hair and Kat leaned over to examine it more closely.

"Shit, that looks like a fingernail!" She said, then covered her mouth and laughed.

Ed began to choke and cough, pushing his chair back from the table; he stood, leaning over his plate as he tried to expel what was lodged in his throat. Traci jumped into action and wrapped her arms around her husband from behind, forcing air into his lungs.

The room was frozen as the ragged tip of a man's finger shot from his throat and landed in the center of the white tablecloth.

Ms. Gates gasped, clutching the pearls at her neck, but after a few seconds, she began to laugh wildly and point at the fingertip. Kat caught on and joined her in laughter; beneath the table, she kicked off her heels and stretched her toes.

His windpipe clear, Ed sat back down, smiling and shaking his head. He took his fork and flicked the fingertip off the table where Luda gobbled it up. Without missing a beat, Ed picked up the serving spoon and dug once again into the bowl of seasoned breaded goodness.

“Okay, who made the damn dressing?” He asked, and the rest of the table erupted into laughter.

About the Author:

Kenya began writing short-form horror in her teens and won several writing awards for her creative works. She has since established herself with the 2014 release of *Daymares*. You can also find Kenya making appearances in anthologies like *Black Magic Women* and *Deadly Bargain*. Readers will find that a common trait among Kenya’s stories is that, more often than not, the truly frightening monsters are human.

Amazon Author Page: [Kenya Moss-Dyme](#)

Facebook: [Author Kenya Moss-Dyme](#)

One More Piece | *Radar DeBoard*

Jack heard his mom call for him to come upstairs. He started to make his way towards the stairs but stopped. I’ll have one more piece, he thought. He walked back over to the five bags of candy on the floor.

He sifted through an open bag, looking for something chocolaty. He finally settled on a small candy bar. He was pulling it out when he noticed a large patch of dry blood on the side of the bag.

He checked himself for any blood splatter. “Those dumb kids should have just given me the candy,” he said walking upstairs.

No Halloween Spirit | *Radar DeBoard*

Francis looked down at the unlit jack-o-lantern on his porch. He kicked the pumpkin with all his might, sending it flying through the air. “Stupid kids,” he muttered as he slammed his door shut.

The doorbell rang again, and Francis threw his door open. “I ain’t given out an-”, he started to shout but stopped. His porch was now littered with jack-o-lanterns. All unlit except for the one at the far end of his porch.

One after the other they started to light, moving down the porch directly towards Francis. Then suddenly, the flames were gone, and so was Francis.

About the Author:

Radar DeBoard is a new author living in Kansas. He is a lover of all things horror. His largest hope for his work is that people will enjoy his writing enough to share it with others.

Facebook: [Radar DeBoard - Author](#)



The chill in the wind drew out the earthy scent from the forest and farms surrounding West Fox Borough. It was a comfortable breeze that allowed for the autumn ritual wearing of a sweater, a light jacket or standing around a burning barrel. George stooped over the pumpkins lining the edge of the yard, carefully igniting the tea candle centered in their bellies. In the surrounding trees, a murder of squawking crows and ravens gathered. Most of the neighborhood complained to the township and borough councils to do something about the birds, but in truth, there was little anyone could do until they moved on.

When he finished, George stood on the street to admire his work, a field of jack-o'-lanterns amiss collections of scarecrows where customized ghosts popped through stacks of hay surrounded by legacy Halloween decorations. All cast in the dark glow of lights from deep red to bright orange to sharp purple. He and Lara carefully crafted a display that invoked nostalgia.

Emerging from beyond the side of the ranch house, Sarah rode her bike to the end of the driveway skidding to a stop behind George. The petite girl's long dark green hair swayed over her shoulder. The girl embraced the gothic-punk like a lifejacket.

"It looks amazing Mr. Mason."

"Thanks. How are you doing?" George always asked Sarah about her activities.

She pulled her hair back, "Okay. School was tight today. Some jerks kept riding me about my dad."

George winced. Her father's write up in the paper was just an outline into his character. He didn't care for her mother either. They didn't deserve a daughter like her. "If you need anything."

She blazed a bright smile. "It's Halloween. The best time of the year. Oh, I was wondering if I can use the darkroom. I got amazing shots of the old train station on my digital camera. I want to see how the pictures from the film camera turned out."

"You know where the key is, just make sure the warning light is on," he said. It was a joy for him teaching her photography. Sarah truly enjoyed the art, especially using film. Knowing that someone took an interest in the old style methods pleased him. "So what are you going to do tonight?"

She grew quiet, remained so for a second, "Going to hang with a group tonight. They want to go to the train station."

"Sarah, you shouldn't go there at night," he cautioned. The abandoned station of the old Pittsburgh-Lincoln-Grove City line developed a reputation of being haunted.

Her hand drove into the gray cat-shaped purse, pulling out a small red flashlight and her phone. The flashlight's beam blinded him for a second as she waved it around. "Fresh batteries and my phone is fully charged. It's not my first time there at night."

"But who are you going with?" George inquired, stepping to the role that her parents discarded. They rarely troubled themselves with Sarah unless it required getting another check from the system.

"Just kids from school." She flinched as if pulling out a terrible secret.

As a rogue, Sarah didn't have many friends, but those George knew were kind to her. "Be careful, don't fall into anything there."

She flashed off another bright smile, "Will do."

Off the girl went down the side street as the streetlamps flickered on. The dark blue sky was rapidly fading into the darker shades of night. George looked up, searching for the brightest stars. He enjoyed the challenge to find them as early as possible in the fading light. It helped to keep his eyes sharp.

One of the ravens flew over him, breaking his concentration while vocalizing deep cries. It circled the property several times, looping over him to return near the trees. After each pass, one or more other birds leaped from their perches to join the mob. Their calls unified into a continuous chant, which unnerved George. Deep into his old bones, it felt they were crowd calling out as a band played. He'd seen crows and ravens freak out if something threatened them, but this was different.

They flocked over the telephone wires, coming to roost on the lines in utter silence. A woman stood beneath them.

Washed in the warm sodium vapor glow of streetlight, she stood in the center of the street. His photographer's eye noted her stature, tall and thin, concealed in a long butternut frock coat topped off by a little Victorian hat. He didn't recognize her, so he carefully approached.

"Hello, there," he said, gaining the lady's attention.

As she turned towards him, George got the impression that she was surprised. "Hello."

The Lady's oval face featured an off-white complexion, not overtly pale but highlighted by her shadowy features. "I didn't see you come down the street. Are you from around here?"

Perhaps he was rude to ask directly, but in a small community, it is a good idea to know strangers. The Lady nodded, "You didn't, and I came down from Lincoln."

"So you came for a visit?"

"Yes. I'm taking in the displays while on my travels. Yours is very impressive." She extended an arm towards his yard, revealing a gloved hand.

George found it strange that she would simply tour Halloween decorations. "You came to this town for that?"

Tilting her head, "West Fox was listed in the top twenty places in Western Pennsylvania for autumn festivals in the paper last month."

"I forgot about that. I'm George." He extended his hand

"Tatiana Curtlin." Her grip caused a strange sensation. He couldn't place the feeling, but it felt that respect was due to her. "Your display is very quaint."

"Lara, my wife, and I like classic style decorations. Modern ones look cheesy. Tatiana, that's a usual name?"

She smiled, "No, it is not. You carved a lot of pumpkins."

He noted how she avoided the question, "My own handiwork. The neighbors hate it."

"Why?" Tatiana asked in a somber tone.

George felt she knew, but wanted him to say it, "One jack-o'-lantern for someone who died. Thankfully, this year we didn't add one."

The Lady smiled, "It's fitting."

"Well, it's the right time of the year." He continued, definitely feeling that this was a test. "I personally believe that if people do return that they aren't necessary evil. Maybe they are just checking on us."

"Yes." She spoke as it was real. "I must go."

As last of the evening succumbed to the night, George noticed her eyes were dark without whites. Her shadow went against the grain of light, flowing like a cape. As she proceeded down the street, the crows leaped into flight to follow. He quickly spurred his tired legs onward to keep up.

"Have you seen the display at McConnell's Coffeehouse? It's like Halloween exploded in their shop." George kept pace, as she easily slipped her hands in the jacket pockets.

Her ethereal nature drew out his curiosity, "Perhaps I could walk you back to your car."

"No, I have no need for that." Again the Lady gave a soft smile, "Your photographer's eye has seen, now ask the question."

"You appeared out of nowhere, and those crows acting weird, and how the lights and shadows flow around you... Is it real?"

Tatiana's eyes widened, "Well, that is new. Yes, I'm real. I'm sure you know of the Sluagh."

It felt as if called on by a teacher asking a surprise question, George stammered out, "The Unholy Host of the restless dead, they travel like flocks to snatch away the living."

She bobbed her head, "Dramatic, although I don't fathom us as unholy. We collect the restless dead to urge them on."

"Are you here to collect me?" Feeling cold and hot George began to sweat.

"No. I just enjoy seeing decorations. I've gone to haunted houses."

"Really?" George could accept her nature, but that seemed ridiculous.

"I find them extremely captivating. Don't you?" She asked.

"Lara and I go every year," George answered. The Lady cocked her head away towards a side street.

"That street, where does it go?"

George stepped closer to her, "Well, that's Kirkland Street. It goes right to Valentia. Just down a bit is the old train station."

She commenced walking towards the road, "Please, show me."

"They say it's haunted." He managed to get ahead of her.

"Most places are," she said as the crows erupted above.

"If I may ask, why were you surprised that I noticed you?"

"Most people don't." The Lady laughed, "You have an artist's perspective. Or perhaps it's your beliefs. Truly, I don't how you noticed me, but it does please me."

George stopped, "Should I be afraid?"

She gazed at him, "Yes. Anything of Faerie, of the supernatural, you would be wise to fear. I assure you, I will bring you no harm."

They proceeded along the road. The station was just outside of the borough. It was a boneyard of buildings, abandoned to history and forgotten in the present. In the soft moonlight, the main station broken by trees rising from the center impressed a feeling of sadness.

"Is this haunted?" George followed Tatiana around the station house. They approached the front, where the trains used to stop and load on passengers.

"No."

The Lady stopped at the corner where part of landing jutted out. It survived the seasons relatively solid. George noticed a glow streaming upward, with enough light falling on a black booted foot extending slightly around the corner. Tatiana's eyes followed him as he turned the corner.

"Sarah!" George shouted.

The girl's blank eyes stared upwards towards the spot of light from the phone. Blood oozed from her torso, slowly channeled away by the grooves between the planks. At first, George thought she was gutted like a fish, but she suffered from numerous wounds.

His heart raced, breathing became hard. He reached out to touch her arm. Still warm, he prayed that it would flinch. The stillness broke him, yet he managed to find his phone to call for help. After talking with the dispatcher, he held her hand, "She's a child."

The Lady's silence sank heavy on him. George felt weightless, as rage and despair clashed together in a desperate struggle to escape. Time vanished as he realized Sarah was gone.

"Do something," he whispered.

"What you want, I cannot do." Her tone was gentle but laced with firmness.

George turned his anger at her, "Why not? She deserves a life."

Tatiana transformed into a darker mien that was fearsome to behold not to terrify but impress on him not to goad her. "It's over."

His legs screamed from the effort to stand and step closer to challenge the creature mere footsteps away. "You knew this would happen. You allowed her to die. If you want a life, take mine. I'm old and spent."

The Lady didn't respond, so snapping he seized her by the arm. Instant pain sprang from his hand to strike through his body. Her appearance morphed into shadows, flowing and twisting anger around him. She spoke, "I sensed her passing. That's my nature. I have no say in the manner of her death. Even if I could trade lives, would it be a fair trade? Your life has equal value as hers."

His pain eased as her hold faded. She stepped around George to get a solid look at Sarah. "The authorities are approaching, we need to go."

George asked, trying to keep his composure and not to anger her again, "You're taking her?"

A high-pitch wail of noise rose beyond the road, the sirens of a dozen racing vehicles. Slowly with grace, Tatiana raised her hand. "I offer a blessing and a curse."

Deferentially he took her gloved hand. As a gentle coolness overcame him, George witnessed the surroundings changing around them. The station restored itself like an emerging as the iron tracks reclaimed the bike trail. The building's façade returned with old banners and posters hanging on the walls. It all came back, but not quite the same, for it was all a shadow of the past.

Sarah stood on the landing, looking around confused and afraid.

"Amazingly she emerged somewhat aware, but she doesn't realize what has happened to her." Tatiana explained gently, "This is dangerous for her. Reapers are coming for her. I will guide her away."

"Can I say something to her?" He asked.

"No. It's simply not possible. I will say she is concerned about her kittens," she said letting him go. The scene returned back, Tatiana turned to him, "That was the blessing, now this is the curse. Know this, George Mason, you've now been touched, be cautious."

The Lady spun on her heels, walked onto the platform while sliding into shadows. As the sirens grew louder George kept staring, holding out for one last look. But nothing remained as lights streamed on him. The shouts of the first responders deafened his ears. Yet, in the confusion, his photographer's eye caught the light reflecting off a smartphone discarded in the weeds. It didn't belong to Sarah.

Halloween arrived, greeted by a newly carved pumpkin on their front porch. Lara held the large candle as George lit the wick. It flared brightly for a second to smooth into a slow burn. They placed the candle in a jack-o'-lantern, the simple traditional face blazed to life.

As he held Lara's hand, he said, "Sarah deserves a proper service."

"Her parents barely gave a damn about her before; they aren't going to do anything for her now," Lara answered. "We'll take care of her."

"The District Attorney office needs me to make a formal statement as soon as possible," George said.

Lara's hand gripped tighter, "You think the video from the phone would be enough."

"Well, they want to make a complete case taking those monsters to court as adults. They are trying to plea bargain as juveniles." George cringed at the chance of Sarah's killers getting a lesser sentence.

The wretched kids wanted something special to do for Halloween. A thrill killing that would create a legend. Some of them confessed that they simply didn't like Sarah. None of that mattered to George and Lara.

"I developed Sarah's last pictures. She had a real eye for shots. I'm going to showcase them for her."

"She would approve. Come on, we need to feed the cats before trick-or-treat begins." Lara relaxed her hold to enter the house.

George followed but paused for a second. Tatiana said he was touched, he didn't understand what that meant. But for a second, his photographer's eye caught a figure on the road. A shadow colored with flowing green hair.

About the Author:

Gregory L. Steighner is an enthusiastic writer and photographer who draws inspiration from the Western Pennsylvania region. This is his second publication for *The Sirens Call* eZine. He resides outside of Pittsburgh with his wife, mother-in-law, three cats, and a host of stories to tell.

Facebook: [Gregory L. Steighner](#)

Pierrot's Parade | *Gabrian Gui*

The rain had just stopped when the clowns appeared. They seemed to have come out of nowhere, this flash mob of buffoons: one minute the street signs were shaking off teardrops of rainwater onto slick asphalt, and the next a congregation of long black shoes were shattering the rippling puddles as the clowns plodded forward in a slow shuffle, all facing the same way. They were draped in all fashions of baggy clothing, mostly in shades of silver, and their arms ending in beige, oversized gloves. Their faces were all painted: milk-white, with exaggerated lips the color of fresh blood adorning their mouths. Their eyes were misshapen and black, as if the eyeballs had been replaced by jagged chunks of coal, dark and abyssal under the hidden sun. The only real variation amongst this swarm, other than their mismatched heights, were their hair, boasting an impressive and colorful variety of flame-like tufts and cloud-like poofs, thick comical curls and thin weedy patches, in all the bright and gaudy colors of an unnatural rainbow. Their march was uninterrupted, for no bystander dared to wander out and intercept this grotesque legion. Those who witnessed this absurdity stayed hidden, behind closed doors and narrow alleyways, while eschatological whispers escaped from their quivering lips. No one felt the need to venture closer and gawk upon them. After all, there was nothing to be read from their frozen expressions, nothing from the milk-white faces with coal-black eyes and blood-red mouths.

The swarm of clowns trotted forward in total silence, save for the occasional clicking chirrup that was created by some unknown method, for their mouths never opened. From afar, the clicking noise and the rustling sounds from their clothes could pass as an army of crabs exploring through a patch of grass. As they marched, more clowns appeared to join their sullen ranks. One skittered out from under the sewer, while another crawled down the side of a deserted building like a large pale spider. Three even emerged out from under a car that was parked along the street. No one could say where these clowns had come from, nor could anyone say why they made their unexpected appearance, like a hidden disease announcing its presence with a sudden rash of symptoms. Had they been driven out from their clandestine hiding places because they needed to migrate elsewhere? Or had they simply experienced an unspoken impetus: that there was no longer any need to hide? Regardless, the harlequin legion shambled forward, ever forward, until they blurred into a shadowy crowd near the eldritch horizon before disappearing over the hill, towards the sea.

About the Author:

Gabrian Gui lives in Austin, TX with his wife and their three cats and three snakes. He loves to play with words, although his wife has to frequently remind him to wash his hands after spending time with the dirty ones. He is currently working on his first novel as well as a short story collection.

Interview by Trish Wilson

Ramsey Campbell has been thrilling readers with his frightening tales for well over fifty years. I read my first Ramsey Campbell book back in the early '90s. *The Hungry Moon* fascinated me since I grew up in a Christian fundamentalist home. He's an approachable and intelligent man who can scare the living daylights out of you. He has been described as "perhaps the finest living exponent of the British weird fiction tradition" by Robert Hadji, while S. T. Joshi stated "future generations will regard him as the leading horror writer of our generation, every bit the equal of Lovecraft or Blackwood." It was an honor to converse with him, and I know readers will enjoy the interview.

TRISH WILSON: How did growing up in 1950s Liverpool influence your writing?

RAMSEY CAMPBELL: I was an intensely introverted child, not least because of my everyday life. My mother was an undiagnosed paranoid schizophrenic and my father was still living in the same house as us – a very small house. Because they were estranged, he lived upstairs mostly or went out before I got up and came back after I'd gone to bed, so there was plenty of room for dread in my everyday life. He was simply the footsteps I heard in the night, and I was routinely terrified of coming face to face with him.

It was only when I became an adolescent that I became aware of how big the city was, how much of it I'd never seen. Even then going down town was a major voyage on the tram, and the bus required a lot of forward planning; and the belief that this would happen – to get to this unknown territory and come back again safely. I really had the sense that the place was considerably bigger as you do when you're a child; going downtown in my early teens, the city centre was an enormous boundless place full of places you would find the next time you visited that you'd never been to before.

When I began seriously going to the movies, which pretty well coincided with being able to see the horror movies I wanted to see, ever since I saw *Famous Monsters of Filmland* some years previous I then started venturing out into the suburbs. A lot of it was devastated, Kensington was pretty much a bomb site, street after street of foundations, bits of wall, and the odd room standing there exposed to the elements and in the middle of this you'd find a cinema that had somehow survived. This did feed into my sense of what life was like, it was an enormous adventure. In a way the dereliction of the city became my teen adventure for years.

TRISH WILSON: When did you know you found your own voice?

RAMSEY CAMPBELL: It was in fact in my first Liverpool tale, "The Cellars" from 1965. My invented Severn Valley city of Brichester had come increasingly to resemble Liverpool, and in "The Stone on The Island", written in January 1963, it was Liverpool in all but name – indeed, the office setting was the office where I worked. I'd just read *Lolita* when I wrote that earlier story, and the way Nabokov liberated my style is immediately evident. In "The Cellars" the location that inspired the tale is identified, and the story is a snapshot of Liverpool as it actually was at the time. Though there are clumsy bits, it's very much my own tale structurally and thematically and stylistically.

TRISH WILSON: What are some common themes in your work?

RAMSEY CAMPBELL: Gullibility—the human eagerness to find scapegoats—the willingness to embrace belief systems that purport to give you all the answers so long as you give up the right to question—the vulnerability of children (which concerned me all the way back in 1967, when I wrote "The Scar")—the increasing unwillingness of people to intervene when they see or suspect wrongdoing... That said, I do feel that the highest ambition of the field is to reach for the awesome and numinous, and I've made a few feeble leaps in that direction. *Midnight Sun*, for instance, was an honourable attempt, perhaps not quite as failed as I used to think before recently rereading it for a forthcoming new edition, while *The Darkest Park of the Woods* and my recent trilogy perhaps succeed in reaching slightly higher.



TRISH WILSON: What's your average workday like?

RAMSEY CAMPBELL: I'm here at my desk every morning I'm at home (Christmas and my birthday too), usually in time to see the dawn. Certainly I'll be working on the first draft of a tale about six in the morning, when I'm generally most creative. One thing I've learned in fifty years as a writer is always to compose the first sentences before I sit down to write. I generally work until late morning on a first draft, sometimes later. If we go away the tale in progress goes with me, and when I'm out I always carry notebooks – usually one for the novel in progress or next to be written, another for more general ideas. In the afternoon of a typical day I'll work on some other project, non-fiction or proofreading, perhaps. Late afternoon finds us watching a film on disc, most likely Blu-ray. Sunday is my half day!

TRISH WILSON: August Derleth and Robert Bloch were your colleagues. Please tell me about working with them and how you came to be in contact with them.

RAMSEY CAMPBELL: August was crucial in several ways, all of them aspects of my hugely good luck. He was my first editor, and unflinchingly critical – quite right too. I believe I was in precisely the right place at the right time, sending him my earliest attempts at emulating Lovecraft when he was concluding he'd run out of enthusiasm for writing that kind of fiction so as to keep Lovecraft's name more alive. You can find all our extant correspondence, ten years' worth, in the PS collection *Letters to Arkham*. Bob I got to know initially in 1975 in Providence, at the World Fantasy Convention, and we became friends at various similar events. He was very friendly and helpful to rising writers, and I've tried to be worthy of both him and August in that regard. I like to think it makes me part of the continuity, and of course August was similarly mentored by Lovecraft – indeed, his early letters to Lovecraft remind me of mine to him.

TRISH WILSON: What is the appeal of Lovecraft today? What drew you to Lovecraft in the first place?

RAMSEY CAMPBELL: To answer the second part first – originally (when I was seven or so) the sense of almost unbearable dread. In my early teens, the way he conveyed cosmic terror and sought awe. Before long, the range of his work (where he tried out all the methods he could in his search for the perfect form for the weird tale), the care for structure, the modulation of the prose within a single tale, his commitment to horror fiction as literature and to developing its tradition. I'd like to think all these are answers to your first question. I've analysed several of his tales in detail in an essay that's collected in my book *Visions from Brichester*.

TRISH WILSON: You said in a Facebook horror group that writer's block in your experience is: "Writer's block comes from a failure to engage imaginatively with the material." What would you say to writers who have writer's block? How would you advise them to be able to write?

RAMSEY CAMPBELL: About the only trick I've learned is never to sit down to write until I've composed at least the first sentence. In that way the image or the form of the prose sets off my imagination, and off I go. I can only hope it works for others – it's at least worth trying.

TRISH WILSON: What does the best horror fiction offer the reader?

RAMSEY CAMPBELL: Psychological insight, the engagement and enrichment of imagination, a profound sense of uncanny dread... Not necessarily all within the same tale, of course. Equally, horror tales can tell truths, not least about the way we live. For me the very best of them reach for awe.

TRISH WILSON: Let's say someone is new to horror and wants to read the best books. Which ones would you recommend they start with to gain a real grasp of the genre? And why do you recommend them?

RAMSEY CAMPBELL: I think some anthologies would be ideal, giving an overview of how vast and varied our field is. They would include *Great Tales of Terror and the Supernatural* (Wise and Fraser), *The Dark Descent* (Hartwell) and *The Weird* (Ann and Jeff VanderMeer). To keep up to date, both Stephen Jones and Ellen Datlow edit annual anthologies of the best of the year.

TRISH WILSON: Which books of your own would you recommend to readers who are new to you?

RAMSEY CAMPBELL: For cosmic terror, perhaps *The Darkest Part of the Woods* and the trilogy. As an overview of my short stuff, *Phantasmagorical Stories* from PS Publishing. If they'd like some relatively gentle eeriness, *The Wise Friend* is my latest in that vein. For comedy of paranoia, *The Grin of the Dark*.

TRISH WILSON: What are some common human fears you write about?

RAMSEY CAMPBELL: I've no idea how common they are, but recurring themes of mine include gullibility—the human eagerness to find scapegoats—the willingness to embrace belief systems that purport to give you all the answers so long as

you give up the right to question—the vulnerability of children (which concerned me all the way back in 1967, when I wrote “The Scar”)—the increasing unwillingness of people to intervene when they see or suspect wrongdoing...

TRISH WILSON: Are your fears today different from what scared you when you first started writing horror?

RAMSEY CAMPBELL: As a parent and now a grandparent, certainly so. I’ve long written about the state of our world, but I imagine it will concern me more than ever as I grow older still.

TRISH WILSON: What do you think of psychological horror and supernatural dread as opposed to extremes such as gore (horror that seeks to disgust, as you described in one interview with Five Books) that is popular with some aspects of horror?

RAMSEY CAMPBELL: Let me own up enjoying quite a lot of graphic horror – the kind that enriches the imagination (say, some of the films of David Cronenberg or *Hellraiser*) but not the sort that functions as a substitute for it. That said, I don’t go in for it much as a writer.

TRISH WILSON: Where do you see horror going in the next five to ten years?

RAMSEY CAMPBELL: The increase in diversity is bringing new voices and new visions. Let’s wait and see!

TRISH WILSON: What works of yours are coming out soon?

RAMSEY CAMPBELL: Besides the ones I recommend above, Flame Tree Press will reissue *The Influence* around the time Netflix release the Spanish film based on the book, and PS have a new edition of *Midnight Sun*. Electric Dreamhouse have *Ramsey’s Rambles*, my collected video reviews, with a long reminiscence of filmgoing included. Later, a study of the Three Stooges and much more...



Ramsey Campbell’s Biography:

The *Oxford Companion to English Literature* describes Ramsey Campbell as “Britain’s most respected living horror writer”. He has been given more awards than any other writer in the field, including the Grand Master Award of the World Horror Convention, the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Horror Writers Association, the Living Legend Award of the International Horror Guild and the World Fantasy Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2015 he was made an Honorary Fellow of Liverpool John Moores University for outstanding services to literature. Among his novels are *The Face That Must Die*, *Incarnate*, *Midnight Sun*, *The Count of Eleven*, *Silent Children*, *The Darkest Part of the Woods*, *The Overnight*, *Secret Story*, *The Grin of the Dark*, *Thieving Fear*, *Creatures of the Pool*, *The Seven Days of Cain*, *Ghosts Know*, *The Kind Folk*, *Think Yourself Lucky* and *Thirteen Days by Sunset Beach*. He recently brought out his Brichester Mythos trilogy, consisting of *The Searching Dead*, *Born to the Dark* and *The Way of the Worm*. *Needing Ghosts*, *The Last Revelation of Gla’aki*, *The Pretence* and *The Booking* are novellas. His collections include *Waking Nightmares*, *Alone with the Horrors*, *Ghosts and Grisly Things*, *Told by the Dead*, *Just Behind You*, *Holes for Faces*, *By the Light of My Skull* and a two-volume set of *Masters of the Weird Tale*, and his non-fiction is collected as *Ramsey Campbell, Probably*. *Limericks of the Alarming and Phantasmal* is a history of horror fiction in the form of fifty limericks. His novels *The Nameless*, *Pact of the Fathers* and *The Influence* have been filmed in Spain. He is the President of the Society of Fantastic Films.

Ramsey Campbell lives on Merseyside with his wife Jenny. His pleasures include classical music, good food and wine, and whatever’s in that pipe. His web site is at www.ramseycampbell.com.

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RAMSEY CAMPBELL

The Influence



WINNER OF LIFETIME WORLD FANTASY
AND BRAM STOKER AWARDS

Chapter One

As the bus out of Liverpool sped up the overpass, the night storm from Wales came across the bay to meet it. Alison Faraday could see nothing of the Seaforth docks or the marina except rain and blurred lights, and she felt as if she were drowning. At the foot of the overpass, the broad Georgian houses of Waterloo were blocks of mud. Under the Five Lamps, five globes skirting a stone angel, a train slipped eel-like through the bridge. Beyond the station the bus splashed past Thompsons Boot Repairers into Mount Pleasant, where the windows of tall terraces dwindled toward the roofs, and Alison was already hauling herself along the swaying aisle towards the exit doors.

The drenched concrete pole of the bus stop crumbled under her fingers as she pushed herself toward the side street and met the August storm. It plastered her raincoat and her nurse's uniform to her as she fought her way along the narrow street beneath sodden embers of sodium lamps. Darkness several storeys high carried windows past the end of the street, as if Queenie's house had floated loose from its foundations. It was a ship beyond the dunes, and the dark bulk from behind which it had sailed was Queenie's house, towering massively over its neighbors. Up among its chimneys and haphazard slate slopes, Queenie's window glared toward the bay. Alison's stomach tightened as she came to the end of the street and groped through the downpour for the gate.

The garden path was slippery with moss. Alison stooped over her handbag to keep out the rain while she fumbled for her key, and then light from the hall spilled across the flower beds choked with restless grass. Hermione had snatched the door open. "Derek was called out to a job, and she's been shouting for Rowan."

Hermione must have run to the door when she'd heard the gate scrape the path. Her small features looked huddled together in the midst of her long plump face; the dents like thumb marks under her eyes seemed deeper than ever. "I sat with Rowan to make sure she stayed asleep."

Alison squeezed her sister's forearms gently, the nearest she could get to a hug while she was so drenched, and heeled the door shut behind them. "It's all right now. I'm here."

"And every inch of you soaked to the skin," Hermione said, the protective older sister. "I'll make you a coffee with brandy in it while you get changed. She's quiet now. I shouldn't bother going up."

"I may just look in to see how she is."

Hermione brushed back her greying hair that no longer curled properly but wouldn't stay straight, and rubbed her forehead as if she could rub away the wrinkles. "I expect you're right," she said heavily. "She'll know you're here."

The hall that was wide enough to drive a car through stretched fifty feet to the stairs. Plaster fallen on the stained-glass lampshade cast shadows like mould on the darkly papered walls. Shivering with the chill of the building, Alison climbed the zigzag staircase, whose treads sagged toward the cracked rear wall of the house. Three dim corridors formed a T at the first landing. She tiptoed down the corridor towards the front of the house and into Rowan's bedroom.

Rowan's white furniture, her bed and chest of drawers and wardrobe, looked almost lost on the expanse of worn carpet that fell short of the pale pink walls. She lay with her cheek on one palm, her long reddish hair trailing over her face. As Alison stroked it away from her eyes she turned onto her back, mumbling "Down the cellar," though there wasn't one. With her eyes shut she looked even more like a delicate eight-year-old version of Derek: long blunt nose, slightly pouted lips, wide forehead, square chin. Alison kissed her long lashes and tucked the sheets tighter, then she plodded soggily to the next room, hers and Derek's.

It was as though their flat in Liverpool had been reduced to a bed-sitter, their bed and three-piece suite and bedroom furniture fitting easily into the room. She peeled off her clothes and was buttoning herself into a dress when the door inched open, and she heard a slow footstep. It was Hermione, slowed down by a brimming mug of coffee.

She watched approvingly while Alison drank it, and lingered when she had. "Shall I come up with you?"

"I can cope with her," Alison said, and then hastily "You've done more than your share." She gave her the mug and made for the stairs as if she wouldn't dream of hesitating. The upward flight leaned even more sharply, and she held on to the shaky banister. At the halfway turn her hand touched the rear wall of the house, and she felt plaster shift under the browned paper.

Three corridors branched from the top of the staircase. Those to either side were unlit, and she heard the storm blundering about in the dark. The farther of the two bulbs dangling ahead of her on fattened tangled cords had failed in

its rusty socket. As soon as Alison had passed beyond the first bulb, boards giving underfoot beneath several layers of carpet that smelled stale and damp, her shadow filled the corridor in front of her. Silence filled the lightless rooms beyond doors that no longer fitted their distorted frames. The stuffy dark seemed deepest at the end of the corridor, where Queenie's room was. Alison reached for the knob that hung awry in its socket, and eased the door open.

Even seen from the dark corridor, the large room was dim. The browning of the books that were piled against the walls wherever there was space seemed to have gathered in the light beneath the heavy greyish shade. Among the piles of books, black wardrobes and black chests soaked up the glow, which fell short of the corners of the room. Between the door and the far wall, and facing the wide window, Queenie lay in bed.

Perhaps she had been watching the storm or the distant lights of Wales, for the stained velvet curtains and their veils of net were open, but now she appeared to be sleeping, one hand on a book that lay splayed on her chest. Alison's breathing faltered. She had never seen her aunt looking so young: her long sharp wedge of a face with its thrusting chin, her features cramped into half of the face as if the tight thin lips begrudged the others even that much room, looked hardly a quarter of its eighty years. Was she more than just asleep? The room seemed to exhale the smells of disinfectant and old paper as Alison tiptoed forward, suddenly breathless with the childhood fear that Queenie would rear up without warning, all six and a half feet of her. She was just close enough to read the title of the book under Queenie's wizened hand—*The Nurture of the Child*—when Queenie spoke. "You look surprised, my dear."

Her voice was thin as her lips and sharp as her face. She must have been watching beneath her eyelids, Alison realised, angry with her heart for thudding. "If you're taking an interest I'm glad."

"Someone in this house has to. My little girl's safe in bed, I trust, not playing with her dirty friends or with the workman on his rounds, the bright spark."

"He's my husband and her father," Alison said quietly. "And I wish you'd let him do something about the electricity up here."

"He'll do as he's bid in my house." Queenie raised herself on her elbows, her long body sliding stiffly under the greying blankets, and fixed her pale gaze on Alison. "You should be thankful that I harbour him at all after you married beneath you, just like your father. You'll say it was for love," she said, drawing out the last word and shuddering, and then her voice sharpened. "I notice you still haven't brought those masks."

"Queenie, I told you I can't take them out of the hospital. If infection worries you so much—"

"Don't you dare even think it. I'll stay where I've always lived, and God help anyone who tries to shift me." Her right eyelid drooped, spoiling the symmetry of her face, until she raised it with an effort that made her bare her teeth. Then she settled against the pillow, her eyes closing. "Do my hair for me. I don't want to look like a witch."

She was just an old woman, embittered and lonely and now wheedling, Alison told herself. She went to the dressing-table by the window that was shivering with shapeless darkness and picked up the brush and combs. The patch of light around the bed looked smaller than ever. She laid the combs on the musty patchwork quilt and brushed Queenie's long grey hair back from her papery forehead, and Queenie said "Don't stand there like a dummy, tell me about your day."

Alison told her about the little boy who'd been circumcised yesterday, whose parents had still not been to visit him; the four-year-old who'd kept saying "Big one" to a student nurse who had thought he meant his teddy bear and hadn't rushed him to the toilet until it was too late; the six-year-old whose monster puppet had had to ride the trolley down to the theatre to undergo the same operation he had... Queenie bared her teeth again whenever the brush tugged her hair, and looked disgusted by the anecdote about the four-year-old. As a child Alison had always felt drained by her dozens of questions, and now her silence was just as demanding. When Alison had exhausted her day on the ward Queenie peered at her, her right eye opening belatedly. "You've told me more than you know, my dear. You've told me how dissatisfied you are with your life."

"Not with my life, just with the system sometimes. I never thought nursing would be easy, and life doesn't always go the way you want it to."

Queenie let out a breath that showed even more of her teeth. "My father brought me up to expect the best and never be content with less. If more people refused to give up the ideals they were raised with the world might be less hellish." She stiffened as Alison put in the combs, fixing her hair in buns above her ears. "If you ask me, you want to spend less time caring for other people's offspring and concentrate on your own."

Alison lowered her voice to keep her temper. "Rowan has two parents, and we both—"

"I'm saying nothing against the child. She's as near perfect as they come these days. She reminds me of myself at her age," Queenie said, and stared at Alison as if to make sure she realised how much of a compliment that was. "Especially the way she likes nothing better than to sit by herself with a book."

But you never did anything with all your reading, Alison thought, just as Queenie said “You’re thinking I could have made more use of my learning. My father always said it was the work of a lifetime to improve oneself without trying to change the world, but now I’ll surprise you again. You bring the child to me now and see how much I can improve her reading.”

Perhaps she was losing her sense of the time of day. “Maybe tomorrow, Queenie. It’s her bedtime now.”

“Your sister said that hours ago, and I’ve let the child sleep until you came. Don’t think you can do what you like in my house just because I have to lie up here. Your sister knows better, and so should you.”

Alison dropped the hairbrush on the dressing-table and wondered if she was being unreasonable: how long might the old woman have left to spend with the child? Rowan wasn’t starting at her new school for more than a week, after all. Before she knew it, Alison was heading for the door. “That’s the way, you fetch her,” Queenie urged.

Alison hesitated between the twitching window and the glade of light about the bed. Queenie’s eagerness had put her on her guard and cleared her head. Sometimes it seemed that Queenie had only to speak for the family to defer to her, but how could Alison have considered waking the child so late? She turned toward Queenie to refuse as amiably as she could, and the old woman raised herself, her fists gripping the quilt, her pale eyes bulging furiously. The next moment the door slammed.

Queenie leaned forward, her thin arms trembling as they supported her, and poked her face, chin first, at Alison. “Now you give me your word you’ll go straight down for her.”

“Not this late,” Alison said, and strode to the door. A draught she hadn’t noticed must have slammed it, she told herself, and in any case it never closed properly—and then she realised that the slam had wedged it in the frame. She gripped the knob with both hands and tugged until she felt the spindle begin to work loose of the knob on the far side. Whatever she did, she wouldn’t give in to the fears that were welling up from her childhood and Hermione’s; Queenie was just a crotchety old woman, and she wouldn’t plead with her to open the door as Hermione once had. She made her hands let go and turned to the bed. “It looks as if we’ll have to wait for Hermione or Derek to budge this.”

Queenie’s lips pulled back in a grimace so fierce they seemed in danger of splitting. “Either you bring the child to me or you can leave my house tonight, the lot of you. Just remember that you wouldn’t be suffering my hospitality if not for her and then perhaps you won’t be so resolved to keep her to yourself.”

“We’re grateful to you, Queenie, but you seemed glad to have a nurse in the house.”

Queenie stiffened—her knotted neck, the bony pillars of her arms, her eyes that burned like ice. “You think I’m failing, do you? I’ll show you. I’ll bring the child myself,” she said in a voice low and powerful as the wind, and pushed herself up from the bed.

She must intend to open the door. Alison moved to stop her, her nurse’s instincts telling her the strain might be too much for Queenie, whose face was already darkening. Or perhaps that was the light, which had dimmed suddenly, a dimness Alison wanted to blink away or brush from her face like cobwebs. She stooped to Queenie, stretching out her hands, and something dark and wide and suffocating surged up from the bed and flung itself at her, throwing her to the floor.

It was only the mass of bedclothes, the quilt and the blankets. They seemed to close around her as she struggled to free herself, choking on the smell of them, of old cloth and old flesh, of stale books and disinfectant. It must be her struggles that were entangling her. She managed to free one hand, and dragged herself over the balding carpet until she had wormed herself out of the tangle of cloth. She shoved herself back on her haunches and levered herself to her feet, and swung toward the bed.

Queenie lay on her back on the faded striped mattress, gasping. Her whole body seemed to be straining to make a sound. Her arms were stiff at her sides, her hands gripping her pink nightdress so hard that her ribs showed through. Her eyes stared past the dimming bulb. They looked blind, drained of colour, intent on something only she could see. A convulsion as ferocious as the one that must have flung the bedclothes heaved her body up on her elbows and heels, and she managed to speak. “Father,” she said like a desperate prayer, and then her age flooded her face, her eyes rolled lifelessly awry. As her long chin sagged and her mouth opened emptily, the light failed with a noise as if a moth had struck the glass, and darkness stormed into the room.

Chapter Two

The old couple who lived near the Freshfield squirrel reserve insisted on sharing the food from the freezer Derek had rewired. They couldn't eat it all before it went off, they told him, and insisted on paying him in full. The storm was blustering across to Wales as he drove back along the Southport road. At Hightown, where trees grew almost parallel with the ground, a rescue helicopter whirred above the sea. The flat land was still, except for the changing of traffic lights, dropping a red coal into the blackness of the road as they changed to red above. Frozen chops and steaks shifted in the bag on the seat beside him as the car swung around the curves, and he thought he'd make it on his own if there were a few more folk like those.

He had to make it, and a year ago he'd thought he would, though less from choice than because the contractor who'd employed him had gone bankrupt. All the same, he'd wanted to work for himself since he'd met Alison while he was working at the student nurses' hostel; she was making the most of her qualifications, and he should make the most of his. Many of the contractor's customers had known Derek and appreciated the care he took, and quite a few had promised to support him.

Up to a point, they had—usually up to the point when he sent them his bill. Small jobs paid on time; it was the large firms that made you wait and might be using you to stave off bankruptcy, but if it weren't for them he wouldn't have enough work. He needed the money even more than he had a year ago. He'd needed it then so that they could move out of Liverpool, and now he needed it to take them out of Queenie's house.

They'd stayed in the run-down flat in Liverpool for as long as they'd felt safe. The burning buildings of the eighties had stayed streets away, the street battles three storeys below. But once Rowan started school they'd realised that the National Front lurked at the schoolyard gates with racist leaflets and ten-year-olds smoked heroin in disused shops. Earlier this year a police van speeding along the pavement towards a potential riot had demolished the gateposts of the flats, where Rowan often stood to watch the street. They'd begun to work all the hours they could, desperate to save enough for the deposit on a house, their savings having dwindled constantly since Rowan's unexpected birth—and then Queenie had invited them to come and live with her.

As soon as they'd moved in Queenie had taken to her bed. She'd read all day and had expected Alison to be available whenever she was in the house. Within weeks she was bedridden, which made her more demanding, as if she was determined to prove she still had power. Derek had supposed he would help look after her, until she'd made him realise the extent of her contempt for him. Having to rely on her, to hope they could trust her hints that she might leave the house to Alison, dismayed him almost as much as her power over Alison—almost as much as the thought of her gaining a hold over Rowan too.

He trod hard on the accelerator until he reached the suburbs. Where Crosby became Waterloo the houses crowded together, thinner and shabbier. As he turned along the side road, a buoy tolled beyond the dunes that faced the parade of nursing homes. Out past the marina, the coastguard radar cupped the movements of the night. He parked by Queenie's house, under the last streetlamp.

The street was quiet except for water splashing from a gutter and the slow muffled beat of the sea. He lifted the gate clear of the scraped path and let himself into the house, and made for the living-room, whose window was lit. But the only sign of life in the high gloomy room with its huge cold fireplace was a Lisa Alther novel, face down on the leather settee.

That would be Hermione's book, the kind she gasped and shook her head over. At least she'd come over from Wales to keep Alison company. He made for the kitchen by the stairs. The women weren't in the cavernous stone-flagged room with its black iron range. He left the steaks and chops in Alison's refrigerator and went back along the hall, pushing open doors on either side of him, but all the rooms were dark—the dining-room whose dusty chandelier chimed sluggishly, the sewing-room full of draped machines, the sitting-room with its screens and piano and framed brown photographs. He hoped the women were asleep, getting the rest they deserved. He climbed the wry stairs into the gaping hush the storm seemed to have left in the house.

Rowan was murmuring disconnectedly in her sleep. He lingered outside her room, enjoying the sound of her being herself, and then edged the door open. Hermione was sitting on the bed, one arm stretched along the headboard, her head drooping sleepily toward the child. The door creaked, and Hermione lurched up from the bed, brandishing the stick she had been clutching. "Hermione, it's me," he hissed at her. "Derek."

Her features drew even closer together, and then she managed to smile. "I don't know what I was thinking of. I came in because Rowan was calling, and I must have dozed off."

"Where's Ali?"

"Upstairs. She went up—" She glanced at her tiny gold wristwatch, and her features huddled together again. "More than an hour ago."

"Don't blame yourself, girl. I'll go and see what's keeping her, and how about making yourself a fresh pot of tea?"

"Making one for you, you mean."

"If Ali could see through me like you can I'd still be single," Derek teased her. He might have thought he'd cheered her up except for the glance of panic she gave him as he climbed the stairs. He'd rewired the lower floors without telling Queenie, so that the house would be less of a fire risk, but the top floor was darker than ever. A single bulb made the askew walls into a frame for the dark where her room was. He peered ahead, and then he realised that he couldn't see a light beneath her door.

He went swiftly but carefully along the corridor. The door was wedged, he saw. He knocked softly on a cracked upper panel, not least to hear if Queenie was asleep. It was Alison who responded. "Is someone there? Derek, is that you?" Her voice was low and strained, just beyond the door. "It's me all right," he called. "Stand out of the way while I budge this."

As soon as he heard her move aside he gripped both uprights of the door frame, his fingertips sinking into the wood, and kicked at the lock. The door staggered inward, the doorknob split the plaster of the inner wall, and Alison dodged out at once and made for the light in the corridor, muttering "Close the door."

He could see nothing in the room but darkness, which seemed to billow toward him as a wind shook the window. "What about—"

Alison turned as she reached the light. "Gone. I checked her pulse."

He could tell she was smothering her feelings. He closed the door and hurried to her, put his arm round her shoulders, raised her small dainty long-cheeked face by its chin, which had a hint of her aunt's resolve without the disproportion. Her quick smile made him want to hold her tight and stroke her straight black hair that stopped just short of her shoulders, to remind her how much he loved her and admired her. Sensing that she didn't want to linger, he led her down to the next floor, and then the question proved too much for him. "How long was the light out, Ali?"

"A few minutes. Maybe half an hour or so. I couldn't get the door open, and I didn't like to shout in case it brought Rowan up there."

"My God, why wasn't I here?" He didn't want to imagine how it must have felt to her, he wanted her to tell him so that he could help. He was guiding her towards their room, where he hoped she could lie down while he told Hermione not to bother them for a while, when Hermione came hurrying upstairs. "Tea's brewing," she said, and her voice and her face wavered. "What's wrong?"

"Your aunt's passed on," Derek said.

She glanced upward more nervously than ever. "I want to see." "The light in there's bust."

"You can change the bulb, can't you?"

She sounded close to hysteria, and he couldn't think how to keep her away from Alison. "I'll be cutting off the power to the top floor. It's a wonder it kept going as long as it did."

"It would while she was alive. You'll let me have your flashlight, won't you?"

"I've got to see."

"We'll both go up while he cuts off the power," Alison said.

She sounded reassuring, though he was sure she needed that herself. "Just let me pull the fuses," he said, "and then I'll take Hermione up if she really can't wait."

But the fuses were stuck fast in the dusty board under the stairs. He was still trying to dislodge them when the women brought the flashlight from his car.

Before he could delay the women, they were overhead. He managed to jiggle one fuse loose, and then the other, and heard a muffled scream at the top of the house. He threw the cracked porcelain fuses into the kitchen bin as he ran to the stairs. He liked the silence up there even less than he'd liked the scream.

Nearly all the light on the top floor was in Queenie's room. He was able to distinguish the women, standing just outside the door and outlined by the glow that the flashlight was casting within. The light swung toward him as he trod on a loose board, and then it fluttered back into the room.

An old woman was lying face up on the bare mattress. Death had seized her by her chin and dragged her mouth wide open, had pinched her cheeks inward as far as they could go. He knew she was Queenie, if only by the way the long pink nightdress couldn't reach to cover her scrawny veinous shins, but she looked older than he would have imagined anyone could look. No wonder the women seemed almost hypnotised by the sight of her, until Alison murmured "Go and look if you want to, Hermione."

Hermione stepped backward, hunching up her shoulders and shaking her head violently. "Well then," Alison said "hold the flashlight while I cover her up."

Hermione almost dropped the flashlight. The lit wall nodded toward them, opening its mouth that had swallowed Queenie. Derek made to grab the flashlight until he saw that Alison was trying to make sure her sister's mind was occupied. The light did its best to fasten on the bed while Alison closed the eyes that were gazing blindly at opposite walls. She stooped to gather up the bedclothes, and the light shuddered. "Watch out for her!" Hermione screamed. Derek thought she was talking to him. He ran into the bedroom and grabbed one edge of the bedclothes to help Alison heave them over the corpse. She insisted on smoothing them and tucking them under the mattress and under Queenie's chin before she would come out of the room, though the flashlight was trembling so violently that it made him feel the floor shake underfoot. "Now what were you saying, Hermione?" she said gently as she stepped over the threshold. "Didn't you see her move? She's only pretending. It's another of her horrible games."

"It must have been the light, love. She's dead now, at peace."

"Don't you know her better than that?" Hermione crouched over the flashlight as if to protect it. "Look at her," she whispered. "She's listening to us, can't you see? God help us, she's smiling..."

She gripped the flashlight with both hands and poked the beam at the collapsed face. Now that Alison had closed the mouth and tucked the quilt under the chin, the corpse did appear to be smiling, so faintly it looked secretive. "She's up to something," Hermione cried, and then swung wildly towards the stairs, almost smashing the flashlight against the door frame. There was movement at the far end of the corridor.

The walls tottered, the floor reared up. This time Derek caught hold of the flashlight and steadied the beam, and found Rowan on the landing, yawning and digging her knuckles into her eyes. "Mummy, why are you all up here? Why was Hermione shouting?"

Derek closed Alison's hand around the flashlight and murmured "Was Jo and Eddie's light on when you went to the car?" "I think so, but—" But he couldn't linger while Rowan might see what lay in Queenie's room or be infected by Hermione's panic. He hurried Rowan downstairs to her room and saw from her window that someone was still up at Jo's and Eddie's, three houses distant on the opposite side of the street. "Just put on your coat and shoes, and we'll see if you can sleep with your mates tonight," he said.

"What's wrong, daddy?"

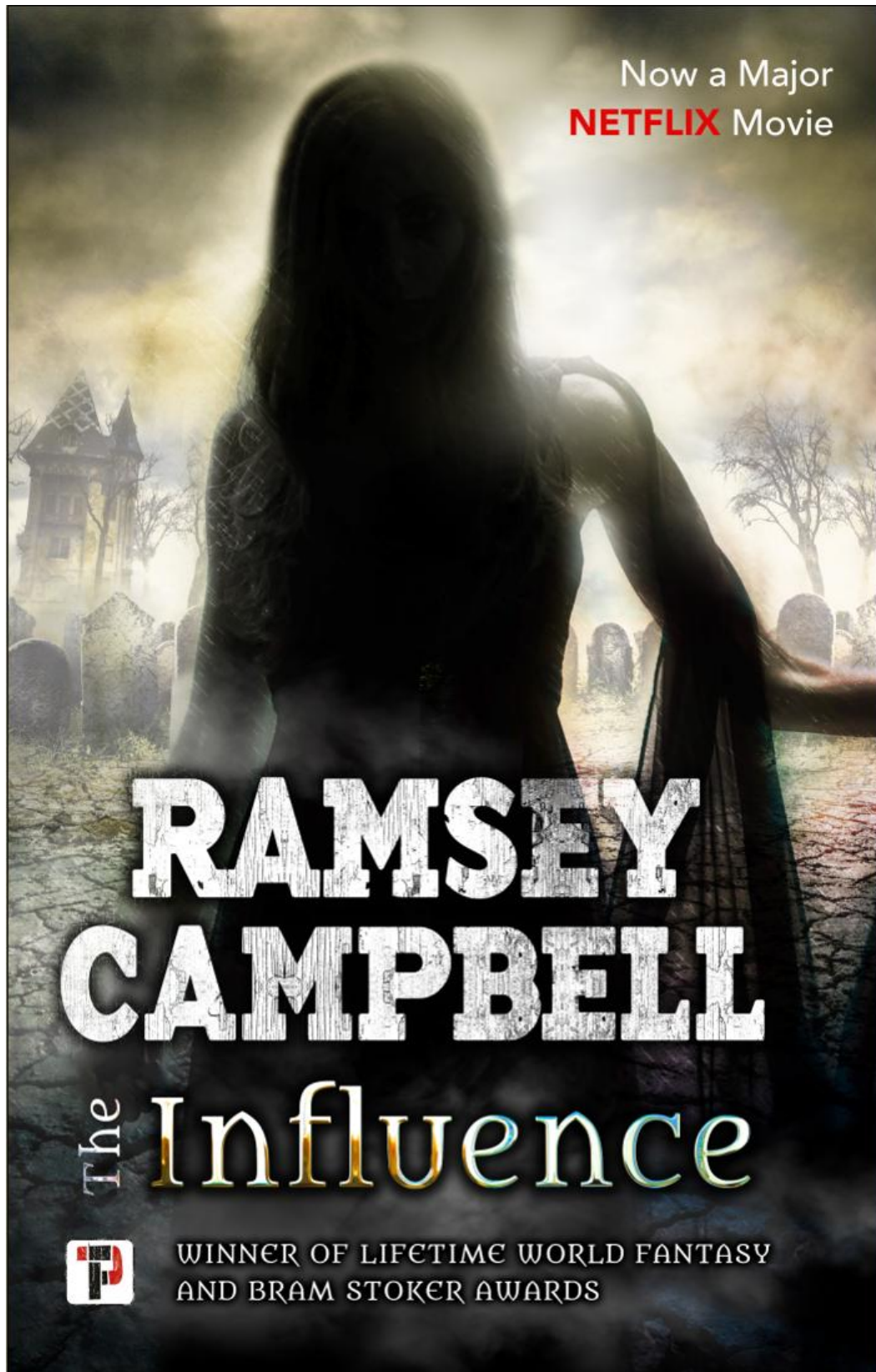
He was touched by her grave look, her willingness to help and be grown up. "The old lady died tonight, and that's upset Hermione."

Rowan clutched her collar to her throat as they stepped out of the porch. The wind from the sea was so cold it seemed to make the stars wince. Jo and Eddie were watching a video, but switched it off when they saw Rowan. "You can sleep in our Mary's bed, give her a surprise when she wakes up in the morning," Jo said, and hustled Rowan upstairs without even asking Derek what the trouble was.

He told Eddie about the death, and declined the offer of a Scotch. "I'd better get back and see how they are," he said, preparing to help calm Hermione so that Alison could let go of her feelings. But when he let himself into the house that felt as if the night were seeping down through the roof, he found the women in the living-room, sipping quietly from large glasses, a bottle of gin and one of tonic on the floor between them. He might have thought they were over the worst if it hadn't been for the way Hermione had stared at the door to see who he was. He might almost have thought she was more terrified of Queenie now than she had been when the old woman was alive.

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